

—*Portobello Buddhist Priory*—



A Temple of the Order of Buddhist Contemplatives



*Kanzeon figure at Throssel, carved by RM Daishin
(with thanks to Eric Nicholson)*

Newsletter

September—December 2023

**Portobello Buddhist Priory
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Newsletter

75th edition
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(& 35th e-edition)

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

We'll continue coming together for meditation, dharma and ceremony on the Zoom platform each Wednesday evening. We also physically meet in the Priory on Sunday mornings and—currently—on Friday evenings (once per month.)

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

— *Prior's Notes* —

Recently I was kindly taken to the opening concert of the Edinburgh Festival, to experience the performance of 'Buddha Passion' composed and conducted by the contemporary Chinese musician, Tan Dun. He tells how he was inspired by once conducting J.S. Bach's 'St. Matthew's Passion' to extend the theme beyond a Christian framing.

So Buddha Passion is the musical retelling of the journey of Awakening, performed by soloist singers and a dancer, a large choir, a full orchestra and a group of traditional Chinese musicians. The story that unfolds includes dramatic depictions of Jataka-like parables, telling of heroic acts of compassion. Later we hear the chanting of the Heart Sutra, accompanied with more invocations of compassion.

The musical forms were international, both ancient and modern. For the audience and surely for the performers too, this was an immersive, embodied experience, our senses being engaged and our attention taken on a 'musical journey' too.



Performance of 'Buddha Passion'

Reflecting the next day, as we performed our Sunday morning service at the Priory, I found myself grateful for the structure of our own forms and liturgy. Rev. Master Jiyu had surely done a remarkable job in translating and bringing the Japanese Soto Zen forms to the West. Her musical background gave her access to a range of musical expressions including; medieval plain chant, nineteenth century hymn tunes, Russian church music, ancient Ceylonese invoca-

tions, chanting for the Ancestral Line, and liturgical patterns of call and response.



Ceremonial Practice at Throssel Hole

With this range of musical forms, along with the central role of the altar, our iconography, the physical movements of bowing and offering, we are allowed an immersive embodied experience. The result is cere-

mony as a Sangha practice, where we come together and create something in the moment with body, speech and mind, that both includes and can transcend the sense of our just being separate selves.

Each time we come together to celebrate in this way, we could perhaps say we are partaking our journey of Awakening, our own Sangha Passion.



Impermanence

One of the qualities of a flower is its transience. If it were not ephemeral, it would not be a flower. I cannot own it for it exists only in the moment as does my appreciation of it. I have taken photos of flowers to show other people. This is part of human communication, the spreading of ideas, the sharing of a small pleasure.

But I cannot own a flower this way. In fact I cannot own any thing though I may have temporary custody of it: flowers, books, gold watches, ideas — all these things are temporary. The things that may define me to the wider world, to my peer group and to myself, will one day become compost, ashes, wedding rings, irrelevant. This is also true of the “I” that would own them.

This is obvious to anyone who considers the matter, yet still I collect things and feel wounded when parting with them: when the bookshelves run out of space, the painting fades, the clothes tear and the ornaments break, the ideas become old-fashioned. All the things that I may use to define my self to myself. The people I care about grow old, become sick and die and my body and mind, once healthy become weaker and ill at times. But also babies are born and become children, then adults; bulbs become tulips, snowdrops, and that can be a joy.

There are moments in my life that have been seminal, life-changing, that have insisted on new direction of thought and action as a deep lane insists on the direction of a journey. Some have been freely entered into; others forced upon me.

The story is that one day the Buddha, then prince Siddhartha, went out from his father’s palace and he saw an old man, a sick man and a dead man. He then came upon an ascetic renunciate. For him this was a life changing event, for he realised that he would be subject to all these conditions at some time. And that this would continue for life after life. He found this to be deeply troubling and unsatisfying and thought to follow the path of the ascetic to be released from

this. Life-changing for him and a seminal event for the rest of the world, for what he found in a long-ago May, he taught.

We have all had these seminal events: some drawn out like long-term caring for a sick person, or being a parent; some like a car crash or a serious illness.

