The following is an edited transcript of a beautiful short talk given by Ajahn Brahm to a group practising on the Eight Precept day. Here Ajahn discusses the value of contentment in meditation and in life.

Today is the opportunity for us to spend the day keeping eight precepts, practicing meditation, studying the Dhamma, putting all of our focus on the practice. An Eight Precept day provides an opportunity to put aside all those things that usually occupy us and focus on what’s really important.

You often find in life that whatever you feel is deeply important or valuable, it’s usually what you spend your time doing. People who really like sport will spend today playing or watching sport. People who want to go shopping and buy more stuff, will do so because they think that’s more valuable.

Whatever you find has value, you’ll give priority to in life. It’s the same in your meditation and Dhamma practice. For those of you who really value the Dhamma, you’ll find it will fill more space in life. You’ll tend to listen to talks, to read Suttas, to meditate.

Sometimes people only find the importance of Dhamma later on in their life, so then they’ll spend more and more time studying, practicing, discussing, and contemplating.

The Dhamma is something which grows on you. And once one understands some of the great teachings of the Buddha, they really have a huge value for us. Not only do they have a value in giving us a sense of direction in life, but they can also give us value in creating a huge sense of peace and satisfaction.

This morning I was talking to a fellow monk, and he asked me whether I was happy here. I said yes, I am happy here. I’m always happy wherever I go.

I recently came back from Germany, and when I was there I was making sure that every day, every moment, everywhere I went I was happy. The Dhamma teaches you to do that.

Whether you’re at home, whether you’re healthy or you’re sick, whether it’s cold weather or warm weather, whatever’s happening you can develop this beautiful contentment through the Dhamma.

Seeing as this world is just as it is, we can’t control it, it’s just part of this life to sometimes be hot, sometimes be cold, sometimes to be successful, sometimes to fail, sometimes to do amazing things, sometimes to do silly things.

This is the nature of life but we can be content with it, we can make peace with it. It’s about changing our attitude towards life. And that’s one of the great teachings of the Dhamma. When people stop trying to change the world but change their attitude towards it, in other words, they make peace towards it, they really are developing some compassion and some wisdom.

“For he’s a jolly good A-jahn … and so sang all of us!”

More than 120 well-wishes squeezed into the Dana Hall bearing trays of birthday cakes, goodies and yummies to celebrate Ajahn Brahm’s 59th birthday.

Once again our “Mouth Harmonica Piper”, Eddy Khoo, played the Birthday song repeatedly whilst Ajahn Brahm was receiving numerous birthday cakes.

Eddy then spontaneously changed and played “For he’s a jolly good A-jahn” at our request, whilst we belted out the song to a chuffed, beaming Ajahn Brahm. May Ajahn Brahm have many, many more Happy Birthdays to share with all of us!

They can be content anywhere, wherever they go, even in a place that can be unpleasant, such as waiting around for an aircraft or being on a long journey. Whether you’re at home and cooking, or whether you’re cleaning, or just resting at night, whatever you’re experiencing you can always change your attitude towards it.

That’s such an important part of the Dhamma: just to learn how to be content in as many moments as you possibly can. That contentment means you don’t want to be anywhere else in the world, doing anything else, rather than just being here right now.

Every morning at the retreat I was teaching recently in Frankfurt, I got up early. Most people over there get up late, but it’s in my blood to get up early. I always get up about four o’clock.

Because it was summertime over there, the sun came up very early, and I just remember sitting by myself on the verandah with a beautiful view, having a cup of coffee, just being so contented and so happy to be there. That really set me up for the whole day.

You can do something similar. Sit in your garden, or sit in your room, or sit in your monastery, just reflecting how wonderful a place this is, and how content you are to be here, and you have this beautiful
feeling. You don’t want to be anywhere else in the whole world, which means you have no more desires, no more craving, and that gives you a sense of deep peace.

All peace comes from the subduing of this wanting or craving. It’s not just that wanting causes suffering, but wanting is suffering. Whenever you want something, you can’t enjoy what you already have.

Wanting is the distance between where you are and where you want to be. No wonder that’s always going to cause suffering, because there’s a gap there. That’s called Dukkha, that’s called suffering.

The more moments in the day you can spend just being content, there in those moments you find peace, you find stillness, you find bliss. You find even the deep meditations.

So remember, if you want to be somewhere else, if you want to get rid of this moment so that you can be somewhere else, you’ll always be suffering, that’s Dukkha. If you don’t want to be anywhere else in the whole world, that’s freedom.

You don’t have to have beautiful scenery or a healthy body to be content. Wise people can be content with anything. Just being content, wherever you are, whatever you’re doing, you know you always find a great sense of peace and freedom.

So in your meditation today, remember contentment. Contentment is overcoming wanting. Contentment leads to stillness. You can’t get into deep meditation when you have no contentment. Deep meditation, especially Jhanas, are just the result of the build up of moments of contentment, one after the other. So the more you are content throughout the day, the easier it is to meditate.

It’s not what you experience in meditation, it’s how you experience it. If you’re dull, are you content with that? If you really are content, the dullness doesn’t last.

