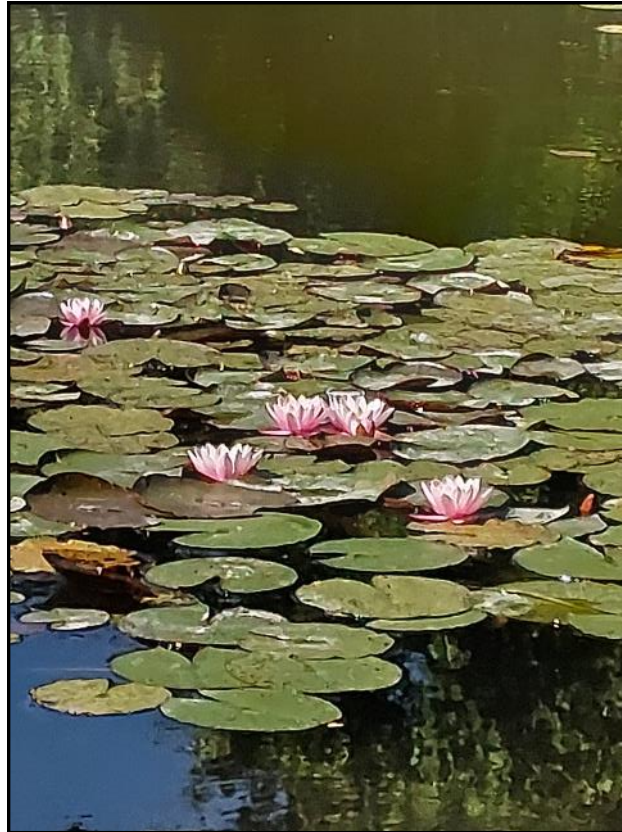


—*Portobello Buddhist Priory*—



A Temple of the Order of Buddhist Contemplatives



*Monet's garden near Giverny, France -
(with thanks to Fedor Bunge)*

Newsletter

September—December 2022

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Newsletter

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(& 32nd e-edition)

Please Note: this issue of our Newsletter doesn't yet contain a schedule of events due to continuing uncertainty about Covid-19. However, the Priory opened again on Sunday 24th April for meditation and ceremony. There is no restriction on numbers currently, but there is a requirement to be fully vaccinated and not experiencing any covid symptoms.

Until further notice, there will be no group visits around Scotland by the Priory due to RM Favian's health condition.

We'll continue coming together for meditation, dharma and ceremony on the Zoom platform each week, and will review arrangements in the light of developing circumstances. Again, please consult the Priory website for the most up to date information.

— *Priory's Notes* —

Standing at the Edge: the dynamic nature of Zazen

Let's set the scene with some affirmations: Our True Nature is the home ground of everything that is. Wherever we turn, there we are; but in order to know this, we have to be willing to face into the unknown. Thought can't go there, as it moves in time. The timeless dimension is right here and now where awakening redeems us from the separate 'me' identifications. Questioning 'what is this' brings us to the unknown. The challenge is to stay present right on the edge between the known and the unknown and not run away.

We may discover that something emerges and knows itself as us; this, that is awake right now. The scriptural line: "The snowy heron in the bright moon hides", speaks to this.

We tend to become identified with the objects of mind and forget their source. So we can ask “what is this?” and let this energy of enquiry lead us back to the source. In this enquiry we are learning to ‘walk on the surface of the ocean as well as the ocean floor’. This depth of being isn’t born and doesn’t die. It is acceptance and non-judgement, and it cannot be threatened by any experience. It stands as the background awareness to our lives and the foreground intimacy with the present moment of experiencing.

Having heard this affirmation of the deep sufficiency of existence, let us turn to the Sitting.

The invitation here is to become present, no past and future grasping of mind, just this right now. Be present with an open mind and body so that awareness can move through the various layers of our identity: through the energy of thought, through the areas of feeling and tension in the body. Then let the attention sink below identification with thought and feeling. What is noticing this movement of attention? So we are taking off our conceptual clothing and standing free as the aliveness of being: moving through the mind/body identifications, the labels of name and form, our roles in life, our job, our gender, race, likes and dislikes; until perhaps we may come to a sense of just: ‘I am’. Now can we drop even the ‘I am’, letting ourselves move to the edge of the mind’s familiar territory, the edge of where it seems able to go, and so now is available to the unknown, that is nevertheless sensed as presence.

Buddhism tells us we are this presence that is awake and aware, and boundless. As one Zen Master puts it: ‘Leap into the boundless and make it your home’. We can learn to look and feel and think without leaving this: ‘home ground’. When the strength of present moment awareness becomes stronger than our identification with separating thoughts, we can intuit we always share in this undivided nature, the ‘One Bright Pearl’.

Through this release into our True Nature, whatever thoughts and feelings, fears and desires that may arise, can do so, like the heron in the bright moon,

emerging from this background of completeness, neither judged nor rejected. Because now identifications have been seen through, we don't have to experience and suffer ourselves as fundamentally fractured beings. So everything can be investigated with, 'what is this.' Awareness can move through this body and mind, the thoughts and feelings, as this dynamic Truth-seeking movement we call Zazen.



We're very grateful to Reverend Master Haryo, Head of our Order, for giving permission to include in this newsletter a transcript of the talk he gave at Wesak in May this year, at Shasta Abbey.

Homage to the Buddha, Homage to the Dharma, Homage to the Sangha.