For me one of these events was cancer. Within a very short time, much that I thought I knew and depended on became inconsequential, leaving me bereft. The future I thought I knew was no longer. I was in considerable pain and facing major surgery. The surgery turned out to be brutal and the immediate post-operative recovery became an ocean of overwhelming agony and terror in ICU. I discovered a thing I already knew in abstract: the value of this life. And I found out how kind people can be and how supportive, how caring.

Sometimes the mallet hits the Buddha on the foot and sometimes on the head.

I mostly think of impermanence as the losing of things. I have attempted to try and find an upside to the inevitability of the passing of time: the changing of rotten vegetable matter to compost to new plants. But the attempt to change the pain of loss of friends, of youth, of beauty to a tranquil acceptance that sits like morphine on the senses is a mistake.

My favourite bodhisattva is Acalanatha, the one who sits in the flames. Acalanatha just sits. Doesn't try for tranquillity, doesn't look for an upside or a way out. But sometimes, just sometimes, beyond hope, beyond expectation, dead plants bloom.

Dead Plants Bloom

It was once written by Philip Pullman that it was not his job to explain the meaning of his stories, at least not to be used as an absolute authority on the meaning of his own writing.

The full article can be found here: <http://www.philip-pullman.com/newsitem?newsItemID=10>

However, I offer this to those who might find it useful.

The above phrase “dead plants bloom” can be understood in many different ways. And it almost demands to be used as an analogy.

The beginning of T. S. Eliot’s poem *‘The Wasteland’* touches on a facet of these words. The element of surprise, of wonder, of joy and of pain remembered, but without the poignancy, the immediacy: “*Breeding Lilacs out of the dead land...*” — “*Summer surprised us coming over the Starnbergensee...*”

In the Most Excellent Mirror Samahdi there is a line “*See! The wooden figure sings - and the stone maiden dances.*” It looks impossible; beyond any kind of logic and reason and yet...

A seemingly impossible phrase can be used to shock the listener or reader into stopping for a moment to be in the present. This happened to me when I was asked “*Who are you anyway?*” by a monk many years ago. I could not answer. It was a bit like being hit on the head with a mallet. Almost like having “*Look! Pay attention —*” shouted at me.

Some years ago I met a man who had been so violent that the police had to use a taser to restrain him. He was and does suffer from paranoid schizophrenia. He seemed to have been pretty much written off, a dead weight, and would require close management for the rest of his life. Over many years he went from a chain-smoking lump drugged up to his eyeballs with anti-psychotic medications to a pleasant non-smoker who amongst his other accomplishments, could make art with a chainsaw, cook very adequately and drive a car. He will never have a penetrating intellect after the damage he did to his brain due to heavy drug use, but he is most pleasant company. Who would have expected him to bloom?

I do a bit of gardening. I am quite keen on Dahlias especially red ones (Bishop of Llandaff). I bought some tubers which I have planted out in pots. The tubers look dead before planting – just dried out withered roots. I wondered again if such dessicated brown things will ever grow. And yet, after an anxious month, up they come. I plant more in hope than expectation. The same is true for the tiny poppy seeds that are now becoming well grown plants. Not all survive for they are hostages to fortune, but it is such a joy that they do come up

to flower and set seed for next year.
Truly seemingly dead plants do bloom.
And sometimes I just plant.

Graham Jordan



Bishop of Llandaff dahlia

A Memorial for Rawdon

* * *

It was on a cold and dark February evening that I was let in to the front door of the Salisbury Centre in Edinburgh to attend the Zen Meditation Group for the first time. The group was meeting in a small room at the back of the building, which was the Centre's meditation room at that time. There were 4-5 people sitting on the floor of the dimly lit room, one of whom introduced himself as Rawdon. For the next half hour, he showed me how to meditate, which I practiced over the following two sitting periods. It felt afterwards that something had shifted in my life, as indeed it had. It was example of the Dharma being passed on from person to person.



In early July this year, a small group of us went, on a rainy Tuesday afternoon, to a cemetery in the south of Edinburgh, where an engraved stone marks the spot where Rawdon's ashes are buried. This had been discovered by David Pentony while exploring the cemetery. From the funeral ceremony, we had known that the family intended to inter Rawdon's ashes at a private ceremony - and there it was. We offered incense, recited "The Scripture of Great Wisdom" and "The Adoration of the Buddha's Relics", bowed, and expressed our thanks to him. The rain continued unabated, which seemed appropriate, given Rawdon's

love of the outdoors.