All restlessness is a type of escape. Escape through what? Through discontent. If you’re discontent with your restlessness, you’re feeding it. If I’m just happy to be here with this stupid old mind of mine, then the mind stops. It’s like driving a car and turning off the gas.

What happens when we turn off the petrol supply to discontent? You’re just happy to be here, no matter where it is. The vehicle goes slower and slower and slower until it eventually stops. Because you don’t want to go anywhere else, you don’t go anywhere else. You stay put. So that degree of contentment creates a sense of ‘happy to be here.’

That ‘happy to be here’ may feel contrived in the beginning. But if you practice in this way the contentment will build and build and build. Until you get such intense contentment, you’ll find it so peaceful and so still and so blissful, that’s what leads to deep meditation.

And you realise this contentment that you build up in meditation also shows you how to overcome the sense of self. Because the sense of self inside of us is always, by nature, discontent. It never wants to stay still.

So when we develop this sense of contentment, the sense of self disappears, it has no meaning anymore. As the Buddha would say, a dead log has no sense of self because it just sits there.

The more content we are, the more ‘we’ disappear. Our whole sense of self disappears. If you want to understand what Anatta is, Anatta (or the sense of self) is always discontent, it’s always suffering. When we disappear, only then can we find a sense of contentment.

So this is what we do: we meditate to see the Dhamma, we see the Dhamma to meditate. We’re content, peaceful and free. So see how much contentment you can build up. It overcomes desire and produces peace and bliss, even enlightenment. So don’t try and fight or be discontent with anything today. Change your attitude to life, rather than changing life.

This talk was given on 24 July 2010
Edited and transcribed by Julienne van Loon.
This year's entry to the rains retreat at the lovely Dhammasara nun's monastery in Gidgegannup was joyous and beautiful; and as always left me feeling calm and happy having been privileged to take part in, and share the merits with all who attended. After arriving and receiving instruction from the friendly helpers, we made our way to the dana tent with our food offerings. There were a lot of people already there, and the tables were rapidly filling with a diverse range of culinary delights - Thai, Indian, Chinese, Malaysian, and Aussie tucker too.

The weather - not too hot, not too cold - was ideal for BSWA supporters to catch up with one another over a cup of coffee, or tea, before proceedings began. But, like all things impermanent, the noisy chattering ceased when the nuns asked everyone to be seated for the blessing, giving of the five precepts, a dhamma talk & various Pali chants.

Venerable took us further on to another spot where there was a large rock face exposed from the hillside, we all had a rest here for a bit and basked in the afternoon sun before beginning our return descent down the hillside. After navigating more prickly bushes, and spring loaded branches, we arrived back at the stream, but nowhere near the bridge. So following Venerable's example, one-by-one we all carefully leapt across the stream (to the dhamma awaiting on the other side).

Venerable then asked us to 'stop' for a 10 minute group meditation, so for the 20 or so of us left (including children too), we all sat on the adjacent rock area and used the peaceful sound of the flowing stream as our meditation object. What a relief it was to have 10 minutes of peace and calm from what was a very noisy, busy and exciting day. It was a nice reminder that meditation can be practiced anywhere and doesn't always have to be on your favourite cushion or at the temple. After the meditation we all walked slowly back to the main residence to finish a long, but very nice day.

The large crowd meant people were overflowing outside onto the verandah deck where seating and a public address system had been setup. During the nun's address, we sent our well wishes to Ajahn Vayama & Venerable Seri who were absent. After the chanting, Venerables Nirodha & Hasapanna collected rice offerings from supporters who formed a long continuous line around the outside path of the nun's residence. Here, we not only had the opportunity to perform dana, but we could also make personal contact with each nun by way of a smile and saying hello. After the meals, two guided walks were on offer for supporters to see the beautiful monastery grounds where our nuns reside and practice. A shorter one hour walk, or slightly longer two hour walk/hill climb gave people the option to burn extra calories if they happened to overfill their tummies at lunch time. Both walks started at the main nun's residence where Venerable Hasapanna & Anagarika Upheka led the largeish (20-30 person) group of us single-file, through a narrow meandering bush track until we came upon the first nun's kuti - a simple brick hut attached to a covered walking meditation path & water tank.

Everybody in turn, peered through the window to see what was inside a bhikkhu's kuti. So, what was inside? Not much, just somewhere to sleep... sadhu, sadhu, sadhu. Shortly after, we passed a second kuti, then arrived at a fresh water stream and bridge. This is where the short course walkers turned around to go back, and for the rest of us, the real walk began. After crossing the bridge, I soon realised this tour was becoming less of a casual walk, and instead more of a vigorous hill climb.

Venerable Hasapanna led this keen group of Buddhist bush walkers up the hillside through many a prickly bush and jagged sharp branches. When we eventually arrived at the top, we were treated to a beautiful view over the valley and a weird eucalyptus flavoured lolly that I've never tasted before (nice to know what it's like being a koala eating gum leaves).
Bodhinyana (Monks) Monastery Report

Wat’s Happening (Wat is Thai for monastery)

Everything is well at Bodhinyana Monastery, except that - how to put this - the presence of monks might soon be noticeable through the nose! The drought in the Serpentine area has been worse than the one in Perth, and our water situation is the worst ever. Our water tanks are no more than half full, and our dams still well below capacity.

