

—Portobello Buddhist Priory—



A Temple of the Order of Buddhist Contemplatives



Snowdrops in the last traces of winter snow, Scottish Borders

Newsletter & Calendar of Events *No.23 May to August 2006*

Portobello Buddhist Priory
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website: www.portobellobuddhist.org.uk

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

Daily (*Every day except Mondays, Thursday afternoons & Sunday evenings*)

MORNING

7.00 Meditation
7.40 Morning service
8.15 Breakfast

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. You are welcome to stay for breakfast.

*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, discussion.

7.30pm-9pm

May 12th, June 9th, July 14th, August 11th

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. Please see *page 6* for weekly variations. For those who cannot attend the whole morning, it is fine to arrive or leave at 10.45am

*9.30am-
12.30pm*

Meditation days

See centre pages for details. 35 min meditation on the hour every hour, followed by walking meditation and a 15 min break.

9.30am-4pm)

Festival mornings

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

**> > > For specific events during May–August
2006, see centre pages 6-7 > > >**

— 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
Rev Favian, Prior*

— Prior's Notes —

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.

(Continued on page 4)

(Continued from page 3)

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.

Accident—

Six weeks ago I fractured a vertebrae in a skiing accident. Fortunately, the fracture was not serious and I have every prospect of a full recovery. Although I am still in the recuperation phase, there is a lot of teaching in what I have experienced so far.

The most direct teaching came in the immediate aftermath of the accident, when it was obvious that a momentary choice I had made had immediate and serious consequences. I have a clear recollection of making a reckless decision, the equivalent of choosing to overtake on a blind corner, and then of lying immobilised, with a clear understanding of the choice I had made and the direct connection to the painful consequences. It is not often that there is such a graphic demonstration between our past choices and present conditions. There was also a recognition, as well as relief, that I was fortunate not to have injured anyone else, which could easily have happened.

Reflecting on the accident I could see that the immediate decision was an expression of what could be called “teenage boy type karma”: overconfidence in my own abilities, showing off, and a sense of invulnerability. Although we make our choices and thereby shape our future, moment by moment, our choices are made in the context of what has gone before, our conditioning and the habit energy resulting from previous patterns of choices. Looking at the causes of the accident in isolation tended to make me judge myself quite harshly. Seeing it in the broader context gave me a more compassionate perspective, showing the areas where I need to work gently with what I have been given. It also illuminates the funny side of things!

I have also been reflecting on whether I will continue to engage in adventurous outdoor activities, which necessarily involve an element of risk. My love of mountains and wild places is such an important expression of my life energy, that I am sure I will. However, the accident has forcibly reminded me that these are not an enduring refuge, and that as I get older I will have to let them go. In the immediate period after the accident, while I was hospitalised and ambulated back to Scotland I was given a look into some of the changes in life that come with getting old. My body was painful and I was incapable of doing the most basic things without the

help of others. Although I recognised that for me this was a temporary state and I was determined to do all I could to get a good recovery, there was also the knowledge that this state is the inevitable direction of life. I am still digesting this teaching, together with those aspects of my reactions to it that involve fear and denial.

In the later stages of my recuperation, at home, cared for firstly by my sister Joan and then my daughter Amy, I have again been aware of the choices I make moment by moment, and their consequences. Now my choices focus around whether to take seriously the siren voice of despair that says that because most of my normal amusements are temporarily no longer possible, there is no point in giving any energy to life. The consequences of choosing to follow this voice are listlessness, grumpiness and a descent into a well of selfishness from within which it is hard to appreciate the kindness of others. As Dogen says in “Aspects of Zazen”, “..if one action is done with a bored or uneasy mind, all things become boring or uneasy...”

Now I am well on the mend and am progressively able to do more and more of things that I did before the accident. For the first time last weekend I was able to take part in a retreat with members of the Aberdeen Group and Rev Favian.

Bob McGraw, Lay Minister

‘The myriad things’

About two years ago I had the opportunity to visit Charles Darwin’s house in Kent, now a museum. This refreshed my interest in and affection for this remarkable naturalist whose thought, unsurprisingly, had a significant influence on my career as a biologist.

