

fall-winter 2020

# vajrabell

*spreading the dharma  
keeping sangha connected*

## Climate Crisis: 'It's really happening'

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The *Vajra Bell* is an online and print publication featuring articles on the dharma teachings and practices of the Triratna Buddhist Order and Community in the U.S. and Canada. It is published by the Aryaloka Buddhist Center in New Market, NH, USA, once or twice a year.

In each issue, you will find insightful articles on dharma topics, reflections and practices from our Triratna Buddhist Centers in North America, reviews of Buddhist books along with poetry and artwork created by sangha members.

Each issue is available for download in Adobe Acrobat (PDF) format or can be viewed online on the Aryaloka [website](#) or The Buddhist Centre [online](#).

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[VajraBellTriratna@gmail.com](mailto:VajraBellTriratna@gmail.com)

# vajrabel

## VAJRA BELL KULA

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF: Saddhavasini Schaefer  
[mbschaefer@comcast.net](mailto:mbschaefer@comcast.net)

ASSOCIATE EDITOR: Betsy Cadbury  
[betsycadbury@yahoo.com](mailto:betsycadbury@yahoo.com)

PROOFREADER: Maitrivati  
[dipalaces15@comcast.net](mailto:dipalaces15@comcast.net)

EDITORIAL ADVISER: Danamaya  
[maya108ratna@gmail.com](mailto:maya108ratna@gmail.com)

DESIGNER: Callista Cassady  
[callistacassady@gmail.com](mailto:callistacassady@gmail.com)

## CONTRIBUTORS

Gary Baker  
*New York Sangha*  
[gbaker@thehackettgroup.com](mailto:gbaker@thehackettgroup.com)

Narottama  
*Nagaloka Buddhist Center*  
[bnarottama@gmail.com](mailto:bnarottama@gmail.com)

Jessica Nelson  
*Boston Sangha*  
[jecalynnelson@gmail.com](mailto:jecalynnelson@gmail.com)

Mary Salome  
*San Francisco Buddhist Center*  
[marycsalome@comcast.net](mailto:marycsalome@comcast.net)

Samatara  
*Rocky Mountain Buddhist Center*  
[samatara108@gmail.com](mailto:samatara108@gmail.com)

Shraddhavani Pruitt  
*Portsmouth Buddhist Center*  
[shraddhavani18@gmail.com](mailto:shraddhavani18@gmail.com)

Suddhayu  
*Aryaloka Buddhist Center*  
[suddhayu@aryaloka.org](mailto:suddhayu@aryaloka.org)

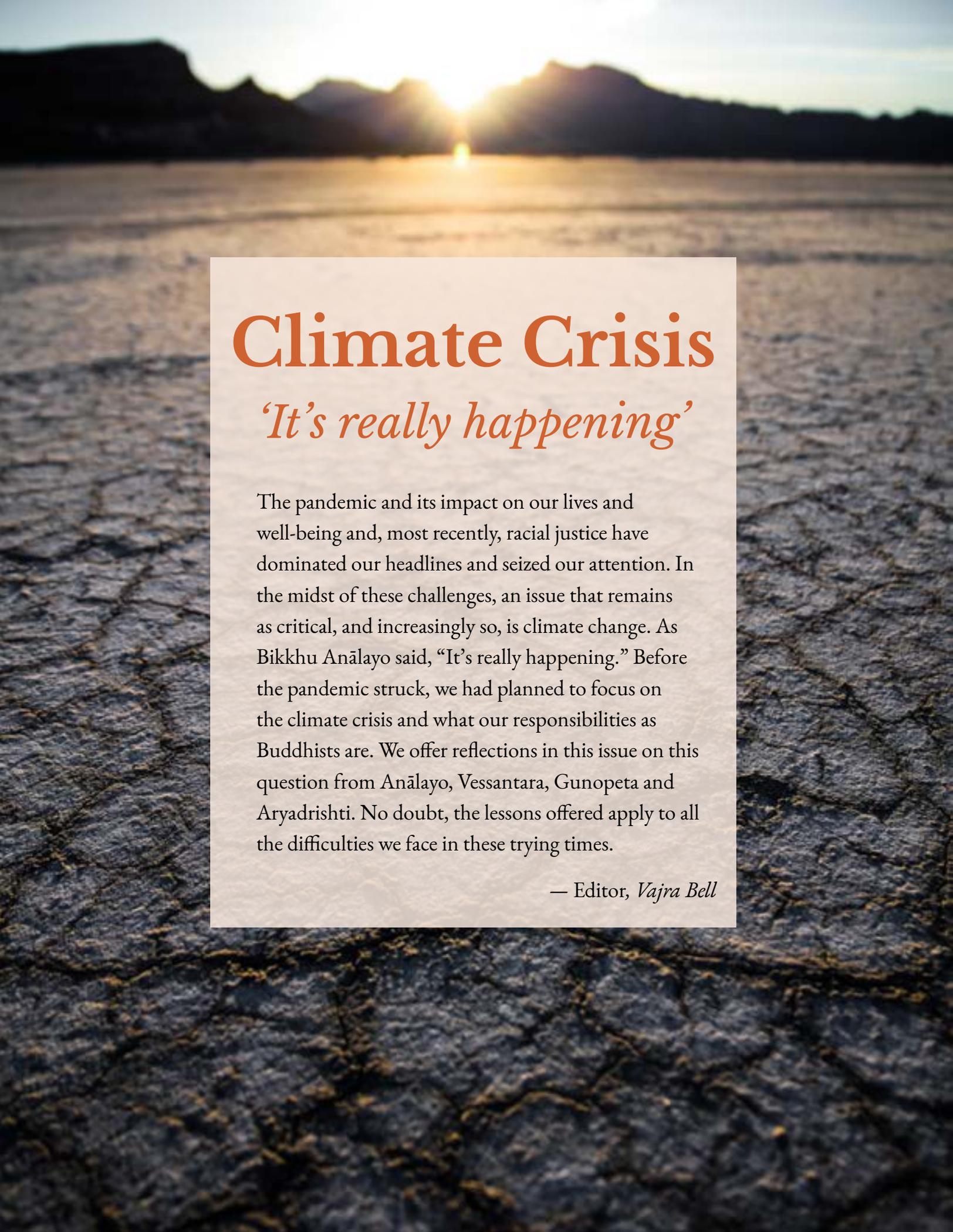
Mary Edwards  
*Seattle Buddhist Center*  
[edwardsmarcom@gmail.com](mailto:edwardsmarcom@gmail.com)

Christine Thuring  
*Vancouver Buddhist Centre*  
[christine.thuring@gmail.com](mailto:christine.thuring@gmail.com)

Aryaloka Buddhist Center  
14 Heartwood Circle  
Newmarket, NH 03857  
(603) 659-5456

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# Climate Crisis

*‘It’s really happening’*

The pandemic and its impact on our lives and well-being and, most recently, racial justice have dominated our headlines and seized our attention. In the midst of these challenges, an issue that remains as critical, and increasingly so, is climate change. As Bikkhu Anālayo said, “It’s really happening.” Before the pandemic struck, we had planned to focus on the climate crisis and what our responsibilities as Buddhists are. We offer reflections in this issue on this question from Anālayo, Vessantara, Gunopeta and Aryadrishti. No doubt, the lessons offered apply to all the difficulties we face in these trying times.

— Editor, *Vajra Bell*

# Conversations with Buddhist Teachers in the U.S.

## *A walk and talk with Anālayo*

When I interviewed Sangharakshita a year before his death, he asked me about the state of Buddhism in the U.S. I certainly did not have a short, simple answer to that big question, but it prompted me to begin a series of conversations between Triratna order members and Buddhist teachers in the U.S.

The first of these exchanges is with Bhikkhu Anālayo. Anālayo is a scholar-monk and the author of numerous books on meditation and early Buddhism. He was born in Germany in 1962 and ordained in Sri Lanka in 1995. He currently resides in Barre, MA, where he is a faculty member at the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies (BCBS), having retired from being a professor at the Numata Center for Buddhist Studies at the University of Hamburg. His close friend and fellow Buddhist teacher, Joseph Goldstein, invited him to come to Barre, also home to the Insight Meditation Society Retreat Center. The two meet periodically to walk the grounds at Barre and talk dharma.

