

—Portobello Buddhist Priory—



A Temple of the Order of Buddhist Contemplatives



Chinese Buddhist Stupa, Royal Botanical Gardens, Edinburgh

Newsletter May—August 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 Covid-19 it still seems wise for the Sangha not to come together for meetings, either here at the Priory or around the country in our respective groups with the Prior. We'll continue for now coming together for meditation, dharma and ceremony on the Zoom platform each week, and review arrangements in the light of developing circumstances.

— Prior's Notes —

(Given the Prior's current indisposition with vertigo which precludes use of a computer, here reprinted are 'Notes' from the May 2011 edition of the Newsletter, 10 years ago.)

I am of that age now when to sit with other middle-aged folks is to find oneself comparing notes on our various ailments; the arthritic joints, and the medical read-out number which is starting to show up on the wrong side of the official health line. The flip side of these conversations can be the enthusiastic and promoting of our health regimes, special diets and exercise. All of this can be fine and good, but sometimes and at some point we may feel that 'still small voice' asking; "What's this about?" Speaking personally, what it's about can often be my fearful mind obsessing and resisting the manifestations of impermanence. The Buddha saw the 'four sights'; old age, sickness, death and the spiritual seeker. We may find ourselves dwelling on the first three,

without engaging the fourth. A zen comment relating to this, states; “Our lives are like leaky boats put out to sea”. We can spend our lives trying to plug the holes, but this boat is inevitably going down.

We can perhaps recognise that our Practice helps to open the obsessive identification with the 'me' boat, towards a wider perspective of the ocean world. We are familiar with the little boat world as the imperfect state, where the marks of impermanence are daily visible. But our attempts to protect our lives beyond what is good and wise is symptomatic of living the delusion that we are only separate selves with, for some, the belief option of eternal life.

This 'self' then becomes driven by fear and desire, and is in fact an expression of resistance to the connectivity of the universe all around us.

Every time we sit zazen the invitation is there to see and let go the seeming security of the 'known', the grasping and identifying movements of the mind. To risk the feel of the ocean world, its expansiveness, buoyancy and beauty, to learn to swim here, as well as caring for the boat, are in the end, not two separate activities.

Our lives are deeper and more boundless than we know.



Wood, wire and stone



Roger Keyes' poem '*Hokusai says*' appeared in a Sangha Newsletter in 2019. The simplicity of its structure and its themes conveyed to me the wisdom needed to understand and appreciate the bigger picture. Around the same time, BBC4 showed a biographical documentary "*Hokusai: Old Man Crazy To Paint*" a sympathetic and detailed account of his life, work and times. At present this is not available on the BBC i-player, but Wikipedia also gives a good account.

The column, which is four sided and 1 metre long, was part of an elm branch from a friend's garden. I started to 'carve' it in 2018. The 'pagoda tiers' just happened as a wish to think architecturally. Then it lay about, waiting for inspiration: skyscraper windows were an option (you know the awesome night-time views of New York for example), but then I thought about placing 'Hokusai says' in the tiers. The letters were made using copper wire dots, which gave me many opportunities to practice my working meditation (but nothing beats separating lentils and grit for an hour at Throssel!) The finished column stands on a piece of slate that was once part of a snooker table.

Best wishes to all.
Ian McPhail

Hokusai says —

Hokusai says Look carefully.
He says pay attention, notice.
He says keep looking, stay curious.
He says there is no end to seeing.
He says Look Forward to getting old.
He says keep changing, you just get more who you really are.
He says get stuck, accept it, repeat yourself as long as it's interesting.
He says keep doing what you love.
He says keep praying.
He says every one of us is a child, every one of us is ancient, every one of us has a body.
He says every one of us is frightened.
He says every one of us has to find a way to live with fear.
He says everything is alive —shells, buildings, people, fish, mountains, trees.
Wood is alive.
Water is alive
Everything has its own life.
Everything lives inside us.
He says live with the world inside you.
He says it doesn't matter if you draw, or write books.
It doesn't matter if you saw wood, or catch

fish. It doesn't matter if you sit at home and stare at the ants on your verandah or the shadows of the trees and grasses in your garden. It matters that you care.
It matters that you feel.
It matters that you notice.
It matters that life lives through you.
Contentment is Life living through you.
Joy is life living through you.
Satisfaction and strength is life living through you.
Peace is life living through you.
He says don't be afraid.
Don't be afraid.
Look, feel, let life take you by the hand.
Let life live through you.

