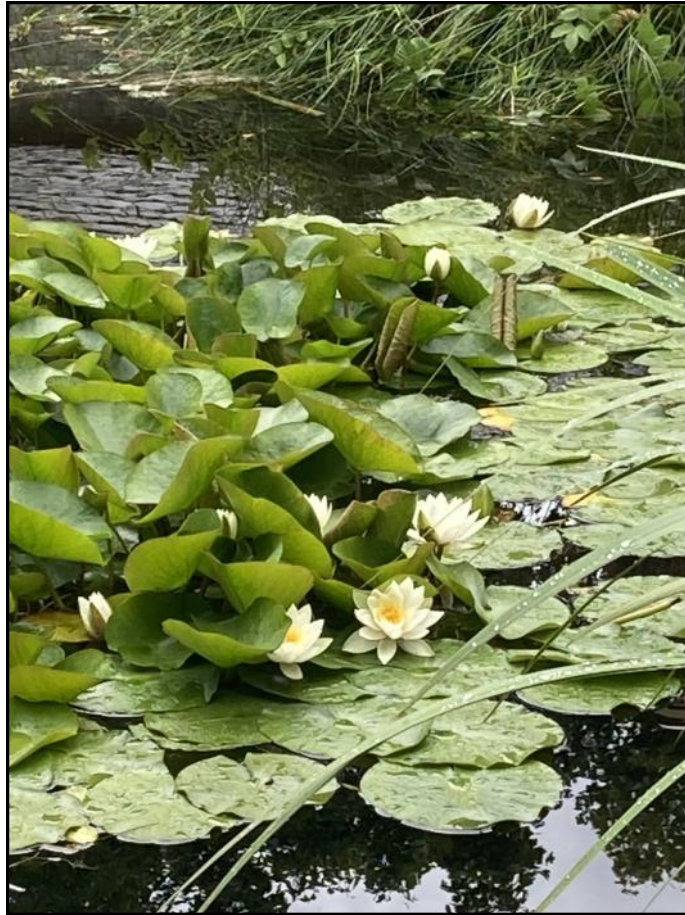


—*Portobello Buddhist Priory*—



A Temple of the Order of Buddhist Contemplatives



- Pond in Little Sparta garden, Pentland Hills, near Edinburgh -

Newsletter

September—December 2021

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Newsletter

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Please Note: this issue of our Newsletter doesn't yet contain a schedule of events due to continuing uncertainty about Covid-19. Since 15th August, the Priory has been open on **Sunday mornings** for meditation and this will continue unless circumstances change, as will morning meditations at 7.00am on **Tuesdays** and **Fridays**. Please consult the Priory website for up to date information.

For the remainder of this calendar year, there will be no group visits around Scotland by the Prior.

We'll continue coming together for meditation, dharma and ceremony on the Zoom platform each week, and will review arrangements in the light of developing circumstances. Again, please consult the Priory website for the most up to date information.

— Prior's Notes —

(Given the Prior's current indisposition with vertigo which precludes sustained use of a computer, he has chosen his 'Notes' from the May 2006 edition of the Newsletter to be reprinted here.)

Perhaps we could be forgiven for assuming that a defining characteristic of the human race is its ability to generate conflict around notions of group identity. I read the other day of experiments using everything from ethnic, political, religious and gender-typing, to even the flip of a coin to divide people into groups promoting loyalty to that group and a willingness to view others as outsiders and therefore potentially hostile. I've found for myself how easily I slip into an 'us or them' mentality when say, watching the news; sure in the knowledge of who the good and the bad are, and of course to which camp I belong.

Buddhism asks us to question this belief that our primary identity is a separate,

permanent self, and points to the resulting suffering this view engenders when situations and encounters in life are viewed as a series of threats and obstacles to be wrestled with and overcome. It suggests there is another way of being that involves a profounder human experience, where the sense of separation dissolves for a while, to be replaced by a deep empathy, rooted in the universals of shared joys, hopes and griefs. Others are in actuality our kith and kin by any definition that goes deeper than a surface look. The more we let go and open to this compassionate response the more the connectedness of life becomes our authentic experience. It is as though we have discovered a capacity to expand the circle of our identity beyond self, family, clan and nation to a sense of our oneness with Life itself, and we find this is where our loyalty and allegiance lie.

To approach this way of being must take courage because it no doubt goes against strong conditioned tendencies to keep that circle small, tight and well defended. So first we need to wake up to the inner patterns of response that tend towards this. A risky business, because we are not now simply relying on old categories of thought and feeling to tell us what the reality of this moment is presenting us with. But if we persist in being open and present, risking vulnerability, we have an opportunity to truly meet the situation and then through our deep connection make wise and compassionate responses.