My interest in biology developed in my later years at school when I found that it was possible to collect the wild flowers of the countryside and identify them, and, in parallel, to find and experience the fascinating world of marine biology, exploring the incredible diversity of marine organisms. So my field of interest was clearly that of “sentient” things – though, after the way of field naturalists and avid collectors of specimens, my study of them often rendered them “insentient” via the plant press or the killing bottle. Looking back on this now it seems a little paradoxical that while I could readily “sacrifice” living creatures “in the cause of science” I seemed at the same time to develop a kind of sympathy with them.

This fascination with the many and complex things of the natural world can be totally absorbing and Darwin claimed that this had led

him to become such a machine for the gathering of facts that he lost much of his ability to appreciate literature, music and art. He allowed that he could still be moved by landscapes and there is a charming story related about his delight at the Lake District scenery when he made his first visit there in old age. Not being as single minded or as capable of sustained application as Darwin I don’t think I was affected to that extent, though I have to admit that my “working memory” recalls the names of obscure yet delightful creatures encountered fifty years ago better than those of people met last week. Sometimes, however, I am inclined to feel that this recollection of names is not entirely useless, it serves as a reminder, on the fringes of consciousness, of that relationship to oneself which constitutes other sentient beings, recalling that quick movement of the spider among the summit rocks (*Micaria alpina*) or the arctic-alpine plant nestling among the boulders (*Saxifraga caespitosa*).

Nowadays Darwin’s influence on thought is often associated with a materialistic, dualistic, or even aggressively anti-religious outlook on life. It is of course true that Darwin himself

Weekend events in Edinburgh at the Priory

May 2006

Sunday 7th	Meditation Day	9.30am-4pm
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Sunday 21st	Renewal of Precepts	11am
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June

Sunday 4th	Meditation Day	9.30am-4pm
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Sunday 11th	Festival of Great Master Dogen	11am
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July

Sunday 2nd	Meditation Day	9.30-4pm
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Sunday 16th	Renewal of Precepts	11am
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August

Sunday 6th	Meditation Day	9.30am-4pm
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Sunday 20th	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 evenings.

(Please phone beforehand, and please note when the Prior is holding re-treats elsewhere – see next page)

Events elsewhere in Scotland with the Prior

May

Saturday 20th Dundee group morning *10am-1pm*

Sunday 21st Aberdeen Day Retreat *10am-4pm*

Monday 22nd Aberdeen group evening *7.30-9pm*

June

Friday 2nd—Sunday 4th Falkland Retreat

July

Saturday 1st Dundee group morning *10am-1pm*

Sunday 2nd Aberdeen Day Retreat *10am-4pm*

Monday 3rd Aberdeen group evening *6.30-9pm*

For further details please phone :

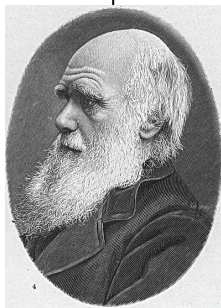
Aberdeen –	Bob McGraw	(01330) 824339
	or Joyce & Gordon Edward	(01467) 681525
Aberfeldy –	Robin Baker	(01887) 820339
Dundee –	Elliott Forsyth	(01333) 451788
Peebles –	Julian Goodacre	(01721) 722539

became alienated from the prevailing religious traditions of his time and place and his intellectual heritage is incompatible with certain widely held specific religious beliefs. In particular it is incompatible with those that require the affirmation of a “teleology of existence” – a sort of universal game plan or script according to which the universe unfolds. These teleologies, generally very man-centered (anthropocentric) and judgemental, include the “Creationist” ideologies which are currently undergoing a resurgence on the fundamentalist fringes of certain faiths. Darwin was also, at least in some of his moods, repelled by what he saw as the “clumsy, wasteful, blundering, low and horribly cruel works of nature”. However, having characterized the evolutionary process in this way and fully acknowledging the abundance of suffering in the world, he nevertheless concluded that “according to my judgement happiness decidedly prevails, although this would be very difficult to prove”. He argues for this on the rational grounds of natural selection but adds “... several considerations moreover, lead to the belief that all sentient beings have been formed so as to enjoy, as a general rule, happiness”.

