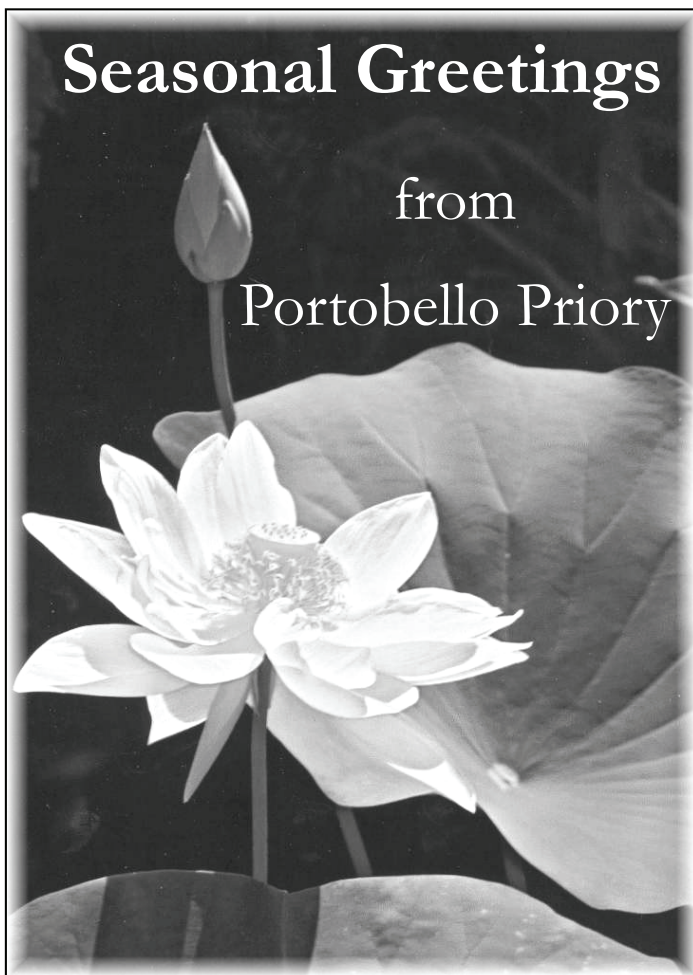


—Portobello Buddhist Priory—



A Temple of the Order of Buddhist Contemplatives



Calendar of Events January to April 2009

Portobello Buddhist Priory
27 Brighton Place, Portobello
Edinburgh, EH15 1LL

Telephone (0131) 669 9622

email: favian.straughan@homecall.co.uk

website: www.portobellobuddhist.org.uk

— Welcome to all —

Portobello Buddhist Priory, a ground floor flat in the Portobello district of Edinburgh, opened in 1998. It is one of a handful of temples in Britain which are affiliated to the Community of Buddhist Contemplatives. The training monastery of the Community at Throssel Hole near Hexham in Northumberland was founded in 1972 by Rev. Master Jiyu-Kennett, an Englishwoman who trained within the Soto Zen tradition at one of its main monasteries in Japan. The resident Prior at Portobello is one of the senior monks from Throssel Hole Buddhist Abbey.

The purpose of the Priory is to offer lay training within the Serene Reflection Meditation tradition (Soto Zen) to anyone who sincerely seeks to undertake it, and the prior's role is to support such training. The prior and members of the congregation are also involved in activities such as religious education, hospital and prison visiting.

All are warmly invited to join in the Priory's programme of lay practice, the purpose of which is to come to know and live from our True Nature, whose expression is our wise and compassionate living.

With kindest wishes from Rev Favian, Prior

(For details of the day-to-day schedule at the Priory, please see back page)

- Weekend events at the Priory -

January 2009

Sunday 11th	Festival of Buddha's Renunciation	11am
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February

Sunday 1st	Renewal of Precepts	11am
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March

Sunday 15th	Festival of Avalokiteshwara	11am
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April

Sunday 5th	Renewal of Precepts	11am
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The Priory is open to visitors as well as trainees every day from
6.45am - 9.15pm

except Mondays, Thursday afternoons, and Sunday pm.