We don't need tsunamis to illustrate our wonderful ability to express compassion, nor to be reminded that ecologically we sink or swim together. Getting off the bus today an elderly woman slipped and fell. Two people immediately picked her up while others gathered her shopping together. Nothing extraordinary there, and yet charged with the possibility that if the human race is to survive at all, it is upon this very instinct for empathy and caring action that our hope rests.



Some Questions —

In recent years I've been consciously taking part in social group activities as a way of compensating for my tendency towards introversion. Avoidance of what we fear does NOT work.

Today I met with two people who, along with me, are members of a health walking group. We met in our park to discuss how we could use photography for a park sculpture walk I'm leading. Wendy is the photographer and wanted to know which sculptures we were including. I explained that we were only omitting *two* out of ten sculptures. The other member of our trio then proceeded to itemise the other *eight* sculptures; this was unnecessary in view of my explanation. As he spoke at length I felt a surge of impatience but held back from interrupting him. (I think I eventually politely reiterated what I'd said before.) I think there are a few things going on here (judgementalism and aversion) but my first question is, are there degrees of letting go? I could have jumped in straight away, giving in to the impatience but I held back, but not completely! I know Patience is one of the Paramitas and recognise that I've had

to work with impatience for decades.

Later on Wendy showed us some of her photographs and I was conscious of an inner voice assessing them 'as nothing special.' Of course I didn't say anything negative to her and even praised one or two. However, I was painfully aware of my 'perfectionism' and as we strolled round the park another thought bubbled up into consciousness: that I might be patronising in my commentary on the sculpture walk or say something inappropriate.

I find this constant self-awareness both painful and tiring. I know I can't talk myself into having more equanimity but I wonder if you have any reflections about this? I have a hunch (more than a hunch) that my agitation is related to the need to have more faith in the 'Eternal/Buddha Nature'. To really trust the silence and stillness underlying my thoughts and feelings. In my experience there is no magic key to strengthening faith; it seems a very slow 'drip-drip' kind of process. I wonder if the trusting oneself goes hand in hand with trusting the Eternal?

Eric Nicholson

Editor's note: *Eric asks whether sangha members have reflections on the questions he raises in his article. If anybody would like to respond, Eric can be contacted at ericleo@blueyonder.co.uk*

Wood

Wooden Stools

My first experience of Zen meditation came early in 2001 when Rev Lewin gave an evening talk to our Peebles meditation group. He brought some of the stools from the Priory for us to use. I wanted to continue meditation at home, so I made one for myself. That summer my sister-in-law was living with us, and years later she recalled me stating that *“Any spiritual practice that involves a band-saw is obviously the practice for me!”* I have no memory of saying this, but it does sound typical of what I might have said, and I trust her memory better than mine.

Over the years I have made quite a few, both for myself and friends, and continue to experiment with various designs that are easy to make, portable and suit my sitting position. Most of them have easily removable supports. I have even made a couple of lightweight travelling versions. These were needed back in the days when I was often flying to foreign parts. I still have one which resides in my son and daughter-in-law’s flat in Poona, India. I wonder when it will be possible to sit on that one again.

Much of my life has been spent working with wood and I have never lost my fascination with it. We will all have heard the adage that from an acorn an oak tree will grow. When you hold an acorn in your hand and stand in front of a tree that is maybe 500 years old, it is a reminder of the miracle of the living world that is all around us and that we are part of. I have some yew wood in my workshop that grew at Dalkeith Palace and counting the growth rings by eye I calculate that it was planted in 1780. Each ring shows a year’s growth. And the width of each ring is like a fixed chronicle of the growing conditions over the years of its life. The scientific study of tree growth is called dendrochronology of which I know little. I just enjoy observing that some rings of this yew wood are much closer than others and pondering the conditions over the past 240 years that have caused them to be that way. But this is relatively ‘young’ wood, when you consider that there are still some living trees growing that germinated before the birth of Buddha. That takes some pondering!

Wooden Bagpipes

For over half my life I have been making a range of bagpipes out of British hardwoods, mostly fruit trees, many of which would otherwise have been cut up and used as firewood. I like to take a photograph of each tree that I use, if it's possible, so that the customer can see their pipe in its previous 'incarnation'. At Jukai in 2018 Rev Wilfred told me that he had kept the large trunk of a rather decrepit plum tree that had grown in the Abbot's Garden because Rev Myfanwy had told him that I use plum wood, and in fact plum is one of my favourite woods. He was a busy monk during that week as he was unexpectedly leading the whole retreat, yet he somehow found the time to remove his monks' robes, don his working gear and wield the chainsaw to cut it into manageable lengths to fit in my car. Much respect to him! I wonder when that tree was planted? When was it only a plum stone? I suspect that must have been quite a few years before Throssel Hole became a Buddhist monastery. The trunk was not in a state to determine its age, as its centre was rotten, but I've already rescued enough good wood to make a copy of the oldest surviving Scottish smallpipe for one of my customers, and I still have more of the wood.