Well, good morning, and thank you all for coming. It's gratifying to see so many people after these two years of drought; and as we start to open up slowly, it's nice to see you all coming again.

And I'd like to thank Rev. Master Meian for inviting me to say a few words.

Today we celebrate the life of the Buddha in its entirety - the birth, his life of teaching and his death - with a certain emphasis on the birth of the Buddha because of the ceremony we've just done.

When you read what we sang today, or read stories of the Buddha's birth, the accounts usually contain some miraculous aspects: trees consciously bending down; the Buddha taking seven steps; and lotus blossoms appearing where he stepped. His being born from the right side of his mother, or him stating "I alone am the World-Honoured One". And one might ask - is the truth of Buddhism dependent on those aspects of the story of Buddhism being true?

I wasn't there, so I cannot speak with absolute certainty as to what happened, but my guess is that that much of what is written down is the result of generations of the story of his birth being transmitted orally. And of course a story is easier to remember if it's interesting; so I think some of what we have are embellishments to make the story more memorable.

I also think there's some symbolism included: seven is often a number associated with stages of spiritual progress in religion. And the infant's stating 'I alone am the World-Honoured One' may be an addition to encourage faith; when do you hear anyone claiming "my religion is second best!" I can understand the value of adding elements to the story that factor in our human nature and help us to just get on with our practice and not wonder whether there's something else that's better out there. Seeing it as a skilful means of transmitting a story

that inspires confidence and faith in those who hear it makes sense to me; but it needn't go beyond that, to talking down or denigrating what others do as lesser.

When I became a monk some years ago, I was fairly naïve. I was following more the path of discipleship than that of 'becoming a monk'. I didn't ask - what does this mean, and what does that mean. I just bowed when we bowed, and did what we all did. So I can't tell you the meaning of some of the things that we have in our practice.

I created a personal meaning for various aspects of our practice. For example, the Buddha on the altar has always symbolised the Buddha within me, the Buddha within all of us. In pouring water over the baby Buddha, as we did today, we can look at that water as symbolising the cleansing power of compassion and acceptance, for ourselves, as well as for others. So if you're wondering about the meaning of something, you can ask about it, or you can find a meaning for it within for yourself.

What do we actually know for sure about the Buddha's life? The teaching was transmitted orally for generations before being written down. We can assume he existed; that he was born, that he taught, and that he died. The true facts of his life may not be known, but the validity of Buddhism is not dependent on the absolute truth of the story: the truth of Buddhism is proved by doing the practice, by applying the teaching.

In terms of what words the Buddha actually spoke so long ago – well, it obviously wasn't English for one thing, so there's the matter that translating is not an exact science. There's also the aspect of consistency of an oral transmission. I don't want to under-estimate the accuracy which can be maintained if someone's practice is to hear something and pass it on orally. At the same time, I know how things can change quickly. I know I've given a talk, and five minutes later someone will say - I really like what you said about such and such; and that was news to me!

I would guess that earliest scriptures are likely to be the most accurate, but in terms of knowing the absolute accuracy—did the Buddha say those exact words, and what did he mean by them---well, I don't think we need to do that.

I don't know that we even could.

So what *do* you have to believe in? I think a bottom-line thing is that you have to believe you can change. I think most of us have come to practice Buddhism because of the wish for some sort of change. If we were completely content, we'd just be at home watching telly, or whatever. But usually there's something we want to add to what we've got; something that inspires us, that we think we don't have. Or something we'd like to fall away; some aspect of suffering that is hard to endure, and that we want to become less.

So it's necessary to believe you can change. But you also have to be willing to look at yourself, and do whatever work that's required. Buddhism offers a way to do that work. It's not the only way to do that work: it's just a particular way to do it. And it's a way that leads us in a direction of suffering less and finding pleasure, joy, happiness in life.

Suffering can exist on a variety of levels. It can exist on the physical level of pain: learning how to pay attention so that when you're driving you don't get in an accident and suffer pain. That's perhaps the coarsest type of suffering - physical pain - but obviously there's emotional pain, psychological pain; and there's the existential pain of just simply having a self that seems very perishable, very isolated, and with the anxieties and fears that can come upon one when death is at hand. Buddhism does offer ways to come to terms with all these aspects of suffering; but again, it requires doing the work to walk that path, and not just to believe that it can happen.

I look at the story of the Buddha's life as a template for the average person's life; it has a universal quality. The story says he was protected from seeing suffering in his palaces: don't we do that with our children? Don't we try to prevent them from suffering, try to minimise it, and protect them from physical harm or disturbing events that might scar them emotionally? Don't we protect ourselves from whatever is disturbing to us, whether it's trying to avoid confrontation, or whatever else we've all got on our list of things we'd like to avoid?

We try to minimise our suffering and turn towards that which is enjoyable or pleasurable; and that's baked into us biologically - which ultimately is good. It's

an artefact of evolution, of our animal selves, but unfortunately some of that baked-in stuff still within us includes the propensity for anger; the propensity for recognising and then judging others as different than ourselves. But now we have the human intelligence to look at that those parts of ourselves and say 'no'. There was a reason perhaps on the animal level for us to behave in certain ways; but we don't have to now, we can see that the reasons no longer apply. However we have to make that choice and just not say; well, because I feel a certain way, that's the truth of things and justifies my actions.

