

# —*Portobello Buddhist Priory*—



A Temple of the Order of Buddhist Contemplatives



*Stillness in winter -  
(Glencorse reservoir, near Edinburgh)*

## *Newsletter* January—April 2022

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# Newsletter

70th edition  
December 2022  
(& 30th e-edition)

**Please Note:** this issue of our Newsletter doesn't yet contain a schedule of events due to continuing uncertainty about Covid-19. From 15<sup>th</sup> December, the Priory has been closed again for face-to-face gatherings as a result of Scottish government guidance. Please consult the Priory website for up to date information.

Until further notice, there will be no group visits around Scotland by the Prior 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.

## — *Prior's Notes* —

### *Points for Practice*

**N**otice your relationship to time, in particular notice how much your happiness seems to depend upon looking forward to things, to meeting goals, to the next event on the calendar where you expect to have fun, to anything that isn't right here in this moment. Now there's nothing wrong with planning for the future of course, but this habit of living for the future is quite addictive and it's often an expression of an underlying dissatisfaction; and it robs the present moment of its reality, which is quite a trick in fact, because the present is the only reality. So whatever the character of your experience at the moment there's a timeless truth to take to heart: do not live just for the future.

We often form an opinion about an idea or set of facts based on how they make us feel. In doing this we mistake our mere attitudes for knowledge about

the way the world is. Watch yourself as you react to the opinions of other people throughout the day. Someone might say something about the consequences of a social policy perhaps and you will find yourself liking it or not liking it and on the basis of that sentiment you will be tempted to affirm or deny the claim and even construct an elaborate chain of reasoning to justify doing this. Sitting with this, you may recognise it as a defensive mechanism for the ego-self and this pattern of behaviour is very likely making you unhappy and less rational. Real reasoning seems to proceed on another plane; it is not about liking or not liking the way the facts line up with the conclusions of certain arguments, rather real reasoning is a method of staying in touch with what is, whether you like it or not, and arises out of non-attachment and wise discernment; these being the fruits of regular practice.

When we sit down to meditate we often find ourselves assailed by thoughts, thoughts about what you need to do later in the day, thoughts about things that worry you, thoughts about things you want or don't want. The moment you attempt to pay attention to your breath or the sound of the wind in the trees, you will meet your mind and your mind can be the most rambling, chaotic and needy person you will ever meet. It's as though they followed you through the front door of your house, and follow you from room to room and refuse to stop talking. It is possible to get him or her to stop talking for brief periods of time; and this can come with greater concentration in meditation where it's possible to pay attention to the breath, for instance, and be so focused on it, the thoughts no longer seem to arise; but it's a temporary experience. Real relief seems to come when we recognise thoughts for what they are: mere appearances in awareness; images and bits of language. The fact that a thought has arisen does not give it a necessary claim upon your attention, your sense of self, or your life. It need not have any implications psychologically or otherwise. Of course you continue to think and be moved to act by thoughts, but meditation gives you a choice: do you really want to follow this next thought wherever it leads?

## *A personal reflection on training and therapy*

**I**n early 2020, a couple of events happened that radically shook my understanding of myself and how I got to be where I am. Although things had been bubbling away under the surface for many years and were probably manifesting in a more obvious way to others than myself, until then, I had managed to avoid looking at what was happening in front of me. This, despite Buddhist training for over 20 years.

However, in the immediate aftermath of these events and with the constant and proactive support of my wife, I realised I needed, and sought, help. My GP was understanding and prescribed medication to enable me to start addressing some of the issues that had been sub-consciously smouldering away for all these years and I found a therapist who listened a lot, prodded when appropriate and offered guidance when needed.

Now, as I begin to emerge from the tyranny of self-judgement, I ask why this did not become apparent (to me) during the years I have spent meditating, attending retreats and occasionally seeking guidance. Although I have no definitive answer and my understanding is still changing, I believe that a mixture of the following contributed:

1. Although I was nearly always driven by fear, this was a less uncomfortable place to be than I sub-consciously felt would happen if I started to address how this fear arose in the first place. In a funny way, I was right but I needed to seek and then accept the constancy and support of others at the same time as acknowledging to myself that this was a journey I needed to take;
2. A reluctance to ask for help from others as this would have been a confirmation of my own inadequacy: on the rare occasions I did ask for help, I asked the wrong questions. I felt that I should be able to address these issues, as much as I acknowledged and understood them, on my own and didn't want to bother others. I still carry this reluctance and only made it 'right' in my own mind by paying for private therapy.

