—Portobello Buddhist Priory—

A Temple of the Order of Buddhist Contemplatives

Spring's abundance & 'incorrigible plurality'
- cherry blossom in the grounds of the Astley Ainslie hospital, Edinburgh

Newsletter

May-August 2025

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Newsletter

80th edition
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Please note: the Priory website at **www.portobellobuddhist.org.uk** has an up to date schedule of events at the Priory. Group visits around Scotland will be arranged on a case by case basis by the Prior.

We'll continue coming together for meditation, dharma and ceremony on the Zoom platform each Wednesday evening. We also physically meet in the Priory on Sunday mornings.

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

— *Prior's Notes* —

Putting the Burden Down

In meditation, we learn to observe what arises without clinging or resisting. The practice allows us to recognise the stories we carry from the past without letting them overwhelm us. With open awareness (Zazen), we can begin to see more clearly what is happening, without trying to control or suppress our thoughts and emotions, by cultivating a compassionate 'seeing', as you would for a dear friend.

By being present with what arises, we can begin to understand its nature and release its hold on us. The past has a way of weaving itself into our present, showing up as the joy of cherished memories or the sting of regrets. It can sow doubts like; "What if I had done this differently?", or "I'm just not good enough." But these stories are not the truth of what we are. They're more like echoes of experience, moments that have come and gone, like ripples on a pond after a stone has been thrown in.

The Buddha likened this to carrying a heavy bag, where each stone in the bag represents a regret, a grudge, or a longing. The more we carry, the heavier it becomes. Yet we hold on because we think we need and are defined by it. Letting go doesn't mean forgetting or dismissing the past, it means choosing not to carry its weight unnecessarily. It means waking up to the truth that the burden we carry is not what we are, but rather something we've been holding on to, and now we see we have a choice to set it down. One of the fears around letting go may be the thought that we might lose the value of the past, the lessons learned, the connection with those we've loved. But letting go is not about forgetting, it's about creating space in our hearts; not throwing everything away but keeping what truly matters, while releasing what has tended to close us off from life.

Meditation allows us to honour the past without being trapped by it. The wisdom we've gained, the love we've felt and even the pain we've endured become part of who we are. Not as a burden but as the interwoven threads of our lives.

Depth

I heard a woodpecker…….somewhere.
I saw a hawk side-slipping
among the bare beech trees,
chased by a flight of crows.

Right away, and to my surprise,
he came to mind…… unbidden.
My father would have laughed,
He had a sense for the absurd.

Wild garlic has sprung up…..everywhere
like a bad haircut,
crowding out the snowdrops.
The dying bow to the newborn.

A pungent tang pervades the air.
But I'm already captured by a memory
of a man in a singlet……. …..shaving.
Old Spice and Brylcreem.

The innocence of spring.
The grace of winter leaving.
Hard frost is forecast……..tonight.
By morning the ground will be brittle.

We come and go like the spaces
between the overlapping branches,
Soon to be filled by translucent green.
The depth between us ……..undivided.

David Campbell

The End of Suffering—talk by RM Daishin

Rev. Master Daishin gave a talk at Portobello Priory on 26th January this year. Here is the transcript of the talk -

I **want to talk this morning about the end of suffering**. In the verse we recite, "How great and wondrous are the clothes of enlightenment," the second line is, "Formless yet embracing every treasure."

What I would like you to keep in mind is that it does embrace every treasure, and it is formless. So, if we're going to explore the end of suffering, we need to explore the formless. That can be unsettling, but it helps if we remember that it embraces every treasure. It does.

I think one of the central causes of suffering is our sense of identity. In our world today, identity has become something that people have tried to make sacred. I think I have some understanding of why that may be. If your identity—your sense of yourself—has not been recognized, then it's necessary that it be recognized. It's necessary that in some way or another society improves itself so people are not excluded and identities are not lost.

But do identities define us? I don't think so.

I think we find there's a gaping hole left if we say, "*Well, I'm a man, I'm Scottish, I'm English, I'm gay, I'm straight*," or whatever. OK, there are various ideas and perceptions we have about ourselves that we describe using that kind of language because, in some ways, that kind of language is needed. We need to recognize identity in that way because we are Scottish or English or black or white or all the other ways that things can be divided out. And yet, however long the description may be that we give ourselves of who we are or what we are, I don't think it ever really scratches the surface. In some ways, it's sort of out there somewhere; it's not an interior thing.

> *"I think one of the central causes of suffering is our sense of identity*

Yet there is something about identity that I came to recognize, when I get angry or upset or distressed—there's a sense of identity at the heart of that. This is not something to dismiss and say, "*Identity? No, we don't do identity; we're Buddhists.*" God help us—we don't do that. And yet there's something here that, if we want to know the end of suffering, is really quite important for us to get past or see through.

The Buddha didn't have a problem talking about identity in the general sense I've been using it. He talked about a self and a great deal about "not-self." It's like "formless and embracing every treasure." To get to "every treasure," the real treasure in this sense, gets blocked when we are understanding ourselves as an identity.

An essential guide in our practice of zazen is: don't grab hold; don't push away. To put it another way: don't make anything; don't deny anything - but don't make anything.