The Buddha, according to legend, saw the four sights – old age, disease, death and the wandering mendicant – which according to the story shook his world and got him thinking. It's not uncommon for us to encounter those sorts of times in life which get our attention. Someone drops dead in front of you, or you get a glimpse of something more profound about life and you want to pursue it: you want to know more about it. Something may cause you to question the meaning of your life. What time do you have left? What are you going to do with it?

Just as the Buddha's status quo was shaken by what he saw, ours can be shaken on a personal level by circumstances, and this probably happens to everyone at some point in life. Presently it feels like it's happening now on a global basis with what's going on with war, or economies, not to mention Africa being on the precipice of famine, - which you don't really hear much about in the news. But it's a mind-bogglingly tragic.

If we have the eyes to see, life is repeatedly showing us the reality of impermanence, and the need to really look at our lives - what are we doing with it? When I drive when I'm visiting temples I will often see an animal that's been killed on the side of the road. I might say the three Homages or just be still for a moment; but if I really think about it, and not think it's 'just' an animal, just like a fly or an ant, I realize that just as its life force was snuffed out, I'm as vulnerable as it was, and that nature doesn't offer me any special dispensation from that happening just because I'm a human being. I then make sure my focus is on my driving since there could be a 'bam' for me at any instant if I lose my attention.

I don't know when I will live my last day. None of us does. You know, if I were to ask who's next, one of you should be holding up your hand! I notice as I get older, the backdrop against which I make choices is different. For example, on a practical level, I might be looking to buy some online data storage, and one option might be a life-time subscription for a one-time price of a hundred dollars. Or you could pay \$20 per year, so five years could be the break-even point. Now I'm 71, and I have to do the calculations - how long am I going to be alive? How much do I want to buy ahead of time?

The whole mindset gets influenced by how far along you think you are. Rev. Master Jiyu used to say "there are a lot of graves in the graveyard shorter than me", equating the length of the grave to the age of the person. So who knows, this could be my last talk. When I realised that that could be true, I started playing with the idea. What if this really was my last talk, and if it's my last chance to pass on anything I thought worth passing on: some aspect of the dharma, or words of encouragement.

If I were falling out of a building, I might yell out – "Carry on friends! Don't doubt you can prove the dharma true for yourself if you practice!" - and that would be it. But I've got a little more time than that; although if I took the time to compose something, it would certainly be longer than the time we have available now. But it would probably contain something along the lines of the following:

I remember a few years ago listening to a late night talk-show, which are usually about nothing particularly weighty. I don't know what the subject was at the time, but in any case there was someone who called in and said he'd been reduced to living in a cardboard box. He'd lost everything; he was at rock bottom. And he said that something had happened to him that he wanted to share over the radio: he said he saw (and these are my words because I can't remember exactly what he said) the glory and miraculous quality of ordinary human consciousness; and it was clear he had gone through some sort of transformation. His was not an intellectual conclusion, but a direct experience of something about his essential nature. Circumstances had taken everything away from him: he had nothing left, but somehow he found a way to look up rather than down, a way to carry on. He had nothing, and in that emptiness some-

thing had the opportunity to shine through.

Soto Zen is sometimes called the comfortable way. I think generally that means we don't engage in difficult ascetic practices: we simply sit in meditation as a core element of our practice. For a westerner who wasn't raised sitting cross-legged in meditation, I wouldn't call it comfortable in that sense! But what I take from it is that, unlike the man in the cardboard box who had everything taken away from him, our way is to let things go one at a time as they arise, rather than suffer the trauma of life stripping us bare.

And by letting go I don't mean cutting off or devaluing things; I mean not clinging to things in a way that denies their reality - the fact that all things change. And doing so - not clinging to things - allows us to be more at ease with the relationships we have, not only with people, but the things of our lives. The letting go is not grasping onto something, but more like letting it fall from your hand. It's still there, but you can pick it up as needed. It's not a rejection or a cutting off.

Getting back to the man in the cardboard box: if he were a good communicator, and maybe had a little charisma, and could share what he found in a way that answered a need within his culture at the time, he might have started a religion. I'm sure there are many people out there who have had such deep insights into their lives, but it doesn't go much further than themselves. If the man in the box did get the attention of others who thought '*I want what he has*' they might look at the externals of what he did, and think - '*I'll get my own cardboard box*' - and do what he did.

But of course his transformation had little to do with the cardboard box: it had something to do with the process that was going on inside him. This reminds me of a bit of the story of the monk who said he was sitting in zazen to become a Buddha, and the master started polishing a tile next to him to make a mirror. The disciples said; '*you can't polish a tile to make a mirror*' and the master essentially said; '*just sitting cross-legged won't make you a Buddha*' - unless of course one does the inner process at the same time, which strictly speaking is independent of sitting or any outward form.

If the man in the box understood his own inner process, he might try to communicate it, knowing however that having a complete understanding of what-

ever process or steps he laid out was not 'it'. The understanding of a doctrine is not the same as the understanding one gets by actually practicing the teaching. But you have to start somewhere: one starts with the known which points and leads to the as yet unknown.

And herein lies the shortcoming of most of us: that being the tendency for our intellect to focus on what it understands and just put aside what it can't get a hold of. Our intellect attaches and identifies with what it understands; what the 'I' in us understands. Now this is not to say that there is no benefit to the intellect, for of course there is. It's because of our intellect that we can realize the consequences of our behaviour in terms of what causes suffering for ourselves and others. We aren't just at the mercy of our animal instincts: we can distinguish between right and wrong, and choose compassion over cruelty. We can choose good over evil; and by evil here I mean those thoughts, words or deeds that cause suffering and reinforce profound separation between self and other. We can choose love over hatred; light over darkness.