3. I succeeded in subsuming my practice into the way I saw the world. For example, I sought ways of being a 'good' trainee by doing what I thought was expected of someone who had been training for some time. Inevitably I always felt that I was failing in this department and could only think of mistakes I had made or how I could, and should, have done better. When it was known that I was a Buddhist, I behaved as if I carried a Zen briefcase around with me that I had to open and show to others as a demonstration of my worth;
4. I experienced the outside world through an image constructed and dominated by my own past experiences and fear rather than allowing it to be as it is and looking any more deeply. Probably we all do this to some degree or other but, looking back, I realise it has meant that I have stepped back from experiencing the wonder of the world around me because I have been so concerned with avoiding (perceived) threatening situations.

These seem obvious now but, until a couple of years ago, I felt that I was being self-indulgent and misguided by looking at what was going on more deeply. I didn't really understand what Dogen meant by "studying oneself". As I look back, I see that I have been continually and doggedly determined to deny any connection with others, a misunderstanding that I still have to challenge now but am at least more aware of.

As a consequence of the help I received, I began to understand, and without the need for judgement, how my difficulties arose and then developed over the years. Over time I came to appreciate that I did not have to continue along this path and for the first time, felt I could look forward with positivity. This has brought a new freshness and commitment to my Buddhist practice, almost as if I have started to encounter the dharma with new eyes.

Perhaps for the first time, I have been able to let go of trying to *do*, or make something happen; and allow, and trust, that whatever arises is fine. Invariably that which does arise comes imbued with compassion and has never been beyond what I can manage.

As with many aspects of training, this is still unfolding and revealing itself day by day and although my understanding has deepened, it does not magically clean the stains left behind. I still carry and struggle with much of the baggage accumulated over more than 40 years. I remain socially reticent and stumble around quite a bit but at least I am better aware when this is happening or might happen and I am more ready to acknowledge it, without judgement, when it does.

I offer these reflections in the hope that they may help others with similar struggles and as a way of summarising to myself where I currently am in this journey, or in the words of my therapist, so I can better see 'the state of Martin' as I am at the moment, although I'm sure that this too will change.

Homage to the Buddha

Homage to the Dharma

Homage to the Sangha

*Martin Hall*



## *Faith in the practice*

**T**he word faith has been one that has given me a lot of pause for thought over the years. Having been brought up in the Protestant Tradition and my father being a minister of the church has also been something working away in the background of training. “On the back burner” as Rev. Master Jiyu would say.

As an adolescent I became agnostic/atheist and stayed that way until after going travelling with my first husband. Coming back home there was a difficult period of change and yet it paved the way for an understanding that the ‘door’ of faith which I had thought shut had always been open.

A long time of trying different ways of meditating brought me to the Portobello Priory just after it opened. Even as Rev. Lewyn opened the door to me it felt like a homecoming. The Sangha refuge has meant meeting and training with so many great people. The teaching of family life, work, mature trainees and Rev. Master Favian have been integral to the opening of

the heart. *‘The longest journey we will ever take is from the head to the true heart’* ? A First Nation saying?

Possibly because of my ideas about faith and a wish not to be disloyal to my father combined with ill health meant that it was five years before I finally visited Throssel and took the Precepts. Hard to believe it took so long because once I got there it was another homecoming. The enduring memory of Rev. Leandra coming out to help me with my bags and being so wonderfully welcoming. The whole experience of Jukai which has been a recent topic of discussion on zoom is one difficult to adequately describe. Like many things of real importance.

Anyway this is a bit of a long way of saying it took a lot of time and training to come to the point where I could write the word Faith without any residue of doubt and confusion. Faith in the practice. Faith in the present moment whatever form it takes. Faith in the depth of our true self to help beyond our limited understanding. Faith in the teaching of the



*Mum and Dad just after they got married*

holes to let light through at different angles and positions. There is a hole for light at the end of the box. Roots grow out and move towards the light so that once they are grown and we take off the top of the shoe box we can see many

Buddhas and Ancestors. Faith in the difficulties and complexities of life unfolding. Faith in the Unborn.

