

—*Portobello Buddhist Priory*—



A Temple of the Order of Buddhist Contemplatives



—*Fields of spring daffodils, Braidburn Park, Edinburgh*—

Newsletter May-August 2026

Portobello Buddhist Priory
27 Brighton Place, Portobello
Edinburgh, EH15 1LL
Telephone (0131) 669 9622
website: www.portobellobuddhist.org.uk

Newsletter

83rd edition
April 2026
(& 43rd e-edition)

Please note: the Priory website at www.portobellobuddhist.org.uk has an up to date schedule of events at the Priory. Group visits around Scotland will be arranged on a case by case basis by the Prior.

We'll continue coming together for meditation, dharma and ceremony on the Zoom platform each Wednesday evening. We also physically meet in the Priory on Sunday mornings.

Again, please consult the Priory website for the most up to date information.

— *Prior's Notes* —

GratITUDE, in the Buddhist sense, is not merely a polite response to kindness, but a quiet recognition of the interwoven nature of all life. When we pause and consider even the simplest meal, we begin to see that nothing arises independently. The grain has depended upon soil, rain, sunlight, and countless unseen hands. In this way, gratitude becomes less a feeling we summon and more a truth we uncover.

Within our practice, gratitude is closely allied with humility. It softens the sharp edges of self-centredness and reminds us that what we call “my life” is, in reality, a shared unfolding. When we bow, whether before the Buddha on the altar, or one another, we are not engaging in empty form, but expressing this understanding with the body-mind itself.

There is also a deeper gratitude that arises in the midst of difficulty. When challenges come, they too may be received as teachers. This does not mean we seek hardship, but rather that we meet it with acceptance, trusting that the Dharma is not absent even here.

To live with gratitude is to walk gently, aware that each moment is given, not owned. And in this awareness, a quiet joy can appear—unforced, steady, and sufficient.



Buddha head sculpture. This copy is of a style thought to originate from the Gandhara region in north-west India, dating back to the 2nd-4th century, when the Buddha was first depicted in human form. The elongated earlobes are thought to be symbolic of the Buddha's former life as Prince Siddhartha (wearing heavy gold jewellery that stretched his ears) before renouncing his wealth.

With thanks to Fedor Bunge

The world of an infant

In the last couple of years I have become a **grandfather**. My two grandchildren, who are brothers, are quite close in age. It has been a revelation seeing them come into the world and start to grow. We tend to think of impermanence in terms of losing things, but it also includes things -and people - coming into existence.

One of the most striking features of children of that age is their openness of being. It feels like there is no barrier between them and the world. When they become able to focus their eyes, this is expressed in their look. They look straight into your eyes, absorbing what they see unconditionally. When I look back at them, all my thoughts fall away. Another aspect of this openness is the fact they are totally dependent on the world - and especially their parents - for their existence. This is a kind of trust in the universe, as mistrust has not arisen.

Infants inevitably live fully in the moment. An example of this was when I was pushing one of them along in a buggy when he was about 6 months old. He was quite sleepy. We went over a bump which jerked the buggy, and he became startled, raising his arms and opening his mouth and eyes wide. The moment after the bump, he closed his eyes and looked sleepy again. There was no aftermath; letting go was immediate.

Infants need to communicate their needs, and they often do this by crying. Again, this is very direct; at that moment their little being is full of crying. Their loving parents have become skilled at interpreting these cries and responding to them, enabling the children to maintain their trust in the world.

Another striking feature is their affectionate nature. This is evident in the older grandson. He spontaneously cuddles the younger one and is clearly glad to have him around. He has started showing me affection too, for example, want-

ing to sit on my knee. This wish to love and connect with others is built into them.

Of course, before too long they will develop a sense of self. This is a necessary and healthy part of their development, but as we know, it also brings challenges. So what can we adults learn from these young beings? I can imagine that if we were in, say, a car that jerked like that buggy, we might respond by frowning and mentally complaining about the state of the roads. But fundamentally, we have not lost that innate ability to let go instantaneously. Adults can do many things that children cannot, because of the wonderful fully grown brain. This does mean we also have the ability to hold on to thoughts, but we can also stand back and be aware of them. This changes them from being a source of suffering to the natural functioning of the intellect.

The accompanying photo was taken when I first held my first grandchild. It was a moment of beginner's mind for both of us.

