



Welcome to the Autumn Newsletter

Introduction...from Balajit



I write this as autumn creeps in. Outside the lush greenery is gradually wilting and receding through browns, yellows and reds. Somewhat appropriately too we are mid-way through the 'Death And The Only Beauty that Lasts ' Retreat.

Thanks to all those who commented on our first newsletter. For this edition we mark 30 years of Vajraloka! In particular acknowledging the heroics of the hardy few who braved the elements to transform a derelict farmstead into the Vajraloka we now

know. Sadhu!

It has also been a time to remember all the teachers who have lived here over the years, and helped people with their meditation and practice. No doubt the ripples of wisdom from Vajraloka have travelled far and wide.

Thanks also go to a few of our regulars who in this edition, capture what this place evokes for them in their 'Vajraloka Is' pieces. If you have any tales, pictures, poetry or other outpourings from your time here, do consider sending them in (info [at] vajraloka.com).

Reflections as Vajraloka Turns 30...from Tejananda

Work had started on Ty'n-y-ddol, the empty farm buildings that became Vajraloka, 30 years ago as I write. A small team of men, including Kamalashila, Atula and Jyotipala, braved a very cold winter, with few comforts, to get the shrine room and basic accommodation in place.

Then, in the spring of 1980, Vajraloka opened as the first dedicated meditation retreat centre in the FWBO. In 2009, it still remains the only FWBO retreat centre which is exclusively dedicated to meditation.

Vajraloka started as a men's centre (though women's retreats regularly took place here too) with a community living a regular programme of practice week by week. My own early visits here meant simply joining in with the practice schedule and getting on with my own meditation, within the supportive atmosphere built up by the resident team. After some years, realising that a lot of the people who came to Vajraloka needed more active support in their practice, the Vajraloka community started teaching, and a very creative period followed.

There was a huge amount of exploration of Sangharakshita's teachings on meditation in conjunction with traditional Buddhist sources, and 'new' approaches were developed that have become part and parcel of the way we talk about and introduce meditation throughout the FWBO now. For example, approaches like 'breadth and focus' and 'PIPER' originated at Vajraloka. Ultimately, all of these explorations and approaches became the basis of Kamalashila's popular book 'Meditation: The Buddhist Way of Tranquility and Insight'.

Essentially, Vajraloka has continued in this mode ever since. When I moved here almost 15 years ago, the conversion of the farm buildings into facilities for the retreat centre was nearing completion – reflecting a huge amount of dedicated work, by many people, over the first 15 years of Vajraloka's existence. What became equally evident was the huge amount of practice and experience, and the very directed and hands-on meditation teaching, that had been evolved by the team. Or I should say teams, as Vajraloka's resident community has always been fluid, with many people living here for longer or shorter periods of time.

My own meditation teaching prior to coming here was, I have to admit, pretty basic. In fact, it hadn't developed a very great deal in all my years of teaching meditation at centres prior to that.



But living here, over the first few years, I picked up from the existing team, especially Vajradaka, a much more subtle, informed and exploratory approach to all the practices we do in the FWBO and WBO. This was, I could suggest, the 'Vajraloka tradition' being transmitted to me, and subsequently through me. This isn't to say that Vajraloka has been the only place where our collective approach to practice and teaching has been deepened -far from it. But by being focused on meditation and teaching, Vajraloka has always had a lot to offer to the movement at large.

So Vajraloka is more than a great place for meditation retreats (though it's definitely that). It's also a place devoted to enabling people to take their practice deeper, and to offer the support and specific, appropriate teaching that enables those coming here, however experienced or inexperienced, to deepen practice, to take that step into the unknown...

The next 30 years should be interesting!

What's New?...from Balajit



So what's new here since our last Newsletter in Spring?

Well, our 2010 Programme is now out. Featuring many of our popular retreats as well as a few new ones. If you haven't already seen it, you can view it from our website www.vajraloka.com, or pick a copy up from your local FWBO centre, or drop us a line and we will pop you one in the post. Amongst the highlights for 2010 will be a month long practice retreat

(broken into weekly options) over the new year, a retreat on the Satipatthana Sutta with Smrtiratna and Tejananda and a mid summer Practice Retreat with optional yoga classes.

Our dining room has passed through a successful makeover. Its has left behind its 'scout hut' type minimalism and, with new fixtures and fittings, is I think much more welcoming. Also on the technology front, we have recently introduced on-line booking (if paying in full). You can now just visit our website, click on the chosen retreat, and you will be taken to payment options. It is already proving popular.

