

—Portobello Buddhist Priory—



A Temple of the Order of Buddhist Contemplatives



Avalokitesvara: The Seat of Royal Ease (Liao Dynasty (916-1125))

Newsletter

September—December 2020

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Newsletter

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Please Note: this issue of our Newsletter doesn't contain a schedule of events. Due to Covid-19 it still seems wise for the Sangha not to come together for meetings, either here at the Priory or around the country in our respective groups with the Prior. We'll continue for now coming together for meditation, dharma and ceremony on the Zoom platform each week.

— *Prior's Notes* —

In various spiritual traditions we find the recurring image of the 'spiral stairway'.

It has served since ancient times as a teaching aid along with perhaps, the more familiar image, at least in Buddhism, of the Wheel of Life.

I have found it helpful recently in giving a sense of how both duality and non duality work together as we proceed in our practice.

A dualistic view of practice may be described, in its more negative expression, as an understanding of ourselves as separate and permanent beings caught in a state of some fundamental 'lack'. We sense the possibility of a fulfilment, a sense of wholeness, and yet seem driven by the forces of fear and clinging.

Buddhism describes this situation as beings caught on the wheel of Samsara, ignorant of our true state and condemned to repeat patterns of behaviour that entrench feelings of separation and dissatisfaction. Escape from this wheel of life can set up the understanding of spiritual practice as a journey between two distinct states, ignorance and awakening; a dualistic understanding where we're still caught in a world of the opposites.

Walking this path, while obviously having a relative truth, tends to limit our practice to a view of linear spiritual progress, an improvement through time

requiring self purification; a journey from a fallen state to that of an enlightened one.

Implicit in this approach is a judgment of rejection, as though we must get rid of certain impure aspects of ourselves so as to achieve a perfected state. The non dual view of training neither judges nor rejects the sense of a separate self. This finds expression in Zazen meditation where we train to be with thoughts and feelings without suppression or rejection, allowing them to come and go without attachment.

It is here where I find the spiral stairway image helpful. The stairway represents a movement from below to above, a journey involved in and acknowledging the role of time in the spiritual journey. But crucially our journey up the stairway includes a circling back upon itself, a revisiting of familiar views and experiences, but now from an elevated perspective. So the experience is never repeated in

quite the same way. So again, in meditation, we're learning to neither grasp nor reject the experiences that come into view and over time we can do this more readily, with recurring patterns of say, anger or fear. We learn that, when not clung to and identified with, these patterns of thought and feeling are in-fact insubstantial and fail to reconstitute a particular sense of 'me' as the angry or fearful one. And at the next turn of the stair, similar patterns of thought and feeling





can emerge but now the perspective has subtly changed as has the experienter and the dualistic view loosens its hold.

The spiral structure supports this awareness by representing in its revolving centre, the constant ever present now, available within movement and change. The centre is accessed

through the letting go of attachments and reveals 'itself' as a freedom and sufficiency at the heart of being: this present, presencing itself in time. In learning to dwell more readily in the ever-present, the unconditioned freedom available now helps dissolve the old reactive habits of attachment. We're no longer condemned to repeat the patterns of suffering on the wheel of life. There is a relaxing back and out of constriction into a more boundless state of being.

So the spiral stairway brings together both time and eternity and allows to develop a spiritual practice of inclusivity, where training and awakening are experienced now as an undivided whole.



A PERSONAL TRIBUTE TO REVEREND MASTER MYFANWY



May 25th 1949 - July 2nd 2020

Lizie McCorry spent most of her early life in Loanhead, the mining community just south of Edinburgh. She was the only child of Dick and Lizbeth McCorry. Dick was a miner. She was naturally artistic and went on to study Art in Dundee, married and began working as an art teacher at Castle Douglas High School, Kirkcudbrightshire. This was some time in the early 1970's. She didn't get on so well as a teacher but stayed on in the area and eventually joined Laurieston Hall, a commune and community in south-west Scotland that I was involved with. I think we got to know each other in 1975 and have always remained close friends.

I was shocked when RM Favian told me of her death and immediately shared the news by email with my friends who lived with her at Laurieston, some of whom had not had any contact with her for years. These are a few extracts from their memories, all of which ring true with me.

'I have a strong sense of her, very vibrant, with passion, a big voice and a big heart. She had a way of looking one straight in the eyes, always direct.'

'Lizzie was loving, warm, infuriating and challenging in equal measures. I carry her muddle soul in my heart.'

'She was a strong, challenging, creative and vibrant person.'

'We laughed and spent 47 years laughing. I thank her for all the laughter. I will miss her.'