On returning to the Priory, an obituary was read out, listing his many achievements. For our part, a major memory was his quiet presence, reassuring, and in its own way powerful.

Neil Rothwell

Darkness

These are a few personal thoughts about 'darkness'. I am not exploring how concepts of dark and light are used throughout Zen: that is a slightly different topic.

So, let us consider 'darkness' while negotiating a forest of somewhat over-used metaphors. We all know, for example, that the lotus has to have its roots in the dark mud. The Dark Night of the Soul, a theological term with a specific meaning, has become common currency to suggest any very dark spiritual or psychological time.

Common phrases abound. 'In the dark, a dark plot, dark humour' (which I respond to) and 'we all have a dark side'. Then there is Dante's 'dark wood.' The etymological meaning is of something 'hidden' and I can identify with this. I prefer this slant to the common negative or 'bad' associations in circulation.

(I did Google 'darkness' and was intrigued to see an article titled, Celebrating Darkness. The gist of it I think was that we can't rely on our senses in the dark but we can rest in the unknowable. I think the Christian classic, The Cloud of Unknowing describes and explores this view.)

Buddha Nature was hidden from me for decades. I couldn't trust that I was worthy or had a 'spark of the divine' as it is sometimes expressed. Other people had it but not me.

Everyone seems to prefer lightness to darkness. However, I love looking at the night sky: at double stars, galaxies and nebulae. I complain because the sky isn't dark enough! It is only a sky free from light pollution that enables us to see some galaxies and faint nebulae. (Is there a metaphor there? The darker the sky the more fainter objects can be seen. Also, maybe we can 'surf' between awareness of the particular and the whole, the One and the Many?)

'When the opposites arise the buddha mind is lost - - - Light goes with darkness as the steps in walking.'

In my late teens I identified with a dark view of life, thinking it was truer to reality. Others preferred sweetness and light. It is said that the common denominator to any trauma is 'loss.'



I lost connection with buddha nature at the boundary of adolescence when I went to boarding school. Institutional abuse resulted in my distrust of adults and various kinds of defensiveness. Looking back more than 60 years it seems I have lived in darkness in the sense of not seeing my true nature and being driven by self-concerned thoughts

and feelings (darkness=something hidden). Even in this one-sided, apparently negative view of darkness there was/is something enlightening.)

This 'something hidden' aspect is worth contemplating. Many of us for example, may ask a monk, '*What am I not seeing?*' when discussing a spiritual problem. There is a sense of something in shadow.

As with many others, the pain and suffering through decades of adult life became so severe that I knew I had to do something about it. That's when I found Throssel. It would be nice to relate that the darkness was replaced by light - - - but I find dark and light alternate. In ordinary language, there are good and bad days. The 'ideal' is not to prefer the light to the dark, but 'with the ideal comes the actual.' To let go of the envious, 'dark' painful feelings we may have towards another person over and over again for example, may be the action of a buddha and may be enough in itself. But we can also investigate 'who' or what is feeling the hurt. Is there a substantial self there, or is that a fiction?

This example comes up a lot for me. We can do this 'leaving alone' with any painful feeling. Why cultivate this habit? Because the feeling is obscuring our 'peaceful, unchanging mind.' But we must not hate the feelings.

As the mind is self-concerned and its *modus operandi* is made up of trying to maximize pleasant events and minimize the unpleasant, it is little wonder we can take decades to find any stability, or what Rev M Jiyu called 'the third position.'

The dark moods still include occasional suicidal thoughts even after all these years of training. Can I extend compassion even towards these feelings-thoughts?

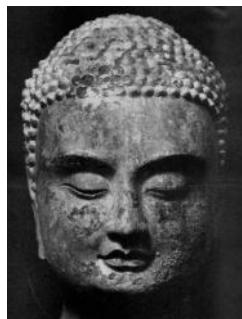
The Unborn, Uncreated Reality is not something that can be described let alone grasped but the more we can realise our habitual self is an elaborate self-creation the more there is space for Unbounded Spaciousness to be sensed! 'It' is always there 'under/behind' the agitated thoughts and feelings. Some people call it universal Love.