Buddhism is sometimes referred to as “cosmocentric” rather than anthropocentric though this was probably not altogether true in its early history when a clear distinction was made between beings which were “sentient” and those which were “non-sentient” – and only the former were deemed to “have Buddha Nature”. Dogen rejected this interpretation in a radical manner, preferring the understanding that all beings, both sentient and non-sentient *are* Buddha-nature. As Dogen acknowledged this conclusion had already been anticipated by earlier Chinese Zen masters who held that insentient (and sentient) beings were continually preaching the dharma.

What then are things?

Some philosophical positions insist that we cannot know “things in themselves” but only the attributes we observe in or confer upon them. This is the dualistic perspective of the separated observer viewing the thing as object. It is a perspective of which science ostensibly makes skillful use, I say ostensibly because one suspects that the real relationship in science is rather more complex. I am not inclined to belittle the merits of the scientific enterprise which at its best displays an admirable creative openness towards things though some of its early proponents did speak in terms of “putting nature to the rack”, that is to torture nature for the information it contains!



One can find, within the Buddhist scriptures, statements which appear to point to the “unreality” of things, attributing to them the nebulous character of a dream, perhaps the best known example being the closing verse of the Diamond Sutra where we are exhorted to “think of this fleeting world as ... a flickering lamp, a phantasm and a dream”. These statements, taken in isolation, have sometimes been thought to give Buddhism a negative or nihilistic flavour. My understanding is that it is not the reality of things that Buddhism questions but rather our attachment to an interpretation of things as having permanent substance rather than as being of the nature of processes.

Our experience can lead us to a relation to things/beings which is much closer than that of a detached observer. We can sense that we do not stand apart from things but share with them our arising in dependent origination, and our impermanence. In so far as we are we always exist in community with things and this sense of community is a kind of knowing that can lead to compassionate sympathy with them. If all beings both sentient and insentient can teach the dharma why should we not feel grateful to them, and be prepared to refrain from judging them solely in terms of how they

appear to profit us and serve our narrow purposes?

Darwin's early studies in geology convinced him of the changing nature of the physical world and his development of the theory of biological evolution by natural selection is very much concerned with demonstrating the impermanent nature of living species and the way in which they change. Evolutionary theory both before and after Darwin became rather unhelpfully conflated with the idea of progress but although this was, to a limited extent, implied in some of Darwin's writings it did not receive much emphasis until later, particularly within the questionable fields of "social Darwinism" and Marxism.

While the fact of change/impermanence is emphasized in Buddhism it does not tend to be linked with an idea of evolution, at least not one with a progressive theme – on the contrary the idea of "degeneration" over time has, at times, assumed predominance. This rather pessimistic outlook was not something that Dogen subscribed to. In so far as an evolutionary perspective is to be found in Buddhism it perhaps manifests within the framework of the spiritual evolution of the bodhisattva path. In some of the Mahayana scriptures, most notably in the Avatamsaka, this is elaborated to a vast cosmological scale with metaphor piled on metaphor in order to try to express its spiritual depth and universal significance. Indeed if we add together the fact of impermanence, the perspective of dependent origination and that of mutual interdependence/interpenetration of all things (Indra's net) one comes close to defining the ingredients of an evolutionary understanding without a teleological perspective and unencumbered by a concept of progress, though this is not to say that one cannot choose to describe some aspects of change as progress if one makes clear what one means by this word in the context in which it is used.



"Conveying the self to the myriad beings to authenticate them is delusion. The myriad things advancing to authenticate the self is enlightenment". Dogen makes this very important statement about our relation to things in his *Genjokoan*.

Conveying the self to the myriad things to authenticate them seems to be pointing to the widespread human habit of imposing ideas and theories on the things that 'confront' us and looking for corroboration of these ideas in the things. I think we can recognize this tendency in ourselves, perhaps particularly in our relation to other people. We can also see aspects of it within the enterprise of science. However if this was the entire story the whole of our understanding and the scientific enterprise would reside in delusion, and I don't think this can be so.

What then might Dogen mean by "the myriad things advancing to authenticate the self" being enlightenment? I feel he is making a vital point here. Perhaps if all things **are**

Buddha Nature, as Dogen holds, they are indeed all and always "advancing to authenticate the self", but the self authenticated is not a static "thing". Neither is it the "pre-occupied" self which may feel it has no room for, or indeed might seek to resist, this authentication though even here there is the possibility of authentication through suffering and a turning around within the heart. Much seems to depend on our volunteering to be open to things, and not just to the things which we feel to be our immediate concern. Maybe we need to be willing simply to dwell within or, perhaps, just learn to be, the space/emptiness within which things "advance", a place we can experience as having horizons but no boundaries – the place or "neighbourhood" of sitting meditation.