If we have to start rationing the shower water, the number of visitors to the monastery may drop dramatically. Perhaps we will have to start fasting. If things get really bad, please just discretely give a deodorant stick… As usual, the boring but merciful reality is that there will be no such problems. Our contingency plans are already in place.

The Monastery is now on its annual 5-month Rains Retreat, in accordance with the ancient Buddhist monastic tradition going all the way back to the time of the Buddha.

For this year’s retreat, the monastery houses 12 monks, 4 anangarakas and 8 lay meditators. The retreat started with a large ceremony on July 25th, which was attended by perhaps 800 people. It was a beautiful day with a great sense of goodwill and harmony.

Aijahn Brahm’s Travels

Astonishing as it may seem, Ajahn Brahm has not been going anywhere since the beginning of the Rains. This is good news for the Monastery. The teachings he has given, as well as the more private advice, have been very much appreciated by everyone.

However, the time before the Rains Retreat was busy as usual for Ajahn Brahm. From 12th - 20th June Ajahn Brahm led his annual Executive Meditation Retreat, this year held at the Le Meridien Chiang Rai Resort in the north of Thailand.

The purpose of these retreats is to give people with busy lives time to relax and learn some Dhamma. This year the retreat included 5 days of ‘meditation and fun’, and then an optional 5 days of silent retreat. Over 100 people attended the retreat.

Towards the end of June, Aijahn Brahm attended the AGM of the Australian Sangha Association in Brisbane. This organisation brings together all monks and nuns in Australia of the various Buddhist traditions. While he was in Brisbane, he also gave a large public talk at the local Sri Lankan temple.

From 11th - 18th July, Ajahn Brahm led a retreat in Frankfurt, Germany. Because Frankfurt is situated pretty much in the middle of Europe, this retreat was attended by people from all over Europe. The retreat was held in an old hotel building in beautiful surroundings in the hills outside of Frankfurt. It is great to give Buddhists in Europe this opportunity, since many of them listen to Ajahn Brahm’s internet talks on a regular basis.

On his way to Germany, Ajahn Brahm had a 7-hour stopover at Bangkok airport. Without wasting any time, as soon as he landed he drove straight to the city, gave a Dhamma talk at The World Fellowship of Buddhists Headquarters, and then went straight back to the airport to catch his flight. This is how he is able to get so much done!

On 2nd June, Ajahn Brahm spoke at St. Georges Cathedral on the topic of Christianity and Other World Religions, presenting Buddhist teachings to the Anglican community. On 6th of August, he took part in “A priest, a rabbi, and a monk walk into a bar” at the UWA summer school. It was an evening of fun and discussion on how spirituality can address problems created by our modern lifestyle.

On 12th of August, Ajahn Brahm gave a presentation at the Retirement Village Association Conference in Perth. He says he is looking for options for his imminent retirement! (Don’t believe it! The truth is you wouldn’t be able to make him retire with any inducement, except perhaps an anonymous cave far away from anywhere.)

Comings and Goings

As for the other monks, life has been mostly blissfully quiet. One exception was the author’s (Aijahn Brahm’s) 5-day trip to Singapore, where I gave teachings from the suttas, the Buddha’s discourses. As usual for Singapore, the teachings were highly appreciated.

Ven. Ekaggata, our charming American monk, had an operation on his hand at the end of August. They took off a few pieces and added a few others, so it will be interesting to see what it all looks like when the bandages come off.

In June, Ajahn Khemavaro came from Wat BuddhaDhamma in Sydney to teach a highly successful 9-day meditation retreat at Jhana Grove. He also stayed at the monastery for about a week. Ajahn Khema previously stayed at Bodhinyana Monastery for almost 10 years.

Our long-standing and faithful Anagarika Amandus left for Wat BuddhaDhamma in June and is staying there for an indefinite period. Amandus has been supporting the monastery since the very beginning in 1983. So it is only reasonable that he gets a holiday after almost 30 years of service.

The father of one of our two Norwegian monks, Ven. Nitho, died at the beginning of the Rains Retreat. Ven. Nitho left for Norway almost straightaway, and then performed the funeral service for his own father. This is one of the great benefits of being a Buddhist monk!

Jhana Grove Retreat Centre Report

Building and Maintenance

The bamboo floor is continuing to bow in different sections. Sai from the Burmese temple in Westfield fixed one section with his friend. They also fixed the ceiling leak in the dining room and some minor plumbing jobs.

Not only did they spend almost one full day here working hard, but they also left a donation too! Very inspiring example of kindness & generosity.

Jorge, a professional floor man, will come in within the next month to fix the rest of the floor in the dining room. He did a good job in fixing the previous bowing.

Bill Prins was very helpful in doing some maintenance around the centre such as getting the green stains off the bricks and finishing cleaning the outdoor lights (Dania started cleaning it but Bill offered to finish cleaning it).

Prem is taking good care of the water tanks maintenance and came several times to check up on it. Ajahn Brahm has always been very helpful in everything at Jhana Grove.

The fire inspector from Serpentine came and approved the fire safety here.

Concrete inspector came and hopefully the concrete spraying will be fixed, which is still under warranty.