*(Please phone beforehand, and please note when the Prior
is holding retreats elsewhere)*

Newsletter

no.31

December 2009

— Prior's Notes —

Winter seems to suddenly arrive, with a cold snap. Conditions change. I can feel the resistance like the stiffening in the body, contracting in upon itself against the drop in temperature. A weekend has passed and there has been some meditation; a willingness to open around what is, and other aspects are now noticed: the crows silently sitting in the tree tops, absorbing as much heat as they can by facing the blood red sunrise. Winter is an interesting time for spiritual practice.

A season of contrasting experience: heat and cold, light and dark, festivity and mental dullness. Our practice is about 'being' these conditions. That might sound too obvious, as though we had a choice, but look and see how we reject, deny and grasp after things different; trying to 'fix' the flow of impermanence and in so doing generate the delusion of a fixed self separate from this reality and this self aches because it can't feel at home.

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When I'm cold I seek warmth, like the crow. That's what conditions call forth, and what is good to do. But I add layers to this, I argue and complain about reality, 'it shouldn't be like this' and this movement is a gesture away from this moment and I don't fully dwell in that which is, my true self. This is not a call to deny or suppress my reactions but rather to fully see what happens when I allow them full reign: this uncomfortable sense of division.

When we are chasing after ideal conditions for our happiness, obtaining the Christmas gift we really wanted, can we notice the momentary joy arising is actually due to

the cessation of desire itself, shortly before another 'object' of satisfaction is grasped after? With time spent in practice and its key feature, true acceptance, we can come to see that our true refuge and the source of a peaceful abiding, is built upon the insight that we are not separate selves adrift in a hostile universe, caught between fear and desire. Rather we are and always have been truly rooted in That which Is, truly at home with conditions that arise afresh before our eyes as what I am.

Experiencing our life

'A life with no hope is a peaceful, joyous, compassionate life. As long as we identify with this mind and body -- and we all do -- we hope for things that we think will take care of them. We hope for success. We hope for health. We hope for enlightenment. We have all sorts of things we hope for. All hope, of course, is about sizing up the past and projecting it into the future'.

- Charlotte Joko Beck **Everyday Zen** p 63

There are times when the world seems too full of contingency and ugliness. At these times I become aware of my vulnerability and find myself scanning the horizon, searching for some hope that will bring comfort or the promise of safety and security. When I first read Charlotte Joko Beck saying that living with no hope can be a positive experience it struck me as a brave thing for her to suggest as it seems to flout the conventional view that hope is a good thing. By pointing out that hope arises from a misidentification and a movement away from the present moment she helped me appreciate the errors that I am prone to make. She also helped me to see that in seeking to correct these errors I would not lose anything. She points to the completeness and sufficiency of the life of training.

To have faith in zazen; to practice zazen is a necessary thing since, in a very radical sense, we must face what is, or otherwise risk missing the living experience of our human life.

Gary Thomson

On Being Faraway on Christmas Day —

I wrote this article a couple of years ago, on Christmas Day 2006, when I was working and living in Kosovo. Being away from home can give rise a lot of questions about where home is...

I grew up in England with a long unbroken sequence of happy, traditional Christmas days to remember, for which I am extremely grateful.

In Kosovo there is no Christmas to speak of, it being a country that generally celebrates the Islamic calendar. There is no tradition of

present giving and receiving, card sending, getting together with family...and all the other things that collectively create the experience of Christmas, at least the traditional British one. There are however some rather tacky attempts at various Christmas traditions, badly dressed Santas in shops and such

like, but these only serve to make what is missing more obvious. For me it is difficult to let go of the feelings engendered by those childhood Christmases and this particular day is no exception. I have lived nearly six of the last eight years away from Britain and do not usually feel homesick but today, Christmas day, I miss our Edinburgh home, family, friends and all that is Christmas.