When we take refuge in an identity, we make something—and this goes very deep because our sense of the world is made up of our sense impressions and perceptions and feelings. Out of those perceptions and feelings come volitions and our consciousness. That tends to lead to a visceral sense of being something in here—that "I am the perceiver" of my perceptions; "I am the feeler" who feels sensations I experience.

"When we take refuge in an identity, we make something—and this goes very deep because our sense of the world is made up of our sense impressions and perceptions and feelings."

There's quite a strong identification there that goes beyond an intellectual idea; it's a viscerally felt thing. Sometimes it's almost like: "I am this thing in here looking out there," and what happens out there affects me. There's that division—that sense of self-definition: "I am this," and then "the world is that." If you look carefully, though, this does not occur unless we make it so.

In other words, we can produce this sense of identity—but we don't have to. A lot of training for me has been slowly coming to recognize what it means to make a self—to create a self—and more than that: how I break

"When we make an identity, we divide ourselves from the world "

up the world into "*this thing*" and "*that thing*," one against another.

It's not completely wrong to tell the difference between an apple and an orange—that would be absurd—but does it really matter whether I have an apple or an orange? Not really. There's a way of being in the world that isn't rooted in this visceral sense: "*This is me*," and "*This is what gets hurt or offended or disregarded*." What would it be like if we didn't do that? If we didn't have that?

On some level, I think we're drawn to that idea—and on another level repelled by it. It's important to recognize both the attraction and repulsion around this, because it's frankly frightening to feel: "*I don't know who I am*." Or: "*You're telling me this thing I've felt all my life as 'me' is actually a bit of a fiction?*"

So what's going on? In Zen practice, when you don't make something—how is it? You may struggle to reply to that question—to put it into words—and yet you have some sense of it; you have an intuition. You don't just disappear in a puff of smoke when you don't make yourself.

When not making, what is the world? There's no world to grasp—but that doesn't mean we are nothing or that the world is nothing. This is quite difficult to grasp conceptually; it takes time to work through what's involved in not making an identity—it certainly has for me.

This is something worth reflecting on deeply: and do remember: '*Formlessness embracing every treasure*'. When we make an identity, we divide ourselves from the world: "*While I am me—I am not you*." That imposes a certain take on the world—a certain kind of defensiveness: "*This is me, and it's all I've got! I'll try to be good; try to be compassionate.*" Often in Buddhism, we're exhorted to be compassionate—yes; but what actually stops us from being compassionate? It's fear—a fear of losing ourselves; somehow it'll be a step too far. Somehow I need to hold on to this thing. and actually, Buddhism is asking us, the Buddha is asking us, "*Well, hang on—look at that. Is that really what you want? The thing that actually causes the gap between you and the world?*"

When we talk about emptiness in Buddhism, in some ways, we're talking about emptiness of idea, emptiness of conception. More significantly, emptiness of appropriation—that we don't appropriate a self; we don't appropriate the world. That's a different thing to depending upon this in here as being "me"—that's an appropriation. If you don't appropriate, in a way, you leave whatever it is that is here to the universe. You don't need to make it; you don't need to defend it in that sense.

Once you have come to the point at which you can see that, and I think this has to be a personal thing—you can't say, "*Well, I know I'm saying this to you, but I trust your practice.*" You can't say, in general, "*Oh, don't worry about identity; that's a load of nonsense.*" No, you'll get creamed, I think, if you do that—perhaps justifiably so. Because you're not—it's using one thing that is trying to get out of something very deep and using it in another context that it's not intended like that.

I know one of the questions in delving into what is meant by the end of suffering has been the question, "*Well, is it for me? In other words, will I find the end of suffering, or is it for the world—that the world will find the end of suffering?*" I've come to realize it's neither of those. But that as long as I'm seeing this in here as one thing, the world as another, that is a pertinent question: Is it for this, or is it for that? But once this has begun to be let go of, that question dissolves with it.

One way of putting that is to say it's not about what I want or desire or react in fear to; it's what is good to do. And how do I know what is good to do? Well, I can't claim some miraculous way of discerning what is good to do. What for myself I know that I can do is let go of the defensive, holding on to the thing here, the making of separation. To the extent to which I can let go of that, there is a connection; there's the possibility of—well, there is an actuality of not dividing, of allowing it to be every treasure. That's work in progress for me. It's not like I'm speaking to you from a perspective of having done this, job done; that this is the pinnacle that I'm pointing to, that you can now go to. No, there's something that continues here.

And this is an important point: The world is not divided at all in reality. There isn't, on the one hand, as it were, where Buddhism goes to the end of suffering; and then there is suffering. When we have these two things, there's a way of

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mistaking the world, dividing the world up into pieces, into bits, into identities. I don't think there's another way. Instead, it's just that for me, I need to just not do that. Where I see I'm doing that, I need to say—oh, right, okay, that's what I'm doing.

To put this in other language, cease from evil. Evil is a big word, maybe in this case, it's slightly misapplied—but what I mean is it's enough to see what not to do, and there's something that trusts that what is good to do arises when I don't make problems. It arises because we're connected. The divisions are self-made.

It's true that other people will make divisions, too, and we have to live in a world of divisions. It can be easy to say, "*Well, whose fault is it*?" This doesn't get you very far.

"*Whose fault is it*" in some circumstances is a necessary question. We need to understand when things have gone wrong, what's gone wrong, to see how can we do this better. Very important. I think we come to see that more when we don't divide things up into guilt and innocence. There is a connectedness that can be there that facilitates understanding. And then it's - again, what is good to do?