She left the Laurieston community in the early 80s and after living briefly in

London and Hebden Bridge in Yorkshire she began her training as a monk at Throssel, where she was ordained in 1983 and became Rev Master Daishin's second disciple. This was the time that the monks were building and finishing the new ceremony hall and I understand that she created a lot of the painting and decor for the completed hall that we still see today.



Laurieston Hall 1974. On her way to teaching Art in Castle Douglas High School

In 2002 she moved away from living with the Throssel community to start Dragon Bell Temple for the Sangha in the south-west of England. It took great courage to leave the community on her own and set up the temple. On our phone calls she often voiced her doubts and fears about being there. There is no 'blueprint' to follow for setting up a temple, the local sangha was quite small, and finance was often precarious. But she held on, held on, and I trust that through her unfailing commitment that the South West Sangha will continue to prosper.



Myfanny at Throssel Hole 1984-1

Her early path to Throssel had been a rocky one and it didn't stop once she became a monk. In fact, she left for a spell in the mid-1980s and stayed with her parents in Loanhead before returning to the community. My wife Sharon and I were then living in Edinburgh and she often visited and sometimes babysat for us. Sharon already had a Buddhist practice, but it was through the example of Myfanwy that she began to be drawn to the Zen practice of Throssel and

eventually took the precepts in April 2000. Prior to this I had no spiritual practice whatever, but later that year I began to take meditation instruction from Rev Lewyn. In 2001 Sharon was diagnosed with cancer and eventually died in October 2002. Rev Myfanwy and Rev Lewyn officiated at her funeral, and the lotus flower carved on Sharon's gravestone was designed by Myfanwy. Myfanwy and Sharon are vital links in the chain that links me to my personal ancestral line as the example of their individual practices has led me to my sitting chair.

I remarried in 2010 to Pat. We had hoped that Myfanwy would be the celebrant at our wedding, but she was not available on the weekend that we had chosen, so we were happily married by Rev Master Saido. On our honeymoon we visited Myfanwy at Dragon Bell Temple which at that time was situated in Exeter

She was an ardent believer in women's rights and the equality of the sexes, and I believe that this was a major reason for her to follow the path of Rev Master Jiyu Kennett. Myfanwy could be very direct and outspoken and her way of instantly cutting through the crap in a situation could make her quite formidable, but her respect and love always shone through. She was forthright, honest, often hilarious and very Scottish! She had a special connection with dogs. I knew Guinness and Moon (who is buried at Throssel) but I never actually met Snoops, although he played a non-speaking part in all recent phone calls. He was with her at her sudden death and I trust he is being cared for in his new home.

It's so hard to put into words what she meant to me. We had forty-five years of friendship. We took delight in each other's good fortunes and supported each other through the tough times..... Sharon's death, her mother's death. Long phone calls sharing our passion for Captain Beefheart, rock 'n' roll, films, comedians, John Hegley, laughs..... her wisdom and compassion always shining throughout.

In an email to me last January she wrote *I am still here, not everybody's idea of what a*

Zen monk is, and I am still here.'

It has been an inspiration for me to observe the continuing transformation she made in herself from those early slightly crazy hippy days through the steadfast uncompromising path that she chose. For me, Myfanwy will always remain a shining example of the transformative power of our Zen practice.

Julian Goodacre



Painting Flora



This painting has been emerging for a while, born of current circumstances and a wish to paint.

Since retiring I have been developing Zen practice and meditating alongside being free enough to follow some of the paths that were closed to me in my life as a teacher. I have volunteered with a charity working with children who were floundering a little on entering secondary education; we took them out into nature and the wilds, encour-

aged them to explore, to learn about nature and conservation and to play. Later on I became more involved with a local project seeking to make something of an old four and a half acre walled garden – here, along with my wife, Di, and other volunteers, we have planted an orchard, planted willow for basket making, developed a cut flower garden and a vegetable garden, planned a woodland/food forest, and left quite large areas for nature, for wilding. It has been such a joy to be in nature, with nature, part of nature and to have the time to observe and be. I made bee skeps from willow and, during lockdown a sunhive. I leave the bees we introduced to get on with it but love to stand and observe them. We have noticed how there are more insects in the garden and how the birds have come in and we enjoy seeing the randomness of how wild flowers pop up. We have been developing a keen interest in biodiversity and connectedness. On Wednesdays some of us (2 at the moment!) meet for a Garden Therapy session that includes, checking in, meditation, peaceful walking and some tasks – it has been of great benefit to some of the volunteers

who have mental health issues. Mindful walking in particular, as it gives a chance to see ourselves as part of nature and to enjoy and observe the garden.