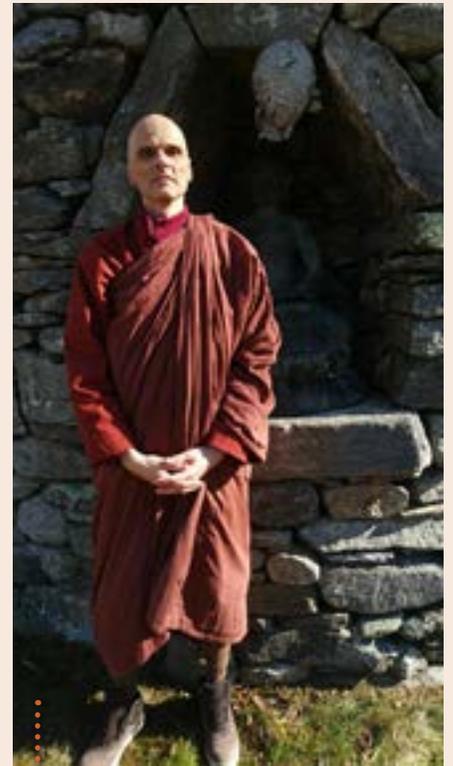
Anālayo's first connection to Triratna goes back "a very long time," he says when he stayed at a Triratna center in India, where he said he helped organize its library. He is one of the first teachers outside of the Triratna order to have his work published by Windhorse Publications. This suits Anālayo's

desire to spread the dharma across the boundaries of traditions. He has become one of the publisher's most popular authors, offering the rare combination of authentic scholarship and deep practice. Three years after the publication of any new work by Windhorse, he is free to make the PDF available online.

His books published by Windhorse include *Satipaṭṭhāna: The Direct Path to Realization*, published in 2003, based on his PhD on the Satipaṭṭhāna sutta; *Mindfully Facing Disease and Death*; *A Meditator's Life of the Buddha*; *Perspectives on Satipaṭṭhāna*; and *Compassion and Emptiness in Early Buddhist Meditation*. In November 2019, *Mindfully Facing Climate Change* was published by BCBS.

Order member Satyada and I interviewed Anālayo in Barre, MA, in November 2019. I had the privilege, too, that month of attending the retreat, "Neurobiology of Compassion and Compassion Practice" with Diego Hangartner and Anālayo at BCBS. The articles in this issue draw on Anālayo's teachings on climate change, our conversation with him and his offerings at the retreat.

— Saddhavasini  
Editor, *Vajra Bell*



Anālayo stands in front of the stupa at the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies in Barre, MA, where he lives.

*Photo by Satyada*

# ‘We Are Part of Nature’

*Grounding our activism in ethics and compassion*



by Satyada

Since reading Anālayo’s book, *Satipaṭṭhāna – The Direct Path to Realization*, I have been drawn to Anālayo’s ability to bring early Buddhist

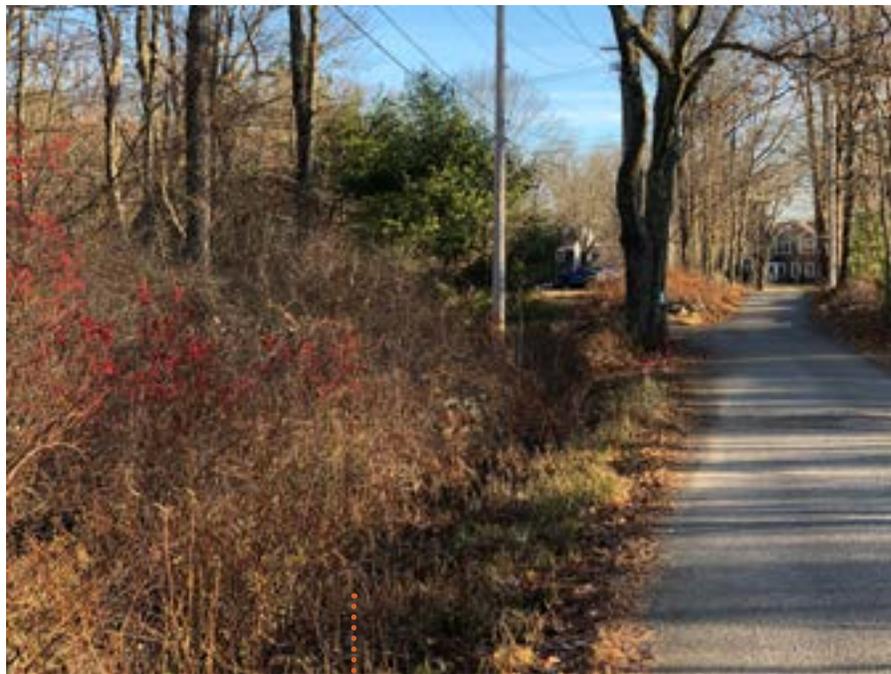
teachings to modern day practitioners with an accessible clarity. As a Triratna Buddhist Order member, I have been curious about how Anālayo’s work aligns with the teachings of Triratna and Sangharakshita, my teacher and founder of Triratna. With that curiosity in mind, I was delighted to have the opportunity to meet and talk with him.

We met in Barre, MA, on a late fall day and walked through the country roads and New England’s fall splendor. Having recently read his *Satipaṭṭhāna Meditation: A Practice Guide*, I started with Anālayo’s contemplation of the elements within the Satipaṭṭhāna sutta.

“The sense of being different from outside nature, in combination with the conceit of ownership and control, is the chief culprit for many a problem,” Anālayo writes. “It is our responsibility to take care of nature outside just as much as we take care of our own body.”

That passage seems strongly connected to one in Sangharakshita’s *Living with Awareness*: “In our modern techno-scientific culture we are able to do all kinds of things with and to the natural world, but as a result we have lost our affinity with it. Alienated from nature, no longer experiencing it as a living presence, we sorely need to recapture the sense that to be human is to be part of nature.”

Walking through the countryside seemed a perfect place to contemplate our relationship with nature. When I asked Anālayo about this connection,



our conversation turned towards the application of ethical concepts from early Buddhist teachings to pressing modern issues such as climate change.

His book, *Mindfully Facing Climate Change*, was about to be released. The book is accompanied by five videos online – four installments on the Four Noble Truths and the fifth a conversation with his friend and fellow Buddhist teacher, Joseph Goldstein. The book and videos draw on early Buddhist teachings as a way to engage with and respond to climate change.

Reflecting on his talk with Joseph Goldstein, Anālayo talked through ways to ground our environmental activism in fundamental ethical concepts, eventually coming to the grounds of compassionate concern. When we recognize that all human beings require certain conditions to live their lives, and that our personal actions may affect those conditions in harmful ways, we are responsible to act out of compassion for the suffering we cause with our actions.

Anālayo strolled with us along the country lanes leading to Barre Center for Buddhist Studies.

*Photo by Saddhavasini*

The role of compassion in our social engagement connects our concerns with issues such as climate change, racism, diversity and political turmoil with our Buddhist practice. Anālayo suggested that we need to balance this compassion with wisdom. He used the phrase, “compassion and emptiness, the two wings of the bird,” to reflect this balance.

Mindfulness is the way in which we can achieve this balance, he said. From practicing the Brahma Viharas, we know that compassion arises when we are able to meet suffering within ourselves or others with a desire to relieve that suffering. But when we become too involved in this suffering, we may fall into empathy, the near enemy of compassion, where we take on the suffering of others.

Taking on this suffering is likely to give rise to mental conditions

- continued on page 23

# Responsibility to Cause No Harm

*Mindfulness and compassion are key*



by Saddhavasini  
Editor, Vajra Bell

The sky was a boundless blue with the cold, dry air of late fall. Satyada and I met Anālayo outside the “farm house” of the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies (BCBS) in Barre, MA, where he lives. Since Anālayo prefers to walk and talk rather than sit and discuss, we started down the long drive with him to stroll along the country roads and talk dharma.

Downed trees and branches had been cleared from the roadways, remnants of a fierce storm that had come through the area earlier in the week. The storm had a strong, unnatural energy that threw things over, according to Anālayo. “So, it’s really happening,” he said.