We receive calls almost every day from people wanting to attend the 9 day retreats. Perhaps we can ask Ajahn Brahm if he can do the June 9 day retreat with priority given to those who have never done a retreat with Ajahn Brahm before?

Carl, Derryk, Reese, Perry and some of the other inmates from Karnet Prison Farm come regularly to do some outdoor work around Jhana Grove: gardening, planting, rock work around the drains, cutting & spraying weeds.

Overall, all is going well here at Jhana Grove and it is a pleasure to live and serve here.

Dania & Michael Percy
"A Priest, a Rabbi and a Monk walked into a bar"

By Ron Mutton

...and when they had talked and had a glass (or two) of water, the observers could have sung 'For they are jolly good fellows' and clapped and wished them to live happily ever after.

And why you may ask? Canon Frank Sheehan, Centre for Ethics, Christ Church Grammar, Rabbi Shalom White, Chabad, WA and the one and only Ajahn Brahm had a conversation about marriage, its breakdown and solitary living.

Well it was really a bit like an inter faith triangular one day cricket series, except no one seemed to care what they scored. In fact the score was: White's Multicolours nil, Sheehan's Justice: nil, Brahm's Bassadors nil.

The truth indeed was that the captains were more concerned about the process - the spirit and way in which the game was played, rather than the score and that was why we really clapped at the end.

The moderator reminded us that 40% of marriages end in divorce and much solitary living. Often in too big houses. The trio were obviously on about a serious subject.

Ajahn Brahm reminded us of this with his opening gambit declaring that if Adam and Eve had been Chinese Buddhist we all would have lived happily ever after - because they wouldn't have gone for the apple but eaten the snake!

Seriously though, if just for a moment, Ajahn Brahm pointed to getting the relationship right at the beginning of the marriage. He saw this as moving to seeing a relationship in which it was no longer 'his' and 'hers' but 'ours'. This shift from being critical of one another to solving "our problem" makes it easier for all parties to finding agreement. This brings to mind another famous saying, "Two heads are better than one for solving problems".

Ajahn Brahm was also for smaller houses, saying he had grown up in a London council flat and in the unpretentious quarters, the family learned to live in close contact with each other compared to being separated by many bedrooms, living spaces and screens.

Rabbi White talked the Adam and Eve story/truth with seriousness, drawing from it the innate longing for a life companion. He drew out the biblical wording that Adam 'knew' Eve. There was an intimate companionship. He pointed to this being a universal story/truth and the central idea in Jewish marriage.

The rabbi pointed to a tendency in modern society to be scared to talk oneself into a 'commitment'. He saw intimate communication as a profound and central issue. He had concerns regarding people's great reliance on internet communication which, by its nature, lent to less intimacy.

Frank Sheehan entered holy orders at 17 in the Roman Catholic church. He confessed he went through the sexual revolution without firing a shot! However he 'jumped ship' at 40 years of age when he met the love of his life on a refugee boat in Darwin harbour. Fr Sheehan declared himself a 'liberal' in the church.

He commented for instance 'our sexuality is very fragile' and looked to come from a position of compassion when a couple suffered from a break of trust. He encouraged couples "to really try and keep the promise" and to "go back" when a mistake is made.

Well there was a smorgasbord of values and wisdom on the table for question time.

Ajahn Brahm declared he was never lonely. He always had his good self - and was happy to have a "celibate life" float in the Mardi Gras.

Fr Sheehan spoke of "happiness through transcendence" - it's not all about you. Rabbi White spoke of the value of "learning from a place of tranquillity" rather than the bombardments of modernity.

The final question offered opportunity for the trio to share about how they could breast the bar of life together. There was reflection that we can always see things in others we appreciate, that it is wise to not only have friendships with like minded people.

There was consensus on common goals for all: to love, for peace and contentment. There was a strong sense there was a place for a godless man like Ajahn Brahm, who was content with his own company and the company of all others!!

The following submission is prompted by a Dhamma Talk given by Ajahn Brahm in mid-2010

Nāmarupanupassanā

The body's just the vehicle to gratify desire; when what it needs is cooling down mind holds it to the fire.

When the mind is restless, the body has to dance; when body's been beat down, mind always takes the chance.

When the mind is frightened then body takes the pills; the mind runs up the account but body pays the bills.

When the mind is thirsty the body turns to drink; from what are the mind's demands will body never shrink.

When the mind's been hungry body's had to overeat; does mind want more experience? it's body feels the heat.

The mind reacts with anger and body wears the bruises; it's mind decides on everything that body never choose.

Mind wants to go exploring body takes it to the mind always has to have its fun but body bears the scars.

Body needs to take the pledge mind takes the plunge, unbecoming; mind may walk the razor's edge but body does the bleeding.

A wiser mind might choose to show a gracious change of heart: without a trace of loss of face, i'd grace fully let body go, before it falls apart.

But soon we'll watch the body balk and mind not realize it's time to just get our walk and deal to all of body's talk - and seeing through disguise.

We'll watch mind once more lose its grip, and resigned, just rub the chalk along the handle of the whip, and lay the lash across its eyes.