So nature, flowers, gardens have very much become part of who 'I' am at the moment. Alongside this is our own garden and what Di and I have made as our home here in the village. Di is a great plantswoman and gardener, more so than me; I have mostly been involved in laying out, planting fruit trees and making vegetable beds. Di is a printmaker, artist and ex-teacher and art therapist. On a trip South a while back she bought some material embroidered with yellow flowers that she thought she would make into a warm dressing gown to wear in the winter. She made a quite stunning garment that I called her wizard's robe...it is beautiful.

Musing on nature, on interconnectedness, on how we are all of nature I wanted to make a painting that would represent this connectedness and the healing power of plants and also something that had the spirit of Di within it. Painting is a skill and means of expres-

sion I would like to develop – I have not really painted anything since I was about fourteen and had to drop Art as a subject at school. I was very taken by the large scale banner-like works painted by Mayumi Oda – a Japanese/Hawaiian artist and Buddhist connected to Green Gulch Zen Center, in particular a Thangka called Queen Mother of the West – you can see her works here - <https://mayumioda.net/collections/giclees>

In the end we conceived a joint project where I would paint and she would show me how to make a lino-print. Our house is full of watercolour works by Di's first husband (a very accomplished painter) and her own drawings and prints – so it had often seemed too daunting a task for me to attempt to paint something. However in these times of isolation it seemed like we would both enjoy this project and Di was able to show me how to prepare watercolour paper and also assist me with some of the drawing – hands in particular. I persuaded Di to don the gown and to stand by the apple tree in our garden while I took some photos to get the form right. In the end I made two paintings from a small first

drawing, scaling up in size each time. Painting the flower pattern and individual flowers took a lot of time but was a very rewarding and meditative practice. As was thinking about Flora – a Goddess of nature and the flowers. I began to think of her as a Bodhisattva – representing the healing powers of nature. The act of painting became a form of meditating and contemplation. In the final, larger painting I wanted to show the flowers surrounding Flora becoming part of her, merging with the flowers of her gown and to give her a transcendent yet compassionate presence.

The final painting is growing on me: at first there were parts I liked and others I was not happy with at all, there are lots of mistakes. Now I have been able to step away and the finished painting is simply there...currently lying on its side on a chest of drawers awaiting a decision of whether to hang it or simply put it aside and see it as part of an onward journey. It was great while it lasted and, I think, more than adequately describes my own feelings around interconnection, of change and transformation, of us as a part of everything – waves in the ocean—and of how healing recognizing this can be.

Jerry Simcock



A small sharing from Findhorn —



This is Cluny Sanctuary, Cluny College in Forres, Moray.

'Cluny' is a Victorian Spa hotel and was bought many years ago by the Findhorn Foundation – the spiritual Community started in the 1960s next to the village of Findhorn in the north of Scotland. This ex-hotel hosts most of the many courses and workshops which are the important Education arm of the Foundation and one of the main sources of income for us. The Sanctuary there was originally the billiard room!

The Community has always embraced all religious practices, although was founded by Eileen and Peter Caddy who were Rosicrucian Christians. Their friend Dorothy Maclean, who was the only surviving founder

until recent weeks when she died after achieving her 100th birthday, was also with them. The founders represented three principles which are at the root of our life here: Going within; Love in Action; Co-creation with Nature.

We have plenty of Buddhist practitioners here but they are either 'Tibetan Buddhists or follow Thich Nhat Hanh (Northern Lights Sangha). I appear to be the only person from our tradition. Outside virus emergencies! I lead morning meditations twice a week in Cluny – as although it is a drive of 5 miles away from my home, I have a special relationship with the place and its Sanctuary.

The Sanctuary team recently replaced the terracotta cushions with these beautiful zafus and also reupholstered the chairs. Then a Dutch woman took over the

continuous and lovely task of seeing that the central candle was surrounded by flowers from the garden, and chose heather which was exactly the colour of the new zafus.

I felt it was all so beautiful that I took these photos to share.

In gassho,
Ann Milston



Learning from Covid-19 —

In lockdown I decided to undertake a short course on **'infographics'** to help me get better at my day-job. For the course assignment I chose a topic suitable for the Portobello newsletter. Some of you may have seen the infographic already at one of the Wednesday dharma evenings.

In creating the infographic I decided to focus on things occupying my mind in the current Covid situation and to reflect on how my Buddhist practice and selective dharma teachings have helped me to respond. I hope it is self-explanatory and you find it useful.

Michael O'Hara

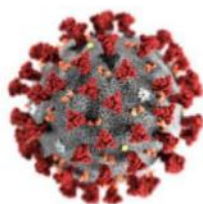
NB If some of Michael's text in the infographic is hard to read, here is a link to the original - <https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1g45BaQj-QHYkmDruWDcfBwEUdTonuhgdVbM1WDir6uE/edit?usp=sharing>

LEARNING FROM COVID-19

Without denying the widespread suffering, the current situation provides fertile ground for personal, societal and spiritual growth

Training in the midst of "suffering"

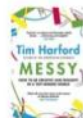
Many agree on the importance, and indeed necessity, of difficult situations. Nirvana and samsara are one.