Neil Rothwell



Dream

I had a dream some few days ago. I was sitting with Rev Favian in the sitting room at the Portobello Priory at the table. He sat in a chair nearest the window and I sat to his left. With his right hand he made to hand me a small item perhaps 10cm square in a dark colour, perhaps a letter or something like. I reached out to take it with my right hand and he withdrew it. He then offered again the same item. Once more I reached for it and he withdrew it. Once more he reached out to hand the item to me. I bowed and he gave it to me. I woke up.

This seemed a significant dream and perhaps some kind of teaching might be taken from it, perhaps some kind of koan or puzzle to be solved. I have read about koans and how they have been used in the past and present to teach and to point. I have read the intellectual explanations about the solutions. I have no particular understanding of any of them, and should I be challenged to give an answer to any of them, I should have to bow and walk away. I have heard that without bowing, there is no Buddhism. An intellec-

tual approach to the dream, some clever interpretation, seems to me to miss the mark.

I have been reading through some of the Buddhist scriptures for many years, more recently the Lotus Scripture and the Shobogenzo. I don't really have any grasp of them at all. They all seem too deep for me and irrelevant to the life that I lead every day: making soup, gardening, cleaning. So I sit facing a wall, try to keep the precepts and keep going on. I consider the question "What is this?" and then just look, expressed thus in the Rules For Meditation - "Look within and reflect upon yourself".

I have been listening to curated recorded talks on Wednesday zoom sessions given by senior monks, people who have been training as monks for many years. I have not heard anything that contradicts that practice although it may be a bit stupid. I am moved by their honesty, their warmth, their humanity, far more than I am able to recall the immediate subject on which they talked.

I have hesitated to submit an article to

the newsletters fearing that I may not be able to make a useful contribution. My limited understanding perhaps making me unfit to offer such. But I have read in the Shobogenzo in the section “Hokke Ten Hokke”, “*Even though our donkey work has not yet come to an end, our horse work will present itself.*”.

Rev Hubert Nearman commented thus on this: “... *one should not wait until the donkey work is done before beginning to do the horse work ... ‘horse work’ is associated with doing good by our giving voice to the Dharma to help others to realize the Truth.*”

I hope this helps.

Homage to the Buddha

Homage to the Dharma

Homage to the Sangha

Graham Jordan



Graham's Altar

Participation

Re-reading any piece of dharma can often deepen my understanding and hopefully some of the insights within it will percolate and settle within me. This year I took photocopies of three articles from the OBC Journal to study during my three weeks stay in India.

One of the articles was a transcription of a talk by the late Rev Master Alexander Hardcastle titled **Going Deeper into Meditation*** in which he outlines four things that we can characterise meditation by:

‘..... it's useful to relook from time to time at the whole process, and to look at what some of the things are that we can characterise meditation by, and I'd like to deal with four of those today. The first is alertness, the second is stillness, the third is non-engagement, and the fourth is unfolding.’

While discussing alertness he used a word that instantly resonated with me, *Participation*. Awareness of this word has helped me with my sitting practice ever since.

I often struggle with words. Recently I wrote a piece for the Newsletter about *sufficiency*. I often hear that word in our Zoom meetings, but I have never (yet) found that the meaning resonated with me. Often when I am trying to grasp an abstract concept, my brain finds a way to construct a physical analogy. Recently I have noticed that I sometimes use a decidedly curious mental analogy when trying to grapple with the meaning of a specific word. I don't know where it sprang from! Quirky? Yes! But it helps me!

My analogy is of a tea-cosy and a teapot. The tea-cosy represents the word, and the tea pot is what the word is actually describing. When I hear a word that resonates with me, I can instantly visualise the tea cosy as it descends onto the tea pot and fits snugly. And yet I know that with greater understanding or insights the teapot can change its shape and the cosy will still accommodate this.

It's just another 'finger and the moon' analogy.

And with the word *sufficiency* I am still left with the word, but only with a very ill-defined idea of what it means. The cozy currently fits loosely on an ill-defined tea pot! Hopefully one day this may change.

But my cosy and teapot were an instant fit when I read that word *participation*.

Here's another analogy that might be easier to relate to. I am on a train sitting opposite two people who are having an engaging conversation. I can make the choice to risk attempting to join in on the conversation. To *participate*. Sometimes this can lead to awkwardness, but more often in my experience this participation can lead to an enjoyable conversation which becomes a pleasant way to spend the journey. But it is **my choice** whether I try to participate in the conversation. I could also choose to ignore them or read a book or put my headphones on. My choice.