This attitude is at the opposite pole to having contempt for things, indeed such an attitude is alien to Buddhism and particularly to Dogen's thought in which one meets many important

teachings and examples of the right attitude to things as, for example, in the passage from the *Genjokoan* quoted above but also, in many practical ways, in his “advice to the Chief Cook”, the *Tenzokyokan*.

I once came across the advice, attributed to a Nobel prize winning geneticist who said, concerning her work, that it was always necessary to be “open to the organism”. While Darwin was always on the lookout for features in the natural world that would illuminate his evolutionary theory one also senses, within his diverse writings, this type of openness to the natural world. He seems to have been the sort of person who is prepared to listen to at least some of the “dharma” preached by the most humble of forms of existence, from beans to

barnacles or orchids to earthworms.

After an immensely energetic early manhood Darwin’s later years found him largely confined by illness to his home at Down where he lived a very domesticated existence while still pursuing a wide range of natural history studies. A “sand path” borders his property at Down which I followed with my wife and two grandchildren on an earlier visit. A picture forms in my mind of him, in his old age, walking around that path absorbed in the memories of his early travels and more recent studies in the growing awareness of the influence these were having on man’s understanding of the world in which we participate with all things.

Randon Goodier, Lay Minister

Calling on Kanzeon

Last summer at Throssel, Rev. Hakuun spoke to us about calling on Kanzeon. My initial sense of what she spoke about was that this ‘call’ is what we do when we ‘offer up’. It seemed to me that by allowing that which arises and falls to arise and fall without clinging, we are taking refuge in Buddha and within this, the call that we make for help is what we do when we seek what is good to do, acting from the deepest sense of this that we have. Rev. Hakuun added that whenever she calls out for help, when she really needs it, something always answers (at least this is how I remember it). I was intrigued because this seemed to be a bit different from my understanding.

Months later I was at home getting ready for work and without enough time to wash the pots I had burned making my breakfast. I was working a double shift and wouldn’t be home for about 11 hours so I said to my mum that I would steep the pots and then clean them once I got home. My mum said that there was no way I was leaving the pots there all day and that I’d have to be late for work and clean the pots. When I refused she got very angry and so did I and I stormed out to get my bus.

On the bus on my way to work I was very upset and all I could think of at first was how I wasn’t going to do this or that because if she couldn’t be reasonable then I wasn’t going to be! Then I caught myself with these defensive thoughts and feelings, and I knew that acting on any of them wouldn’t help. I could see that they were arising because I felt hurt, so I began to think about what I could do to help the situation – basically what would be good to do. I began to imagine having a conversation with my mum and as I continued this imagined conversation I realised that at the centre of it was that I was trying to both tell her and show her that I was right and she was wrong. When I noticed this, I could see that this wouldn’t do either, it wasn’t going to help and it was still dualistic – about me versus her. I didn’t know what to do. I knew that I wanted to help the situation but I didn’t know how. I then just sat within this not-

knowing and turned within, gently asking for help and just sat with an 'asking'.

Over the next few hours I began to see that I hadn't really been pulling my weight in the house. I hadn't lived in the family home for some time and staying there again I had seemed to fall into the old conditioning of being a child and not really doing an equal share of work and upkeep in the house. For example I never did the laundry and hardly ever emptied the dishwasher. I had never thought about it, it had just been the way we lived, but I could now see very clearly that this had led to my mum becoming increasingly agitated over time and this increasing agitation had led to the anger that morning. I became aware that I could help the situation by not acting on the old conditioning by consciously making sure that I did an equal share of what needed done in the house (and maybe trying harder not to burn the pots!).

The next day when I saw my Mum I told her that I had realised I wasn't pulling my weight and that I would therefore make sure that I did my share of work and as a result of this we ended up having a heartfelt chat about some things we had never really talked about and our relationship has greatly improved since then. It feels as though I can see my mum more again, like we are meeting more directly somehow.