You may remember in the last newsletter we launched a year long shrine room appeal – to buy a whole new batch of cushions and mats. So far we are on target, having raised around half our target of £2500. Big thanks to all those who have donated so generously. There is still plenty of time to give – simply send us a cheque. It's an opportunity to support (quite literally) people's meditation practice for years to come.

Steady efforts are being made to become more sustainable –

both to cut costs and leave a lighter carbon footprint. For example, a small (embryonic) allotment has appeared in our grounds – the fruits of which will hopefully make it, via the kitchen, to people's plates. Where affordable, more of our foods now come from organic and fairtrade sources. We are also, when possible, making rather than buying our bread.

One Year On: A Word From Our Cook...from Ian

For those of you who haven't been here for a while, I'm the main cook here.

I got here last May after spending a year or so at Gampo Abbey, a Buddhist monastic community in Nova Scotia, Canada. I came here with some trepidation, especially regarding the cooking, as I'd only just learnt the arts at the Abbey. My last four months there was spent anxiously trying to cater for thirty plus hungry, if appreciative, mainly North American Buddhists.



I'd rarely been to Vajraloka in the previous ten years, and only knew Rijumitra from Leeds a little, and Shuddhakirti from my earlier times in Croydon. However, the prospect of living in a mature, self motivated, and meditative community really appealed. I had gone to Canada, to intensify my practice, and benefit from a structured programme. For a year this was exactly what the 'inner' doctor recommended, and my practice opened, and even dare I say it exploded into new inspirations, and clarity. But now I needed a place to engage under the direction of my inner voice, (this phrase I use loosely, as it cannot be named by words and would take a lot more unpacking). Vajraloka, offered me a place, and I am extremely grateful for the opportunity.

Each day I am well aware how at home I feel, here, in my life, and at this present time. This, I have to say is a very rare experience for Ian. For once in my life, I am not firmly holding the exit door open. Each cooking day too, is offering me a great chance to face my blame, fame, and shame tendencies. I am loosening up around having to provide a dish to others, and not get anxious.

As to the team here, I am very grateful to be in a community of exploring, engaged, and honest men. Each of us has our own ways into the exploration of Truth, Dharma, and what inspires us. This enthusiasm, I believe, is beneficial to the Vajraloka ethos, of living, meditating, and teaching.

I've been impressed by Tejananda especially. I hardly knew him, or his teaching style before I came to Vajraloka. But having now been on five of his retreats over the year, I am grateful to see someone who is growing in clarity and understanding so rapidly.

It is a rare opportunity to be able to see someone whose understanding is evolving so explicitly, and this gives me confidence in the potential for all of us.

What of the future, well I am considering how to improve my cooking skills, maybe some new recipes to learn. I'm learning to play guitar (again!). Its going fairly well, even had my first public gig in the Vajra band, during a musical puja recently... and no one screamed! At present I feel my practice/life is unfolding usefully and fruitfully. For many years I'd had a sense I'm not doing enough, or little old moody me is incapable of real understanding. At present that self defeating thinking seems to have mostly dropped away. Anyway, enough of me, I hope to see you at Vajraloka sometime soon.

Vajraloka Is...



"Vajraloka is... a pool of silence; an open secret; a shrine room so thick with meditation that you could cut the air."
Vishvapani, Manchester



"Vajraloka is... hills emerald green in summer; brown rocky trails in winter, leading past fir-trees through empty mists. A group of stone buildings, silently communing like pieces of sculpture. Everyone sitting in a pool of quiet sunlight outdoors, looking far away at the horizon of the hills. Steaming hot porridge on a frosty morning: in the late afternoon the darkness gathers us in for the evening. Late at night: I'm last out of the shrine room. Vajracitta smiles down from his photo on a window ledge as I switch the lights off."
Janaka, Bristol



"Vajraloka is... a warm welcome; catching up with my friends in the community; practice reviews in Tejananda's 'magic den'; solitary walks in the woods; fabulous pujas; deep silence; happy hours working in the Vajraloka garden; 'quality' retreats; croaking frogs at mating time; wonderful food; deepening practice; simplicity; the tame pheasant peering through the glass in the dining room door hoping for a snack; pheasant chicks; a mythic space; A place of integrity."
Gail Mckenzie, Edinburgh

Creativity in Meditation...from Appicha

The Buddha called himself a physician whose task was to remove suffering. We've resolved to sit and meditate but sometimes it seems our suffering is increasing! How can we approach this creatively?