But an enjoyable conversation with myself is not what I am looking for when I am meditating. Inevitably a new thought enters my head and when I become aware of it, I always have the choice to let it go. But very often I choose to *participate*. Once it has entered my mind, I carry on fanning the flames of the thought until such time when I become aware that this is *participation*. Once again, I notice that I have taken that choice to participate in the thought. But once I have noticed it, I can make the choice to let it go.

An awareness of this word is helping me in meditation. In gratitude to Rev Master Alexander and Chris Hughes for transcribing this talk.

Julian Goodacre

* *The Journal of the Order of Buddhist Contemplatives Annual of Articles 2021*

Questions from schoolchildren —

Every so often our Prior answers questions from curious local school-children. We thought the sangha might be interested to know what kind of questions are asked, so here's a recent sample:

Q. What happens to the temple offerings?

If by temple offerings you mean donations, well, they go to pay for the bills and upkeep of the Priory (temple), like any household, as well as providing for the wellbeing of the Prior, and things like travel expenses when visiting groups.

Q. What festivals are there?

Festivals include Wesak, the birth of the Buddha, Hungry Ghosts (Segaki), for all those who get caught in fear, desire and anger, unable to experience their Buddha Nature.

Jukai, (the 10 Precepts), where people formally become Buddhists by following the ethical Precepts eg. not killing, stealing, lying etc. with the Precepts expressing our True Nature.

Celebration of the Buddha's Enlightenment, his awakening to his true nature and the freedom this brings to live with compassion and wisdom for all beings.

There are others, but these are the main ones.

Q. What do you do with the Buddhist group?

The Buddhist group is an expression of one of the Refuges, the Sangha, along with the Buddha and the Dharma (teachings). So we come together as Buddhists to meditate, which reveals our fundamental nature of open awareness and connection to the world. We do ceremonies, chant scriptures that express various themes like gratitude, compassion, love and wisdom. We study the teachings of Buddhism.

And we use the social life of the Sangha group to express our Buddha nature, by living mindfully with each other. So all our activities, like talking together, preparing food, doing dishes, going for walks and relaxing together, are ways we practice being present and mindful, doing what is good to do, rather than living distractedly and selfishly.

If You Meet the Buddha, Kill the Buddha

The narrator asks [the Japanese Zen master Ōmori Sōgen]; “Is that the Buddha you are bowing to?” The Zen master answers that it is a form of Buddha: namely, Kannon, the Bodhisattva of Compassion. He then adds: “When I bow to it, I bow to something in myself. That something I call compassion.”

This Bret W. Davis reports from an excerpt of a BBC documentary in chapter 11 of his book “Zen Pathways: An Introduction to the Philosophy and Practice of Zen Buddhism” (Oxford University Press, 2022). And this is also intimately linked to one of the most popular interpretations of Zen master Linji’s (Rinzai in Japanese) kōan “if you meet the Buddha, kill the Buddha”.

At first, this kōan may seem utterly absurd: apparently, not only are we asked to break the first of the ten great precepts about not taking lives, but we are also asked to take the life of a Buddha. Traditionally, so much as wounding a Buddha is among one of the five ānantarya karma, i.e. actions so heinous that it is thought their negative karma brings about immediate ruin.

As practitioners of Zen, however, we

are no strangers to kōans sounding unorthodox or nonsensical. We all know the drill: go from mundane duality over to the realm of non-duality, only to realise the two were never separate and sanctifying the mundane is all there can ever be.

If “I meet the Buddha”, it means I am a subject interacting with a separate object, with which I can only relate through my own prior frames of reference. Within my experience, this object is thus deprived of freedom. How can this be though? To call something Enlightenment itself and yet limiting it? Discarding this incorrect view of the Buddha now seems far less paradoxical than holding on to it. “Killing the Buddha” can therefore be like placing a mirror before me and seeing my biases for what they are and, in so doing, finding it in myself to let them go. This

way, my past and present conditions – when staring at screens! – and notice nurtured by greed, anger, and delusion – become skilful means on the path. Thus, killing the Buddha and zazen cannot be different. In my view, this is what Rev. Master Daishin was talking about this past Wednesday (1st April) when referring to the reflective quality of Buddha nature.