As a kind of example of this, I want to be a bit more specific. In the precepts, in the commentary on the precept "*Do not be angry," the commentary goes, "There is no retiring, no going, no truth, no lie; there's a brilliant sea of clouds; there is a dignified sea of clouds.*" When you think about it, that's a very strange thing to say about "Do not be angry." There's an awful lot packed in there. "Do not be angry; there is no coming or going." You might say, "There is no advance or retreat." In other words, when I'm angry, do I go out, or do I go in? Dogen is saying, "No."

"No truth, no lie"—that's more difficult. We want there to be a truth. You want there to be—I want to be right, not just because that will satisfy my ego, but I want to be right because I want to be right. I don't want to be wrong. I don't want to go around screwing people up or messing the world up. I want to be on the right side of things.

And yet, there's an identity there. I need to be right. As long as I need to be

right, it's almost like there's a section of the world I can't quite see—the bit that's telling me, "Okay, you might be right, but have a look at this -" There's something there that's hinting to us all the time when we are trying to reinforce or live from this point inside. We're all the time walking around a bit with blinkers. It's hard to see what you don't see. Of course.

Then he says, "*There is a dignified sea of clouds; there's a brilliant sea of clouds*." I think it's worth noting what he doesn't say. He doesn't say, "The sun is shining behind the clouds." He says, "*There's a dignified sea of clouds*." I take that to mean that when we look at anger, there is a dignified sea of clouds. That's not usually how we think of anger. Anger is—oh, no, we're supposed to be compassionate. So, compassion—I don't want to be that. No, there is a dignified sea of clouds. There is a dignity in this. If we fail to recognize the dignity, then we're going to be in a continuing warfare with anger.

The dignity is the brilliant sea of clouds. I think that points to how it is when anger arises, and you sit—I don't mean necessarily literally sit down, but you sit in the interior, in the real, in the true sense of the term. You let go of the self-element in there, and then what is there? The dignified sea of clouds.

You can't lay hold of that and say, "Oh, my true nature is a dignified sea of clouds." That's straight back into identity. And yet, there is a dignified sea of clouds. You can't grasp it; in some ways you can't even identify it.

In some of the scriptures, it talks about how the Buddha sees the world. The Buddha often refers to himself as, "*How does the Tathagata see the world?*" It describes it in that kind of language. There is nothing to hold on to, and yet everything is given. When we look at everything, there's nothing to hold on to, and everything is given.

There is an end of suffering. I used to not really believe that, to be honest, because it seems—you know, sometimes people that you meet claim to know the end of suffering. Really? Also, it's like, "*Well, what about what's going on in Gaza? What's going on left, right, and centre in our world? How can you say there's an end of suffering?*" To deny all that makes no sense. And yet, there's something here that is of profound importance and profound value that enables us to live in the

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world as true beings.

We don't need to make the self that suffers. From one perspective, that is asking us to give up a hell of a lot. It's asking us to give up absolutely everything. Because all that we have, that we think we have, is involved. That's what makes this identity. And yet, in the doing, we find that it's not like that at all. That actually we never needed all that in the first place. That that was the illusion.

And that what this is pointing to, in terms of the end of suffering, is the undivided. And the utter sufficiency of undividedness, or to put it another way, the utter sufficiency of reality – and by reality I mean what is not made; what is not compounded. In other words, not put together out of me and something. Not created in the sense of something that I have taken from me, my sense of who and what I am, those components of identity: that I was brought up in England, that I have an English accent; I have certain ways of thinking, and yes, that's all fine.

But from the inside out, do I see a self or not? Well, sometimes yes. Definitely. But at other times, well, I don't ask the question. Because it doesn't arise. If you're sitting Zazen, you don't ask yourself – am I making a self or am I not making a self? Off you go: you just leave that. You trust whatever this all is, if you like, to the universe. It's think it's enough that we just trust reality.

It's something I've come to think of as reality-confidence, rather than self-confidence. I think as we are developing as human beings we need self-confidence. A child or a growing adult needs some sense of self-confidence in the way that is normally used in the world. It makes sense. There's something there that is - I think we recognize instinctively – true. There's something there that's important. I'm not trying to deny that. I'm saying let's not stop there. Let's not make that the sacred definition of what it is to be a being.

There is a whole other thing. Because if we stay there, life becomes something about the preservation of identity—hold on to this, because it's all we've got. And I'm saying no, that's not how it is. That actually, perhaps we have to first

of all form an identity in order to let it go. Maybe that's the way—the rather knotty way—that humans are. And so it's not helpful to deny identity, and yet for ourselves we need to see more deeply than that if we want to come to the end of suffering.

And it is a different world. I think there's a kind of—well, there is a deep shift that training enables if we understand what's going on, if we understand the purpose, if we understand what training is pointing to in this kind of letting go.

And the shift is a movement from seeing the world as a world of things.

And it's profound, the way that we see the world as—in its deepest sense—you have to know the anger and the brilliancy of clouds are not two things. That is asking a lot. But that's the direction. And when you don't divide things like that, you're not creating the conflict: anger, compassion. There's actually nothing to hold on to. And there is the ongoing flow of conditions, if you like—the ongoing flow of life in which stuff's happening all the time. We encounter it all the time. And, in one sense, it seems to call forth from us some sort of a response.