It may be trite to say the blue sky always exists behind dark clouds. But if there was not an 'unborn, uncreated, unconditioned, undying,' (the metaphorical blue sky) then complete and utter despair would be our lot. I found recently I put into words my personal koan: 'to live beyond futility.' (From my late teens I tended to agree with the existentialists' assertion: life is meaningless.)

I find now in my late 70s I can trust in the elusive Unborn/Buddha Mind more and more. A non-Buddhist may say that is wishful thinking but I've experienced timeless, expansive moments where the 'small separate self' has disappeared so I *know* the Buddha was only voicing the literal truth. That's what keeps me going. I hope I've made a friend of darkness.

At the end of our lives we have to go into the seemingly *ultimate* darkness so it is probably good that we get acquainted with its many manifestations beforehand.

Eric Nicholson



Resonating

There may be something in this word which can help us open up to the possibilities available to us in every moment.

As a drum is struck and resonates
carrying the sound through invisible air waves and reaching our ears.
As the vivid smell of the green growing world comes in through our nostrils.
As our eyes absorb the colours of the spectrum of human sight .

Bees see more blue than we do.

Everything resonates to its own individual pulse and the complexity and completeness is expressed.

Still

‘Enslaved by words we fall into a hole’ as The Most Excellent Mirror Samadi tells us.

Not to cling onto any particular understanding and not to reject it either.

There is an ancient Chinese teaching I often think of when we have our Wednesday zoom meetings. This may be not an accurate quote.....

‘The learning of the self taught is ponderous and one sided.

Learning with others takes on a cheerful lightness.’

With deep bows in gratitude for the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha.

Kathleen Campbell

Zen and two modern artists

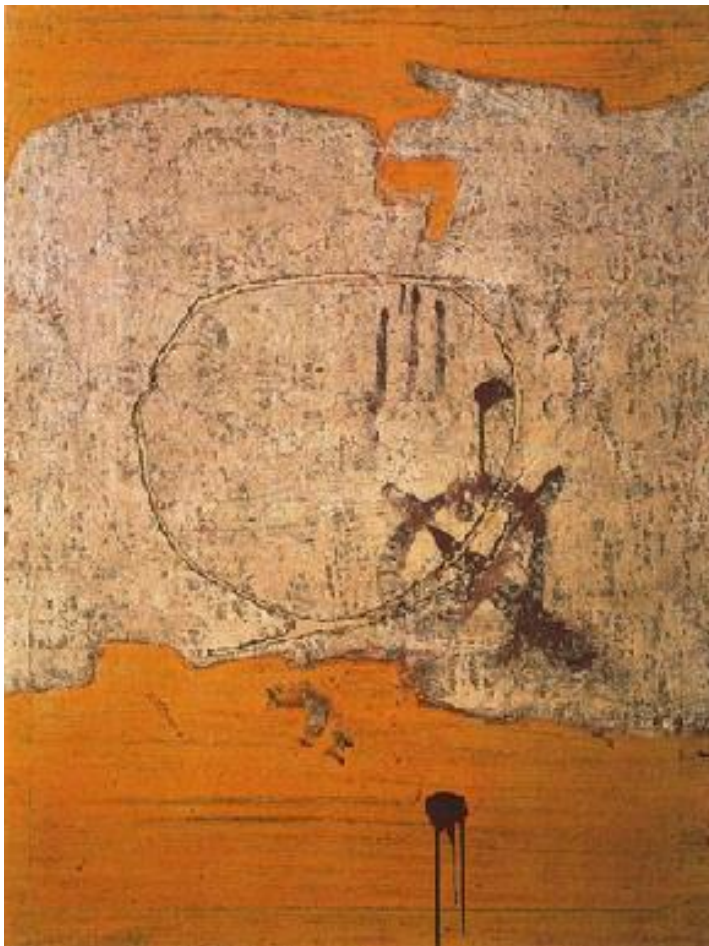
As an art educator, I look at a lot of modern and contemporary art. I wanted to mention here a couple of artists that I have encountered who have drawn on aspects of the visual art traditions of Zen Buddhism.