This reading of this kōan might also come in handy in those situations when I may feel as though I'm following the Teaching but I'm instead feeding my own self-making. When reading the news, I'm altogether too quick to fall into this trap, as my first instinct is often to feel such moral outrage I may see wrongdoers as completely different from me. In my mind, it's as though I were invoking a false image of compassion which can't be extended to those I see as other and instead acts more as a dam to real compassion. In other words, a false Buddha. But this knee-jerk otherisation is the easy thing to do, as is any reaction stemming from it. I find it helpful to take a moment to pause, breathe, maybe even blink – which is surprisingly easy to forget

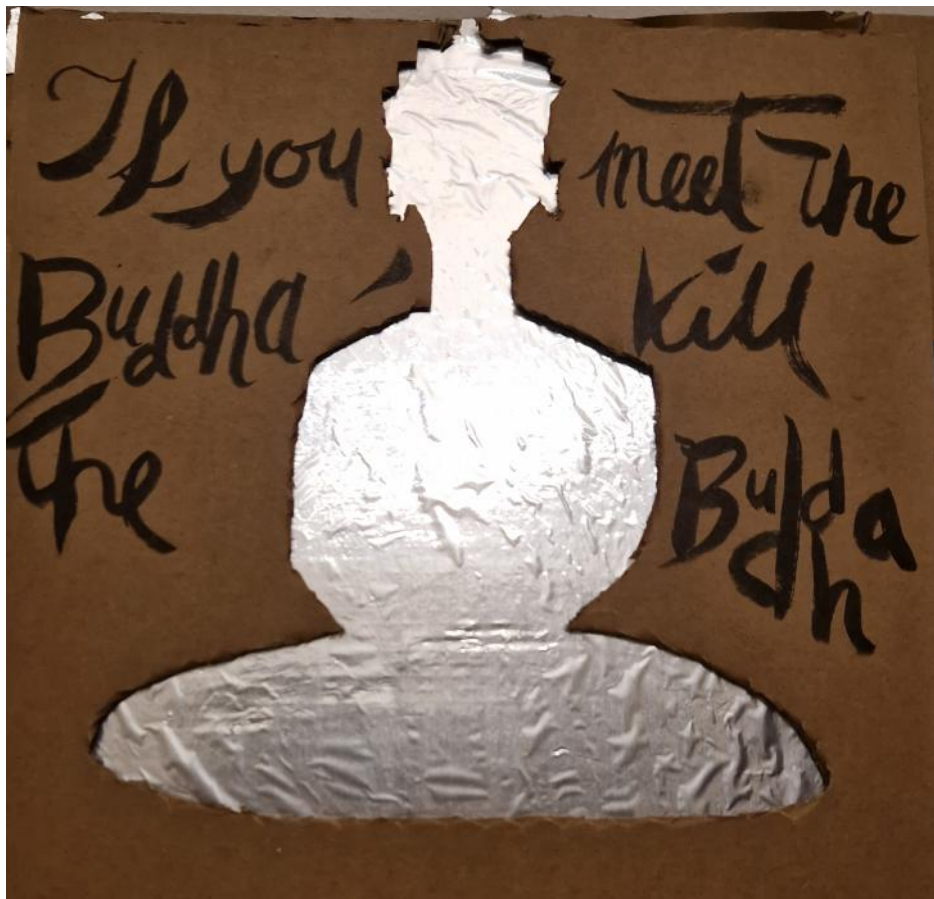
how this mental barrier between me and them gets built, with greed, hatred, and delusion as its bricks. And yet, this reveals itself as a great mirror: could these very three poisons be something those wrongdoers and I share? Clearly, the extent of the impact of our actions may still differ, but the root causes are no different. This realisation chips away at this wall, and the idol is slain. The perpetrator is revealed as just another person – neither to be spurned nor to be feared, but to be seen in their wholeness – and addressing greed, hatred, and delusion as the only true effective way forward.

I find this approach – by no means a new discovery – to be a great antidote to the despair which would otherwise ensue.

Naturally, many other interpretations of this kōan exist, but I just wanted to focus on this one in particular for now.

In gasshō,

Mattia Poli



With thanks to Matt for his illustration

The announcement of the deadline for contributing to the newsletter as a constant cause and condition brought to

zazen -

Jottings after a specific zazen session

Accepting that the desire to contribute is an anxious distraction in zazen
accepting that an idea arises to narrate an experience in zazen
accepting that a conversation ensues
accepting the debate about poor me or grandiose me
accepting that doing it is better than cogitating in the moment
accepting the Temptation to continue the distraction.

Allowing the swinging between developing the experiential idea and letting go,
allowing some elaboration of the recounting of the experience,
allowing the doubts about the motivation,
allowing certain self congratulations about the possible contribution

Letting go of the distraction,
finding some peace and relief,
letting go is scary,
staying with the fear,
letting go becomes more difficult,
temptation to return to the writing of the piece
and discovering letting be is okay,
letting go can feel wonderful and opening to the way of further training.
Acceptance can be like catching the experience/ball,
allowing can be like the excitement of holding the experience/ball
letting go is like the fear of losing or misdirecting the experience/ball
sometimes letting the experience/ball be, as it becomes more possible than letting go.