Okay, well, that's one way of thinking about it. And in responding to life, I think we do so much better if that response is out of our connection—out of not needing to make that division into this and that. And we can know that such a thing is possible. It is actually possible to sit and not make a self—even if it's just momentary.

And you don't need to be judging every moment. Just knowing that when it's going on, it's enough to let it go. See it, and then—having recognized it—in a certain sense, you've already let it go. Just move on. Don't sort of obsess over it.

There is a teaching in Buddhism that things don't exist in the sense that something comes into being and exists for a while, and then it goes out of existence and disappears. It's sometimes described as momentariness — that things exist for a moment only.

Actually, they don't even do that. If we think about it literally, it becomes absurd. How long is a moment? What is it — 10 to the power of minus 44 seconds, the Planck constant? How small can you go?

The world must be awfully, awfully busy if it's remaking itself every 10 to the minus 44th of a second!

In other words, there's an inherent absurdity in momentariness if we conceive of it as a quantity – It's not a quantity. It's thinking about things in another way. It's thinking about things in the sense of not being made. There is no truth no lie, there is a brilliant sea of clouds, there is a dignified sea of clouds.

In many contexts there is truth, there is lying; there's things that are denied that in fact took place. And that matters. But there's a difference between, as it were, our action when we try to defend truth (which sometimes we need to do) but we haven't identified with that truth – in the sense of: this is me, and if this goes the other way, then I'm totally lost; I'm totally destroyed if my truth isn't recognised. That's coming out of a need to defend something, in here, in me.

And there is no truth, there is no lie. There is a brilliant sea of clouds, there is a dignified sea of clouds. Let our response be the dignified sea of cloud, the brilliant sea of clouds, as best we are able. And in doing that we don't need to make identities. We can see that there's something more than that. And we have, in one sense, a basis for that. We have a practice. We have, if you like, a faith. We have the possibility, at least, of a confidence — a reality-confidence.

What I mean by that is we're putting our confidence in the nature of the real. In other words, the unconstructed — that which does not depend on another thing to make it. And if it doesn't depend on another thing, you can never grasp it. And yet, it is reality.

Two days at Throssel

Bullfrogs belching in the pond. Rabbits amongst the trees. Patches of snowdrops amongst the grass. A deer standing in the road. Spring already. Nearly two years ago – my first visit – the monastery grounds were deep in snow.

Shared taxi with a Geordie door-to-door poet (book out soon!) and a lovely French Bookseller. Meeting fellow retreatees: Chatty Irish lady living in Jersey. German lady with a kind smile. Dutch woman with a bad back, whose intriguing squeaky zendo chair made me laugh.

Working meditation: practising our tug-of-war skills pulling down a half dead tree with Reverend Wilfred (unconvinced we actually helped – but it was fun).

Zendo – transfixed again by the colourful dance of morning ceremony and its quick-gentle harmonies.

Mealtimes: buffets of unknown and mostly delightful sweet and savoury tastes, silently chosen. Beginner confusion at the silent formal lunch. Where to put my plate? My fork? When to bow? Have I got everything right? Anything right? Nope.

Kitchen duty – caught up in the impressive purposeful dance of post-dinner clean up.

The luxury of my own room this time. Sitting in the armchair, windows open looking out onto the beautiful blue day.

Sleepless night, pitch black. An owl hooting outside my window.

Facing a wall beneath a golden Buddha. Dropping off (not mind and body - sleep deprived!). Back to the present. Dropping off again. Bringing awareness back. Slowing thoughts. Gaps of silence. Singing bowl. Walking meditation. More sitting. And more.

Dharma discussion: teatime treat of biscuits on a silver tray – laid out in piles of two – choc chip on top.

Looked after by kind hardworking monks. Smiling and bowing. So much to learn just by watching. A teaching from Rev Daigen about doing what's good to do: 'The boat makes you a boatman. A carrot to chop makes you a chef' (significant for those on kitchen duty). A half dead tree to fell briefly made me a tree surgeon I guess.

Taxi to the station with a friendly driver who is planning to build a canal boat when he retires – all learned on

youtube. 'You can travel by canal all the way from Newcastle to London you know'. A built boat will make him a boatman.

Packed train from Hexham. Quick dash at Newcastle station onto the Edinburgh train.

Back home and fitting back into family life. Washing green beans – I'm the chef. Listening to my eldest's homework gloom – I'm mum again. Missing the intensity of Throssel life and the simple choices of a retreat. Enjoying a clearer mind, resolved to slow the tempo and be a better, kinder Buddhist!

Jane Herbstritt

Lonely things

On a summer afternoon I sat in the park with my three-year-old granddaughter as we munched our way through a bag of gold-foil wrapped chocolate coins. After a period of companionable silence, my granddaughter said, *"I lost my book out the car window."*

This remark puzzled me at first, as it seemed to come out of the blue. Then I remembered that about eighteen months earlier she'd thrown a favourite book out of the moving car window. Although we'd pulled over to look for it on the grass verge, the book couldn't be found and my granddaughter had been upset about the loss.

The conversation continued,

"I remember that. It happened quite a long time ago."

"It feels lonely."

"Well, when we lose something, it feels a bit like being lonely."