When I became a monk, Buddhism was not in our culture as much as it is now. You tended to hear about it - at least I did - if someone in your circle of friends told you something about it. I can remember a few books that were out then: 'Three Pillars of Zen', 'The Teachings Of The Compassionate Buddha', 'Zen Mind Beginner's Mind' (I don't think I had read that). Of course there were the works of Alan Watts which were very popular but I just hadn't read much of that. Nowadays it's a very different scene. There wasn't the internet then: now you can spend day in and day out, probably for the rest of your life, and continue to find new expressions of Buddhism. There are innumerable YouTube talks and books which point out the importance of cultivating the virtues of compassion, love and wisdom; and point out the importance of aspiring to the good, and the transforming of our selfishness and harmful behaviour. As important as morality is, it's not a final resting place as far as Buddhism is concerned. Doing good is not a bench at the end of the road on which to sit, although I suppose it depends on what you aspire to, and by that I don't mean to judge that to which anyone aspires.

I'm just saying there's something beyond both good and evil; something beyond the opposites of good and evil. And to encounter that requires not get-

ting stuck with or resting in the good; resting in love or light. Not letting them become a subtle anchor for the self. As kids we used to do an experiment where you'd hang a thread in sugar-water, and you'd come back some days later and there'd be all these crystals that had attached themselves to the thread. And the doing of good should not become a thread to which the self gets attached, and becomes hard and set, or turns to judging others.

This doesn't mean you don't do the right thing; you don't forget about being compassionate and kind. But it's something you let go of and you move through as you do it. There is something beyond separate selves helping other separate selves, which of course has merit - but there is a bigger picture. Buddhism offers a more profound understanding of 'what is'.

Now we can all appreciate the value of not acting from a selfish point of view. The problem is actually doing so when our conditioning or instincts are acting upon us. It's not always easy to restrain ourselves in thought, word and deed even when we know it's the right thing to do. And the problem with doing good is that we don't appreciate that it too has some hooks; we can fail to realize that we have to walk past it as well. (Again, the string in the sugar water) We walk past good as we do our best to do the right thing. As to what lies on the path beyond the opposites of good and evil, that's something we have to find out for ourselves directly, so I won't give you any definition to hold on to.

But I will say that to encounter it sheds light on how influential the workings of your mind are in creating the meaning of the reality in which you find yourself. And you also see that you have much more say so about how your mind works and the reality it creates. You realize you have much more say so than you had appreciated before: how to let go of the stuff of the mind; and you also have an appreciation of how to let go of the mind itself.

Rev. Master Jiyu's University - Durham University - had a motto: *'That which is true is greater than that which is holy.'* But I might ask - what is greater than that which is true? Regarding this aspect of keeping going, I found a section recently in the biography Mae Chee Kaew, a Thai Buddhist nun considered a modern-day Arahant. She died in 1971; and I encountered a passage that I found very much to the point which resonates with our teaching of letting go, and having no resting place. I'll quote some of it, not exactly, the vocabulary is

a little different, and her practice may emphasize different aspects of the overall practice; but it does help me make a point. Her biographer wrote:

'When the offshoots of delusion were completely cut, her mind converged into a nucleus of supreme, sublime radiance: a radiance so majestic and mesmerising that she felt certain it signalled the end of all the suffering that she had been striving to attain. Having relinquished all attachment to the factors of personal identity, the subtle radiant splendour at the centre of the mind became her sole remaining focus.'

Sounds pretty good! And she decided to speak with her teacher and tell him what she had found. She spoke of her progress over the past year, carefully detailing the consecutive stages of her experience and concluded - *'With her lion's roar, the radiant emptiness of mind that permeated the entire cosmos and transcended all conditions.'*

When she stopped speaking, her teacher looked up and calmly asked - is that all? She nodded. Her teacher paused for a moment and then spoke:

'When you investigate mental phenomena until you go completely beyond them, the remaining elements of consciousness may be drawn into a radiant nucleus of awareness, which merges with the mind's natural radiant essence. This radiance is so majestic and mesmerising that even transcendent faculties like spontaneous mindfulness and intuitive wisdom invariably fall under its spell. The mind's brightness and clarity appear to be so extraordinary and awe-inspiring that nothing can possibly compare. The luminous essence is the epitome of perfect goodness and virtue, the ultimate in spiritual happiness. It is the core of your being. But it is also the fundamental source of all attachment to being and becoming. Ultimately it is attachment to the allure of this primordial radiance of mind that causes living beings to wander indefinitely through the world of becoming and ceasing. That centre of knowing appears as a luminous emptiness that truly overwhelms and amazes; but that radiant emptiness should not be mistaken for the pure emptiness of nirvana. The two are as different as night and day. The radiant mind is the original mind of the cycle of constant becoming; but it is not the essence of mind which is free from birth and death. Such radiance is a very subtle natural condition whose uniform brightness and clarity make it appear empty. It is the very substance of mind that has been well cleansed to the point where a mesmerising and majestic quality of knowing is its outstanding feature. When the mind finally relinquishes all attachments to forms and concepts, the knowing essence assumes ex-