Reflections on the jottings

I now realise that the words accepting, allowing, letting go and letting be arose without any clear definition. The experience of accepting was very much an inner conflict about whether I was breaking the rules of meditation by writing a contribution and badgering myself to accept what is arising.

Allowing was a far more relaxed experience which made it possible to go in and out of developing the contribution while being aware of what was happening. Letting go is my goal of going beyond my ego whereas letting be is more relaxed way of being with what comes up. What I label as Distraction is part of the process of zazen and the word itself is a clue to the story of self criticism. Letting be might be experienced as – **there is no retiring, no going, no Truth, no lie; there is a brilliant sea of clouds, there's a dignified sea of clouds** (from the precepts ceremony) – I have discovered that letting be is the important part of my training in zazen. The changing landscape of thoughts and feelings and sometimes having glimpses of letting go is perhaps a more precise form of acceptance.

The key recognition is that letting be is a more frequent experience than letting go. I use the idea of the letting go experience as if it was a state for which there was striving without acknowledging that letting be takes away the sting from goal-oriented zazen, how about this for a misunderstanding. . I am relieved to say that I have not been stuck into structuring my meditation by going through the stages of accepting, allowing, letting be and —bingo— dipping into letting go and magically having a glimpse of Nirvana.

The wonderful recognition seems to be that the starting point of describing stages of a particular session is impermanent and what is experienced as a particular format is only relevant to one moment.

Tom Franks

Peace Pagoda

I was in London recently, and visited The Peace Pagoda on the Thames, and found the quotation about civilisation so relevant:

The London Peace Pagoda was offered by Nipponzan Myohoji to the people of London to celebrate the 1984 GLC Peace Year. The architect was Dr Minoru Ohoka and the consultant architect was Mr Tom Hancock. The ceremonial platform and surrounding landscape were created by the Heritage Lottery Fund and Wandsworth Council who maintain the peace pagoda.

“Civilisation is neither to have electric lights, nor airplanes, nor to produce nuclear bombs. Civilisation is not to kill human-beings, not to destroy things, nor to make war; civilisation is to hold mutual affection and to respect each other.”

The Most Ven. Nichidatsu Fujii



- and Rev.Master Koten's recent mail to the monks and lay ministers regarding war seems very well worth passing on, and he did say it could be shared:

Fedor Bunge

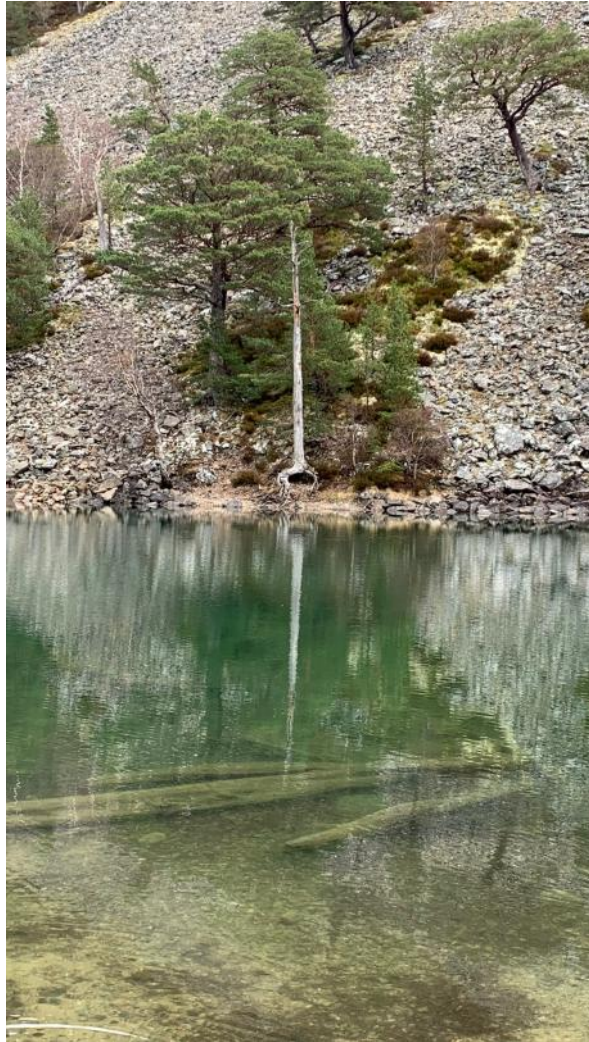
‘In the present atmosphere of anger and delusion it is important that we do not become afraid of our neighbours because of false witness and poisonous mythology.