The chasm just gets deeper as we leave the coast behind, for herein lies the sleeper, mind is his brother's keeper, so he teaches him a lesson with his skinny Smith & Wesson; but when the pressure doesn't lessen, he turns it on himself.

And thus mind kills the body - ignores its final cries; but, unlike the body, mind never simply dies; for to that end, must comprehend life's final karmic bond; again, it's born, again to wend; become another body's friend*; and even then, 'world without end' (Amen)

* (serial monogamy - at least until amāsana)
Dhammasara (Nuns) Monastery Report

Entry to the Rains Ceremony

The Entry to the Rains Ceremony for the Bhikkhuni Sangha at Dhammasara on Sunday 18th July 2010 was well attended with over 120 supporters and well wishers. We were happy to see so many of our old & new friends.

Some 30 - 50 people participated in the 2 traditional walks - one shorter one around the kutis headed by Anagarika Upekha and the other longer 2 hour walk across the stream and up into the hills, led by Ven. Hasapanna and Lin, encountering spectacular wildflowers along the way.

A special thank you to the core group of lay supporters, whose hard work & willing hands over many years now have helped make a smooth and happy running of the event, from the preparation beforehand, right through to the cleaning afterwards.

This year’s Entry to the Rains Ceremony was particularly auspicious, as we received a very rare offering of Buddha Relics from Burma.

Community

For this Vassa, there are two Bhikkhunis (Ven. Nirodha and Ven. Hasapanna), two Anagarikas and one lay woman interested in monastic life, residing at Dhammasara.

As announced in the last issue of ‘The Enlightened Times’, Ajahn Vayama (due to ill-health) is spending five months away from Dhammasara, accompanied by Ven. Sori, in a supporters’ house in Perth. Both left Dhammasara on Sunday 27 June, with all possible assistance.

They continue to be well supported in the city. Every two weeks we meet and go together to Bodhinyana to receive Ovada/the Teaching. The four Bhikkhunis have also been meeting together at their Leeming Retreat House in Perth every full-moon day for the recitation of the Patimokkha.

To minimise our travel, we are not going to Perth on new moon days. We continue on with our usual moon day programme on those days at our monastery.

On Friday 11 June 2010, Venerables Nirodha & Hasapanna attended the Official Opening Ceremony of the Buddhist Relic Exhibition at the Perth Town Hall, where they participated in some chanting.

Second Hand Car Offered

A good second hand car has been generously offered and gratefully accepted by the monastery. It is an extremely well cared for, one year old, Toyota Corolla, Sedan. This will provide many benefits to the monastery, including more safety during the bushfire season. It will enable the whole community at Dhammasara to attend Wednesday evening talks at Bodhinyana. Sadhu to all involved.

Building and Maintenance

The cover over the caravan near the Vihara has been approved and will be installed shortly. The main road has been graded from the gate to the Vihara. We also had a tree surgeon to look at and cut branches from two wandoon trees near the Vihara for safety reasons.

At the Entry to the Rains Ceremony, numerous people left their phone numbers to contact us when we need extra help for small projects between busy-bees. Thanks to these volunteers, we were able to shift the 2 rain water tanks at the old campsite to collect water and to make the area more usable, since the old caravan is still in good working order.

Future Plans and Projects

Our immediate project is to erect a 3 or 4 bay farm shed (open on one side, perhaps with a small lockable shed) to park our two cars, plus our trailer and new fighting pump/equipment.

We are also looking at Toilet/Shower/Storage facilities in the valley, where the first 4 kutis are. Specific funds are on hand.


Until recently, some projects were put on the back burner due to Ajahn Vayama’s ill-health. We are now ready to take these on.

Firstly, we need to look into building a Sala complex. Given the time span involved, the need for council approval, raising funds etc., we are beginning NOW!

End of Rains Ceremony

Dhammasara End of Rains Ceremony will be on Saturday 30th October 2010. Please arrive at 9.00am for a 10.00am start. There will be opportunities for bushwalks after the ceremony for those with suitable footwear.

We would like to take this opportunity once again to express our heartfelt gratitude to all our supporters, both near and far, for their ongoing support on so many levels. Even the monastery cat is well fed and healthy.

P.S. We are pleased to announce that together with “best Friends Rescue” team, we succeeded in rescuing an ill-treated run-away dog who had found his way to the monastery. He is now happily reunited with his carers.

We are also pleased to announce that despite the plans/activities of the past and he future, we are enjoying a very peaceful and quiet present.

And finally to whom it may concern, thank you for the rain to fill our dams.
Enhancing your Happiness skills
by Chris Perrier

As a follow up on my recent August 6 talk at Dhammaloka, I just wanted to provide a very brief summary of the latest scientific research on HAPPINESS.

What Is Happiness and What Skills Are Needed for Developing Happiness? It would appear that this body of knowledge is very rapidly and dramatically providing scientific validation for the Buddha’s teaching on ending suffering.

Over the last 10 years, research in the new field of positive psychology suggest that we have a happiness set point. Through remarkable studies with identical twins separated at birth, scientists have discovered that about 50% of our happiness is determined by genetics, and that we have a level of happiness that we tend to gravitate towards – this is happiness set point.