There has also been a recent awareness of how I subtly (or not so subtly) wish to push away or deny the self in time and cling onto the wholeness. A wish for a peace which will take away all the difficulties both inner and outer of life on the planet Earth. Yet everyone has their own life and path to tread. I remember a really helpful image from one person who said people are like a potato put into a shoe box. Inside, different pieces of cardboard are placed with

twists and turns in the growth of the roots. All the time though the driving energy is to reach the light. How can we judge our own training or anyone else's? No matter what the seemingly painful or ridiculous or harmful choices beings make, the energy is still that drive to find the truth. Even though it's hard to see or acknowledge it at times.

Just to finish I would like to say how grateful I am now that I was brought up with faith as an integral part of life. My father was not a preaching minister but a practising one. Even after ill health made him take early



retirement, once he was better he still loved to go out shopping and was a great one for chatting and really listening to people . Mum was endlessly patient and good humoured keeping open house (manse) for all the different people who came, and hosting endless guild meetings, coffee mornings and sales of work.

I am also deeply grateful that throughout my family life, teaching career and volunteering at Hadeel, I have met so many good hearted people of all faiths and none. Bodhisattvas everywhere if we are willing to look.

Homage to all the Buddhas in all worlds.  
Homage to all the Bodhisattvas in all worlds.  
Homage to the Scripture of Great Wisdom.

*Kathleen Campbell*



*Mum and Dad on their Diamond Wedding Anniversary*

## *Not enough pieces —*

**S**omeone sent me the annual report for a counselling service a couple of months ago. The cover had a photograph of a beautifully repaired bowl, and it was explained that the image was an example of the ancient Japanese art of *kintsugi* which celebrates the process and craft of repair.

It further explained that *kintsugi* originates from the belief that what may appear as broken is in fact a starting point for the revelation of new beauty: it uses skill, patience, and transformative gold to reconnect the pieces and rebuild the integral original.



I was attracted by the image; and by the unstated implication that the counselling service might be seen in the same light.

I found it an intriguing idea, and read a little more about the background to *kintsugi*, discovering that it arises from traditional Japanese aesthetics; a world view known as *wabi-sabi* which is centred on the acceptance of transience and imperfection, and is said to be derived from the Buddhist teachings of the three marks of existence – impermanence, suffering, and no-self. In *wabi-sabi*, beauty is appreciated that is ‘*imperfect, impermanent and incomplete*’. Or to put it another way; ‘*nothing lasts, nothing is finished, and nothing is perfect.*’

By odd coincidence, shortly after reading about *kintsugi* and its origins, I was talking with a friend. He suffers from a neurological condition which amongst other things affects his sense of balance and orientation, and while carrying a treasured bowl, he had collided with a door jamb and dropped it.

The bowl broke into many pieces, and its loss affected him emotionally. Having had a difficult life, and being at a particularly low point accentuated by the times of Covid, the breakage of the bowl came to symbolise for him what he saw as the brokenness of his life; particularly his aloneness, the absence of a family, and of what he was feeling to be an absence of purpose and meaning in his life.

I was a little alarmed at his state of mind. We talked on the phone regularly and I happened to mention *kintsugi* as a possibility for repairing the bowl. The tremors in his hands meant that it just wasn't feasible for him to undertake this himself. I had developed a strong curiosity about the technique, and offered to attempt the repair – although with a reservation that I couldn't offer any guarantee about its quality or success.

I have to confess that I had an additional and in retrospect very probably naive hope that if the bowl was repaired, he might be relieved of the (to me) unhealthy symbolism of its breakage and his life. That it might encourage him to see that a life, too, can be rebuilt, or seen from another perspective, appreciated for what it is, and the contribution it makes to others.

I collected the pieces from him on a journey south, and when I examined them a day or two later, I concluded that he must have missed some; that there weren't enough to constitute a bowl. This impression was so strong that I phoned him and asked if he could re-examine the floor where he had dropped it. He did so; and did in fact find a few tiny fragments – but so tiny that they wouldn't make any appreciable difference.

I felt discouraged; he must have missed these extra pieces – who knows, perhaps he might have swept them up absentmindedly & thrown them out.