Being away from where I grew up, in a foreign land, has often led me to ask the question; where is home? I have a life

here in Kosovo, family and friends here and have enjoyed many wonderful times and experiences. But is it home? Is for that matter England or Scotland home? There is an enormous sense of longing that comes with these questions, a longing to know where home is, to be home.

But I suspect this longing is something much deeper; that even if tomorrow I was to go and live in the exact same street where I spent most of my childhood I would feel no more, or no less, at home than I feel here, in this far-off place that doesn't have Christmas. It seems to me that home in its true meaning, and I am probably stating the obvious here, is not a physical place at all but a state of mind, a deep contentment that in fact can be found anywhere if we chose to look. It is where we stand right now. Early

this Christmas morning I went for a walk near our house in the mountains in the south of Kosovo, and in this place without Christmas, I had a sense of this in the peaceful beauty of a crisp snow white morning frozen in stillness. This is hard to capture in words - maybe the picture speaks more.

Indeed it is true, as is oft said, that 'home is where the heart is' ...but the heart can be at home wherever we are.

Tim Westmoreland

Right in the middle of everything —

At a recent Dharma talk about ceremony and its meaning in helping us bring the mind of meditation to everything we do, there seemed to be a clearer choice than usual for me towards the end of the discussion. To stay with the 'safe' option and offer something 'useful' about wearing the Kanzeon pendant allowing people the chance to ask about it, or to risk asking a half-formed question around the unease I had recently been feeling to do with my home altar.

So despite the feeling in the tummy that somehow it was dangerous territory I did ask a somewhat unclear question about not wanting other people in the family to feel awkward about me meditating. (Don't know why this should surface when I've been doing it for many years now.) It became clearer that it was connected to how important the practice is for me, and Rev. Favian suggested that I should ask people how they feel.

Our daughter Alison said; “We all know you're a crazy Buddhist. Like, we all kind of GOT that. I think its lovely that you're a Buddhist.”

When I first started meditating I didn't really want to have an altar at all.....something too ‘religious’ about it and not necessary . Then gradually I just had a small Buddha statue in the room; next some flowers beside it; later on candles and a water holder; a small home made Sumaru altar for the Buddha to sit on. At the moment I have a plant on one side and on the other some heads of barley that came from the flowers at my father's funeral.

I usually get up early to sit, and once other people are stirring, I finish and say the Kesa verse. If I'm later maybe I'll just do some bows and say the verse.....I also use the other rooms in the house for sitting at different times, depending where everyone else in the family is and what they are doing. The altar is in the dining room at the back of the house, and over the last couple of weeks it has become clearer that the disquiet is to do with the feeling that perhaps the practice is taking me away from family life? Then today in the garden Dogen's words came



to me in connection with the altar:

‘The most important thing for a Buddhist is to understand birth and death completely’

and realizing that this is not to the exclusion of everything else, but right in the middle of everything.

So over the years the altar has become more important to me, just as wearing the Buddha or Kanzeon pendant has. A constant reminder, right in the middle of getting up grumpy and not wanting to sit, right in the middle of family life, right in the middle of clearing up and doing the hoovering.

There have been times when I've wondered about putting the altar in a room which isn't used so much and never have. Partly because the dining room is the warmest room in the house, and also now, how important it is to be in the middle of everything, right in the heart of the house.

Kathleen Campbell

The Journey to the Monastery - part 1

It is now nearly 30 years since I first started making periodic visits southwards to Throssel Hole.

Sometimes I have travelled by rail via Newcastle but generally it is the journey with others by car over the Border hills, that has become most closely associated in my mind with the journey to the monastery. If you look at a map of southern Scotland and Northern England of a scale so that you can compare them with neighbouring regions it immediately becomes apparent how sparsely settled this part of Britain is so that the most direct inland route is mainly through open country, farmland or moorland, with just the occasional small country town or village.

