

—Portobello Buddhist Priory—



A Temple of the Order of Buddhist Contemplatives



*Seated Arhat, China (1484)
- from the Burrell collection, Glasgow
(with thanks to Jim Morron)*

Newsletter January—April 2023

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Newsletter

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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, and on Sunday mornings at the Priory. Again, please consult the Priory website for the most up to date information.

— *Prior's Notes* —

There's a poem by W.B. Yeats:

'My fiftieth year had come and gone,
I sat, a solitary man,
In a crowded London shop,
An open book and empty cup
On the marble table-top.

While on the shop and street I gazed
My body of a sudden blazed;
And twenty minutes more or less
It seemed, so great my happiness,
That I was blessed and could bless.'

We too sit, solitary, many of us in social isolation, but also and more profoundly, in meditation with ourselves. Can we feel blessed and able to bless in these changing and uncertain times? The rapid change and insecurity of our times

can bring an urgency and give sharper focus to our sitting. The Buddha is said to have stated that sense perceptions and thoughts rest in the mind and that the mind rests in awareness and that awareness rests in the Unconditioned; the constancy within all changing experience. And if we seek security and peace, we should look for it where it resides, in our own being.

We can, in reflective moments, have a sense of our undivided nature but for most of us, such moments are fleeting and temporary. And it is for this reason that not everyone is in touch with and can feel the peace and equanimity which is Its signature.

For many of us, our being is so thoroughly mixed with the contents of our experience: the fears and clinging born of the delusion of being a fixed and separated self, casting about for its security, that while we may sense the potential of our true freedom, we do not know how to live from that 'place' with any stability.

A helpful analogy I find, is that of the wave and the ocean. Our sense of isolation is like that of the wave, viewing its reality only with reference to the ocean's surface, unable to recognise the depth of its ocean nature. But with meditation we practice turning the 'light of awareness' into our depth, into the depth we arise from and in which we have our being. I think Rev. Master Daishin talks about this movement as *Zazen doing Zazen*, where we are involved. Perhaps we could also say that our 'wave' nature is one of the ways the ocean comes to know and express itself in this particular place and time. And so, if in these uncertain and insecure times we seek true security, we can practice this letting go of our self delusions and turn within, to that which lies behind and indeed pervades all experience.

With practice, Buddhism tells us, we can come to know this for ourselves, sensing its presence in the background, like a constant friend, bestowing its peace on everything that we experience. All that is necessary is to turn towards

this True Nature and if we do so, it can gradually take us into itself. When we're in touch with our own being we are truly blessed, for then we are in possession or rather, possessed by, that which is most precious in life. And what naturally flows from this is a wish to also bless, to share this innate peace and sympathetic joy with all beings.

We come to discover we are able to sit in solitary meditation and find nothing is lacking in our connection with others; that at every moment the full life of Buddha is presencing its infinite emptiness in these very beings, as all of us.

(From the May-Aug 2020 Priory Newsletter)



Gratitude

On Wednesdays at 7pm is Zoom Zen evening. We are invited to join a Zoom session hosted under the auspices of Portobello Zen Buddhist Priory. I am invited into lots of peoples' homes all at once. We sit in meditation for 20 minutes, sometimes guided by Rev Favian and then we mostly listen to a talk given by one of the senior monks in the Order of Buddhist Contemplatives. Occasionally we listen to a talk given by some other senior Buddhist teacher. Sometimes we just talk about our own training.

But you probably know this.

It comes then as no surprise to me that I hear deep insights into the Buddhist teaching - the Dharma, from the monks who have trained and continue to train intensively; insights that wake me up and suggest my attention be given to some particular aspect of the Dharma as I train day to day: insights and advice that come from experience and a deep understanding of the Buddhist path.

After the talk come questions or observations from the lay trainees. Very often someone will say something that hits me where I live. Every time it comes as a surprise that members of the lay Sangha should be so insightful. I don't know why this should be so.

But it doesn't end there for me. I mostly expect wise words from senior figures in the Sangha and sometimes from certain senior lay trainees, but sometimes teaching comes from non-Buddhists.