ceedingly refined qualities. It has let go of everything... except itself. It remains permeated by a fundamental delusion about its own true nature. Because of that, the radiant essence has turned into a subtle form of self without you realising it. You end up believing that the subtle feelings of happiness and the shining radiance are the unconditioned essence of mind. But emptiness, radiance, clarity and happiness are all subtle conditions of a mind still bound by delusion. When you observe the emptiness carefully, you will observe that it is not really uniform, not really constant: sometimes it changes just a little but enough for you to know that it is transient. Try imagining yourself standing in an empty room: you look around and see only empty space everywhere. Absolutely nothing occupies that space, except you standing in the middle of the room. Admiring its emptiness, you forget about yourself. Once the mind has let go of phenomena of every sort, the mind appears supremely empty, but the one who admires the emptiness, who is awe-struck by the emptiness - that one still survives. The self as reference point which is the essence of all false knowing remains integrated into the mind's knowing essence. The self perspective is the primary delusion. You forget that you occupy a central position in that space. How then can the room be empty? As long as someone remains in the room it is not truly empty. When you finally realise that the room can never be truly empty until you depart, that is the moment when that fundamental delusion about your true self disintegrates.'

So here we have her teacher pushing her beyond perceptions of emptiness, radiance, clarity, happiness, experiences of joy - pushing her beyond them, saying 'Keep going, don't stop there -'

He's not disparaging them: he's just saying there is more. Which reminds me of our underlying maxim in zazen, where we don't try to achieve any particular state; nor is there a state in which we rest, however wonderful it may be.

It reminds me of the phrase "beginners mind" and also "it is difficult to keep the humility to the end".

As I mentioned before, aspects of Buddhism (which aren't necessarily unique to Buddhism) such as different forms of meditation, have made their way into our culture a considerable amount, but I hope that Buddhism does not devolve into just a therapeutic tool to improve the life of the self, but continues to lead one to a place of liberating insight into what the self actually is or isn't.

Speaking as a monk, I hope the master-disciple relationship does not fall into disuse or fade from the scene, because the mere appearance of hierarchy is deemed not politically correct. I also hope that Masters do not tarnish the relationship by letting their humanity get the better of them. And I hope the master-disciple relationship in its various forms does not lose its efficacy because Masters are afraid to be Masters, lest they be accused of not being sensitive enough or nice enough to their disciples; or are afraid to give hard teaching that challenges the disciples and students, especially at those critical make-or-break times in the disciple's or student's spiritual life.

In other words, I hope Buddhism does not lose its edge as it grows in the West. I hope it continues to challenge us to be more than we appear to be.

Religion can become like a golden cage in which it's easy to see the gold, but hard to see that it's a cage; and yes, one may walk happily and freely within the cage, but still not know freedom in its deepest sense.



Personal reflections on the meaning and importance of ritual

A few weeks ago in a Wednesday Dharma meeting, we touched on the subject of ritual.

Whilst agreeing that it was a key part of practice, it was tricky to pin down why this was so. This led to me to reflect further on ritual in my own life and practice.

A dictionary definition describes ritual as:

‘a way of doing something in which the same actions are done in the same way every time’;

‘a fixed set of actions and words, especially as part of a religious ceremony’.

Many of us probably have rituals in our daily lives. The most obvious for me is my morning cup of tea, pre breakfast, which is my fuel to come from sleep to activity. This is something which I sometimes think would be good to try doing without as it feels more like habit and need than anything else.

A more meaningful ritual is our evening meal. I am the cook and Harold is the layer of the table. We have a

carafe of water on the table, from which he pours a glass each and this is the beginning of our meal. We sit like lord and lady at each end of our table (which I hasten to add is nothing fancy!) Sometimes my efforts in the kitchen have produced something quite tasty; other times, it's not much to write home about. Either way, we eat, "lest we become lean and die." Afterwards, Harold is the dishwasher and I am the wiper of surfaces and clearer of leftovers. This is a daily routine and has a feeling of ritual to it. It is the same in times of joy and sadness. With just us two or when we have visitors. It has occurred in all of our last four homes, in very different rooms but the intent of making time to sit and eat together in an unhurried way is consistent. The actions are almost taken for granted but there is a special quality to each shared meal. It is a punctuation point in the rhythm of what can be a busy life. It offers a position from which to find a quietness and to slow down.

In training, there are many actions which have the quality of ritual for me. Tidying my space to sit, setting out the stool, bowing, sitting itself.

During ceremonies, chanting, reciting, responding. In an actual physical ceremony, moving in concert with others during walking meditation, sitting with awareness of others' presence. These are actions which have been repeated over and over and yet, they somehow give a platform for awareness and being in the present moment. It's almost contradictory and yet there seems to be sense in there. The familiarity and automaticity to the body of the actions

somehow frees the awareness to be in the moment. There is deep comfort in the familiarity of what's done. Old yet new. Same yet different. Here before, here now. For me this brings with it a sense of a rhythm or movement which is ongoing. A collective, universal movement, the same rhythm now as with past generations and future generations. Life just happening.

Jane Stephen



The Way

Friend, I have lost the way.

The way leads on.

Is there another way?

The way is one.

I must retrace the track.

It's lost and gone.

Back, I must travel back!

None goes there, none.

Then I'll make here my place,

(The road leads on),

Stand still and set my face,

(The road leads on),

Stay here, for ever stay.

None stays here, none.

I cannot find the way.

The way leads on.