"Sometime it takes a personal, family or community tragedy, a severe illness or near-death experience, a disastrous love relationship, brutal poverty, or a mid-life crisis to wake us up. Sometime the wake-up call comes as the result of an intensely painful adolescence; sometimes it comes late in life when a person looks around and sees friends dying and youthful ideals nowhere close to being fulfilled."



"What is to give life is to endure burning".



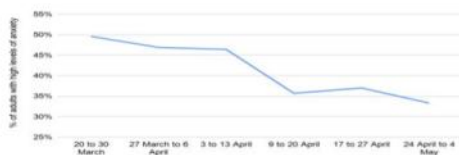
"The trouble with tidiness is that, in excess, it becomes rigid, fragile and sterile. In Messy, Tim Harford reveals how qualities we value more than ever - responsiveness, resilience and creativity - simply cannot be disentangled from the messy soil that produces them."

How are we feeling?

Government surveys show not all is bad (source: Opinions and Lifestyle Survey (COVID-19 module), 24 April to 3 May 2020)

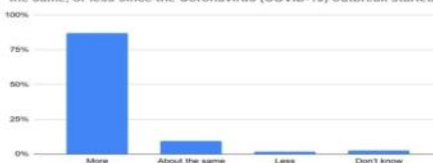
Falling anxiety: As we adapt and respond

Participants were surveyed every 10 days



Compassion: Helping and caring for one another

Participants asked if people are doing things to help others more, about the same, or less since the Coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak started



Sitting, accepting, responding

Not separate, doing what is good to do, sitting amidst the flames.



"Achalanaatha Bodhisattva, the 'Immovable One', represents commitment and determination in Buddhist practice. Achalanatha is portrayed sitting in meditation amidst the flames of the passions, and is not driven away from the place of meditation by them, however much they seem to burn. Achalanatha holds the Sword of Wisdom to cut through delusion, and offers us the rope of the Buddhist Precepts. To begin with this may seem like it constricts us, but when we look more closely we see that it liberates us." (source <https://www.turningwheel.org.uk/festivals/achalanatha/>)

"In giving myself to the sitting, and so to the universe, there is a response, and I am not alone. I experience this as knowing myself to be the wave and that the wave is sufficient. This changes how I experience the situation, the world and my life. It is not happening to me, it is just happening, and I am part of it. This makes all the difference. Acceptance takes us beyond suffering if we wish to go."



Kind Leadership

The above title is the name of an e-book I have written. It is written particularly for people in a leadership position at work but much of it can apply to work and non-work situations more generally. I do not talk about Buddhism or meditation in the book, but the content is underpinned by what I have learned from the practice of zazen, applied to my work in the NHS. This extract is taken from the final chapter called "Leadership and Kindness". The book is available on Amazon.

I have not mentioned the word "kindness" very much throughout this book, even though it is in the title. We all know what kindness is. It is perhaps easier to recognise in others than in ourselves. When we act kindly we are often not aware of it; there is simply a sense of doing what's needed at the time. Kindness is at the foundation of our nature. Evidence of this is that if there is an incident in the street e.g. an old person falls over, people around will instinctively turn towards the person to see if they can help. The people don't think "how can I be kind here?", it is just something hard-wired into us. Similarly, people often remark how much news in the media is negative. If all the news reported was good, we would unconsciously think "this is how things are meant to be – in line with kindness" and not take too much notice. This would not make a profit for the news media. When we see things

are wrong, that same part of us thinks "let me find more about this" with a view to seeing if there is anything we can do to help.

This natural foundation of kindness is one of the reasons I have not mentioned it much in the rest of the book. It can be helpful to cultivate kindness within oneself, for example asking the question, "what is the kindest thing to do here?" On the whole, though, being kind tends to be most effective when it isn't too self-conscious. We can try too hard to be kind, although even that is probably better than being unkind. If we have the intention to be kind, it will tend to flow more easily.