However, the following evening I thought I might as well start with the pieces I had and see how much of the bowl I could reconstruct. I felt an unexpected thrill when two pieces fitted together perfectly. Quickly I became engrossed – the mixing of the resin, the absolute need for a steady hand. Patience in holding the pieces together until they set. How easily fingers stray and end up smearing resin on to other surfaces. Should I paint on the oh-so-fine gold dust while the resin was still sticky and setting – or mix it in? A magical glittering in the air when I inadvertently breathed on the tiny pot of dust – careful, careful, it could all blow away. My breath stilled.

Slowly, very slowly, a shape began to form; and the following night I suddenly realised that in fact – astonishingly – all the necessary pieces were there, barring a few tiny fragments.

As I continued to work on it, I found my mind returning to my initial conviction that pieces were missing; that there simply weren't enough of them – but that in reality all that was necessary was there. Where had my assumption of incompleteness come from? Had it been a perceptual illusion? Or, confronted by a task that was unfamiliar and a little challenging, was there an underlying reflex of 'not enough-ness' both about the materials I had to hand, or my own ability to undertake the task?

I found myself smiling at my agenda of trying to nudge my friend into viewing the 'insufficiency' of his life in a different light: was my default setting with this task any different? I ruefully remembered him describing crawling about his floor, diligently looking for the non-existent pieces I'd insisted must be there.

I'm still working on that small bowl; noticing flaws and imperfections in my amateur workmanship and attempting to correct them, not quite knowing when enough is enough; when the best becomes the enemy of the good, or good enough; when mild obsession threatens.

I'm also aware that I'll miss it when I return it to my friend. And might he drop it again? Quite possibly. And what will he make of it, if anything, anyway?

All to let go of. Just letting go – but like the ghostly smile of the Cheshire Cat, what hangs in the air is that conviction of 'not enough pieces'.

*Willie Grieve*



*Twice Blessed*

**S**o that I stopped  
there  
and looked  
into the waters

seeing not only  
my reflected face  
but the great sky  
that framed  
my lonely figure  
and after a moment  
I lifted my hands  
and then my eyes  
and I allowed myself  
to be astonished  
by the great  
everywhere

calling to me  
like an old  
and unspoken  
invitation,  
made new  
by the sun  
and the spring,  
and the cloud  
and the light,  
like something  
both  
calling to me  
and radiating  
from where I stood,  
as if I could  
understand  
everything  
I had been given

and everything ever  
taken from me,  
as if I could be  
everything I have ever  
learned  
and everything  
I could ever know,  
as if I knew  
both the way I had come  
and, secretly,  
the way  
underneath  
I was still  
promised to go,  
brought together,  
like this, with the

unyielding ground  
and the symmetry  
of the moving sky,  
caught in still waters.  
Someone I have been,  
and someone  
I am just,  
about to become,  
something I am  
and will be forever,  
the sheer generosity  
of being loved  
through loving:  
the miracle reflection  
of a twice blessed life.

*David Whyte*

*(with thanks to RM Favian for contributing this poem)*

## *Feeling evangelical*

**I** grew up Christian, and evangelism was a long-standing issue for me. I had a problem with the claim that Christians were unique because they were the only ones who realised Jesus was the son of God. I was always interested in other religions and didn't like the idea that I had to claim my beliefs as superior to the beliefs of people who followed a different religion. Even worse was the claim (a bit old fashioned by the time I was a child) that those who weren't Christians – including my dad and my best friend – would all go to hell, or at least be excluded from heaven unless they converted. And then I just had a problem with evangelism itself – with the pressure to try and convert other people to my religion – which was something I took quite seriously. (I have to add that there were plenty of positive things I got out of Christianity too – evangelism was just something I struggled with).

Now that I am a follower of Buddhism, you would expect that pressure to have lessened. Evangelism isn't Buddhism's style. I think the Dalai

Lama once said that you should continue in the faith you were born into if you can, rather than convert to Buddhism. As I understand it, as Buddhists we are invited to find out the Truth for ourselves and never take the word of others, including Buddhist teachers, or even the words of the Buddha - on faith – but work out whether and how these things are true for us.

Yet, because Buddhist practice has had such a powerful impact on my life, and because it has helped me through many hard times, I find that I am now feeling rather evangelical about it! I'm not interested in converting people who already have a faith or spiritual practise of some kind. But I am sad that some members of my family don't have any kind of spiritual practise in their lives. For example, as my children grow up and begin rejecting the Christian teachings they grew up with (my husband is a committed Christian still, and I go to church with him), as friends struggle with different problems or are in hospital, I feel an urge to recommend the Buddhist path.