She became quiet again, then remarked,

"We're having a talk about lonely things."

I was touched by this brief exchange and found myself reflecting on possible meanings of what my granddaughter was saying. It seemed she was communicating something important, and I wanted to try and understand what she was expressing. I was aware that her great grandmother had died a few weeks earlier, and that my granddaughter hadn't talked much about this. I wondered if she was beginning to make sense of her feelings by connecting this recent bereavement with a previous loss experience.

Although losing a favourite book may seem trivial compared with the death of a person, this was one of the few prior experiences of loss in my granddaughter's young life that was available to her as a reference point. In his wonderful book *A Fortunate Man*, John Berger discusses how time and loss are experienced by young children:

'Nothing fortuitous happens in a child's world. There are no accidents. Everything is connected with everything else and everything can be explained by everything else. (The structure of their world is similar to that of magic.) Thus for a young child a loss is never meaningless, absurd - and above all, unnecessary. For a young child, everything that happens is a necessity.'

So, for my granddaughter the loss of a favourite book may have carried significance in helping her to work out what loss is and what it feels like.

Another aspect of our conversation that fascinated me was how she'd spoken about this event from 18 months earlier, half her young lifetime ago, as if it was a recent occurrence. Young children often seem to refer to distant events in this immediate way, whereas in adult life, time seems to move in a linear, repetitive, and relatively predictable fashion, even if there are moments when this apparent orderliness falls away.

Discussing how time is perceived differently by children and adults, Berger writes,

'There are no inevitable repetitions in childhood. 'Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday. April, May, June. 1924, 1925, 1926' represents the antithesis of their experience. Nothing is bound to repeat itself. Which, incidentally, is one of the reasons why children ask to be reassured that some things will be repeated. 'And tomorrow I will get up and have breakfast?" Gradually after the age of about six, they can answer the question for themselves and they begin to expect and depend upon cycles of events; but even then their unit of measurement is so small – their impatience, if you wish to call it that, so great – that the foreseen still seems too far off to qualify the present to any important degree; their attention still remains on the present in which things constantly appear for the first time and are constantly being lost forever.'

Reflecting on the brief conversation with my granddaughter also led me to think

about how the experience of time is altering in my own life. With age, I find myself prone to looking back and taking stock, remembering the people I've known, things I've done and that have happened to me along the way. Sometimes the past seems far distant, as if it happened to another person in a different life, or as if in a dream. But there are other moments when time seems to concertina, and the past is almost tangibly present.

And with Zen training the sense of linear time seems to have become looser for me. In meditation, as I sit in stillness and try to pay attention to what's happening right now, watching my thoughts arise then fade away, the impression of time flowing in an orderly fashion occasionally becomes softened and I can glimpse this as another construction of the mind: a compelling narrative imposing orderliness onto a fundamentally fluid and mysterious phenomenon.

So, thinking about my granddaughter and I as we sat together on that sunny afternoon talking about "lonely things" – about transience and the way loss sometimes feels - from our different vantage points, I see a commonality. She apprehends her experience with a genuine 'Beginner's Mind', while I aspire to unlearn a lifetime's conditioning and return once more to this immediacy of perception.

Alex Reed

References

Berger, J. & Moher, J. *A Fortunate Man: The Story of a Country Doctor.* Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 2015 edition, p. 123-124.

Suzuki, S. *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind.* Massachusetts: Shambala, 2019 edition.

Fear opens us up

My trusty laptop (veteran of many an online Dharma evening) was coming to the end of its life. For some time, I had been looking forward to replacing it with a different laptop with extra features, which had a reputation for being user-friendly. When the time came, I bought the new computer and, with some excitement, started using it. I found it less user-friendly than anticipated, and I ended up abandoning the first attempt at setting it up.

After going to sleep that night, I woke up in the middle of the night feeling panicky. I realised that setting up the new laptop from my old system would be a major project which I had little time or energy for. I slept poorly that night. Eventually, I realised that I would need to return the new computer and buy a less glamorous one more like my old model. This I did, and the replacement laptop has proved to be a good workhorse which was easy to set up.

Why did I become panicky about this? At one level it was quite irrational, as I knew I could send the new laptop back and obtain a replacement without much trouble. But there was more going on here. I had become set on that particular replacement model and was eagerly anticipating using it, as well as buying some attractive peripheral devices. This was a dream I had to let go of, and it was this that was causing the panic: holding on to a dream. Through letting go, another way forward emerged, one that was superficially less attractive, but which proved to be a better option.

Buddhism teaches that everything is dharma, if we approach it with the mind of zazen. This includes fear, which is a universal experience. What we fear is typically an outcome which we do not want. When life asks us to follow this outcome, fear is a natural accompaniment. When seen in this way, fear is a gateway opening us up to a more fulfilling path. Awakening involves all-acceptance, and fear can help us take this step. We begin to realise directly that everything, even difficulties, can liberate us from our self-imposed limitations.

In the scheme of things, my laptop story is quite a trivial one. Yet this process equally applies to the most serious challenges we face. We are averse to a lot of things, and this is part of being human. By embracing fear, when it comes, it becomes an ally in opening us to unconditional freedom.