The “it” is climate change. Much of our conversation that lasted a little more than an hour dealt with the climate crisis, an issue about which he is passionate. His book *Mindfully Facing Climate Change* was about to be published by BCBS, and he had recorded lectures and guided meditations to supplement the book. All can be found on the BCBS website.

The gravest crisis the planet is facing is climate change, he said. The planet will see more hurricanes, wildfires and irregular weather. The areas for food production are decreasing, supplies of drinking water are being depleted, and the oceans are warming and rising.

We have known these facts for a long time, he said, yet sufficient action is not being taken. As Buddhists, we have a responsibility to cause no harm and to respond with mindfulness and compassion.

## Mindfulness is key

Mindfulness is key, he said, to facing what is difficult, such as the climate crisis. “It begins and ends with mindfulness.” Mindfulness is what enables us to be with what is without getting overwhelmed by it and falling into grief or fear.

Anālayo cautions against empathy, taking on the pain of the world, which is a near enemy of compassion. This was a central topic of the retreat I was on with him two weeks after our conversation. He compares the typical responses of humans to climate change – fear, anger and resignation – with the three mental poisons of greed, hatred and delusion that are the root cause of all unnecessary human suffering.

“Fear and grief are not good motivators for sustained action,” he said.

Mindfulness means a willingness to be receptive, to listen and to engage in the open exchange of information. He related a recent visit he had with the dentist, who asked him to let him know if anything bothered him. “And I said, ‘Yes, yes, what bothers me is climate change.’ And we laughed,” he said.

After the dental procedure, though, the dentist asked him about climate change, and Anālayo shared some things he could do. It was a light way, he said, to open the exchange of information that can lead to increasing global awareness.

## Compassion: How can I help?

Another key component of a Buddhist response to climate change, according to Anālayo, is compassion – the wish for the absence of harm to others and also to oneself. “Compassion,” he writes in his book, “means wanting to do something to relieve the hardship of others.”

Even with the horrible scenarios out there, he said, there is “massive potential.” It can be a turning point for all of us, as Buddhists, to raise global awareness and find a way to live on this planet with nature instead of against it.

We need to find our own position, he counseled, and work with that as a continuous practice without denying and pushing it away. That might mean, for example, to conserve water or to avoid traveling by plane in the future. We all can make our own contributions.

In his conversation with Joseph Goldstein, he said, they agreed, “It is upon us to contribute to the probability that the potential can be realized. This can take the simple form of asking ourselves, ‘How can I help? How can I help?’ That is really the key.”

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The late fall colors near  
Anālayo’s retreat.

Photo by Saddhavasini



# 20 Suggestions for ‘Dealing with Overwhelm’

*‘Ultimate solution’ – awareness of emptiness*



by Vessantara

*The following is an edited excerpt of a longer article written by Vessantara. The basis of the article was a talk he gave at the Cambridge*

*Buddhist Centre (Cambridge, England) in 2016 called “Ferrying Across.” The full version of this article can be accessed [here](#). — Editor*

We live in what the old Chinese curse would call “interesting times.” Climate change, racial injustice, species extinction, terrorism, the refugee crisis, drought, flood, famine, populist movements, radical changes to the established world order – make your own list. For Buddhists, ignoring it all isn’t an option. Surely, we practice the dharma to help ourselves and benefit the world. We care, and we want to respond to these situations. However, sadly, they can paralyze us and leave us unable to respond effectively.

Much of our society suffers from a deadly duo of low self-esteem in relation to ourselves, and horrified anxiety in relation to what is happening in the world. This tendency to become overwhelmed seems so common, even among Buddhists, that I offer 20 suggestions to help you avoid overwhelm and deal with it when it arises.

**1. Be aware of how much you take in of what is disturbing.** The news media constantly offer disturbing images. If you need to follow the news, find “cooler,” more indirect ways of learning about what is going on,

which have less visceral impact and are easier to absorb.

## **2. Stay resourced and balanced.**

Often difficult issues, whether tragic world events or upsets in our own Buddhist community, are so compelling that we become sucked in by them. Give yourself time for other things: replenish your energy, give your brain a rest, regain perspective by seeing there is more to life than the current issue.

## **3. Be mindful on social media.**

On social media you often only have words on a screen to give you a sense of the people you’re communicating with, and the debate usually moves fast. To be helpful, you need to enter empathetic communication with others and reflect and feel deeply. That requires as much direct communication as possible: preferably face-to-face; failing that, Skype, phone or considered written exchanges.

**4. Stay well grounded.** In challenging times, aim to be like a strong tree in a high wind. Breathe into the lower belly, imagining it warm and relaxed. Walk, run, do Yoga, Tai Chi or Qigong. Developing stable meditation posture helps you stay grounded when gales of strong emotions surface.

## **5. Look out for the near enemies of compassion.**

Watch out for pity, which can look like compassion. Keep watch for horrified anxiety, that sense of “Oh no!” which is still about us and not about the situation. When those feelings arise, catch them and experience them with kindly awareness, acknowledging that this situation is not easy to open to. Give

your awareness more fully to the actual suffering, allowing yourself to empathize.

## **6. Watch out for irrational guilt.**

Contact with suffering often provokes guilt that isn’t justified. Don’t be part of the problem; aim to be part of the solution. If you’re in a lifeboat trying to rescue people from a sinking vessel, you don’t help by making a hole in the lifeboat as a display of fellow feeling.

## **7. Hold in your heart the wish**

**for suffering to end.** Often, when you are confronted with suffering and your heart opens, you can move from compassion into worry and feelings of powerlessness. Allow yourself to feel that deep heart response, that longing for the suffering to be transformed. Stay with and hold that heart wish, like a prayer almost. In that longing is deep dharma; the seed from which bodhicitta will flower.

**8. Let your heart break.** When you hear about a situation of suffering, or sometimes in meditation when you really open to the suffering in the world, it can feel as if your heart will break. Despite how it feels, stay with it. All that has happened is that your heart has become more open, more tender and responsive than it was before. Even a great wave of sadness will transform into the next experience of your life. Just let it flow through you.

## **9. Work in your sphere of**

**influence.** Once you have allowed yourself to feel the full impact of the situation on your heart, and your heart’s longing for that suffering to be relieved, reflect on how to respond. Focus on what can be done, not on

what you can't do or on what isn't good enough. Allow the difficult situation to deepen your motivation.

### 10. Empathize with the perpetrators as well as the victims.

This doesn't mean agreeing with them. When you look deeper, you can see that even those causing the suffering are suffering. Closing your heart to anyone isn't justified. Any step you take in the direction of empathy will help you feel a little more freedom in yourself.

### 11. Work on the inner as well as the outer level.

Even when there is nothing to be done, rather than feeling powerless, work inwardly. At least send loving-kindness. Practice buddha and bodhisattva mantras to evoke compassion. These inner actions do have beneficial effects on the outer level.

### 12. Entrust the situation to deeper forces.

The everyday "me" can never fix the suffering in the universe. Invite bodhicitta to act through you. You can let the Buddha meditate. Don't try to do everything yourself; draw on deeper resources.

### 13. Check your expectations about life, in the light of the dharma.

A contributing factor to overwhelm is overly optimistic expectations that things should turn out well. As the dharma reminds us, all meeting ends in parting, all accumulation in dispersal, all life in death. Check if your expectations of mundane life are too high and look at your consciously held views and semi-conscious assumptions.

### 14. Do your best to let go of hopes and fears about outcomes.

Let the future take care of itself. Just work

in the present to do whatever you reckon is going to be most helpful. Even if things turn out badly, your bit of kindness, help or generosity will mitigate the effects of what's going to happen. If everything goes down, you might as well go down helping.

### 15. Use the "wishing-prayer that dispels hope and fear."

In the Tibetan Mind Training (Lojong) tradition, they recommend that when you're full of hopes and fears about how a situation will turn out, you make the wish that whatever is for the best may happen.

### 16. Equanimity comes from reflecting that everyone has their own karma.

This traditional reflection on equanimity (*upeksha*) helps you recognize the limits of your power to help others, and prevents you from becoming over-responsible and over-reaching, leading to burnout. This reflection helps you do your best, without becoming attached to things having to turn out as you want them to.