Wood Sings

There has been a tradition among violin makers over the centuries to inscribe V S D M inside a new fiddle. These are the initial letters of a four-line Latin verse which translates as

*'I was alive in the forest.
I was cut by the cruel axe.
In life I was silent.
In death I sweetly sing.'*

Working with wood connects me to a different timescale compared to the brevity of my life. I work in the hope that some of the trees that I have turned into musical instruments will continue to sweetly sing and bring pleasure long after my time is through.

Wood Plinth

The first times I attended the Portobello Priory the Buddha statue was sitting on a wide altar covered in flowing cloth. It was only later when I was asked to open the windows that I saw from the back that the altar was an old oak dresser. Sometime later it was replaced by the current impressive wooden plinth which, on first sight, I considered rather severe, even though I admired the craftsmanship with which it was made. Later, when I visited Throssel I noticed that the statue of the Buddha in the Ceremony Hall is sitting on a plinth of the same design. During lockdown last year on one of our Wednesday evening Sangha zoom meetings we had a reading that explained some of the symbolism of this design. It was a revelation for me that it can be seen as a representation of the path towards enlightenment. The bottom two grounded steps support the central column, which in turn support the two highest steps which represent the more internal spiritual realms of our ongoing journeys.

Over the years I have created a meditation area in our bedroom with a small statue of the Buddha. It is a copy of the Big Buddha at Kamakura in Japan and is 5 ½ inches high. After that Sangha evening I decided to build a small plinth of this design for it to sit on. I chose some walnut from a small grove of trees

that my father had planted during the last war in the garden of our family house in Leicestershire. I played under these trees when I was a tiny tot. Dad had planted them a bit too close to each other, so about 20 years ago my brother had some of them felled to give the others more space. Walnut is a lovely dark wood that I use for making the bellows on my smallpipes.

When making things though, there are always compromises and choices to be made. My bagpipe bags, for example, I make from cowhide and some of my pipes are adorned with buffalo horn. How does this sit with the precepts? *I intend to train myself not to kill*. I found that the walnut I had chosen for the plinth had a slight infestation of living woodworm. Should I go ahead and use it knowing that at some stage beetles would emerge to infest something else in our house? Should I discard this wood? Normally I burn wood that I cannot use which also would involve killing the woodworm. Chemical treatment to kill would introduce fumes into our bedroom. Museum conservators sometimes put small wooden articles, such as musical instruments, in a deep freeze for at least a week. A quicker technique is to place the wood briefly in a microwave oven. What was the right course of action for me to take? *Decisions..... compromises....* the stuff of everyday living.

The stools that I make are mostly sturdy and made from bits of softwood and plywood that I have reused from here and there. They are practical and intended to be functional rather than objects of great beauty. However, I took great care making the walnut plinth and since completing it I found that contemplating that central pillar has helped to enrich my practice. And when I am settling into my sitting position, I sometimes try to visualise my spine as that central pillar. Sitting grounded firmly on my stool, my spine, a central pillar, supporting my head wherein the eight winds oft do blow. Feeling that physical support and trusting that there is calm beneath those wayward and ephemeral winds.

Since that Wednesday evening Zoom I now notice that other bits of Dharma teachings resonate with me in a way they didn't previously. I listened again to a talk by Reverend Master Jiyu Kennet in which she referred to *ascending the pillar*. And in a recent article, Rev Master Alicia writes:

Traditional Japanese temples were built around a central pillar which penetrated through all

the levels of the temple so that when there was an earthquake the building shook, but the presence of the central pillar prevented the building from being shaken apart. The three treasures are like a central pillar, anchoring us in this life.

Wood Wave

In cutting up the wood to make this plinth I unexpectedly exposed a gentle wave - like ripple contained in the wood grain which I always position on the front edge of the highest step. This wave must have been formed by some incident in the growth of the tree within its 50 year life. It is a reminder to me of the waves of the Boundless Sea, taken from my favourite scripture verse.

**Jewel bright is the boundless Sea, its surface churning
with the waves of births and deaths.**

**The gate to the great tranquillity dissolves the shapes
of past and present, the forms of coming and going.**

**We pray that the darkness of our delusion be illuminated by true com-
passion.**



Julian Goodacre

Footnote: *Since I completed writing this article Rev Favian has reminded me that the traditional design used at Throssel and the Priory is called Sumeru and has 3 steps, a central section and 3 more steps in mirror image. JG*

Pebbles

In his series of talks ‘Ocean Mudra Samadhi’, Rev. Master Daishin explores the relationship between ourselves and a pebble (pebbles were given out during the retreat he was leading when giving the talks).