What I describe here are accumulated impressions over many years, they do not occupy the whole of my mind on every journey to the neglect of other aspects of the landscape – the seasonal changes in colour, the pattern of old ridge and furrow prominent under winter sunshine - though having once noted them I guess I am nudged by their recollection .

Setting off from Edinburgh open country soon appears. I have the feeling of leaving town when starting to ascend the hill just south of Dalkeith, particularly when, on gaining height, one glimpses the fine view northwards across Edinburgh and the Firth of Forth.

Ahead the steep northern scarp of the Lammermuirs. The route is now close to the line of the old Roman road – Dere Street – of which we encounter several sections on our way south. Here it can be followed on foot a little to the west of the present road passing on the crest at 1200ft, Soutra Aisle, the remains of an old Augustinian monastic hospice and monastery founded by King Malcolm IV. Here the needs of wayfarers were attended to in the middle ages. Then, passing the elegant turbines of the Dun Law wind farm the road descends into Lauderdale and the watershed becomes that of the Tweed.

All the country between Edinburgh and Throssel lies within the boundary of the old Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Northumbria, a kingdom long since dissolved but which left a very strong imprint upon the place names and religious

history before much of it was ceded to Scotland in 973. Actually our route is within the northern part of Northumbria which used to be called Bernicia. What is now Lauderdale was probably the birth-place and early childhood home of St Cuthbert and thus has a special place in the history of the region.

Bede tells the story of the vision that was to determine Cuthbert to become a monk: *“Cuthbert, at that time (31st August 651), happened to be looking after a flock of sheep committed to his charge, away up in the hills. One night when his companions had gone to sleep and he was keeping watch and praying as usual, he suddenly saw light streaming from the skies, breaking the long night’s darkness, and the choirs of heavenly hosts coming down to earth. They quickly took into their ranks a human soul, marvellously bright, and returned to their home above. The youth was moved by this vision to give himself up to spiritual discipline in order to gain eternal happiness with the mighty men of God. Next day he was told that Aidan, Bishop of Lindisfarne, a man of outstanding holiness, had passed into the Kingdom of Heaven at the time of his vision. He delivered the sheep back to their owners and decided to enter a monastery.”*

I am not concerned to “demythologise” Cuthbert’s vision but reading about it reminded me of the view of the northern lights (Aurora Borealis) that I had seen when driving over the Soutra Pass in the early 1950s. To the Welsh poet R S Thomas, commenting on a similarly rare occasion on which he saw them in North Wales – they were something *“tremendum et fascinans”*. .. not unlike a huge ladder between earth and heaven and *“behold the angels of God ascending and descending on it.”* I think most people who see the Aurora Borealis are similarly moved by this wonderful natural phenomenon which is in no way diminished by its scientific explanation.

The monastery to which Cuthbert made his way was not the impressive remnant in present Melrose which was built by the Cistercians in 1136, but the much older foundation of Old Melrose (Mailros). This, situated in a great bend of the Tweed about two miles downstream, was founded by St. Aidan in the middle of the 7th Century with monks brought from Iona by way of Lindisfarne. Thus it was the monasticism of the Celtic Church that Cuthbert joined. The first

Abbot Eata was one of the twelve Saxon youths instructed by Aidan himself. The name of the first Prior, St Boisil, is perpetuated in the name of the nearby village of St Boswells. Cuthbert himself became the third prior until he was called to become prior at the head monastery of Lindisfarne in 664. The site of Old Melrose Abbey can be over-

looked by taking a brief diversion from the main road to Scott's View – a favourite vista of Sir Walter Scott.

[To be continued]

Rawdon Goodier
Lay Minister

¹ Life of Cuthbert in *The Age of Bede* p 47. Penguin Classics

² R S Thomas 1997 *Autobiographies: A Year in Lley* p 131-132



“ When we try
to pick out anything by itself,
we find it hitched
to everything else in the Universe ”

John Muir, *My First Summer in the Sierra*

(with thanks to Gary Thomson)

Snowdrops

Snowdrops the first sign of spring,
Often dicing with heavy snow.
Who calls to pollinate you?
Little sign of insects on the wing.