Furthermore, external circumstances only contribute 10% to our long-term life satisfaction. This leaves 40% under our control. Developing and enhancing happiness skills to maximize this 40% can result in a profound increase in personal well-being and deep inner freedom. This is what the Buddha was talking about when he said “I teach two things -- suffering and the end of suffering” (which of course means happiness).

Happiness researchers have measured happiness in three ways:
1. Ebbullience (exuberance) - this is the happiness of the sensory pleasure seeking good life and we know the extraverts by this measure I’m more happy than introverts.
2. Absorption in Flow - this is where time stops when you are engaged in an activity that stretches your abilities but does not overtax them.
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fXleFIJcqPs
3. Altruism - you are using your most comfortable talents in the service of a higher purpose.

The good news is that the sensory life come on over the longer term, contributes very little to life satisfaction. What contributes far much more is an individual’s capacity for absorption in flow, and even more than this, the individuals capacity to put the highest strengths in the service of an ultra was the ideal greater than their own self-interest in short, generosity/service to others.
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=17Vsg8xHq-4&feature=related

From rigorous clinical analysis, Dr Sonja Lyubomirsky, a leading researcher in this field, has identified that practicing the following 12 activities powerfully enhances life satisfaction and well-being. These are:

1. Expressing Gratitude and Cultivating Optimism
2. Avoiding Overthinking and Social Comparison
3. Practicing Acts of Kindness
4. Nurturing Social Relationships
5. Developing Strategies for Coping
6. Learning to Forgive
7. Increasing Flow Experiences
8. Savoring Life’s Joys
9. Committing to Your Goals
10. Practicing Religion and Spirituality
11. Taking Care of Your Body: Meditation + Physical Activity + Acting like a Happy Person (faking happiness behaviours to yourself until they becomes so real that you can own them as your own genuine happiness)

Here are some key quotes from Dr Sonja Lyubomirsky’s book.

On Expressing Gratitude:
“People who are consistently grateful, have been found to be relatively happier, more energetic and more hopeful and to report experiencing more frequently positive emotions. They also tend to be more helpful and empathic, more spiritual and religious, and less materialistic than others who are less predisposed to gratefulness.

Furthermore, the more a person is inclined towards gratitude, the less likely he or she is to be depressed, anxious, lonely, envious or neurotic.”
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ipiEvstzNM
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZOGAp9dw8Ac&feature=related

On Overthinking and Social Comparison:
“Essentially, all optimism strategies involve the exercise of construing the world with a more positive and charitable perspective, and many entail considering the silver lining in the cloud, identifying the door that has opened as a result of the one that has just closed.

It’s hard work and takes a great deal of practice to accomplish effectively, but if you can persist with the strategies until they become habitual, benefits could be immense. Some optimists are born that way, but scores of optimists are made with practice.

All that is required to become an optimist is to have the goal and to practice it. The more you rehearse optimistic thoughts, the more natural and ingrained they will become. With time, they will become part of you, and you will have made yourself into an altogether different person.”

“The combination of rumination and negative mood is toxic. Research shows that people who ruminate while sad or distraught, are likely to feel besieged, powerless, and self-critical and pessimistic, and are generally negatively biased.”

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8rMjWUKg4&feature=related
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bm-xwpdW1B

“We have found that the happiest people take pleasure in other people’s successes and show concern in the face of other people’s failures. A completely different portrait, however, has emerged of a typically unhappy person - namely, as someone who is deflated rather than delighted about his peers’ accomplishments and triumphs, and who is relieved rather than sympathetic in the face of his peers’ failures and undoings.”
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DNOMtxqPWAk&feature=related

On Committing to Your Goals:
“it turns out that the process of working towards a goal, participating in a valued and challenging activity, is as important to well-being as its attainment.”

There is growing information available about these happiness skills. Each of the above 12 happiness activities has a whole range of strategies that can be learned and mastered by anybody prepared to put in the hard work of allocating time, energy and resources. My recommendation is to have a look at Martin Seligman’s website: authentichappiness.org

There are many assessments which you can do on this website to help you to assess you level of happiness, your signature strengths, your level of optimism/pessimism and your level of depression.

You get instant feedback relative to your gender, age and socioeconomic status and the whole thing is free of charge! You can also track your progress on these measures over time.

Participating in this would see you making a contribution to the wider body of knowledge on happiness skills, because this website is part of Martin Seligman’s research projects.

I find this to be materially very inspiring and very much complementary to the practice of the Dhamma. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have about developing these happiness skills or related topics on positive psychology.

Please give me (Chris Perrier) a call on 0411734447 anytime.
Part One

By Anne McLeod

The Accidental Monk: Paul Ngo's encounter with Buddhism

For Paul Ngo, a Vietnamese-born American, the spiritual path leading to his ordination as a monk was "kind of accidental". Having grown up in Los Angeles, the son of Vietnamese refugees, Paul left college with a degree in economics and a debt of $20,000 to pay off. Needing a job that would pay, he went straight (after a stint in Africa with the Peace Corp) into banking.

His work took him to Hong Kong and then onto Bangkok in the early 1990s just as the Asian economy was starting to take off. Paul found it easy enough to get a job as a financial analyst with ING Barings, one of the top international brokerages in Thailand. But he was under intense pressure.