### 17. Think "one at a time."

You only ever have to deal with this moment, with the person, situation in front of you. When you understand how to do one thing at a time, then even the totally overwhelming project of "saving all living beings from suffering" comes down to caring for the person you're with now, the situation in front of you.

### 18. Use short pieces of dharma to anchor you.

Find a short piece of dharma, a bit of a poem, or some short saying, that works against overwhelm for you. Write it out and keep it prominent, or learn it by heart and repeat it at regular intervals.

### 19. Get involved in a dharma community and make links with spiritual friends.

Feeling isolated with a problem or issue that you find overwhelming is a recipe for deeper overwhelm. In difficult times, reach out to people who will understand. Choose whom you talk to, and notice which kinds of communication help, and which just pull you further into the whirlpool of unhelpful feelings and lost perspective.

### 20. The ultimate solution to overwhelm is awareness of emptiness.

In the long run, you can resolve your tendencies to overwhelm by using the Buddhist wisdom teachings. If you look into its nature, the overwhelming situation is ungraspable. The "me" feeling overwhelmed is unfindable. Ultimately, there is nothing to worry about. (This view can be unhelpful if used to repress uncomfortable feelings, a process called spiritual bypassing.)

Over years of practice, this emptiness teaching makes a deepening impact on the mind of a dharma practitioner, giving perspective and allowing one not to take even the most serious events too seriously. Therein lies freedom from overwhelm, and eventually, freedom from all suffering.

*Vessantara was ordained into the Triratna Buddhist Order in 1974. He lives in England, where his life is taken up with writing, meditating and leading retreats and courses on Buddhism and meditation. His writings and teachings can be found [here](#).*

# Eco-Anxiety

## *Saying goodbye to the earth*



by Gunopeta

*The following is an edited version of a longer essay written by Gunopeta. The basis of the article was a talk he gave at an order/mitra day*

*on the environment at Aryaloka Buddhist Center in February 2020. The full version of this article can be accessed [here](#). — Editor*

I'm walking near my home by the shore in easternmost Maine. It's late December, warm for this time of year, sunny after yesterday's wintry mix, something we've had a lot of lately. The northwest wind is almost balmy, and the sun reinforces the sense that, just a few days after the solstice, we already have turned a corner.

A flock of 22 Canada geese kicks up from the cove. A quartet of black ducks flies farther out. When I return, the cove holds a dozen buffleheads. I walk to the state conservation land that my late partner and I helped protect. A flock of robins, increasingly year-round residents, crosses in front of me. Despite the idyllic appearances, this scene is troubling, because it links to what is wrong with our local, regional and global environment.

It shouldn't be this warm at this time of year. Spring comes a week or two earlier than it did 40 years ago, and the first hard frost often a week or more later. Summers are hotter; instead of a rare day in the upper 80s or low 90s, we might get a two-week stretch of heat. This brings new pests, diseases, and farming and gardening challenges.

When I moved to this old saltwater farm on Straight Bay in 1980, the bay and its environments were biologically richer. Instead of a few ducks and

geese, I would see flocks of 60 or more geese and a couple hundred black ducks sheltering and feeding at the head of the cove. This parallels a general decline in North American bird life: nearly one-third of our wild bird population has been lost since 1970.

Sea levels are rising, in part because warm water occupies more volume than cold. When I walk my lane, I wonder how much longer it will last. When will my house (about 30 feet above mean sea level) go under? Thirty, 50, 100 years? The ecosystem as a whole is fraying badly; whole categories of beings are in decline and may disappear soon, if they haven't already. Ecologically, the world is falling apart.

My response is grief. It could just as well be anger. I also could turn away and refuse to accept that these things are happening now and that their effects are getting worse. These are all responses to eco-anxiety. I am not alone in this. Joanna Macy, an environmental activist and Buddhist, has written about "despair work" as a necessary response to ecological "signals of distress" since the late 1980s.

Whether eco-anxiety is helpful depends on whether we can see the dharmic implications in our response to these existential crises. Let's look at these responses more closely.

**First, outrage and anger.** These arise out of a deep aversion response: an impulse to push away and reject what is happening to us, individually, collectively and inter-specifically, to use an awkward term. Aversion, and, its more extreme form, hatred, is a desire to expunge what threatens our sense of self or existence. It's the snake at the hub of the Wheel of Life.

Too often, anger seeks a defined enemy, human or institutional, and

dehumanizes the first while reifying the second. This creates a mythic conflict in which we see ourselves as heroes fighting for good and those we oppose as evil. But anger can be useful if carefully channeled, and healthy if imbued with compassion. Anger and hatred can provide the energy and impulse to propel us towards wisdom.

**Second, shutting down.** This can manifest as a refusal to face facts in a closely held and self-protective skepticism. This is akin to *vicikitsā* or doubt and indecision, the second of the first three fetters, as described by Sangharakshita – an emotional, even almost neurotic, unwillingness to commit. We can shut down and simply go along with life as we know it, pretending all is well and will ever be so. This seems related to spiritual ignorance, the pig at the hub of the Wheel of Life. Ignorance, though, can be purified through insight into equanimity.

**Third, grief.** Grief is related to desire – in its negative form, as greed and craving, and, in its positive form, as a desire for the well-being and happiness of self and others. As greed and craving, grief connects to cock at the hub of the Wheel of Life. Desire connects to metta and to karuna: loving-kindness that becomes compassion in the face of suffering.

In one form, grief is a response to loss and is a natural subject for kindly attention, contemplation and meditation. It arises and changes. But unlike grief at the loss of a loved one, grief at the loss of our world and its wonderful creatures is an unending grief that will not weaken and pass away in our lifetimes.

Only by transforming this grief through creative action can we absorb and put it to skillful use. Our grief becomes more infused with and

transformed by the grief that is based in compassion. (A cautious note: As compassion arises in response to suffering, we must not fall victim to its “near enemies” – sentimental pity and horrified anxiety.)

**Transforming grief into something skillful.** How do I transform my grief for the world into something skillful, useful and potentially liberating? In addition to my traditional practices, I write, mostly poetry, staying true to my response to what’s going on in the world and with words that lead in a creative direction. This acts as a safety valve whenever my mental and emotional pressure builds up too high. Any creative activity can help do this.

I also review Vessantara’s 20 suggestions ([page 08](#)) many mornings before going online and getting swallowed up in upsetting news. I think about the dharmic teachings held within the world’s crises and how I experience them.

**Practicing saying goodbye.** Finally, I practice saying goodbye; saying goodbye to the earth, to the world I know and dearly love. When I wake up and look out at the huge spruce tree outside my window, I greet it, and then I say goodbye. When I meditate, I visualize earth from space and offer it all the metta I can muster, and then I bid it goodbye. When I walk along the bay, I greet and appreciate what I see, then I say goodbye. When I enjoy the conservation land that I helped protect, I take satisfaction in seeing it whole, not carved into house lots, and then I say goodbye.



*Photo by Gunopeta*

I say goodbye, because I’m leaving this world, day by day and moment by moment. I’m also saying goodbye, because the world is leaving me. It’s leaving us, almost as if it’s fading away due to climate change, habitat destruction and other human-caused or human-magnified forces. It’s changing and becoming less the world I’m adapted to, a world of extraordinary biological richness, diversity and beauty, and becoming something poorer and more attenuated.

Saying goodbye accustoms me to loss, even of what I hold most dear. It reminds me that everything is change, and that everything that looks solid is in flux. As the Buddha taught, every meeting contains its own parting. It opens my heart to the painful realities of this moment, and, in that opening, compassion can grow. Saying goodbye to the earth in this way, day by day, over and over, feels essential. It feels like an act of love.

*Gunopeta lives in Lubec, ME, where for the past 26 years he has led a weekly meditation and study group. He was ordained at Aryaloka in 1997. His name can be translated as “having good (or meritorious) qualities.”*

# sangha connections

In each issue of the *Vajra Bell*, we profile a sangha and invite sanghas in the U.S. and Canada to share their reflections and practices on a particular topic. This issue spotlights the Vancouver Buddhist Centre, profiling its history and current collective practices. We asked the other sanghas to share how they are connecting in these virtual times and taking their practice off the cushion and into the world.