You take a chance wanting to be first.
Springing out from early leaden land,
Breaking through to grey and cold,
The drive to grow is like a thirst.

Why choose white and green to clothe you?
Surely a splash of red or blue,
Would do more to announce you.
Or maybe your competition is so few.

Come small flower and lift my heart,
Making your statement of rebirth.
Your time has come to gamble.
Somebody has to make a start.

Could I be missing the point?
You take no risk when you seek to grow,
Beneath the ground you have buds on bulbs.
I am pleased you rise to have your say.

Even decked in pristine snow you herald
The end of winter, and speak of joys to come.
Nodding head close to the ground, come lift,
As my spirit climbs to see your gift of life.

John Dickson

This is a story from Twenty Tataka Tales, a collection retold by Noor Inayat Khan, drawn from famous legends about the former lives of the Buddha.

They are tales of people and animals moved to acts of sacrifice by the noble example of their fellow creatures —

The Patient Buffalo

A giant-like buffalo with mighty horns lay under a tree asleep.

Two mischievous eyes peeped through the branches, and a little monkey said:

“I know a good old buffalo, who’s sleeping ‘neath a tree,
But I am not afraid of him, nor’s he afraid of me.”

And he leaped from the branch on to the buffalo’s back.

The buffalo opened his eyes, and seeing the monkey dancing on his hip, closed them again, as if only a butterfly were on his back.

Then the rascally monkey tried another trick. Jumping on the buffalo’s head between his two large horns, he held the ends and swung, as on a tree. But Buffalo did not even wink.

“What can I do to make my good friend angry?” he thought. And while buffalo was eating in the field, he trampled on the grass wherever he wished to graze. And the buffalo merely walked away.

Another day the mischievous monkey took a stick and knocked the buffalo’s ears with it, then while he was taking a walk he sat on his back like a hero, holding the stick in his hand.

And to all of this the buffalo made never a murmur, though his horns were strong and mighty.

But one day, while the monkey sat on his back, a fairy appeared.

“A great being you are, O buffalo,” she said; “but little do you know your own strength. Your horns can break down trees, and your feet could crush rocks. Lions and tigers fear to approach you. Your strength and beauty are known to the whole world, and yet you walk about with a foolish monkey on your back. One blow of of your horns would pierce him, and a stroke of your foot would crush him. Why do you not throw him to the ground and finish with this pay?”

“This monkey is small,” replied the buffalo, “and Nature has not given him much brain. Why then should I punish him? Moreover, why should I make him suffer in order that I may be happy?”

At this the fairy smiled, and with her magic wand she drove the monkey away. And she gave the great buffalo a charm by which no one could cause him to suffer again, and he then lived happy ever after.

With thanks to Robin Baker.

Gratitude —

I recently had an operation I'd been particularly dreading. I had to be at the hospital by 7.30am but in fact wasn't operated on until 1.30pm, so I had ample opportunity to get to know the small group of men also waiting for their operations. We sat in a small room in our hospital gowns, like condemned men awaiting execution, exchanging our stories in the quickly-formed camaraderie of shared apprehension.

Within the first half-hour I realised I

was at the fortunate end of the spectrum: most of the others had cancer, and were awaiting removal of diseased organs. Their main hope was that the cancer hadn't further spread. Over the hours, the jokes and breeziness petered out and real fears began to emerge: would he feel the absence of his kidney, one of my companions wondered. Someone else fretted about growths which had been found on the liver - during an operation on his intestines, would they be able to discover if

they were benign or not? Two had tumours which had been discovered by chance during an examination for a completely unrelated problem – the sudden shock of moving from normality into uncharted territory. One man had left his wife curled up on the settee weeping with fear that he might not return. Another mulled over the fact that his large family depended on him for everything, from emotional and financial support to helping with CVs: what were they going to do if, as he feared, the surgeon discovered that his cancer had spread, and his time was limited. For others this was simply the latest in a long history of illness and disease which had been taking them in and out of hospital for many years, for operation after operation. I could only guess at the fortitude required simply to keep going. My own fears seemed by contrast so self-indulgent.