"As a stockbroker, my life revolved around information, a constant flow, sometimes a whirlwind, of information. A large part of the job is to be able to sift through the stream of information and determine which piece of news will have an impact on the stock market."

"There is a relentless search for the most updated news. By nine o'clock in the morning I would have read four newspapers, scanned the computers for news updates from Reuters and Bloomberg, and checked with the research department regarding recent company developments as well as broad economic and political trends."

Working in such an adrenaline-fuelled environment, the momentum continued throughout the day. After work, he rushed to the gym for a quick workout, met up with friends and colleagues for drinks and then dinner. He would be out until about 10:30-11:00 p.m. two or three times during the week.

Weekends were filled with brunches and lunches, dinners and clubs. He would literally run from one appointment to the next. Rarely would he be home before midnight.

Often on weekends he took trips to Phuket, Chiang Mai, Hong Kong or Singapore. It was not uncommon for him to go to the airport from work on Friday night and come back to the office on Monday morning straight from the airport.

"I was brought up with the motto: Work hard, play hard. Unfortunately, nobody told me about contentment."

In spite of all the activities and options available to him, Paul began feeling bored and disenchanted with life. "Things started to slow down at work due to the economic recession. But regarding my personal life, I began to notice that no matter where I was or what I was doing, there was this undercurrent of boredom and existential anxiety."

"I would be at some 'fabulous party' or the 'in' club and then this feeling would come over me and I would look around and realise that everybody looked as lost as I was. They seemed to be trying to fill up their lives with the same type of material possessions: clothes and cars, and sensory diversions like going to restaurants and clubs and travelling to strange and exotic places, or self-annihilation through drugs and alcohol."

The irony in such a 'glamorous' high-octane, life geared to success, was that everything ended in boredom or, worse, oblivion. Most of the time Paul couldn't remember what he did yesterday.

He remembers thinking: "I got cheated somehow! I have done everything I am supposed to do. They all told me that if I worked hard, followed all the rules, and paid my dues, success would come, and with that, everlasting happiness. By all accounts, I am the poster-child of success. I am barely in my thirties, bringing home six-figure paychecks, dining at the best restaurants, taking holidays anywhere in the world and buying whatever I want. Yet I feel so bored and discontented. This is utterly, utterly unfair!"

As a nine-year-old, Paul's family escaped Saigon just before the Communists took over in 1975. His mother had been working for the Americans so the family was evacuated to the Philippines, then resettled in Los Angeles.

The Catholic Church supported them with housing and schooling, but growing up as a refugee was still a struggle. Surrounded by conspicuous consumption, Paul idolized wealthy people assuming they must be happy. He thought he wasn't happy because he was poor.

Working in the finance industry made him realise that rich people still had their issues, they got stressed, paranoid, and no matter how much money they had, it was never enough.

In 1998 the Asian economies suffered a dramatic crash. While continuing to make a good living, Paul found that he had more time on his hands than before. Curiosity led him to visit an American friend who was staying at a nearby Buddhist monastery.

Arriving with a fairly cynical attitude, his first impression was not positive. There were Western kids sitting around, "a bunch of high school drop-outs and hippies that were kind of bumming around". He reflected, "It's a path about letting go but you have to have something first to let go of. It's easy for you guys because you don't have a job to let go of."

One of the monks at the monastery, Phra Peter, was English, had written a couple of books on Buddhism and could answer Paul's questions. When he first heard some of the Buddha's teachings, something resonated in Paul even though the concepts were all new to him,

"It was as if he was expressing something deep inside my consciousness. The teachings on kamma and sila [morality] - if you do good then good things will happen to you and that your goodness will protect you from harm - these were teachings that I believed and have always tried to live by."

Born into a Catholic family, Paul had become disillusioned with morality and its association with Christian Puritanism and self-righteousness. Buddhist morality seemed to have a different tone. He actually found the teachings on keeping precepts quite attractive, as something that you offer the world, not something demanded from above.
The Accidental Monk Part One

"Another appealing aspect of Buddhism I found is that we are responsible for our own enlightenment. The Buddha discovered the path to Nibbana but it is up to each one of us to make the effort and walk down that path."

The first time Phra Peter discussed the goal of Buddhism, which is to do good, refrain from doing evil and to purify oneself, “it felt so natural and familiar that I thought to myself, ‘If I were to verbalize the criteria or goal of my life, this would be it.’”

Phra Peter was teaching meditation and offered the training to Paul, but his natural skepticism surfaced again. “Growing up in Los Angeles, a place of never-ending new-age spiritual fads and fashion, I was prejudiced against meditation. I lumped it in with all that trendy stuff.”

“My initial impression of meditation and yoga was that it was something for bored, rich corporate types to do before they visited their spiritual guru to have their aura examined.”

But Phra Peter engaged his interest by describing how, if you’re a good meditator, you can see the future. “As a stockbroker, I was really interested now.” Motivated by monetary gain, he hoped to apply what he learned to stock analysis.

“That weekend, I didn’t want to talk to my friend, I just wanted to focus on my breath.” During this intensive meditation, Paul was trying to attain the kind of psychic powers that would help further his career but felt something at a deeper level.