An attempt to be kind can highlight things within ourselves that inhibit this response. Anger and fear are two of main ones. Being a leader can involve many situations which are stressful. The stress can be caused by doubts about ourselves and the people we

work with. Emotions can be divided into three components: thoughts, actions and body (or TAB for short, from the initials of the three words). The initial reaction is often a bodily one. For example if we become either afraid or angry, our heartbeat increases. We may become sweaty or physically tense. This is the body gearing up for action (fight or flight). Thoughts may include something like “I’m going to make a mess of this” for fear, or “The cheeky *****!” for anger. Often there is a stream of thoughts like this that keep the feeling going. The more we think about it, the longer the feeling lasts. Thinking can even produce an emotion without any external provocation. For example, worry is a stream of thoughts that on its own can produce anxiety. The third component is how we act on the feeling. Being unaware of the thoughts and bod-

ily sensations can lead to an overreaction, for example, speaking angrily and saying things we later regret, or, giving in to someone when we are afraid, when it would be really best to stand our ground. To break free of this, we need to stand back and look inwards at our own reaction rather than just focusing on the situation in front of us. Take a breath. By recognising that we are afraid, stressed or angry, we bring these emotions into conscious awareness, which means they are no longer controlling us. This creates a space where we can actively choose how best to act. Given this choice, people tend to act more kindly than they otherwise would have done. This means we can act effectively even when we have these feelings. Emotions can be useful and it is not necessary to try to get rid of them, but to see them as part of a bigger picture rather than letting them



control our actions.

Kindness can seem like a soft option but it does not stand against clear decision-making. I have seen a fair bit of poor decision-making in the public sector and elsewhere and this is often the result of one of two things. The most common is fear of change. People can be afraid of either offending someone or simply going into the unknown. Hopefully the collaborative approach described in this book will help minimise the number of people who feel alienated by the changes. It is normal to feel challenged by going into the unknown, but with support and involvement people are more likely to see it as an exciting opportunity. The second common cause for poor decision-making is excess personal ambition on the part of the leader. Sometimes a new manager will come into a new post and try to change things quickly in order to prove themselves. The symptoms of this type of change is staff feeling alienated and a sense of “change for the sake of change”. Of course, it is rare that everyone will be happy with change but neither should most people feel unhappy.

In contrast, decisions fuelled by kindness tend to be productive. The main thing is to look at the totality of the situation. Kindness needs to apply to everyone, not just the person in front of us or the one who is most vociferous. Often there seems to be a conflict between peoples’ needs in a situation but experience has shown me that a good decision ultimately tends to be in the best interests of everyone.

Kindness also takes courage. Trying to be kind in a position of leadership can feel like swimming against the stream. We may feel there is an expectation from others (or even ourselves) to be more authoritarian or “dynamic”. The fact that you are reading this book shows that you feel there is something more to leadership than this, and in following this sense you will be moving towards a more fulfilling and effective job for both yourself and those around you.

Neil Rothwell

Embracing Shadow



With thanks to Katie May —

Letting go of our expectations —

The arrival of the coronavirus came as a shock to the system for my wife Helen and I. An unexpected invisible had arrived. The emotional pain of separated bubbles had to be endured. Empty streets and quiet places produced an eerie feeling, as we carried out our daily 3 mile walk to visit Helen's elderly mum.

Good weather and the odd friendly face in the passing was of some consolation. 'We are all in this together' attitude became apparent.

We were adjusting quite well to the New Norm, but a series of family heart-aches was in front of us:

28 May - my brother Joe (83) died suddenly of sepsis.

15 July - Helen's uncle Norrie (83) died of cancer.

24 July - Helen's mum (94) was diagnosed with cancer.

16 August - my brother Tom (81) died of cancer.

Helen is now staying with her mum and taking great care of her.

Tom is to be cremated on Wednesday 26th August.

At the moment I am trying to focus my attention on some wise words from Rev Master Scholastica Hicks of Shasta:

Let go of our expectations of how things should be.
Get the self out of the way.
Shine the light in your corner.

In the gloomy shadow of the pandemic, let it shine!

Jim Morrow

Skandhas as processes —



A drawing by Kathleen and her granddaughter —

'I liked processes— heaps of sand have always seemed too static'
(prompted by RM Favian using processes in a Sunday talk)

With thanks to Kathleen & her granddaughter —

— The Mirror, The Wall and Zoom —

The initial impetus to write this came during one of our early Zoom Sangha meetings. I had shared an insight about using Zoom and within seconds in the chat box at the bottom of the screen our intrepid Newsletter Editor sent me a private message “This sounds like a topic for an article in the newsletter”. This is the article.

In our Wednesday Zoom meeting we have been reading and discussing Rev Master Haryo’s essay **The Truth Of Being**. This has given me an insight into a vital early stage in a baby’s development. A baby is born with no concept of any distinction between the world and its own experience of its physical needs. It does not have a dualistic view of itself and its place in this bewildering world. Rev Master Haryo names this the state of **Ignorant Non-duality**.

But as a baby begins to develop it gets insights that there is a world *out there* separated from itself; the dawning realisation that it is a separate being. In one of our discussions someone reminded us of the moment when a baby sees itself for the first time in a mirror. There in front of it is a strange sight which appears to be responding to everything that it is doing. But without a concept of itself as a separate

being it is an extraordinary cognitive leap for a baby’s brain to comprehend that the object it sees in the mirror is a reflection of its own body. Each of us has had this experience in our early years.