I have also been taught by other things: rocks and waves; children, lightning, snow, sunsets.

So where am I going with all this? Well, mostly this is just an excuse to say thank you: thank you for letting me into your home for an hour or so, thank you for your insights even if you don't know you have made me sit up and listen. And thank you for your company and making me smile sometimes.

And thank you to those who have no idea that they have taught me something: people I have met in the street or in a cafe or in other places who may not even have said anything at all.

Homage to the Buddha

Homage to the Dharma

Homage to the Sangha

Graham Jordan



Birth into Life and Death

If one's being follows the full arc of human life expression, there is a crescendo into adulthood and a diminuendo towards death. I contemplated this last year, as my father was dying. He was wearing an adult nappy, as we tried to feed him and give him water. His formerly green eyes looked crystal blue. Still with his full head of hair, although now white rather than brown. His skin, which used to be tanned from all his years of tending the earth, pale and soft. I was struck by the parallels between being an infant and being elderly. Blue eyes, nappies, feeding, vulnerability and needing the care of others. I realised that our mothers birth us into life on Earth, but we alone can birth ourselves into death.

Toward the end, the pauses between father's breaths became longer and the depth shallower. This reminded me of a mother's contractions as birth becomes close. The increasing intensity and frequency of contractions, being the exact opposite of breath frequency and depth, during a peaceful death. It

was a privilege to spend the last five days of my father's life by his bedside. We played his favourite music and recounted memories of our time shared together. Like many, I hear, my father chose to take his final breaths alone, seconds before we arrived at his bedside, that very last day.

My father had early onset Alzheimers, a type of dementia. His cause of death was kidney disease and subsequent failure, due to the mix of potent pharmaceuticals he took for his bipolar diagnosis, which was ultimately compounded by dehydration. He started taking pharmaceuticals for his mental health in his late teens and continued to take them throughout his adult life. Studies have linked both dementia and bipolar spectrum disorder with childhood trauma, be it physical, emotional or psychological. My hope is that it becomes more widely recognised that trauma, whether personal or communal, a lived experience or inherited from ancestors (epigenetics), does not have to be a life sentence. Trauma can be permanently released from the

body. Merely suppressing symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, dementia or mental health conditions, grief or addiction, does not address the root causes. These causes can often be addressed, transmuted and overcome. Labelling someone with a condition for life can negate the hope of recovery.

This pattern on the facing page came to me whilst reflecting on my father's death. It feels to embody our crescendo into life and diminuendo into death. And just maybe, we have ongoing lives on earth, and are reincarnated

into 'earth school', to better ourselves and others, assisting in the evolution of human consciousness. I chose to draw the geometry of this piece with lead pencil and paint the pattern with genuine gold. It symbolises our soul's alchemical journey, from heavy 'lead' consciousness into the unchanging, bright, reflective 'gold' of our soul's true selves.

Katie Lowe



This is the view from my father's care home in Southport and was his last sunset. Interestingly my brother-in-law joined a joint triathlon this summer to raise money for Alzheimer's and they swam in this very lake.



Katie's artwork

Two poems —

I have been writing short poems, accompanied by a photo, when walking outside. Here are two of them.

WALK 1



Gull screeches;
Walking nowhere
In fifteen minutes.

WALK 2



Straight across the grass,
and through the cemetery;
everything is here.

Neil Rothwell

Spirited Away

One of my favourite films, and my children's too, is 'Spirited Away' – probably the most famous animated film made by Studio Ghibli. Whenever we come to the time of year of Segaki, the festival of the hungry ghosts, and I start to listen to podcasts from Throssel about it, I think about the film.

I first watched it before I had children, when I was first getting into Buddhism, and the story and the characters in it was how I understood – and still imagine – the realm of the hungry ghosts to be like. Every time I watch it, I get some other meaning out of it. But it first and foremost makes me think about the idea of the hungry ghost – how we become when our desires and greed take over and lead us forwards, and we lose our ability to be authentic.