— Editor, *Vajra Bell*



The Vancouver Buddhist Centre hosted an ordination training retreat over a weekend in June 2019. Participants included (left to right) Christine Thuring, Colin Steele, Claire Robillard, Upakarin, Singhashri, Vimalasara, Dani Francis, Paramita Banerjee and Ray Chernoff.

# sangha profile

*Vancouver Buddhist Centre*

*Small thriving sangha reaches beyond Vancouver*



*Compiled by  
Christine Thuring  
with contributions  
from Reg Johanson,  
Paramita Banerjee,  
Claire Robillard,  
Upakarin,  
Dayasiddhi, and  
Vimalasara*

The Vancouver Buddhist Centre (VBC) was established as a non-profit society in 1998, and formally registered as a charity in 2010. The center's story began in 1989, however, when an order member from England, Baladitya, came to visit his family in the area and initiated meditation classes in Vancouver. He engaged he-who-would-become Aryabodhi to carry on running the meditation classes.

About 1991, he-who-would-become Upakarin got involved. These two men formed the core of a small emerging sangha that met in Aryabodhi's modest flat and a variety of other places over the years. In 1996, a rented house on King Edward Avenue served as the sangha base for meditation classes as well a residential community. She-who-would-become Aryadrishti lived there while completing her degree at the University of British Columbia. Padumachitta, who now lives in Germany, also lived there at the time. Bhante Sangharakshita stayed at that location while visiting the nascent sangha in that year.

## **One by one, the sangha grows**

The sangha began to grow when it rented the basement of Aryabodhi's home. Those formative years were characterized by a regular infusion of order members from the U.K. and the Seattle Buddhist Center, most notably Aryadaka and Shantinayaka, who came to teach and foster friendships. The bonding and friendships established at that time remain the foundation of today's sangha.

Following his ordination in Spain in 2004, Dayasiddhi became VBC chair, succeeding Upakarin (2001-2004) and Aryabodhi (1998-2001). Vimalasara became chair in 2017, shortly before the center moved to its current location in Vancouver.

## **Thriving today**

Today, VBC is thriving with several weekly gatherings. About 15 regulars attend Thursday's Sangha Night. At least 20 people attend Recovery Monday for those recovering from addiction. Sunday morning's sit attracts five to 10 meditators. The last Saturday of every month is dedicated to dharma practice for black and indigenous people of color (BIPOC).

The center is supported by five active order members and about 20 mitras, 11 of whom have asked for ordination. In addition to two mitra study groups, an Ambedkar study group started meeting weekly in the spring. VBC includes a prison sangha, where Reg Johanson serves as

a Buddhist chaplain supporting two mitras serving time. Men and women mitras training for ordination meet monthly for practice.

## **Sangha activities move online**

The pandemic forced the center to move its offerings online. This enables people to attend who could not do so otherwise. Fundraising is an ongoing challenge, due to the uncertainty caused by the pandemic. Retreats and other in-person connections help create a sense of belonging and appreciation that encourage people's generosity.

## **Spreading the dharma beyond Vancouver**

VBC sangha members also are engaged in spreading the dharma beyond Vancouver. Several members have supported events on TheBuddhistCentre.com, most notably Christine Thuring's coordination of Buddhist Action Month (BAM!) and Vimalasara's curation of "Courageous Conversations about Race."

*Christine Thuring is a mitra training for ordination at the Vancouver Buddhist Centre.*

# sangha connections

## BOSTON SANGHA (BOSTON, MA)

### *Daily meditation – a pandemic silver lining*

Boston was an early pandemic hot spot and by March we had moved our sangha nights online. Sravaniya offered to lead a weekday online meditation to keep us connected and grounded. When Friday came, he said, “Well, I have nowhere else to be tomorrow. Shall we meditate together on the weekend as well?” Six months later, we are still meditating together online, seven days a week.

Morning meditation regulars include long-time sangha members and some who have joined us only online. One new member organized a physically distant meditation in the

park, meeting others in person for the first time.

“The focus on metta, staying in the present moment, and owning your own state of being without judgment really helps me,” one new member said. “I am able to be kinder to myself and others during the intense ups and downs of this pandemic and the current state of our democracy.” A regular sangha member said the daily meditation has saved her from dipping into depression. “Sitting for 40 minutes every day has allowed me to be much less engaged in samsara than I would have been otherwise.”

For me, the timing was a gift. Having just witnessed my father’s death, I was navigating the unpredictable waves of grief and struggling to stick with my daily meditation. Within days of returning to Boston after this death, I found myself getting up every morning and meditating with my friends.

At the close of each meditation, we unmutate, bow to one another from our Zoom boxes and express our gratitude. Certainly, a pandemic silver lining.

— Jessica Nelson

## KHANTE OUTREACH (PRISON SANGHAS)

The Khante Outreach Program in prison sanghas has been put on pause since the start of the pandemic. The prisons stopped admitting volunteers in mid-March. The Concord Men’s Prison Sangha was started by the late order member Bodhana more than 20 years ago. A member of that sangha this past year wrote a letter to the Aryaloka Buddhist Center expressing his appreciation for Bodhana. This is an excerpt from his letter.

### **‘Bodhana tricked me’**

Several months into the beginning of my attending the Buddhist Study Group here at the prison, I had a dilemma. During our meeting,

I asked Bodhana to help me; *The (Noble) Eightfold Path* had become overwhelming. “How can I do all these steps at once?”

Bodhana said, “Well, try doing just one of the steps.”

“Which one?” I asked.

He said, “Whichever one you want. Pick one and try your best to make it as skillful as possible.”

I chose Right Speech. I read everything I could that was written about Right Speech: Why it was a precept; the factors of skillful and unskillful speech; what constituted perfect speech . . . I meditated on it. I reflected. I vowed to improve . . . I immersed myself into developing this

one step along the path to the best of my ability.

And a funny thing happened. Over the next few years, I discovered how clever a teacher Bodhana was. The punchline to this story was that by practicing right speech, skillful speech and perfect speech, by trying to figure out how to speak in accordance with the step of the path, I learned something. When one step is truly practiced, all the steps are involved. . . Bodhana tricked me. I am forever grateful to him and to Aryaloka for coming here and offering the teachings of the Buddha.

— Richard

## ARYALOKA BUDDHIST CENTER (NEWMARKET, NH)

### *Online brings in wider participation*

Aryaloka Buddhist Center, like most sanghas, shut its doors to in-person gatherings in early March of this year. Fortunately, we were able to adapt and have remained connected through the Zoom platform. The sangha gathers every Tuesday evening for Friends Night, as well as once or twice a month for workshops or retreats. Most order chapters and mitra study groups have continued meeting online. Sangha friends have virtual tea together as well as meet outdoors for walks.

Our weekly Friends Night is attended by 15 to 25 people, and our online retreats have had 25 to 50 participants. With the online platform, we are pleased to see people at events from the West Coast and Europe, as well as people from the Northeast who normally would not be able to attend in person. This has led us to consider how to maintain an online connection once we are able to meet safely in person again.

When the lock-down was lifted in New Hampshire, some folks

met outdoors at the center in small numbers either to garden together, enjoy the grounds or catch up.

Aryaloka remains closed to in-person events at this time, and we will continue to meet online. Regular contributions, donations from online events, a federal Payback Protection Program loan and special fundraisers have helped Aryaloka to remain buoyant during this time. We appreciate everyone's support!

— *Suddhayu*

## NAGALOKA BUDDHIST CENTER (PORTLAND, ME)

### *Spiritual connections continue online*

On Wednesday evenings at 6:45 EDT, far above Central Maine in the deepest blue beyond, the Nagaloka Buddhist Center community gathers for Friends Night. We zoom from a personal space to a collective one online to explore, inspire each other and practice the dharma in a safe and welcoming space. The Zoom connection makes it possible for anyone from anywhere to join and for sangha members to “come” without the commute into the city of Portland. Order members Dharmasuri, Subhramani and Narottama guide the evening.

Many folks, looking for a still spot in

this spinning world, join us for meditation practice and instruction. Others seek a community of those who practice mindfulness and loving kindness in their daily lives. Others may be fascinated with the life of the Buddha, his quest to awaken to something that goes beyond our daily joys and sufferings of existence. Some of the topics discussed include the Threefold Way of ethics, meditation and wisdom; the Story of Bahia of the Bark Garment; the Four Noble Truths; and the Noble Eightfold Path.