As we grow older, we each develop an individual sense of who we are and construct more and more distinctions between ourselves and the rest of the world; this can be called living in **Duality**. One thing we can rely on in life is that when we see ourselves in front of a mirror it will provide us with a faithful picture of what we look like. A mirror doesn’t lie. However, our interpretation of what we see in it can be clouded by the judgements of what we *want* to see. It never lies, but we lie to ourselves about what we see and create our own ‘add-ons’. “*I’d like my hair to be I wish my nose wasn’t..... I look old.....*”. I suspect we each have our own ways of clouding the stark and impartial way that a mirror reflects



by the electric socket, the green paint, the gold Bo-dhi tree painting, the embossed wallpaper, the pattern of the wood grain in the skirting board. I am encouraged to

precisely what is in front of it. It takes effort for me to look at myself in a mirror and accept that this is the way that other people see my physical body.

So, I grew up believing in myself as something fixed and the world as something separate and *out there*. And this worked for me, sort of, but slowly I became aware that there was more to it than just this. Fast forward to my late 40s where I take my first faltering steps in Serene Reflection Meditation. I am asked to sit with my eyes open facing a wall which, unlike a mirror, is a nonreflective surface. All the additions and clouding are supplied in abundance by the thoughts that swirl around in my mind. The wall is never a completely neutral surface and as my eyes are open I can also get distracted

stay alert and just notice that I am thinking, but not to get carried away with any of these thoughts. It's a subtle process but I do believe that I am beginning to get an inkling that 'I' am not my thoughts and that there is more to 'me' than what my mind is telling me.

I suspect that if someone suggested eight months ago that the Scottish Sangha should have a Zoom meeting there would have been limited enthusiasm for the idea. How things have changed! For me lockdown has provided me with an opportunity to deepen my meditation practice and my reading of Dharma, and this has been supported and enriched by our twice weekly Zoom meetings. It has given us all the opportunity to 'meet' a wider Scottish Sangha. I feel a sense of com-

munity and connection that I never felt before.

But Zoom is a funny fish! It provides my monkey mind with an abundance of opportunities to create connections, judgements and assumptions about others and myself. I've become acquainted with the reflection I see when I stand in front of the mirror, and through our practice of sitting I've learnt to observe the busyness within my mind. But the Zoom screen combines aspects of the two, plus extra bits! The plastic screen with a postage stamp size mirror image of myself together with the images of other Sangha members is a fertile field for my mind, which can race and boil with mental distractions, trying to make sense of what I'm seeing, as it makes false interpretations and reaches its dubious conclusions.

I know that everybody's individual screen presents a different arrangement and sometimes a different number of images. On my screen RM Favian always remains in the top left-hand corner with my image faithfully appearing next to him. The rest of the Sangha assembles below, but for reasons I don't understand they sometimes jump from one place to another. I find myself relishing the privi-

leged position of always being beside RM Favian. My mind tends to view the screen in terms of a hierarchy. I revert to school; I'm top of the class! Top good, lower down, not so good. It's alarming how creative my mental constructs can be as I put 'little me' at the pinnacle of my distorted view of world. The maximum number my screen can accommodate is 25. If there are more than this, they are shown on another page in what I think of as an 'annex'. I am curious and don't want them to feel 'left out' so I click to have a look at their images and when I return to the original page everyone has scrambled into new positions. This confuses my mind which seeks order and consistency.

My mind, which all those years ago was able to begin to make sense of the vision of my body in a mirror, is still as busy as ever. On this Zoom screen I see my own image and those of the other Sangha members in their own homes. If left unchecked, my mind will continue to try to interpret, make judgements and draw its conclusions. Sometimes in life I know such conclusions could be vital for my survival but in a Zoom meeting they are wildly 'off the mark'. I try to remind myself that everyone is viewing a different arrangement of images from

the one of that I am seeing. Isn't this an analogy of how most of us perceive the world? If I work on the self-centred assumption that everyone else is seeing exactly what I am seeing, then there is little chance of any real connection with them.

I remind myself that this is a very new technology that each of us is learning to incorporate into our practice. The first time I sat on my meditation stool was 20 years ago but we have held Zoom meetings for only six months. I am aware of the dis-

tractions that my busy mind is creating during these meetings, and by noticing them and continuing my sitting practice I trust that they will loosen their hold in time. Trusting. Trusting.