The story starts with the main character, Chihiro, and her parents driving to their new home in another part of the country. They are comfortable, well-off Japanese people accustomed to living in the modern consumer world – from which comes many temptations. The family stop at a deserted village, where all the shops are closed. But one eatery remains open. The delicious smells of the food are wafting into the street, but there are no staff to be seen. Chihiro's parents start tucking into the food, and once they start eating, greed takes over and they are unable to stop. Chihiro however, refuses to eat, thinking that it is impolite and she will be told off. She watches in horror as her parents begin turning into pigs.

Chihiro and her parents are thrown into the spirit realm, a world of forgetting, full of many strange spirits with different needs. Chihiro's parents have turned into pigs. They cannot recognise their daughter and live in a pigpen with other lost humans. In the story, Chihiro must find a way to break the spell and rescue her parents so they can all escape back to the human realm.

Chihiro's journey through the film is a kind of Buddhist journey. She begins timid and cowering, afraid of the strange new realm she is in. But as the film



develops, her fear turns to determination. She refuses to be led by others' greed and desires, but follows her own path. Her determination to remain authentic and her kindness eventually wins over the other spirit characters in this new world – even the most powerful sorceresses. The Buddhist ideals of kindness, persistence, gentleness, humility, ordinariness, authenticity are what she represents.

The most memorable 'hungry ghost' in the film is No Face. Chihiro has come to work in the spirit 'bathhouse' where she helps to clean the various

dirty spirits who come in to be cleansed. She lets the hungry ghost No Face in by mistake. No Face is the opposite of Chihiro. He tempts the other spirits offering them gold that he can make appear in greater and greater amounts, and the more they grab for the gold the more of them he eats up, becoming larger and larger and more vicious. Chihiro however refuses to be lured in by his gifts of gold. She only takes what she needs from him, treats him with kindness and listens carefully. Eventually he moans how 'lonely' he is, and she feeds him with a gift that she meant to keep to rescue her parents. Her kindness and respect pacifies him, and from then on he follows her around and is completely placid and harmless.

Really 'Spirited Away' is a beautiful fairy story – creatively and beautifully animated – and you can draw a thousand meanings from it. It is a very lovely and enjoyable watch – and I would recommend you see it with your children, or just by yourself!

And when you've seen it, you should watch some more: My Neighbour Totoro, Howl's Moving Castle and Nausicaa: Castles in the Sky – are some of my favourites! All have a very different more ordinary hero than the Disney movies, and are more likely to be celebrating Buddhist values, as well as the observation of beauty and magic of the natural world.

Jane Herbstritt

The Peace of Wild Things

When despair for the world grows in me
and I wake in the night at the least sound
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,
I go and lie down where the wood drake
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.
I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethought
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.
And I feel above me the day-blind stars
waiting with their light. For a time
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.

Wendell Berry

The 'Immortal Diamond'

Recently Rev. Master Favian kindly sent me a link to an old BBC documentary about the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins whose poetry we both greatly admire. The documentary was deeply interesting about his relatively short life, latterly as a Jesuit priest (he died aged 44). At the time of his death, only six people knew that he wrote poetry.

He was a follower of the 13th century philosopher and theologian, Duns Scotus, one of whose doctrines was the 'this-ness' (*haecceitas*) of everything, the irreducible, unique property or character of each individual thing, free from conceptual elaboration, which is—perhaps — the 'suchness' sometimes referred to in Buddhism.

Hopkins as a poet had a genius for expressing this uniqueness; and seemed in his wondrously idiosyncratic poetry to be suggesting that the purpose of creation was for each thing to be exactly itself and nothing else. For example, in the opening lines of *'As Kingfishers Catch Fire'*:

*'As kingfishers catch fire, dragon-flies draw flame;
As tumbled over rim in roundy wells
Stones ring; like each tucked string tells, each hung bell's
Bow swung finds tongue to fling out broad its name;
Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:
Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;
Selves – goes itself; myself it speaks and spells,
Crying Whát I dó is me: for that I came.'*

When in Buddhism we talk of things – and the self – being empty of self-nature I don't think this means that we lack a uniqueness and particularity: simply that we're neither as separate, nor as static and unchanging as we tend to see ourselves.