Neil Rothwell

DO NOT DISTURB

While staying in India in January last year I visited the Bedse Buddhist Caves which are about 40 km from Pune, which is in the state of Maharashtra. Bedse is not the easiest of places to get to, and the final mile in the motor rickshaw was bone-shaking and it felt like we were driving up the bed of a river! To reach the caves themselves you have to walk up 400 steps in the side of a sparsely vegetated rock face. But it is worth it once you get there as there is a grand view of the plain below. Turn around to face the rock and you see two impressively large caves and several smaller ones. These were all made by Buddhist monks in about 1- 2 century BC.

The view of the plain below

There are over a hundred caves in Maharashtra - all painstakingly and meticulously carved out of solid basalt, which is a hard, hard rock. Carved with only the most basic of tools. In the west we *construct* buildings, starting at the bottom and working upwards and finally placing a roof on the top. But creating a cave involves different ways of thinking. It involves starting at the top and removing most of the rock, only leaving the bits that are required to remain. It is believed that the two main caves each took well over a hundred years to create. All the proportions of these caves are mathematically arranged and executed. The architectural planning is perfect and is obviously based on considerable thought and is the result of single-phase planning before the caves were even started.

They are carved *out* of the mountain side. The main Chatiyaghara Meditation Hall is impressive. Imagine, if you can, that you are standing at the back of a large hall the size of a medium sized church. It has a high barrel ceiling and a large stupa at the far end. There are pillars running around the main body of

the hall with a cloister behind them and small cells in the outer wall. And then try to comprehend that all the space in this hall that now contains air, used to *be solid rock*. All these beautiful columns, the cloister, cells and the stupa were created by *removing* the rock around them.

The Vihara cave is 32 feet deep, which is only slightly smaller than the Meditation Hall, and has eleven cells carved into the walls, which would have been the monks' sleeping quarters. These caves date from the period during the reigning era of the Emperor Ashoka, before there was any tradition of making any image of the Buddha in his human form. However, in later centuries the pillars in the meditation hall were decorated with what turns out to be some of the earliest known images of Buddha. Many other caves in Maharashtra were later desecrated, possibly for religious reasons, but Bedse was well hidden and was only 'discovered' in the early part of the 19th century by interested British officials.

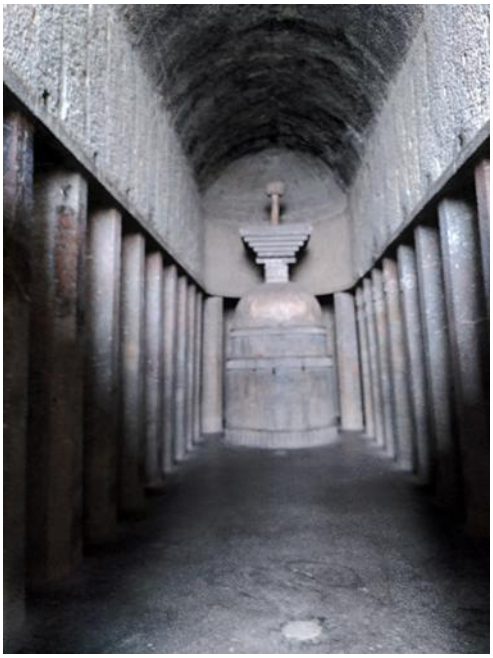
The entrance to the Chatiyaghara Meditation Hall

Nothing is known about the monks who lived there, but it is assumed that the caves were created as a place for retreats during the annual rainy season. In other seasons the monks may have travelled throughout the subcontinent, spreading the dharma. But during the monsoons they would have lived in isolation and be able to meditate for many hours in this wonderful arched cave.

The Buddha Seal has been preserved by both the Buddhas in the present world and by those in the world of the Indian and Chinese Ancestors, they are thus always spreading the Truth—<u>all</u> activity is permeated with pure meditation- the means of training are thousand-fold but pure meditation must be done.

So here I am in this dusty country pondering whether it is futile to try to imagine what it must have been like for the monks living here, cut off from the rest of the world. If they ran out of food, they ran out of food. How things have changed! We are no longer cut off from the rest of the world; last night in our flat in Pune we ran out of bread and with one call on his smartphone my son ordered and paid for a loaf of bread that was delivered to our door in half an hour.

Humans have dedicated considerable time and effort over the centuries to enhance all forms of communication. Naturally, I accepted all the advancements that existed before my birth. Railways, bicycles, cars, radio, cinema, telephones— they were already there, and I never questioned their presence. Television was still a bit of a novelty in the 50s and then came space travel, sputniks, and tales of computers the size of small warehouses. I seem to recall that mobile phones arrived about the same time as those big chunky personal home computers that we welcomed into our homes. Within a matter of years, these devices shrank into the sort of sleek laptop that I am writing this article on. And today, with a mobile phone, we hold in the palm of our hand a far more potent tool that



The Bedse Chatiyaghara Meditation Hall

grants us access to the entire expanse of the internet.
I always do make some attempt to resist the very latest technology. Mobile phone, yes. *But never a smartphone!* When Pat eventually got one, I sometimes had to deal with rising anger when the two of us were together and I realised she wasn't listening to me but was actually having a text conversation with a friend. Now it was not just the two of us; there was an*other person* in the room. And yes, I now have a smartphone. And yes, I do often find myself texting other people, when I could be relating to the person I am physically with in the room.