Oh places I have passed!

That journey's done.

And what will come at last?

The road leads on.

Edwin Muir

(with thanks to Jim Morrow)

Learning about practice

Thank you to the sangha facilitated by Rev Favian and by Neil.

I am discovering a lot about my practice which really has been facilitated both by our discussions on Wednesday evenings and the conversations on Fridays and Sundays at the Priory. What follows is just a few unrelated examples of the welcome learning supported by Wednesdays and the Priory.

* I don't even know why, but for a time in zazen I focused by telling myself to just listen to myself without any comment. After a while it came to me that of course it would be more helpful to drop 'myself' and just listen, a very simple recognition of dropping little me.

* In the last open evening I made a request to possibly spend time discussing the content of Vespers, because there are many references that I don't understand. After the conversation I realised that my motivation was a desire to know instead of just going with the experience. I had to smile

because Rev Favian has once or twice made a playful response to some of my questions about wanting more information or knowledge. It took this conversation for the link between little me and the desire to know, as opposed to letting go of the me and participating in focusing on the whole experience to really sink in.

* Listening to the recording of the talk by Rev. Valora Midtdal of Shasta Abbey, 'Stepping up' given on 20 February 2022 was particularly challenging and useful because of her simple message about the importance of just meditating and bringing the precepts into our daily lives without giving ourselves a bad time for not living up to our own aspirations of being mindful and keeping the precepts. Seeing the overall process as constant training is a vital antidote to constant spinning around in self-blame. She also quoted the Rules for Meditation: –

*'It is futile to travel
to other dusty coun-
tries thus forsaking
your own seat; if
your first step is
false, you will imme-*

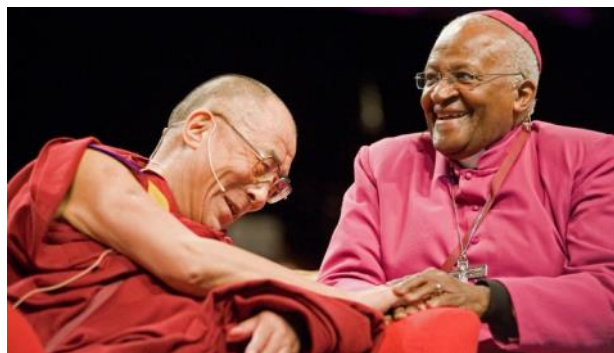
diately stumble. Already you are in possession of the vital attributes of a human being – do not waste time with this and that – you can possess the authority of Buddha.'

Her theme spoke to me because I am constantly monitoring whether I am doing as well as others - while she is reminding us of our own authority to experience what we are experiencing. She also referred to an analogy made by someone else about not searching for different approaches which is like drilling for water and constantly starting a new site instead of drilling down deep enough. Some of you may know I also belong to a Tibetan sangha and at the moment I am finding both approaches to be complementary. Yet I

need to allow the drilling for water image to be part of my processing 'what to do'.

* We had a conversation about playfulness over tea one Sunday morning and agreed that play was the work of children; and then contemplated how it applies to everybody. We referred to professional musicians who 'play' their instruments. The interview with the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Tutu – which we listened to quite some time ago on two consecutive Wednesdays – a beautiful reminder of the importance of playfulness. In zazen I often become aware of a serious and effortful concentration; and as an antidote Rev Favian's playfulness with serious intent comes to mind.

Tom Frank



Coming to rest -

Not long back from a three month cycle tour in Europe, and trying to cope with the return to 'normal' life.

Whilst on the trip there was a daily rhythm - long days in the saddle while

we travelled through the beautiful countryside, villages and towns of France, Switzerland, Germany and Austria, then arriving at a campsite, setting up tent, showering, eating, then collapsing in an exhausted heap! Then the next day,

with the exception of the odd day for R and R, repeat.



This pattern was, at least mentally, an easy one to follow, with an approximate destination in mind when we set out in the early morning.

There was plenty of time to concentrate on the task in hand, a meditation in itself.

But now, having gladly stopped, and in need of a rest, I'm finding a sense of dissatisfaction and restlessness. To use a car analogy, it's as though I'm at a stop but my engine is still running at full revs...how to make it idle, or even better, switch off?

Having reread this I'm strongly reminded of the ending of Sandōkai:

*'How can you ever find the path that certain is,
no matter how far distant you may walk?
As you walk on distinctions between near and far are lost:
And, should you lost become, there will arise obstructing mountains and
great rivers.
This I offer to the seeker of great Truth:
Do not waste time.'*

Fedor Bunge



- *Thistles and Rabbit Holes* -

Though so far I've been an extremely infrequent attendee at Portobello Priory, I thought I'd 'pen' this little piece given my recent stay at Throssel Hole for an introductory retreat. This was my first residential retreat though I've certainly visited monasteries before, Buddhist and Catholic, but this was the first time I'd ever attended a retreat that involved an immersion, however brief and partial, into a communal life of practice.

I first became aware of the Order of Buddhist Contemplatives when I was in my late teens (I'm now 50), when I first started exploring Buddhism, particularly Soto Zen. However, since that time, I have somehow always managed to skirt around the edges of practice and my interests have been largely intellectual. Perhaps I was fearful of commitment or indeed of failure – perhaps the fear that something I'd come to invest in, emotionally and intellectually, might turn out to be difficult or challenging or, indeed, might fail to meet my yawning need for escapist distraction from the mundanities and challenges of everyday life.