It is said that mind precedes all, but what does this mean in practice? The Sallatha Sutta talks about someone who was wounded by an arrow. Not surprisingly there was the painful impact of the arrow entering the body but immediately the mind

'sorrows, grieves, & laments' causing secondary mental pain. The effect now is of two arrows; physical and psychological. The effect of the second arrow of proliferating anxiety can be much worse than the first!

A more immediate example might be our response to pain in the body as we sit in meditation; 'I'll have to move or this pain will turn into serious cramp', 'It's that old knee injury – I'll have to move or I'll have wasted all that money on crystal healing', 'It's good to change position and keep the blood flow moving etc, etc,'



Try taking some time to decide if you really need to move. If you decide to move try doing it slowly noticing the thought process as you settle down again.

What happens if we let these thoughts come and go remaining with the first arrow- the direct experience? Try feeling into the direct experience and take some interest in it - give it some gentle awareness. Is the sensation changing or static? Is it warm or cold? (a felt-sense without too much

thinking!) Can you locate precisely where it is centred? Are you afraid or unwilling to bring awareness to experience that seems unpleasant?

What happens if we turn towards experience rather than away from it?

Try stopping meditating now and then but continue sitting quietly. Allow your awareness to turn to each of the senses, what are you hearing? Smelling? Tasting? Touching? Feeling? What is the mind turning towards? Try just being aware of the actual sense experience (direct experience) not the associated thoughts. Then return to your meditation. If you feel frustrated or lost in unwelcome thought try tuning into these senses again.

Tales from a Long Term Guest...from Andy Kerr

I came to Vajraloka in May from a full-time job working with drug-users in West Yorkshire. Though I have been in contact with the FWBO for many years, at that time my involvement was fairly minimal and my practice was playing a fairly marginal part in my day to day life. I had felt for some time that life was 'getting away from me' – that I was



developing a momentum in what was clearly a quite unhealthy and unhelpful direction. Some of that momentum was no doubt partly a result of a busy, stressful job and life in a hectic city, but I also felt quite clear that it was more importantly the result of 'inner forces'; habitual tendencies that I was failing to address in any effective way. At the same time I think it would be as true to say I felt a need to be with myself and the world in a more satisfying, intimate way.

It's difficult to put into words clearly what I've 'gained' from being at Vajraloka for three months. During the early part of the stay I was aware, particularly during retreats, of an anxious impatience for 'results', to get an answer, to 'have an experience'. An impatience that inevitably led to many highs and lows, to feelings of despondency and futility. I also became increasingly aware that these restless, unrealistic expectations of myself and the world were typical – not simply the result of retreat conditions. It's something I've been doing for as long as I can remember with work, relationships and everything else. The value of being here for an extended period which can, potentially, accommodate the pattern of highs and lows, of hope and disappointment, has been that I've been able to watch these patterns come and go for long enough to gain some detachment from them. To identify with them less and to learn to tolerate the physical discomfort, shifts and transitions underlying the rush of ideas, emotions and behaviour. Basic Buddhist practice really – but in a way that has allowed me to appreciate just how profound and precious that practice is.

During my stay here I have participated in all the scheduled retreats. The mixture of structured retreat time and 'non-retreat' time - when I've been left largely to my own devices to cope with my 'normal' self - has been helpful in allowing me to develop a sense of what a real functioning practice might feel like. The community here is relaxed, friendly and welcoming and I felt at home almost immediately. And the food is great!

**Info on a Forthcoming Retreat:
'Opening to the Body' (Nov 22-29)...from Balajit**



This retreat will focus on the importance for practice of being aware and connected to the 'felt life' of our body.

Starting from the Four Foundations of Mindfulness, we will take time for 'being with' body sensations – seeing how this can help us relax, become more grounded and loosen strong habitual loops of thought.

We will explore how grounding ourselves in the body can give us

the stability to work fruitfully with more restricted, painful aspects of ourselves; as well as help us access and abide in perhaps less familiar, more liberated states of being. So we'll be learning, to quote Kabir, to 'stand firm in that which you are'.

I will also offer some body centered ways of practicing the mindfulness of breathing, the metta bhavana and just sitting, outlining how these practices enable us to cultivate qualities of kindness and sustained attention – which together create a potent alchemy for integration and our gradual awakening. A key emphasis will be on learning to trust and have confidence in our direct experience: and being open to the Dharmic truths within this. Along such lines we will do some experiential inquiry in workshop sessions, asking questions tailored to probe our conventional thinking and assumptions about mind and body.

As with most Vajraloka retreats, there will be plenty of formal sitting, walking meditation and free time – as well as periods of silence. Who knows what else might come up and be tossed around as we go into things!



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