Chatiyaghara Stupa

Smartphones have a DO NOT DISTURB function on them, so, with one tap of my finger, I can be sure that it won't make any noise to disturb me. *What a relief!* But when I press it for the second time, I am making another choice. I am actively asking this device to resume disturbing me! PLEASE DISTURB ME. *Not a relief!*

My mind appears to have the inexhaustible ability to generate more and more unanswerable questions, but my smartphone only has the ability to feed it *more* facts and opinions that in turn will inflame my monkey mind to generate more unanswerable questions. All I can do is to sit facing the wall.

And pay respect and give gratitude to those nameless monks, our Ancestors, sitting undisturbed in the gloom of that big cool Meditation Hall in splendid isolation.

The Ancestors were very diligent and there is no reason why we people of the present day cannot understand.

A RECENT TALE WHICH TESTS MY JUDGEMENTAL MIND!

I mentioned that these caves were created before any images of Buddha were allowed, but that in later centuries the pillars in the Meditation Hall were decorated with images of the Buddha and his attendants. These remained undisturbed and were still clearly visible in the 1830s. However, in 1871, attempting to please visiting British officers, the local Indian officials painted the entire main cave with whitewash with the idea of 'cleaning' it. The subsequent removal of the whitewash obliterated all signs of these pictures for ever.

Julian Goodacre
(one paragraph written with the aid of chat-gpt)

The two quotes in Italics are from ***Rules for Meditation.***

Behind the Chatiyaghara stupa

The Bedse Vihara

Morning desolation -

Some morning desolation, contemplating my age, no way of pausing the clock - stop, several conscious breaths, then follow the natural rhythm of my breathing, sit, alert but not tense, the circle of breath and imagined energy as a continuous wheel, up from my core to the top of my head, then exhale and the energy descends back to my core, then repeat, trying to follow the example of The Buddha, those many years ago.

Fedor Bunge

Ten Things Which Teach

Today I looked around and wondered
What could teach me
Not to swallow the poison.
No, more than that,
How to see lotuses bloom
In the mud.
First, perfection in a pebble.
A dark grey, flat oval one inch long
Light grey ovals embedded along its length.
A fossilised record of life 600 million years ago
Suggests I let go of the irritation over the fire
Burning in my neighbour's backyard
Along with a thousand other gripes.
Second: my tabby cat sleeping
On top of a radiator teaching me
How to relish sensual pleasure and
How to be.
Third: my favourite tree in the park.
Such a sturdy upright trunk, such sensitivity
To the seasons and weather. It doesn't know
Its name and isn't hung up about being
A 'good' tree, nor is it concerned about being
Creative or charismatic. May I be grounded,
May I be rooted.
Fourth: the space in this room. It doesn't have
Colour, shape or texture; it doesn't discriminate
As to what resides or comes and goes here
Or in the bathroom.

Fifth: this slim pencil made from a tree
And minerals from the earth. In my hands
It can create worlds; graphite graffiti erasable
Able to magic up angels or imps.
Sixth; the window pane. It remains obligingly
Transparent and only needs an occasional clean.
Seventh: my very own coloratura aria
Delivered from a chimney pot
On this mid-February early evening. Gratitude
For soundwaves, ears, feathers, syrinx and
A billion neurons in my skull.
Eighth: the ground, the soil beneath
My shiny laminated floor, attracting apples,
Rain and meteorites. It makes walking easier.
Ninth: My stone Buddha statue in the *Earth Witnessing*
Pose. Not easy serenity but a reminder of digging in dirt
for diamonds.
Tenth: the sky, overcast now but always changing.
Boundless, like the sea it invites all beings to cavort
And play. Weather appears without us lifting a finger.
It's a fine drizzle now but don't say it's an awful day,
Every day is a good day if we don't pick and choose.

Eric Nicholson

With sincere thanks to David Williams for this photograph from his ongoing series made on Portobello Promenade – The Promenader

Buddhism and the future

I was talking to a friend recently about the various problems which seem to be looming for humanity, sometimes collectively referred to as the metacrisis, or polycrisis.

One particular aspect I hadn't heard of before is what's called '**discount theory**' in relation to the future. In economics, **discounting** refers to valuing future costs and benefits less than present ones. A high discount rate means we don't place much weight or importance on future outcomes, whereas a **low (or zero) discount rate** gives nearly equal weight to the future.

There are clearly ethical aspects to this: the future includes the well-being or otherwise of forthcoming generations. For example, the Stern Review on climate economics (2006) famously used a very low discount rate based on the principle that *"it is ethically indefensible to value the welfare of future generations less than that of our own simply because we exist prior in time".*

In laypersons' terms, leaving a liveable planet for our descendants seems a high priority; which would mean putting more rather than less time into planning and preparing to deal with the problems facing us.

In our discussion, my friend asked; "*So where does this leave Buddhism, with its emphasis on living in the present? Does it mean that Buddhism ignores the future*?"

For someone unfamiliar with Buddhism, it's an entirely reasonable question. Present moment focus can lend itself to misunderstanding, taken at face value.

Reflecting on it, it's true that cultivating present-centred awareness does seem central to our practice, given that reality can only be directly experienced in the present. At the same time, it's also said that *'the best way to take care of the future is to take care of the present moment'* which implies that attending fully to present responsibilities is in fact the most effective way to influence future outcomes.