I was reminded of this following the death of my brother last year when his widow came to visit. As she climbed the stair, I was struck by how intently she

studied my face. Why is she staring at me, I wondered? Suddenly I realised it was because she could see features of my face that reminded her of my brother: the cast of eyes, perhaps; the cheekbones or forehead. In a way, it wasn't me she was staring at. In her grief, she was eagerly finding traces in me of the man she so wished wasn't dead.

As I write this, I've just returned from the funeral of a neighbour who died of muscular dystrophy. He was unaware that he carried it until his son, who studied genetics discovered as he investigated his own genetic structure that he carried the gene or genes; and broke the news to his father who then discovered that the physical symptoms which were just beginning to manifest themselves were attributable to this inherited condition.

It seems to me that although we are each of us unique, we're also a confluence of waves and currents and influences, like the metaphor of Indra's Net, which has a multifaceted jewel at each vertex which reflects all other jewels in what's been described as a 'perfect interfusion'.

As one writer expressed it, 'Each individual entity is already part of an infinitely extensive context which alone gives it its individuality.'

Hopkins was a Catholic priest and the wording inescapably reflects that, but perhaps he was in the same territory in his poem *'That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire and of the comfort of the Resurrection'* which ends—

'Flesh fade, and mortal trash

Fall to the residuary worm; | world's wildfire, leave but ash:

In a flash, at a trumpet crash,

I am all at once what Christ is, | since he was what I am, and

This Jack, joke, poor potsherd, | patch, matchwood, immortal diamond,

Is immortal diamond.'

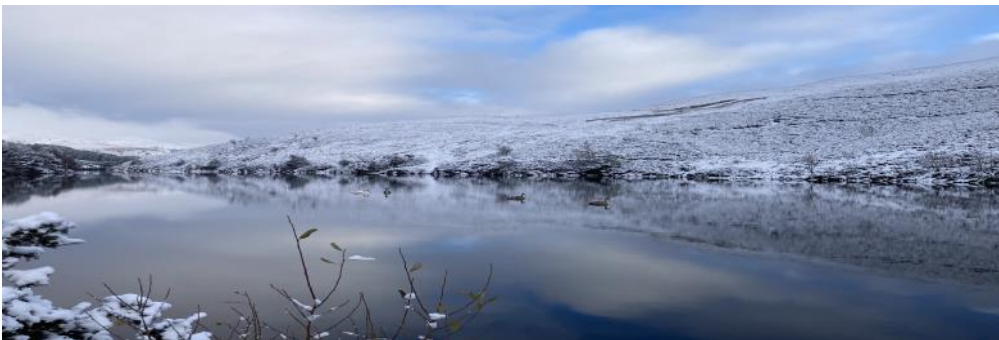
‘Immortal diamond’ seems to be the way that Hopkins expresses the ‘thisness’ of every existing thing and which for him lay at the heart of creation, a never-ending process which forms the ‘infinitely extensive process’ from which the this-ness of each thing, including each of us, arises.

On the one hand there is the sheer extravagance and profusion of the created world—its very superabundance and beauty and uniqueness, which the poet Louis MacNeice once referred to as the world’s ‘incorrigible plurality’. And on the other there is the non-duality of Buddhism; that deep intimation of an underlying unity and ‘oneness’ of all things.

We might at first glance see an apparent paradox or contradiction there. But I believe that the poetry of Hopkins points to a resolution. As the Prior’s notes at the beginning of this edition suggested, we might say that our unique ‘wave’ nature—and that of all things—is one of the ways the ocean comes to know and express itself in this particular place and time.

If anybody wishes to see the documentary about the life of Gerard Manley Hopkins, it can be found here - <https://youtu.be/PEfUpgERINO>

Willie Grieve





Flotterstone, near Edinburgh, December 2022

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