Nagaloka is testing out offering a beginner class once a month online for

anyone with questions about Triratna Buddhist Community, Nagaloka and what we do. Mitra study continues twice a month via Zoom on Sundays, led by Subhramani and Saddhavasini. Sunday morning meditation with Dharma Bites, a brief dharma discussion following meditation, also continues online.

Please sit, take a breath, sign in and join us in the deep blue beyond over Central Maine as we zoom in on the Buddha's teachings. Nagaloka's events are listed on the website, and you are invited to join us.

— *Narottama*

# sangha connections

## SEATTLE BUDDHIST CENTER (SEATTLE, WA)

### *Sangha responds to BLM moment*

As the Seattle Buddhist Center (SBC) sangha was dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic, George Floyd was murdered by police on camera in Minneapolis, sparking protests across the U.S. and around the world. Our sangha felt the need to address the racial justice issues, and organized a sangha meeting. We were heartened by the enthusiastic response, and, forming several teams, decided to:

- Support protesters and to meditate, visibly as Buddhists, at rallies.
- Continue to educate ourselves through a study group with books, films, speakers and specialized trainings like the “Awakening to

Whiteness” series by Bright Way Zen.

- Keep racial justice issues alive through Sangha Night and classes by adding meditations and discussion, and participating in Triratna-led activities such as Courageous Conversations and a mitra and order member retreat, “Our Liberation is Intertwined.”
- Make our support of racial justice clear, strong and frequent via social media posts, web site updates.
- After COVID, reach out to diverse communities and NW Dharma Association to support the movement with a unified stance.

Also important, we crafted SBC’s own statement, based on Triratna’s, which outlines our commitment to supporting Black Lives Matter, making our sangha a welcoming home for people of color, and arresting the karmic momentum of racism.

*While we reflect on the racial and social injustices of the world, we will also look at the effects of racism on our own Buddhist community. Awareness is revolutionary. We recognize the need for a more proactive approach to creating a community that is welcoming to all. We will work to prioritize these initiatives.*

— Mary Edwards

## SAN FRANCISCO BUDDHIST CENTER (SAN FRANCISCO, CA)

### *Continuing practice online and off-cushion*

In the San Francisco sangha, taking practice off the cushion is not new. Engaged practice always has been essential to keeping the San Francisco Buddhist Center and Dharmadhara retreat center going and our sangha connected. Sangha members, following the examples of Sangharakshita and Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, practice Buddhism in various ways.

These ways include buying land and remodeling buildings for retreats, building shrine rooms, fund-raising for local non-profits, helping one another with projects, sharing home-grown garden offerings, collaboratively launching web sites, even supporting

a local mitra who went through an organ transplant. Every retreat requires a team to organize meals, rides and other logistics along with the teachings.

Since the COVID pandemic, we have focused on staying healthy and transitioning to online practice. This past year, members have put energy into both racial justice and climate crisis. Order members and mitras engaged in online conversation that impacted the global movement. After the murder of George Floyd, a mitra organized a weekly sit to support the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement and remember the lives lost to police violence and systemic racism. Her

goal was to make a space to grieve collectively, deepen awareness, develop metta and offer support for the ongoing BLM cause. Meditators meet outside the center, wear masks and sit six feet apart, while others attend online via Zoom.

On the climate crisis front, a group called the Green Sangha formed to create a space for the sangha to engage creatively with others around climate crisis and environmental justice, within the context of Buddhist values and teachings. Members attend trainings, demonstrations and fundraisers.

— Mary Salome

## ROCKY MOUNTAIN BUDDHIST CENTER (MISSOULA, MT)

### *Engaged Buddhism with social distancing*

The Rocky Mountain Buddhist Center (RMBC) is in the midst of the current new reality with COVID-19. The physical and social distancing requirements have brought a wrinkle to the sangha's efforts to take our practice off the cushion. RMBC currently does not have regular, organized community functions as a group. However, individually, the sangha is an active community. Living close to the outdoors is highly valued in Montana. Therefore, good stewardship of our backyard is front and center for most of us. Several sangha members are politically active and work in "green" industries.

Marching in groups is off the table for now but writing and phoning elected officials is still going on. Sangha members have made masks. Another recorded meditations and made them available to friends and family. Members are making a more concerted effort to check in with each other to see how we are doing. And, of course, we stay connected to our personal practice so as not to get carried away with the frenzy in the world.

— *Samatara*

## TRIRATNA NYC SANGHA (NEW YORK CITY, NY)

### *NYC members step up in face of pandemic*

It has been a tough time to be a New Yorker this year, to be sure. But throughout the pandemic, the Triratna NYC Sangha has endured and even thrived, accomplishing amazing things individually and as a group while sheltering in place and social distancing. Here are a few highlights:

#### **Daily drop-in meditation groups:**

Upayadhi and Jon Aaron have closed the Space2Meditate studio in Manhattan and moved offerings online. They have been offering nine drop-in meditations and a dharma talk each week via Zoom since mid-March. Sangha members Ananta and Gary Baker also organize weekly virtual drop-in meditations.

#### **Weekly sangha meetings:**

The sangha continues to meet weekly with programs on various topics, including social justice, dreams, music and sound, dream-yoga, Dharma Day and the elements of nature.

#### **Virtual retreats:**

We have co-organized several online retreats, including: The Dakini in the Cremation Ground (with Ananta co-leading); Avalokitesvara – Compassionate Protector (with Parami); and Our Liberation Intertwined: Interrupting the Karmic Momentum of Racism (with Upayadhi co-leading).

#### **Shelter-in-place artwork:**

Despite being unable to access her studio for more than five months,

sangha member Syma created numerous new works for two shows at the Carter Burden Gallery.

#### **An art salon:**

Sangha member Fay Simpson went virtual with her monthly performance salon, organizing and curating an event featuring performances by 10 artists.

#### **A city-wide sing-along:**

Gary Baker co-organized New York Sings Along, a city-wide event that brought thousands across New York to their windows, doorsteps and rooftops after the nightly tribute for essential workers, to sing choruses of "Lean on Me," "New York, New York" and other classics.

— *Gary Baker*

# sangha connections

## PORTSMOUTH BUDDHIST CENTER (PORTSMOUTH, NH)

### *Experiencing the 'upside' of the situation*

The pandemic arrived just as Portsmouth Buddhist Center (PBC) was moving into a new center after three years of setting up weekly in borrowed spaces. PBC closed a few days before we were due to have our welcoming open house for sangha and community.

Since then, like other centers, our connections have been virtual. In May and June we had a couple of celebratory gatherings, including Zoom meetings broadcast from the center live on Facebook to dedicate the new center. Our Sunday gatherings and two mitra classes continue, and we are offering introductory courses, also on Zoom.

In early August, a few council members reached out by phone to our core sangha members, to check in and support how they have been getting

on with their practice under pandemic conditions.

Many of us are experiencing the upside of the situation, partaking in a wide range of online dharma offerings from [TheBuddhistCentre.com](http://TheBuddhistCentre.com) and many other sources. No one is eager to gather in the center anytime soon, but for this fall we are reviving a tradition of Sunday meditation in the park, properly masked and distanced, of course. Virtual connections will continue for the winter, and we hope for improved conditions next year!

— *Shraddhavani*

## TACOMA BUDDHIST CENTER (TACOMA, WA)

### *Experiencing the 'upside' of the situation*

The Tacoma Buddhist Center opened in March 2016. We have one Order Member, Manidha, and eight mitras. The sangha has stayed connected during the pandemic through Zoom along with regular social distanced activities like paddle boarding, walks and dinner. The center recently started a BIPOC racial affinity group with many members engaged in work to end racism.

— *Manidha*

## Teachings from Anālayo

*Be clear about why you meditate*



by Saddhavasini  
Editor, Vajra Bell

Two weeks after I and fellow Triratna order member Satyada walked and talked with Anālayo at the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies, I attended a retreat with him on “Neurobiology of Compassion and Compassion Practice” that was led by Diego Hangartner. Anālayo guided our meditation in the mornings and evenings and spent time with us taking our questions.

At the time, we were planning this issue of the *Vajra Bell* focused on climate change, a subject about which Anālayo cares deeply. While he talked of the climate crisis on our walk and at the retreat, he offered a number of other teachings that I took away from our conversations with him. Here are a few.