And underpinning that assumption is the fact that the future is inherently uncertain and never guaranteed, so clinging to specific future outcomes (or fearing them) would probably be seen as unwise. Not clinging to specific outcomes might be seen as a form of non-attachment. This doesn't mean

carelessly or nihilistically ignoring the future, or being indifferent about the well-being of future generations; rather, it means engaging with life without rigid obsession over particular results. We can set goals and care about what is to come, but try to refrain from grasping at a fixed idea of how the future *must* be.

Excessive fixation on future scenarios – whether optimistic daydreams or nightmarish worries – pulls us away from mindful presence: that seems to be what's being pointed to. And non-attachment is not the same as indifference. It doesn't feel to me that Buddhism points towards being apathetic or stopping caring; it would be surprising in the extreme if its ethics of compassion and interdependence didn't inherently support actions that safeguard future generations. In discussion with RM Favian about this issue, I was also reminded that as the sense of self quietens in meditation, the sense of interconnection deepens as does our concern for the future, given our shared being.

So it's not about being uncaring or indifferent about the future; or 'hiding in the present', rather like pulling the covers over one's head. It seems more a case of being advised to care wisely. And by wisely is meant, or so it seems to me, that we can have preferences and aspirations, but that we can hold them lightly rather than obsessively. We can plan for the future, but do so calmly in the present, without worrying or dwelling on the future in a way that causes agitation.

Easier said than done, of course, when we're exposed to a tsunami of news and opinion – 'doomscrolling' as it's sometimes called – leading to catastrophisation; anticipating the worst. I wish I could virtuously claim innocence in this regard, but have to confess to lapses when my eyeballs are kidnapped by some particularly hair-raising article prophesying doom by 3.00pm on Tuesday afternoon.

Leaving my hand-wringing to one side, it might be said that mindfulness grounds us in the present, impermanence reminds us that future outcomes are uncertain; non-attachment advises us to care and act without becoming fixated on specific results; and quietened self brings a deepened sense of oneness and inter-being. And all of this with the aim of reducing suffering

that arises from craving control over an unpredictable future, or from neglecting the life that's here right now.

So, as I said to my friend, Buddhism's present-focus might *seem* to suggest ignoring the future, but it very clearly doesn't. On the contrary, it counsels that the way to effect positive change in the future is by mindful, compassionate action in each moment. The *manner* in which we hold our concern for the future seems deeply important – frantic or despairing just doesn't seem to sit right: I was struck by a phrase used recently by Bayo Akomolafe of the Emergence Network; *"The times are urgent; let us slow down"*. There felt to be wisdom in that.

And if we decide to take action on behalf of the future, what form should that take?

It feels that that's for each of us to decide when we search our hearts, taking into account our individual circumstances. Something I've particularly appreciated about Buddhism in general and our Order in particular is its lack of dogmatism or prescription about how we should direct our mindful compassion.

Willie Grieve

A blaze of gorse on the Braids —

Gratitude for sitting —

During Covid, my husband became seriously ill in and spent a month in hospital (thankfully he fully recovered). I was very grateful for all the support I received from friends and colleagues, but being able to sit every day was really invaluable. My sitting at that time felt like a boat that helped me negotiate the anxiety and uncertainty I was going through. A while later, I listened to a Throssel podcast in which one of the monks talked to a layperson whose husband had sadly very recently died, and it struck me that she too similarly described sitting during that hard time as like a reliable boat, helping her through.
Being able to sit while Alex was ill, was such a blessing, and I've wanted to express how grateful I am for it. Hence this poem!

Gratitude for sitting

World upended - mental tempest
Anxiety sky-high - waiting for news
Hurrying thoughts, blowing all directions
Without reprieve

Always the boat; ready at the launch
Halyards rattling, sails flapping
Push out into the cold surf
Set off.

Reach for the tiller, pull the sheets in hard
Grimly tacking in the howling gale
Ever changing storm, tortuous progress
Disorientating

Winds ease, gaining fragile control
Still gripping the sheets, speeding through the spray
Sensing true course, fine tuning the sails
Holding on

Something guiding the tiller, reading the fluctuating gusts
Releasing the tension, relaxing the sheets
Emotions uncleated, hearts' depths plumbed and fathomed
Gratitude overflows

Billowing sails, breeze lifts and falls
Sheets full out, hands rest on the tiller
Riding the gentle waves up and down
Breathe out. Relax. Flow

Small boat in the vast shifting ocean
Below an infinitely blue sky.

Seasons turning, weather changing
Out in the breath-taking seas
Wonderful days, sad days
Many unremarkable days

Always the boat. Moored by the shore
Familiar. Purpose-built. Sturdy
Ready to launch.

Eternal thankfulness for the gift of this little boat
Which is our practice.

Jane Herbstritt

Photographs and artwork very welcome!

In recent times, automated processes are being used to trawl through all publications appearing on the internet, including the Priory Newsletter, checking whether any of the photographs or images used are copyrighted and reproduced without permission. Stiff financial penalties can result. Particular care has to be taken, therefore, when choosing images to use.

Contributions of photographs suitable to be used in the Newsletter and which aren't copyrighted are therefore particularly welcome! And other artwork too, including drawings, relevant to the subject matter of the Newsletter.

With gratitude and a bow!

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