I must have been thinking a lot about this during lockdown when I listened to a podcast by Rev Berwyn Watson that struck a chord. It was actually talking about wanting to help people during the Covid pandemic, but being unable to visit and feeling helpless. But it nevertheless helped me in my thinking about my family and friends who seem to 'lack' a spiritual practise, and how to help them (not that *they* feel they need any spiritual 'help!').

He talked about how our need to 'help' or 'fix' other people's problems is based on our fear that they don't have access to the same truths that Buddhist practise has helped *us* become more aware of. But that these fears have no real basis because actually as our Buddhist practise develops we realise that everyone is intimate with these deep truths. And each person's particular circumstances draws forth a particular teaching for them. Everyone has access to the truth that fits them. We just need to encourage their sense of it – and we do that not by evangelising, but by trusting them.

Rev Berwyn's talk reminded me that

the 'truths' that Buddhism points to, are not 'owned' by Buddhism or any other religion, but are actually part of life itself. Like the famous koan about Buddhism (and I would say other religions too) pointing to the moon – but not being the moon. That in fact life itself is a transformational process. But that the more we can encourage people's awareness of this process that is part of us, the easier it will be for another person to develop their awareness of deep truths.

Rev Berwyn briefly mentioned Avalokiteshwara as the manifestation of this. I remembered the image of the goddess of compassion with her thousand arms each holding a different 'tool' to deal with the cries of the world. Buddhist scriptures say that Avalokiteshwara is available to each person when they cry out, whatever their need and is prepared to take whatever form is necessary in order to meet their need. Including a form that would suit an atheist, agnostic, humanist – whatever – presumably.

Anyway, Rev Berwyn's talk was comforting to me. As he said, to a certain

extent it takes away the burden of needing to evangelise – if you trust that people will find their own way. And it's a teaching in trusting that others' lives are full of deep and profound experience and contain the catalysts for profound conversion in themselves. Religion needn't interfere – or at least we need to trust a person will find their own way to a spiritual practise that suits them.

What this amounts to in my life is probably something quite simple. Dropping any idea of a 'plan' to help develop another's spiritual experience (I do love a good plan). In fact dropping the whole idea of this being a problem I need to fix in others at all. And instead trusting in the depth of their own experience, encouraging

their exploration as I see it happening, be open to talking about my own experience without taking away or taking over their own cognizing process.

Maybe this is all obvious to others, but as I was so struck by Reverend Berwyn's podcast, I thought I would share my thoughts in case it helps others grappling with similar evangelical urges!

Here is the link to the podcast I was referring to in case you want to listen: <https://throssel.org.uk/dharma-talks/our-reaction-to-the-coronavirus-outbreak-dealing-with-fear-and-uncertainty-by-rev-berwyn-watson/>

*Jane Herbstritt*



## *Enrolling the household —*

*'It may be agreeable for certain people to live a retired life in a quiet place away from noise and disturbance. But it is certainly more praiseworthy and courageous to practice Buddhism living among your fellow beings, helping them and being of service to them.'*

(from 'What the Buddha Taught' by Walpola Sri Rahula)

**W**ell, I'm not so sure about the more praiseworthy and courageous but, as for many, the pandemic has brought and continues to bring our household a number of challenges.

However, it has also brought its blessings. Online sittings and Dharma with the Scottish Sangha have been a delightful discovery, resource and support over the last year. And we now have our daughter and her partner living with us and working in Oxford from our home in Stirling.

In preparation for taking the Precepts (hopefully in 2023) I have enrolled the household as fellow monks (okay, without necessarily telling them) in following where the Precepts lead. Thinking of the household in this way has definitely made it easier to sit peaceably with each of us having our own interests and our own ways of doing things and the others in the house continue to provide teaching in this, each of us available as a support to the other in our own way.



*The cat, Jack, giving coaching on how to be with current circumstance exactly as they are.*

It provides an endless opportunity to practise loving kindness and to sit with any urges that might arise to suggest that others might wish to do things differently (how to fill the dishwasher for example). And there are endless opportunities to allow my fellow monks to surprise and delight.

*Alasdair Hosking*

## Gift Aid Declaration

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