I was walking along the promenade with Rev. Favian one day. There were three young girls, aged about 10, sitting in a row behind a low garden wall next to the promenade, facing outwards. They were looking expectantly at the people passing, and on the wall was a hand written sign saying “Please take a pebble”. On the wall were a line of pebbles, each one individually hand painted by them. A couple of them were continuing to paint pebbles as they sat. After checking with them, we both took a pebble. They weren’t asking for any payment. I took an ‘abstract’ one; Rev. Favian took one painted with a ladybird. There was a look of delight on their faces as we took them.

A perfect example of a pure offering, and we were both really grateful.

Neil Rothwell



'ALL GREATNESS STANDS FIRM IN THE STORM'

During a rather bizarre urban canoeing expedition suggested by a friend on the River Clyde on a very cold day in January 2019, I couldn't help noticing a tall pillar jutting out the river supporting the remnants of an old railway bridge in the centre of Glasgow.

The imposing pillar was inscribed in Greek with a translation into English; *'All greatness stands firm in the storm'*. I discovered that the inscription was the work of a Scottish artist, Ian Hamilton Finlay, carried out in 1990, the year that Glasgow was named European City of Culture.

And there the matter rested until, just a few weeks ago, I visited Little Sparta, the extraordinary garden of Hamilton Finlay. It 's a garden of great beauty created out of the bare and windswept Pentland Hills which run south-west from Edinburgh. It's called Little Sparta after Sparta, the rugged military city state which challenged the pre-eminence of Athens in ancient Greece. Edinburgh was known as the Athens of the North (due both to its classical architecture and its fame as the heart of the Scottish Enlightenment of the 18th century), and Hamilton Finlay wanted his garden to *'speak of rebellion and disobedience to the accepted order of things'* as one commentator put it.

Spread over 6 acres, and containing over 280 artworks, it's at the same time beautiful, confusing, enigmatic and sometimes disturbing. The historian Sir Roy Strong described it as *'the only really original garden made in this country since 1945'*.





Head of Apollo at Little Sparta

Having had my interest in Hamilton Finlay reawakened, I found myself again looking into the inscription on the pillar in the River Clyde. The English translation - ‘*All greatness stands firm in the storm*’ – was attributed to the philosopher Heidegger. But more to the point, it seems that the translation was faulty. The Greek text is taken from book 6 of Plato’s Republic, and the more generally accepted translation is: *For all great things are precarious, and, as the proverb truly says, fine things are hard*”. In other words, great things are difficult to achieve, and cannot be taken as being stable and

permanent. The Greek word which is central to the inscription means ‘*prone to fall, unstable, precarious*’.

In March this year, my brother died. It’s only been in the process of coming to terms with his death that I realised that I had had an entirely unconscious assumption that at some point we would have had a conversation, heart-to-heart, in which we would have ironed out the awkward memories of when we hadn’t seen eye to eye, when harsh words had been exchanged; the half-buried resentments, the perceived slights, the big brother/little brother dynamics – all the warp & weft that can be part of close family life, even when there is clear recognition of the love that’s always been there.

Whether such a conversation would have been a good idea, or would have yielded additional closeness and peace of mind is another matter, of course. Arguably it might have caused additional resentments, if thoughts and memories were clumsily expressed, or defensiveness or resentment had crept in. Who knows.

But in any case, from the diagnosis of the terminal and untreatable nature of his condition to his death was 3 days. He was unable to speak on the telephone as it set him coughing. There was to be no conversation, not even to say good-bye. An email to express love; a brief, loving but distracted reply. And that was

it. An end to our 72 years together as brothers on this earth.

Impermanence is not a difficult concept to understand; the meaning is so obvious as to be scarcely worth dwelling on. And yet as human creatures we seem to be built in such a way that the truth of it – the lived, embodied truth of it – runs counter to our unconscious instincts and expectations and assumptions about permanence and security and endless time.

But as I think of my brother as I write this, all I feel is a gentle and tender acceptance of it all, whether of him and I, or the way we're built, or the wonder of our complexity, or the way in which time brings to us, moment by moment, the extraordinary richness and vulnerability of our lives, our awareness of it; and our willingness to let it all go.

Willie Grieve



Farmhouse at Little Sparta

Footnote: 6 weeks ago, I canoed out to Inchcailloch, an island in Loch Lomond, to plant a young Scots pine on its western edge in memory of my brother. On return to the mainland I discovered that deer often swim out to the island, and very probably will have eaten the sapling by now. In a week or two, I'll visit to see – and if it too has yielded to impermanence, well, I'll just have to plant another one. So if anybody knows a hardy variety of tree which deer don't like, please do let me know!

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