I have found that both synagogues and mosques are very welcoming and visits to them can do a lot to dispel clouds of anger and fear.

Are there quarrels in your family, workplace or community that can be brought to an end with courage, reaching out and kindness? Do not wait for tomorrow as the opportunities of today may never be repeated.

Of course, there may be no response but such efforts are never wasted.’





*Scene from the Scottish Cairngorms
(with thanks to Karen Valentine)*

Training and humour

Following a medical operation two weeks ago, I've caught myself feeling a degree of irrational impatience at the perceived slowness of the healing process. It's as if I'm saying to myself; "*Come on, body – get on with it! Hurry up! Heal!*"

When put like that, there's of course an absurdity about believing I'm in charge: that I can issue an edict to my own body, not dissimilar in principle to King Canute who reputedly ordered the sea not to allow its waves to break on his kingdom. Thinking of this, I found myself grinning; images springing to mind of me perched on a throne, rod & sceptre in hand, imperiously issuing orders to the universe to be as I want it to be, rather like RM Daizui's endlessly entertaining story of himself as a child with the toy steering wheel in the family car, believing he was guiding & steering it. And the beep beep button on it. '*BEEP BEEP*' *Come on, get on with it!*

With those images came a lightening of the spirit, a softening, that so often comes with humour, and accompanied with the thought: what are we like? What am I like?

Not for the first time, it had me musing about the role of humour in the path of training. It feels to me that, at its best, humour is allied with humility, not taking ourselves too seriously, but in a kindly way. One of the dangers of spiritual practice, perhaps, can be seriousness in the not-so-good sense; the possibility of a solemn self-importance or inflated moral preciousness, or the lure of being seen as wise, advanced, pure, profound, holy. Humour can mercifully puncture that. As somebody once said, the ego can colonise even religion. Being able to laugh at ourselves probably reduces the chances of being trapped in self-deception or pretension. And in that sense, humour can also help protect communities, religious or otherwise, from becoming oppressive.

It can also illuminate a sense of proportion. Engagement with life, perhaps particularly from a religious perspective, involves clear-eyed engagement with suf-

fering, mortality, failure, contradiction and paradox; and a certain kind of lightness which laughter brings, while not denying these aspects of life, can help us bear them, and give them their right measure or proportion. Being able to see the ridiculousness woven into ordinary life without becoming cynical feels life-giving, at least to me. I rarely feel as cleansed as I do when I've been helpless with laughter - even better with tears running down my cheeks - and laughter that's tender rather than contemptuous or mocking; that acknowledges that we can be foolish and delusive; but also, ultimately, lovable.

There's also a link, I think, between humour and freedom. It can loosen fixed perspectives; breaking conceptual expectations, providing a shift in frame. I could say that it helps me to see that creation and its possibilities aren't limited by my own habitual interpretations of it. George Orwell wrote that every joke is a tiny revolution, ultimately a custard pie; put another way, we might say that the right kind of joke helps to dislodge the cramped self and its assumptions.

And/but, of course, humour can become a defence against seriousness, a deflection from feelings or from necessary discomfort, or indeed from the truth: in which case it doesn't liberate, but evades. And we know too that mockery, irony, sarcasm and cleverness can be used cruelly, and in ways which feed pride and a mistaken sense of superiority. So as with every other human behaviour, discernment is needed with humour; but I believe that we all have that heart-sense to see the difference.

So, body, no more ordering you about, in all its absurdity. But - er - bribery -
hmm - now why can't we sit down & be reasonable here - - -

Willie Grieve



Scenes from Segaki at Throssel —



With thanks to Luis Letelier-Lobos!



Portobello beach 1988
(with grateful thanks to David Williams)

Gift Aid Declaration

To: **Portobello Buddhist Priory**

Your Name _____

Full Home address _____

Postcode _____ Date _____

Please reclaim tax on my donations as follows (delete as appropriate):

I want to Gift Aid any donations I make in the future or have made in the past 4 years.

I want to Gift Aid my donation of [amount] given on [date]

You must pay at least as much income tax or capital gains tax as the amount of tax that we would reclaim on your donations and remember to notify us if this changes.

If this declaration applies to future changes, you are entitled to notify us of the cancellation of your declaration at any time.

Signed _____

Date _____