Spiritual bypassing, I suppose, with a dash of Orientalist fantasy. Hardly unique, I know, and I imagine many might share this experience. I remember attending a talk by Reverend Master Daishin at the Salisbury Centre in Edinburgh, perhaps in the early '90s. Something certainly made an impression, though I have to confess that at the time I understood very little. Then later in the '90s I became friends with someone who practised in one of the Tibetan Buddhist traditions and we agreed we would attend an introductory retreat at Throssel. Missives were penned to the abbey (in the days before email was the prime mode of communication) and our places booked, but my friend ended up having to cancel and I cancelled too, with some relief I have to admit, as the prospect of a trek on public transport did not appeal. More than that, though, I think my persistent tendency toward spiritual bypassing continued to derail any genuine engagement.

Since then, I've attended Portobello Priory on a tiny number of occa-

sions, under two different Priors. Always positive experiences but always there followed one or other excuse for non-engagement, whether the chaos of my work life or doubts about the tradition and a lingering sense that there would be something more authentic out there (more Oriental fantasy, like a chronic spiritual reflux). Perhaps I was looking for something which would be transformative without having to slog through the nitty gritty of practice.

Anyway, earlier this month, approximately 20 or so years on from my first acquaintance with Buddhism and with the OBC, I finally made it to an introductory retreat. I don't fully know what's changed to enable it, perhaps it's due to difficulties which have arisen over the last few years – Covid, family illness, burn out at work. Perhaps I've finally sickened myself into action, or the mental patterns (karmic, I suppose) which have held me back from engagement are now so tired and hollowed-out that I've had simply no choice but to try to establish some sort of practice.

For those who've been before, the introductory retreats are very well structured. When I first read through the itinerary, all those years ago, it

seemed exceedingly busy and I imagined hurrying from one activity to the next, with no time to rest or reflect, and no space or privacy – prospects I found discomforting. And, in fact, it is indeed a relatively busy schedule – up at 6am, zazen, then a series of activities including ceremonies, meals, working meditation, teas and talks etc,



but there is certainly time for some rest and reflection. More than this, in all of the activities we engaged in while there, whether weeding thistles in the field or washing and chopping cabbage in the kitchen, we were encouraged to engage in them as a form of meditative practice. In doing this, and despite the busyness, entering the flow of the community's way of life was somehow deeply refreshing, and in those parts of the day where we did have 15 or 20 minutes spare, this seemed more than sufficient.

The monastics who led our retreat were kind, gentle guides, and utterly authentic. They also gave eminently sensible advice on practice and in terms of the expectations which we might have of ourselves as lay practitioners within the tradition (build your practice gradually, don't try to replicate monastic routines in your home life, and don't try to foist any new found enthusiasms for spiritual practice onto our families and partners – I'm paraphrasing of course, but all the guidance and advice were rooted in a sensible and grounded approach to practice). The Dharma talks and question and answer sessions were clearly deeply rooted in the monastic life of Buddhist thought and practice can



generate in us, but rendered in the language of everyday life, in ways which I think anyone there could relate to.

If it's at all appropriate to have a 'favourite' working meditation activity (probably not), I think mine was working in the fields with a fellow re-

treatant. We worked under the guidance of a monk, our task being to pull thistles and ragwort in order to prepare the ground, though for what purpose we never learnt. After changing into work clothes, we followed our monastic work supervisor up the path to the field (the grounds of the monastery are lovely), double-gloved (for the thistles) and fetchingly accoutred in midge-nets. The monk who led our little work party managed, somehow, to keep well ahead of us, without seeming to hurry or make any great effort at all. It reminded me of the story of the murderer Angulimala, when he pursued the Buddha, filled with fury and intent on committing violence upon Him. Despite Angulimala's angry and fevered pursuit, the Buddha remained just outwith his grasp, walking serenely ahead at a gentle and unwavering pace. Angulimala could not catch him. Of course, the only violence planned for our little work outing was against thistles and ragwort, but it did amuse me to think how we might have appeared, sweating and labouring up the path while the monk made her way ahead of us, seemingly without effort. However, once we arrived at our place of work, the benefits of a mindful approach became quickly apparent, given the prickly nature of the task, the occasional inconvenient

rabbit hole, and the sometimes slippery path which faced us on our journey back down to the monastery. And indeed, (pulling) thistles and (avoiding) rabbit holes could well serve as a metaphor for the exigencies of life and spiritual practice, if I were disposed to a vicarly turn of phrase.

On a more serious note, and reflecting on the experience of the retreat, I was glad that I had finally made it – it has spurred me to establish a more regular zazen practice, at long last. But there's also sadness and deep sense of time and opportunities lost, of loss, of the frighteningly fast passage of time and all that that brings. And it has brought home Dogen's words from the Shushogi, words which seem more real than ever, and has perhaps lent a new urgency and focus to my approach to practice (long may it last):

'Time flies faster than an arrow, and life is more transient than the dew. With what skilful means or devices can we retrieve even a single day that has passed. A hundred years lived to no purpose are days and months to be regretted.'

(from the translation of the Shushogi
by the Soto Zen Text Project)

Stuart Martin

Memorial wreath –

This is a photograph of a memorial wreath I was working on for Jocelyn, Ross’s Mum, who died recently.

An empty circle seems a very appropriate way to offer something for a loved one. A rich life, lived wholeheartedly and a peaceful death. Offering merit, so helpful in ways we don’t fully understand yet trust that greater life that includes all beings.