Julian Goodacre



Staying in the moment

From Michael O'Hara to Kathleen Campbell: 'I was intrigued by your comment this evening on trying to stay in the moment and the relief you feel when you can offer this as a response when asked what are you doing today, at the weekend, etc. Would you consider writing a few paragraphs on this topic and the "strategies" you adopt? Maybe even for inclusion in one of the newsletters?'

Reply from Kathleen: Although I am not sure about having any more really to say I will make an attempt.

I do my best not to have any strategies although if I feel stressed or pushed towards doing or saying something driven by anger/impatience then I still physically hold onto the Buddha pendant I bought at the time I took the Precepts and wear all the time.

Allowing a space to pause and wait for ?..... A possibility of the feeling mellowing?..... Allowing myself to just stay silent and listen without responding from old habit energy?.... A "softening around the mind's judgements" one of my favourite of Rev. Favian's sayings.

Then there is my defensiveness around expectations of how people will receive what I say when they ask "What are you going to do today?"

My perception is that people expect me to give a reply along the lines of a list of THINGS I AM GOING TO DO.

I often have no clear plan of how the day will pan out and the relief was in being able to reply honestly to our daughter Alison when she texted that very question. I know she is interested in looking at how the mind works, has done some meditation and is open to seeing things in new ways so was able to reply: "I am going to do my best to stay in the moment as much as possible today."

As we go back more to "normal" life and meet more people can I find ways to respond less defensively when asked that question.??? We will see.

Writing Straight With Crooked Lines

**A teacher friend recently told me of a class of disen-
chanted, rather rebellious
14 & 15 year olds she taught.** The topic under discussion was the life and teaching of the Buddha; and by twists and turns in the discussion, the culmination of the third session was when one of most apparently disengaged, underachieving boys, who had a reputation as a 'hard man', gave his pal a 30 second hug, much to the amazement and disbelief of the rest of the class.

I was very touched by her story, partly because of the skill and powerful emotional compass she seemed to have, and partly because of the unpredictable outcome which had emerged from discussing the life of the Buddha. I thought the story might be worth retelling.

She was asked to take the class at short notice because their teacher was unwell. It was a 3rd year class and even in normal circumstances 3rd years are regarded by teachers as the most difficult in terms of engagement and motivation and testing the boundaries.

The subject was RMPS – religious, moral and philosophical questions – and the particular topic was Buddhism, about which my friend knew very little.

It felt like entering a lions' den, she said, as this particular class had a reputation for being a difficult class to manage. All strong characters; not full of enthusiasm for the school environment, or being taught; and not minded to give teachers an easy time of it.

So she decided to take the bull by the horns right from the outset. She talked to them about their reputation: not in a confrontational manner, but calmly and openly, putting her cards on the table. She said clearly that despite their reputation, she wasn't going to pre-judge them, or what might happen in their time together. As far as she was concerned, they had a clean slate with her.

She told them stories; about who she was, a little of her background. How she loved being with young people – and how she loved having a platform! And laughing at herself for being in a

great position as a teacher to do just that –

She spoke of how this session could give them all a chance to open up to each other; to find out about each other. How they could turn the classroom into a safe space for each of them – and how, if anyone acted to make it unsafe, she'd have to ask them to leave.

She stressed how important that sense of safety was; and how she would hold that space for them. As she talked on, and they began to respond, she could feel, slowly, the beginnings of a softening and warming atmosphere. She knew from her own experience, and from her teaching, how desperate young people at this age are to hear sense; but at the same time being in the culture of being too cool to talk to adults; struggling to make sense of themselves and the world. 'They're in an abyss of suffering, she thought.

She turned to the topic in hand: the life of the Buddha, about which she personally knew very little. They discussed how the Buddha's father had tried to protect him by shielding him from pain and suffering. Was he right

to do this, she asked? Was this a good thing of the father to do? Slowly the discussion started. Probably not, seemed to be the general feeling – isn't it true that everyone suffers pain? So wasn't it impossible to protect anyone forever? My friend turned it towards them – how did they hear each others' pain? Did they find it easy to listen? Did they always understand each others' pain or difficulties? Was it good to be respectful of each others' pain or unhappiness, even if they didn't always understand it?

The discussion began to become more animated. She realised how closely she was listening to each comment and interaction, moment by moment, reacting instinctively in how she might steer the conversation.

She moved on to the Four Noble Truths, and attachment arose in the discussion although perhaps not in a way that we would immediately connect to the Four Noble Truths. She talked of attachment in general, in relationships, and how important it was. At home, how much did they talk to their families? How much time did they choose to be on their own? A lot, they said.

She found herself talking about how lonely it could be at that age; going through puberty and all the confusion and uncertainty. And how difficult it can be to ask for love from your family; or to ask questions, even. You can feel very unequipped to do that – and to express love yourself.