As the hours dragged by, it became clear that some of the men sitting in that small room without any distractions and with the imminent prospect of serious and invasive surgery being inflicted on their bodies, were perhaps for the first time facing their own mortality and its impact on others. As the fear deepened amongst us what I found particularly moving was a mutual reaching out to each other to offer

comfort, reassurance, advice. Often it was a kind of rough male tenderness, but tenderness nonetheless, and offered in a situation where the usual masks and pretences were stripped away, and to people who had been strangers until that morning.

As I lay recovering from my operation that afternoon, I had a sudden sense of wonder that an Irish woman as a surgeon, and an anaesthetist from the other side of the world, together with a highly skilled team of other specialists, all strangers to me, should come together to carry out intricate and delicate work on this body to improve the quality and perhaps duration of this life. Well, and so what? I might normally have asked myself, but in one of those moments of lucidity which can occur when we are taken out of our day to day routines and habits and exposed to a sense of personal vulnerability, for me it bordered on the miraculous that things should be so ordered. I had a deep sense of gratitude, of course for those who had been involved in helping me that day in so many different ways, but also, in a way that is difficult to explain, to whatever at the deepest level gives rise to the compassion of which I had had such direct and practical experience.

Bill Grieve



*Thank you to all the contributors to this issue of the Newsletter.
Deadline for next issue is the end of March 2009.*





- Events elsewhere in Scotland with the Prior -

February 2009

Friday 6th	Aberfeldy group evening	7.30-9pm
Saturday 7th	Dundee group morning	10am-1pm
Sunday 8th	Aberdeen Day Retreat	10am-4pm

March

Friday 20th	Aberfeldy group evening	7.30-9pm
Saturday 21st	Dundee group morning	10am-1pm
Sunday 22nd	Aberdeen Day Retreat	10am-4pm

April

Friday 17th	Aberfeldy group evening	7.30-9pm
Saturday 18th	Dundee group morning	10am-1pm
Sunday 19th	Aberdeen Day Retreat	10am-4pm

For further details please phone :

Aberdeen –	Bob McGraw or Joyce & Gordon Edward	(01330) 824339 (01467) 681525
Aberfeldy –	Robin Baker	(01887) 820339
Dundee –	Elliott Forsyth	(01333) 451788

— Day-to-day schedule at Portobello Buddhist Priory —

Daily (*Every day except Mondays, Thursday afternoons & Sunday p.m.*)

MORNING

7.00 Meditation

7.40 Morning service

EVENING

7.30 Meditation

7.55 Walking meditation

8.00 Meditation

8.30 Evening office

Early morning practice

You can come for early morning meditation, followed by short morning service.

*7.00am –
8.15am*

Evening practice

Meditation, walking meditation, meditation, evening office.
You are welcome to stay on for tea.

*7.30pm –
8.45pm*

Introductory evenings

Will be held on the second Friday of each month. A short talk about Buddhist practice and the Serene Reflection Meditation (Soto Zen) tradition. Meditation instruction and discussion.

January 9th, February 13th, March 13th, April 10th.

7.30pm-9pm

Wednesday evenings

Midday service and meditation, followed by tea and a Dharma talk /discussion, evening office.

7.30pm-9.30pm

Sunday mornings

Meditation from 9.30am onwards, followed either by a Ceremony, Dharma discussion or Festival at 11am. It is fine to arrive or leave at 10.45am

*9.30am-
12.30pm*

Festival mornings

Priory open for meditation from 9.30am, or come at 10.45am for the ceremony.

*Portobello Buddhist Priory is Scottish Charity no. SCO31788
Prior: Reverend Favian Straughan*