Kathleen Campbell



Two old men on a park bench -

A few days ago a friend and I were sitting on a park bench in a little park above the River Clyde near New Lanark. We'd walked part of the way along a most beautiful wooded path threading its way up and down above the river and stopped to eat our sandwich.

On the walk he'd talked of difficulties in his life: relationship problems; a potentially intractable medical condition; deep loneliness.

As we sat, I found myself telling him about another friend who'd died recently. I'd gone to his wake the night before his funeral: I wanted to give a tribute to my dead friend, and told the many people there of his kindness to me at a time of deep personal anguish because of something to do with one of my children.

My friend who'd died had been sent off to boarding school aged 7, and he'd carried into his adult life a sense that groups of men could represent danger. He'd clearly also learned at boarding school that showing emotion was not advisable, and both his body and face had a curious quality as if frozen. As I got to know him, I'd discovered he was uncoordinated and couldn't for example catch a ball. Conversation with him in the small men's group to which we both belonged was rather difficult: he was guarded, and this together with his lack of facial expression and what would be known as body-language somehow made empathic conversation difficult.

But one day, walking with him in the country and telling him of the emotional difficulties I was experiencing, I powerfully felt a deep, raw kindness from him. His frozen, 'locked in' exterior seemed to melt away; and the intrinsic generosity of his heart was so evident and sincere that I felt held by it and was deeply comforted.

I tried to explain this to the other mourners, and why I wanted to read out Naomi Shihab Nye's poem *'Kindness'* as a tribute to him. As I started to read the poem, vivid recollections of his deep kindness began to come back to me,

and the poignant, heart-breaking contrast between his open and so-generous heart and his otherwise clumsy, frozen stiffness; and I found myself overcome. Perhaps half a dozen times, I had to stop and try to regain control of my emotions. Eventually I reached the end of the poem, and stood, looking down at the floor, silently acknowledging to myself my embarrassment at having shown such emotion, especially in front of a large group of strangers.

As I walked through the crowd to the back of the hall, not meeting anybody's eye, a man took my arm, and thanked me for the tribute. I said I was sorry to have become so emotional, and he replied – 'But that was the tribute. It came from your heart.' I was struck by the dissonance between my embarrassment, even shame (this is Scotland, after all) and how the tribute had touched him. Two strangers, hearts speaking to hearts.

As I told this story to my companion on the park bench, I found myself becoming emotional again. He could see the tears in my eyes; hear the catch in my voice. He asked gently if I knew the poem. Not from memory, I replied, but I have it on my phone.

I passed it to him, and asked him if he would like to read it out. He did so, slowly. We discussed some of the lines: 'the tender gravity of kindness'; how 'before knowing kindness as the deepest thing inside you, you must know sorrow as the other deepest thing'.

We fell into silence, gazing out over the rose garden in front of us to where the trees steeply sloped down to the Clyde, eyes lifting to the fields in the distance beyond the river; and the far away hills, indistinct in their haziness.

Suddenly, startlingly, I heard a deep sob beside me. I turned and saw my friend was crying. It was as if a hard knot of grief or loneliness or sorrow had become dislodged in him, releasing the emotion behind it.

We sat side by side without speaking, two old men in their 70s, tearful on a park bench; two threads uniting in 'the cloth of all sorrows' and letting what had arisen pass through into a place of peace and tender kindness.

Later, still in companionable silence, we walked through the rose garden in the park. I found myself transfixed by the beauty of these flowers, these roses. Deep red, glistening with drops of dew or rain. A perfume, bitter-sweet. Perfection. Utter perfection. We stood for some minutes, enrapt, before walking on.

On the path, fragments of words from Dogen came to mind which I later looked up -

'To carry the self forward and illuminate myriad things is delusion. That myriad things come forth and illuminate the self is awakening.'

Whether mistakenly or not, I had the sense that in the curiously cleansed state after letting the wash of emotion pass through me, those roses had 'come forth' in a way I hadn't experienced before. Their vivid presence and perfection seemed to enter an empty space cleared by a letting go, a letting arise and fall away with nothing added, except perhaps for both of us a tacit acknowledgement that for what we had shared, no words were needed.



Willie Grieve

Kindness

Before you know what kindness really is
you must lose things,
feel the future dissolve in a moment
like salt in a weakened broth.

What you held in your hand,
what you counted and carefully saved,
all this must go so you know
how desolate the landscape can be
between the regions of kindness.
How you ride and ride
thinking the bus will never stop,
the passengers eating maize and chicken will stare out the window
forever.

Before you learn the tender gravity of kindness, you must travel
where the Indian in a white poncho lies dead by the side of the road.
You must see how this could be you,
how he too was someone
who journeyed through the night with plans and the simple breath
that kept him alive.

Before you know kindness as the deepest thing inside, you must
know sorrow
as the other deepest thing. You must wake up with sorrow.
You must speak to it till your voice
catches the thread of all sorrows
and you see the size of the cloth.

Then it is only kindness that makes sense anymore,
only kindness that ties your shoes
and sends you out into the day
to mail letters and purchase bread,
only kindness that raises its head
from the crowd of the world to say
it is I you have been looking for,
and then goes with you everywhere
like a shadow or a friend.

Naomi Shihab Nye

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To: **Portobello Buddhist Priory**

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

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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.

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