What I understand as calling on Kanzeon is to turn within with an asking deep looking, being willing to do what is good to do, whatever that may be, but also being willing to sit in the not-knowing. My understanding is that the life of Kanzeon is both this looking and also the clarity and the guidance that can arise from such a looking. I think maybe this is what Rev. Hakuun was pointing us to; that there are times in our lives when it's helpful to turn within and look more closely at 'what is'.

Kimberley Cadden

Acting from Uncertainty

Could all that I take to be the world be a phantom, a mirage? There is no way to ever be sure that I am not merely a disembodied brain floating in a tank, being fed all of my experiences by a skilled biochemist. Imprisoned by our narrow experiential windows onto the world, we are unable to verify whether that onto which we gaze has any reality at all - it is haunting to consider that all might be hallucination. Gut reaction may tell me otherwise, but this could just be another synthetic experience with which the brain has been infused. Films like "Memento" and "Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind", play with this conceit as a dramatic device, and suggest that this frightening uncertainty is a common human concern. Indeed, every night, we fall asleep to be confronted with a fictional four-dimensional construct generated by our somnolent imagination, and each night, forget-

ting its countless previous tricks, we are once again taken in by our dreams.

If we can never be sure that we are even awake, how can we be sure of anything else? And yet people become easily possessed by all kinds of dogmatic certainty, especially religious conviction. Newspapers report the terrible destruction that mankind wreaks with God on his side: wars are waged, buildings destroyed, doctors who carry out abortions are shot - all by zealots convinced that they are carrying out the divine will. Intellectually crude propaganda techniques are enormously powerful; how quickly new converts to a particular sect (religious or secular) begin to express themselves in the adopted jargon. Opposing ideologies dangerously convinced of their rectitude illustrate both the capacity for self-deception, and the prudence of always chal-

lenging our own beliefs and recognising our own need for certainty.

Buddhism seems to offer, not only a non-dogmatic religion where no doctrine is enforced or killed for, but the enticing promise that the world can perhaps be seen from a new, clearer perspective. The individual who stands against the world in profound loneliness can, by the cultivation of awareness, see the insubstantiality of the self and become truly at home in the universe, "beyond the dream". Paradoxically though, one hears, even in Buddhism, of the need for faith. How does one put trust in anything from within this benighted state?

Buddhist precepts attractively embrace our humble perspective and make a virtue of them, recognising that we can never be omniscient or infallible. Thich Nhat Hahn's mindfulness trainings thus advise: "Aware of the suffering created by fanaticism and intolerance, I am determined not to be idolatrous about or bound to any doctrine, theory or ideology, even Buddhist ones. Buddhist teachings are guiding means to help me learn to look deeply and to develop my understanding and compas-

sion. They are not doctrines to fight, kill or die for."

The precepts are an admonition from those who recognise the need for humility to be careful that our impulse is always "First, do no harm." I may be a brain in a vat, but I should act as if every one of my actions matters. Evolved from simple, unreflective creatures, possessing sensory and cognitive capacities moulded only by what enables genetic survival (perhaps), I can grasp only fragments of the stunningly complex nature of the world and so, unsure of why I am here, of what I am supposed to be doing, I should try to learn how to lessen suffering. Great Master Shuitsu compared every act of compassion to groping in the dark for a pillow; however much we have prayed, meditated or rationalised, can we ever truly know our own motivations for our actions, or what their ultimate consequences may be? Yet, each morning, maybe, if we place that pillow on the ground and sit very still on it - a symbolic and silent response to our perplexity - we can cultivate a little of the awareness and patience necessary to allow us to act preceptually, despite our uncertainty.

Ed Chandy

West Indies update —

For news of the West Indies, go to www.zenislandsangha.org to be forwarded to the new site (I've had difficulty going directly to it at www.zenislandsangha.atspace.com)

Rev Lewyn sends his best wishes, and says his new address is: c/o G. Rostant, 38 Murray St., Woodbrook, Port of Spain, Trinidad, West Indies.

Contributors to this issue were Rev Favian, Bob McGraw, Rawdon Goodier, Kimberley Cadden & Ed Chandy. Thank you. The newsletter is produced for and by the Scottish sangha, so your contributions are always welcome, whether photos, artwork, poems, articles or reports of events anywhere in Scotland. Please send to the Priory or to Bill Grieve at williamgrieve@btinternet.com, or 'phone to discuss on 0131-667-2241. The deadline for the next issue is the end of July 2006.

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