### Mindfulness of breathing, not mindfulness of breath

Meditation is foundational to developing mindfulness. It gives us the tools to watch our minds as we respond to what is difficult. Anālayo came to meditation originally seeking to deal with his anger. He started with the mindfulness of breathing, focusing on and counting the breaths, but he found “the more I was meditating, the more angry I became. Anger is tunnel vision, and I was training myself in tunnel vision.” Instead, he came to realize that the practice was mindfulness of the process of breathing, in particular noting the breath as it goes in or comes out, rather than just focusing on the physical sensation caused by the breath.

### Avoid a ‘hunting attitude’ with our practice

We often engage in concentration practices, such as the mindfulness of breathing, he said, with the idea that “I’m looking for something that pays me back for my effort.” We approach our practice with a “hunting attitude,” to achieve something that inevitably will fall away. When Anālayo practices the Brahma Viharas, for example, he experiences himself as dwelling in them, and the benefit is already there.

### Be clear about why you meditate

Take a moment at the beginning of your meditation to reflect on your intention, your purpose for meditating, he said. For your own liberation? For the benefit of others? You need an altruistic intention. “I am meditating for the whole world,” he said. Having such an intention “makes a huge difference in our meditation.”

### Practice and social action – the same

He also talked about the duality he sees in the West between practice and social action. He identifies himself as a Sri Lankan Buddhist, where he was ordained. There they see meditating and social work as inseparable. In the West, he said, they partition it. If I meditate, I don’t have time for social work; or, if I do social work, I don’t have time to meditate. The two are not separate, he said.

### Being versus doing

There is no inherent value in not doing, he said. Sometimes you have to act. Being and doing are not separate boxes. They are on a spectrum, and you have the freedom to be anywhere on that spectrum. With being, you can be doing and with doing there can be being.

### No one approach is ‘right’

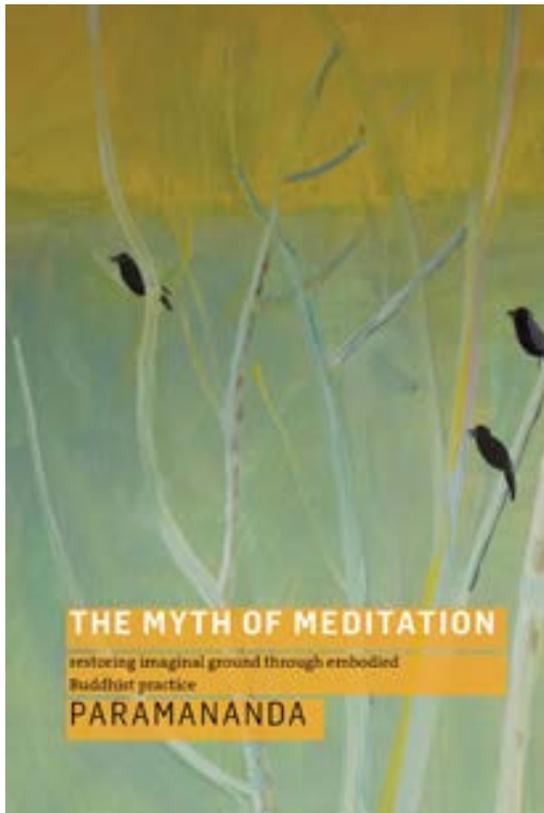
No one practice is right in all situations. One needs mindfulness to see what one needs when practicing in different conditions. He shared that when he sits to meditate, he can ask himself, “What does Anālayo need today?”

In the same way, you can choose and practice different approaches and experiment. Ask yourself, “What do I want, what do I need now?” so that meditation becomes interesting. There are times when mindfulness of breathing is appropriate. But sometimes, he said, it’s too detailed, and “I just want to abide.”

# book review

## *The Myth of Meditation: restoring imaginal ground through embodied Buddhist practice*

by Paramananda



by Danamaya

Paramananda, now in West London, lived and taught in San Francisco for eight years in the 1990s. His books offer concise, helpful meditation instruction. Through poetry and his own poetic style, he shows us how to appreciate more in ourselves and the world to keep our practice flowering and deepening. I personally have benefited from his kindness and practical wisdom, and I was delighted his book, *The Myth of Meditation: restoring imaginal ground through embodied Buddhist practice*, has come into being.

The book is divided into three sections: grounding, turning towards and seeing through. It includes

meditations (along with a link to their recordings), but the book offers more than meditation nuts and bolts. “Meditation is then, more than anything else, a way of investigating our soul,” Paramananda writes. “The intention of the book is to restore meditation to the ‘imagination ground’ from which it arose.”

Grounding is a central theme, a gateway by which to come into a full, bodily experience of our present situation. We find our ground in our psyche by attending to the body. Whether sitting, lying, or standing, by being fully present we find stillness

Trusting what’s there, we then can turn towards our immediate experience – whatever that is – with kindness. It’s easy to see how turning away happens in the face of strong emotions like grief, shame or anger. More often, though, our turning away is subtle and manifests as thoughts, defensiveness or justification in our minds, all felt in our bodies. The emotions end up leaving “a kind of stain on the mind.” By abiding with them in kindness, accepting and breathing with them, Paramananda says, over time they fade and release.

We are not trying to destroy or transcend anything but want to let everything have its place in the psyche. Love and care support our turning towards and deepen our awareness.

“This radical non-interference is at the heart of what we are calling turning towards,” Paramananda says.

“The turning towards necessitates a grounding and sets up the conditions for seeing through (the third section).” If we regard our ideas as actual things (so often I do this!), we can go off the rails into literalism, bias and polarization. That strategy takes us into chaos.

When we “see through,” we are in the world in a different way, a way that is rich and complex. There’s our rich, inner “polytheistic psyche,” as he terms it. That fascinating phrase invites me to look deeper at my own archetypal underpinnings and approach them through fully experiencing my body in the here-and-now.

In these fraught and perilous times, Paramananda’s voice reaches through this vivid froth to bring me back to my senses. I can distinguish the “pain that separates us from the sorrow that connects us.” The clarity that arises comes with kindness. It is this, then, that I can bring into the world, to meet the moment and everyone I encounter.

*Danamaya is an order member with the San Francisco Buddhist Center (SFBC), and was ordained at Il Convento in Italy in 2002.*

# book briefs

## Mindful of Race: Transforming Racism from the Inside Out

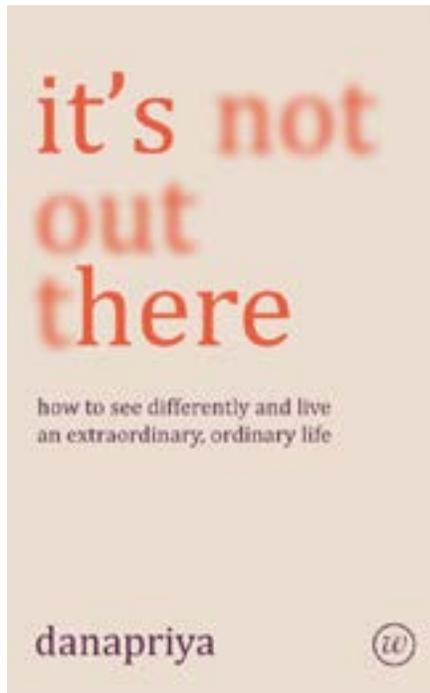
by Ruth King

The Boston Sangha is reading *Mindful of Race* by Ruth King, Insight Meditation teacher, as part of our weekly Sangha Nights. King begins with a direct, loving diagnosis of the habits and conditions that underlie racial injustice and then offers a path for cultivating recovery. She demonstrates how Buddhist practice has enabled her to “experience racial distress without warring against it.” Reading this book together has fostered a dialogue about recognizing ourselves as racialized beings and cultivating awareness of our habitual, conditioned reactions to racial distress enabling wiser responses to arise.

— Jessica Nelson, a mitra training for ordination with the Boston Sangha

## It's Not Out There: How to see differently and live an extraordinary, ordinary life

by Danapriya



Most of us constantly look outside ourselves for something: happiness, love, contentment. But this something is not out there. “It” is within us. We are full of these qualities: happiness, love, contentment and more.