In these two images of a cat, Marta Cárdenas (1944-) has taken something from looking at Japanese art, particularly the Zen tradition of suggesting through the brushstroke, rather than insisting on small details. Although much of her work is brightly coloured, she knows that an absence of colour can have its power, too.



The Catalan artist, Antoni Tàpies (1923-2012), became well known in Spain, and there is a museum dedicated to his work in Barcelona. He was part of a movement in 20th-century European art, Informalism, that took inspiration from the unloved, the despised and the ignored. Japanese art has been influential in Europe since at least the late 19th-century, but Tàpies was unusual in the extent to which he was interested in the art and philosophy of Zen.



Tàpies liked walls. He said that during the Spanish Civil War, at a time when the Barcelona newspapers could not be trusted, people would check the walls for bills or graffiti with news and information. He was also aware (although I don't know whether or not he meditated himself) of the Zen practice of sitting facing a wall.

David Hosking



*With thanks to Fedor Bunge for this photograph
taken in the Netherlands of Kanzeon sitting in the
'Royal Ease' posture*

Letting be

The bowl sounds thrice. Drop
Into the body. Cares and desires
Arise and occupy. Drop
Through those, hands open.
Letting be, the birds, the traffic
And the pattern of the carpet.

Wondering when the bowl will sound again
And sitting through that,
Touching a richness
For which there are no words.

Alasdair Hosking



'As we think, we live'

There's an old joke about a crofter who breaks his spade while digging peat. He decides he'll ask his neighbour Donald if he can borrow his spade; but as he trudges towards Donald's croft, he begins to reflect that his request might be refused. *'And after me lending him things – what a cheek if he doesn't- - .'* And then another thought occurs: *'Aye, he might pretend he's lent it to somebody else. Can you imagine somebody being that dishonest - - ach, only a sleekit liar - - '*

By this time he's knocking at Donald's door. Donald opens it: *'Hello Hamish! How are you, man? What can I do for you?'* Hamish glowers back at him: *'Aye, well to hell with you, Donald! And you can keep your stupid spade!!'*

I was reminded of this when I came across the quote from the philosopher A.N. Whitehead recently: *'As we think, we live.'*

I took it to mean that we experience the world through our minds; and in that sense we 'make' the world through our thoughts, through the lenses we encounter reality with. It also brought to mind RM Haryo's talk *'The Vessel and its Contents'* the transcript of which appeared in our Newsletter some time ago.

In that talk he said:

'To me, realisation has to do with insight into the nature of our minds: our minds being the very source of whatever exists in our world. It's the seeing the birthing of the opposites occurring within our minds, and this created world spewing forth and interacting with everyone else's created world. Truth and delusion are but one pair of opposites that we become entangled with. But when we see this process of creation within ourselves – truly see it, by being still enough to see it – and know the value of desisting from that process, then I feel we are actually appreciating what the Buddha was ultimately pointing to. So for me the Truth that matters is insight into the way things arise within us; insight into their transitory and ephemeral nature. And seeing this breaks the false reality of our world that is around us that seems to have

some absolute reality. That reality is seen through. Indeed the first line of the Dhammapada talks about all the mental phenomena having mind as their forerunner; they have mind as their chief; they are mind-made.'

And this can feel very real in our own experience. I recently had my 74th birthday; and in the following days and weeks I found myself thinking of what an older friend had said to me a few years before she died: “*Getting old isn't for softies.*”

Without being entirely consciously aware of it, there was an imperceptible but growing sense of – what? The waning of possibilities, I suppose. A kind of feeling of the walls closing in on me. That aching left knee which I know isn't temporary; ditto the back pain and sciatica. A growing list of medical conditions, some of which I hadn't even heard of (blepharitis – really?) The appointments about my heart, and my eyes. An awareness of decreasing energy; undeniable. My ever-diminishing sleep & the increasing sense of tiredness. A growing ‘I-can't-be-bothered-ness.’ Facing up to the fact that some things just aren't going to happen. That long-cherished idea of exploring the mountains of Japan, for example. And never mind Japan: how many Munros will I climb now? Will I ever be on the top of Ben Nevis again? With that knee, I don't think so. The selling of equipment which I know I just won't use. The number of friends and acquaintances of my vintage being struck down in different ways. A friend with Alzheimers; a colleague with a brain tumour; the death of my brother-in-law. And so on.