Back at work with not a lot happening, he decided that he would take a year off, do more meditation then go back to New York and ‘clean up’. “That was my motivation to join a monastery”, he recalls with some mirth.

With too many distractions in the city, Paul wanted a more conducive atmosphere for meditation. He transferred to a quieter monastery in the country. Although he was only one hour’s flight from Bangkok, his lifestyle as a stockbroker seemed worlds away.

Coming from such a fast-paced and sensory-driven world to Wat Pah Nanachat, where it seemed that the only sounds were from the swaying bamboo bushes and falling leaves, was a bit of a shock. Immediately he felt strong conflicting emotions.

“I remember feeling at times quite lost and ill at ease with the calm and stillness of monastery life. I can recall experiencing many mood swings during my first week.” He had his share of frustrations and disappointments dealing with the conditioned thoughts that sabotaged his progress, but overall, was attracted to the simple and peaceful life of the monastery. “And the structured environment of having scheduled activities throughout the day really appealed to me.”

At the end of most meditation sessions, he felt a refreshing sense of being calm and centered. Perceptions of his surroundings seemed to be enveloped in a mist of goodwill and gentility.

“The irony was that in contrast to my blind pursuit of happiness and excitement in my lay life, which ended up in boredom and desperation, I was finding enthusiasm and contentment just sitting in my kuti counting my breaths.”

At the end of the year, 1999, he was quite happy to return to the US and apply what he had learned to his stockbroker life and stock analysis. But after his first rains retreat, a time during the rainy season when monks and nuns stay inside the monastery for extended meditation, Paul was asked if he would like to come along to visit some revered, perhaps even enlightened, masters in their forest monasteries.

It was during this visit that Paul, somewhat cynically, thought he would test out a monk who had a reputation for psychic powers. Not understanding any of the Thai being spoken, he tried to communicate telepathically with the monk, “OK, if you know what I'm thinking, why don't you show me?” So I closed my eyes. Suddenly I saw this dragon flying at me.”

In Hong Kong as a bored young stockbroker wanting to make a statement beneath his suited office uniform, Paul had had a dragon tattooed on his arm. “So I thought, OK, maybe he does have something”, he laughs.

But more impressive was the vibration of loving kindness that emanated from these monks. The effect on Paul was deep and profound. “They were just so peaceful. Not super soft and fuzzy, but something solid, something otherworldly. I was very curious.”

Something triggered in him. “They impressed me as having something I wanted to have, some quality I could aspire to.”

That was the inspiration to ordain for another five years and see what happened. “The thing is, it was never a long-term thing. I never thought, ‘Oh, I'll never have another relationship, never have sex again.’ I just thought: ‘OK, I can do all this, one year at a time, till five years time.’”

Worried that there might be some adverse physiological effects from staying celibate for so long, he asked some monks. They said, no, that they'd been celibate for sixty, seventy years and it wasn't a problem. Paul couldn't conceive of lasting that long without sex.

“In retrospect, my decision to commit to the five years of celibacy was quite fortuitous because a lot of people obsess about it, ‘Oh, I'm never going to do this again’, and they get very nervous about it. But if you say to your mind, ‘Well, you can do what you want in five years time’, then it's no problem.”

He never thought he was giving up the world. Even now, he keeps the option open of returning to his old life but because things are going well, he's happy where he is. “When I talk to my friends they're doing the same thing, so the world is still sitting there, out there. If I really want to, I can pick it up anytime.”

Paul Ngo's encounter with Ajahn Brahm brought him to Australia, where he has since touched the lives of many people through his teaching of meditation. His journey in Australia will continue in the next Summer issue of Enlightened Times.
Upcoming Activities

Dhammaloka

- Chanting, Guided Meditation and Dhamma Talk - Every Friday, 7pm-9pm.
- Beginner’s Meditation Class - Every Saturday, classes start 1st Sat of the Month, 3pm-4pm.
- Sutta Study Group - 2nd & 4th Sunday of the Month, 3pm - 4:15pm.
- Dhamma School for Children - 2nd & 4th Sunday of the Month, 9:15am - 10:15am or 3pm - 4:30pm.
- Sangha Dana - Every Weekend, 10am.

Armadale Meditation Group

Meditation Class - every Tuesdays, 7pm - 8:30pm

Dhammaloka Library Opening Hours

FRIDAY: 6.00 - 7.30pm (closes, then reopens) 9.00 - 10.00pm
SATURDAY: 2.00 - 3.00pm (closes then reopens) 4.15 - 5.00pm

End of Rains Retreat

The End of Rains Retreat will officially be on Saturday, 23 October 2010. The monasteries will observe the End of Rains Retreat as follows:

Bodhinyana (Monks) Monastery - 31 October 2010
Dhammasara (Nuns) Monastery - 30 October 2010
For Kathina programme, please refer to page 8

Meditation Retreats at Jhana Grove Retreat Centre

9-Day Retreats
- 5 Nov - 14 Nov - Ajahn Brahm Weekend Retreats
Weekend Retreat
- 10 December - 12 December
- 21 January - 23 January 2011 (Sutta Contemplation and Meditation Retreat)

The activities are correct at time of printing. Please contact BSWA (info@bswa.org) to verify the times closer to the date.