In *It's Not Out There*, Buddhist teacher Danapriya helps you to look inside yourself in such a way that life becomes more vivid, joyful and extraordinary. It's about seeing the reality of the human predicament and seeing through the illusions that create unnecessary pain for yourself and others. This book uncovers the fertile ground of your own potential and enables you to live the life you are here for.

— Windhorse Publications

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Please give [here](#). And thank you for your generosity!

# poetry

## Witness

by Gunopeta

*"...it's not just species that are vanishing. Entire features of the earth are disappearing..."*  
—Elizabeth Kolbert

Prayer flags  
weather in the wind.  
Vibrant once, they've  
faded. Blue

white red green  
white. As if half  
rubbed-out. Becoming  
nothing.

Threads appeared  
then disappeared  
carried away  
by time. Hems

ragged, pieces  
tore off. Big.  
Little. On the ground  
or who can say?

Now  
they flap in shreds  
their prayers almost  
silenced. Did you notice?

One for the earth.  
One for the sea.  
One for the air.  
One for all now gone.

And one  
for the little boy who lives,  
and for the little girl,  
unknowing, down the lane.

## Only Knew

by Kiranda

If we only knew how very hard it is to slip into  
One of these human lives, rare and precious.  
To have a chance to love, learn, know.  
To be guided and supported in the search.  
How very special and unique the journey truly is.  
How easily lost and hard to attain.

If we only woke up .... and knew,  
We'd work with such deep intention  
Yes, as if our hair was on fire.  
Or we'd go off for three years  
To the forest, to think on it.

## Foxgloves

by Ed Rogers

Photo by Ed Rogers

Washed by the rain,  
captured briefly in bold sunlight,  
the fragile beauty of these foxgloves  
is visually stunning.

They exist in a wild place,  
where Nature is unkempt,  
at its most beautiful,  
enjoying their days in the sun.

What need of poetry  
when such beauty is unleashed  
into the world?

Washed by the rain,  
captured briefly in bold sunlight,  
transient as the wind.

*This poem is from Fallen Leaves  
– a collection of poems by Edward  
Rogers of Scotland. The collection  
was published in November 2019  
by Tuba Press in the U.K.*



# 'We Are Part of Nature'

## *Grounding our activism in ethics and compassion*

- continued from page 6

of anxiety and even anger. These poisonous mental states make our engagement unsustainable and easily can lead to burnout. When overwhelmed by empathetic responses to world challenges, to images of police violence against people of color, to images of the sheet ice falling off glaciers in Antarctica as a result of global warming, to images of the suffering caused by the polarization in our political system, we are unable to act in a way that is consistent with our Buddhist principles.

Mindfulness is the way to overcome this danger, he said. We need to work with our minds, using mindfulness to see with clarity both our experience within, but also without, as is outlined in the Satipaṭṭhāna sutta. With mindfulness we can avoid extreme views, finding the middle way.

These concepts also apply to how we deal with issues of racism and diversity and the polarized nature of political discourse. Anālayo suggested we look to “open a space” in our dialogue, using mindfulness to take in the other person, manifesting the dharma as we offer an opportunity for open discussion. That is best done when we come to it with a quiet, equanimous mind, a mind where mindfulness is allowing us to be firmly grounded in our experience.

Of course, there was much more we touched upon in our conversation, but I close with this reflection. As Buddhists, we have a lot to offer in the way of transforming the world through the sphere of social engagement. To do that successfully, we first must look into our own minds and not confuse empathy with compassion. If we get too caught up in an empathetic response, we will burn out just as Icarus' wings in Greek mythology melted when he flew too close to the sun. If we can balance

compassion with mindfulness, we can bring our Buddhist wisdom to bear, including the realization that we are part of nature, not above or outside it, as the contemplation of the elements in the Satipaṭṭhāna sutta shows us.

## MINDFULLY FACING CLIMATE CHANGE

BHIKKHU ANĀLAYO



Barre Center for Buddhist Studies published Anālayo's book, *Mindfully Facing Climate Change*.

*Satyada was ordained into the Triratna Buddhist Order at Aryaloka in July 2012. He has been part of a team teaching the dharma at Aryaloka and in prisons for more than 12 years.*

# The Earth is My Witness

*What we do matters*



by Aryadrishti

*This is an edited version of a talk given by Aryadrishti as part of Buddhist Action Month 2020. The full talk can be viewed [here](#).*

— Editor

What we do matters, even though suffering in the world is overwhelming and unending.

Nature was my refuge when I was little. I remember as a child entering the forest in a fit of rage, believing that people were mean and stupid. As I stewed, a squirrel approached me, assessing whether it was safe to pass. In that moment, my hatred dissolved. This was the first of many encounters with nature that broke my negative preoccupation with self and opened a deep connection with all that lives. I resolved to work for the welfare of all beings.

Nature brought me to Buddhism. I discovered rock climbing. I felt a vivid connection to the earth, clinging to stone ledges above chasms of empty air. In those moments when a single-pointed concentration, where doubt and fear would lead to falling, I felt most alive. When I met Buddhadasa, a rock-climbing order member from Australia, and described my love of climbing – the fearlessness, connection, concentration – he smiled. Nothing, he said, compared to the spiritual friendship he experienced in the Buddhist community.

When I entered the Melbourne Buddhist Centre 25 years ago, I picked up a book with readings on the Triratna refuge tree that described the futility of seeking power, wealth and pleasure in the civilized world. I knew I was in the right place. Since then, I have followed the path of the Buddha. The practice and the friendships the path has offered are more challenging

and deeply satisfying than climbing ever was. It is my refuge, but nature is still my touchstone.

Let me tell you the story of Tahlequah, a mother Orca whale who swam more than 1,000 miles carrying her dead baby above the ocean's surface for 17 days, desperately trying to get it to breathe. Knowing it was hopeless, the love for her child was painful to watch.

The Pali canon offers a similar story of a mother's loss. Kisa Gotami also had a dead child and was overcome with grief. She went to the Buddha who told her he could bring her child back to life if she could bring him a mustard seed from a household that had not experienced death. While many households had mustard seeds, each one also had faced death. She came to peace with the loss of her child, returned to the Buddha and eventually gained enlightenment.

The story of Tahlequah's baby is not an isolated incident. Hers was one of many dead Orca babies who have less than a 50-percent chance of survival. Only 72 southern resident Orcas are left, and the adults are stressed and starving. Our pursuit of happiness has created conditions that threaten them.

Killing them outright and capturing them to perform in aquariums has stopped. But the dams that provide clean, cheap electricity decimate the salmon runs upon which the Orcas depend for their food. Runoff from our streets, plastic waste and oil spills pollute the waters. We didn't know that these things that improve our quality of life could cause suffering and bring such horrific consequences. But now we do know, and we carry on.

As the Buddha sat under the bodhi tree before his enlightenment, Mara challenged his right to enlightenment. The Buddha answered, "This earth supports all beings; she is impartial and unbiased toward all; she is my witness."

What we do matters. This is the law of karma. Every action we take, large and small, influences the conditions that create the world we live in.

Over 25 years I have worked to create habitat to support the salmon that feed the Orcas, and it is not enough. I remember that this is not about me. I lean on the Buddha's example; I breathe deeply and connect to the suffering from a place of strength and positivity.

Healing the earth from environmental destruction is a monumental task. Every choice we make impacts it. I recently flew to Mexico for a Triratna convention and looked into the carbon offset for the flight. It was only \$12; that didn't seem like enough to make a difference. But the work I do to restore salmon habitat is not nearly enough. But if every person on every flight gave \$12, we could do a lot and create meaningful jobs for people.

We must be painfully aware of our impact. We can't justify it or give up in despair. We need to take responsibility. If we don't know what to do, we must learn. Like rock climbing, it takes training, practice and determination. It also gives life purpose, a life worthy of our breath.

Every act I make leaves a mark on the earth, on the multitude of species who inhabit it. May every action I take be out of generosity, love and wisdom. The earth is my witness.

*Aryadrishti started practicing Buddhism in 1995 and lives in Portland, OR. She runs a water resources engineering business, restoring aquatic habitat, improving water quality and reducing flood risk to people and property. She is an order convenor for Triratna US and Canada.*