I wasn't conscious that I was stitching all of this into an encompassing pattern of thoughts about the ageing process, but clearly I was; and my growing attitudes, assumptions and expectations about the process of entering older age was undoubtedly shaping the world I was encountering, in that I was interpreting what I encountered as confirmation of my growing fears.

It was only during a phone call with my elder sister that I woke up to this

stealthily encroaching process. I'd described my reaction to my birthday, and there was a silence at the other end. After a pause my sister said; "*Willie, I'd give anything to be 74 again!*"

My immediate reaction was that she was teasing me; but then I did a swift calculation to remind myself that she was 85 years old. And indeed, at 85, being 74 could seem a very attractive proposition, I reflected -

I found myself smiling ruefully, realising how comprehensively I'd been constructing a negative view of my age and assuming that my partial view of it was, as it were, the truth. But my sister's heartfelt comment had unwittingly demonstrated that there were other ways of looking at it; other equally legitimate 'truths'.

And of course, that's not to say that there isn't an ageing process which needs to be faced up to. But I remember RM Daishin once in a talk saying something along the lines of - '*Don't put another head on top of the one you already have*'.

Yes, there are real consequences of getting older; but I don't need to make a story out of it which, like a snowball rolling down a hill and getting larger and larger, ends up in that 'sticky' narrative-making way at which we're all so talented, forming a self-imposed prison of a natural stage of life which, like all other stages of our lives, has its challenges and rewards.

Willie Grieve



Water lily in a bath
(with thanks to Fedor
Bunge)

Meeting the deadline —

Meeting the deadline for this contribution
Willie gently urging us to submit a writing
Should I should I or not

Ideas come and go during zazen

I say yes and push them away gently; but sometimes they are an enormous distraction.

Fear of writing rubbish or uncomfortable desire for praise
Wishing to have the balance between allowing and letting go
these ideas which I only remember fleetingly
seem little-meish or even big-meish

- At the very last minute there is an event in my daily life clarifying the meanderings

– An experience of compassion happening more and more

On the way back from the local Co-op

A grandmother with her three-year-old grandson

Accosts me to ask me whether I need help to cross the road

I thank her and explain that I have been wobbly all my life

Previously I might have been slightly defensive and offended

Now I appreciate the genuinely human concern and the opportunity

To have a very good conversation with a wonderful lady

Tom Frank

/over

Note: Tom has explained that his friend Colin Brydon introduced him some years ago to RM Daishin's book 'Buddha Recognises Buddha.' Four years after being introduced to the book, Tom began attending the Priory.

The relevant page of Colin Brydon's website - <https://www.colinbrydon.net> – is as follows:



Signposts

*My fears and desire come to look less like obstacles
and more like signposts.*

Rev Master Daishin (2010)

A tree grows as it can, unconcerned by the obstacles it encounters. Seeing the tree in the picture we are clear about the challenges this particular tree faces. We are not unlike the tree, the challenges of life shape us and our actions just as surely as they shape the tree. But we have a great advantage over the tree; we can come to know, through our fears and desires, these obstacles for what they are, and so help form our lives with this self knowledge. Consciousness allows us to let the wind become a guide, a signpost, rather than an obstacle.

Something within me responds —

At one of our **Wednesday Sangha Zooms** Neil spoke the phrase *getting below the intellect*. Something within me responded when I heard that phrase.

At the same Zoom Rev Favian also talked about *jewels in the sand*. Something within me also responded when I heard that phrase.

Years ago I bought the book **Secret Tibet** by **Fosco Maraini**, an Italian who had travelled in Tibet several times, I presume in the 1930's. It was translated into English and published in 1954 and is full of vivid tales of visits to monasteries and his many Tibetan friends.



36. The west explains, the east implies

The West explains, the East implies

It also contains 60 exceptionally vivid black and white plate photos. One photograph and the caption beneath it has always resonated with me. For me it is a perfect juxtaposition of an image with words.

I first saw this at least 20 years before I had any special interest in Buddhism of any kind, yet even then it made an impact on me on some level.

Something within me responds.

Julian Goodacre

Gift Aid Declaration

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