When was the last time you said ‘I love you’ to someone in your family, she asked? Or to yourself? When was the last time you even told yourself you were good enough?

There was a hubbub of conversation. One girl said; it’s probably the opposite for us, what we say to ourselves. It’s very easy for us to slag ourselves off – it’s a lot harder to say good things about ourselves. There was a murmur of agreement, heads nodding. My friend agreed, and told them how at their age she could remember standing in front of a mirror, saying hateful things to herself.

The lesson was coming to an end. As the last few moments ticked by, my friend said she had homework for them; and it was to say to themselves – just once, before next week’s lesson – that they were good enough. Just once. And as they filed out, she looked each

one in the eye individually and said; ‘And you are good enough!’

The following week, she noticed how they were all there, on time; with a certain degree of alertness in how they were sitting and watching her. She asked how many of them had been able to say to themselves what she’d asked them. Some had; others not, it turned out.

Some said; ‘I’m not there –’, and my friend would add; ‘- not yet!’

As the lesson continued, she found an opportunity to explore whether they had ever said something like that, something affirming – like ‘you’re good enough’ - to someone else, to their classmates for example.

Perhaps predictably, a couple of the boys made risque comments; and instead of ignoring it, my friend stopped to consider what they had said, and remarked that she thought it had come from a kind of insecurity; that they were maybe uncomfortable at the level of discussion – and that it was important that they knew that; and that she did too – and that it was OK – but to try to stay with their feelings rather

than trying to defuse it with rude comments. She continued: 'I'm not sure myself here, I'm just going with the flow: let's just see where it takes us.'

What struck her was how engaged the class were by this point; an openness she hadn't experienced before with them, and a sense of how important this discussion was to them.

She had the sense that although they were, as it were, together against the world in the sense of feeling like outsiders, this didn't mean that they could be trusting and sharing with each other.

'When was the last time any of you had a hug?' she asked suddenly, in a pause in the discussion. The young people looked at each other, surprised – then thoughtful.

'Can't remember', one of them said. Several nodded in agreement. 'Once when I cried', a girl said, rather wistfully. My friend asked why we hug; and after initial hesitation, answers came. 'For comfort', someone said. 'It makes you feel wanted', offered the girl who'd been hugged when she cried. Several nodded, rather embarrassed.

'Did you know that a 20-second hug releases chemicals that make you feel better about yourself?' my friend asked the class. 'I hug other teachers!' she continued – 'well, the ones I like!' The class laughed.

'So who would be up for hugging someone else in the class for more than 20 seconds?' my friend asked. 'Here and now?'

There was a shocked silence. They all looked at each other and then at her. The silence deepened. And deepened.

And then one of the boys, sitting near the front, suddenly said; 'I'll do it!' Everyone stared at him. He was a bright boy, but underachieving for his ability. Disengaged much of the time, and yet he was a volunteer coach with younger children for football, and was known to have real flair in coaching.

'I'll do it – I'll hug someone'. He looked round the class. My friend realised that they might be holding back, being frightened of him, as he had something of a reputation as a hard man. Quite a complex young man.

Silence. Nobody volunteered. As if realising the reasons for their hesi-

tancy, he reflected and then said; 'Maybe I'll just hug my pal!' He looked at his friend who hesitated, then grinned and agreed. They both came out to the front.

My friend said; 'OK, I'll start a timer – remember, it's got to be at least 20 seconds!'

She could have heard a pin drop. The class were absolutely rapt as the two boys began to hug each other. Awkwardly to begin with; a little clumsily. But as the seconds passed, the hug became more natural and affectionate. They held each other in genuine warmth of feeling.

Something had happened in the class that she knew none of the young people would forget; she herself felt deeply moved; and as the boys went back to their seats, grinning affectionately at each other, she found herself saying; "You've no idea – that's one of the most sincere things I've ever seen – it was beautiful. What a connection between you – and when you think of the reputation you guys have had - - look what you can achieve –". She found herself quite spontaneously bowing to them both.

The class remained silent for a few moments and then began to laugh; not mockingly or jeeringly – but as a release of strong feelings, and with a kind of joyousness. Something precious had happened; a separation that had kept them apart and isolated had melted away. She knew that the young people wouldn't have been able to communicate their feelings in words, but whatever it was that had happened was something that they were desperate to hear and to experience.

As she recounted the story to me, I found myself moved by it. Not perhaps the most orthodox way to teach Buddhist dharma, and no doubt potentially eyebrow-raising in terms of formal teaching techniques.

But an old Christian aphorism, I think usually attributed to St Teresa of Avila, sprang to my mind which, if we don't get hung up on the theology of it, somehow seemed to me to fit the process: 'God writes straight with crooked lines'.

Willie Grieve

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