Roger Keyes



Old Man Crazy To Paint

A Light-Hearted Practice Journey from the North -

I don't know about you, but I have always struggled to maintain a regular meditation practice. Attending a group helped but for many years my practice has been erratic with a few days per week vying against periods of no meditation for months. I also found that I had this self-defeating habit of not meditating when things got tough – like I was withholding an activity that would help for some hard to fathom reason.

Now I'm not judging myself; I assume this is fairly normal? Having a family and working meant for me that it felt hard to carve some time into my day for meditation. I always had something else to do! But that did not mean that I didn't value meditation. When I did practice regularly, I could feel the difference in myself and then spent a lot of time telling myself how I should practice more, whilst not! The irony.

However, joining the Portobello Priory Sangha in October last year has been a watershed for me. I have realised how hard it is to sustain a meditation practice without active engage-

ment in all three of the refuges – Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. Before coming to this group I did not recognise this lack. I also did not recognise how interdependently the three refuges support each other via meditation.

So just before the new year I set myself a 'challenge' – I was going to meditate every day for a year. I made this vow quite quietly as I was worried that I would make it to day six and give up. I did actually nearly miss the boat on day two as I forgot and had to get out of bed to meditate. But since then, with the help of a daily reminder, I have kept it up.

As I write this piece, I am nearing my 100th day of a daily meditation practice and yes that is written on my calendar. Seriously though, this experience so far has taught me a few things about myself. Firstly, meditating daily is not that hard!! I had built regular practice up into such a thing in my head but actually making the decision to do it, has simplified that. I just do it every day and that is it.

Secondly, I also realised that I had

started this challenge as a bit of an experiment – to see what I would be like if I meditated every day. Which reveals that despite knowing the folly of this, some small part of me did think that I might suddenly be transformed into something pretty amazing by meditation magic. I slightly squirm to acknowledge this—but it's there.

Actually, I used to think that enlightenment was something that happened to other people. It seemed such a lofty ideal that I had no reference point for it. Also chasing after it seemed to be written about as a mistake, so

that I had always thought that perhaps I had just better meditate, live my life and I'd be nearing that goal in a few lifetimes.

So now I have managed to let go of the sneaky idea that I am going to become enlightened by a cosmic ray as I sit: is it something that will happen to me? I really have no idea – so sorry no revelations so far. But



maybe I can sense that enlightenment is not an ideal to put on a pedestal. Maybe it is even openly available to everyone drop by drop as we sit day by day. My daily practice has opened up for me the tentative awareness of the reality of the Buddha nature in every one of us.

Learning to trust this has helped me

to let go of some fears. It has allowed me to be open to the idea of having less certainty about who I am and consequently have less judgement of others, all of which feels helpful.

So what am I like,

now I meditate every day? Well, perhaps not surprisingly I am just the same and also different every day. Whether I complete this so-called challenge is really no longer the point – it no longer feels like a challenge but a choice. Rev Master Daishin's words in chapter three of *Sitting Buddha* resonate for me here: "Zazen needs to become the default

position for which we use our abilities to plan, think things through and utilize all the other wonderful abilities we have”. This is how I currently see my zazen practice. It is the ground of my being which supports the rest of my life, my roots.

I would like to thank everyone in the

Portobello Priory for your support and welcome to the zoom group. Listening to you all has been such a privilege and has really helped me through some difficult moments.

Clare Serginson



(With thanks to Gabrielle Smith for this photo from her garden)

The Joy Of Outdoors—



To be able to walk in the outdoors was a great blessing for us. We were lucky to have a variety of pathways to choose from. Our friend and neighbour Josie accompanied us, and we were able to share thoughts and feelings. This exchange, I am sure, helped to keep the pandemic blues at bay.

Our favorite place was Balbirnie Park at Markinch (in Fife), which contains a great variety of trees and shrubs in a beautiful /





setting. Sometimes the elements kept us confined to barracks, and gloomy winter made its presence felt. We experienced flooding rivers and a flooded golf course, which turned into an ice hockey pitch for the young. Gradually spring unfolded: first the snowdrops, then the daffodils followed by the rhododendrons.

An occasional trip to the seaside was a great treat for us. Land, Sea and Sky merged into the picture. The smell of the sea, rocks, sand and sea-birds a delight for the senses. Nature's therapy at its best.

Jim Morrow



Ithaca

Constantine Cavafy was an important Greek poet of the late 19th & early 20th century.

One of his most famous poems is *'Ithaca'*. The poem is based on Homer's account of the return of the epic hero Odysseus to his homeland, the island of Ithaca.

Although, of course, his destination is deeply important to him, the poem puts equal if not greater emphasis on the journey; and suggests, perhaps, that our wisest course is not to have our eyes always fixed on our destination.

There was a resonance for me in this in relation to our own journey of training; discovering our own being in the present rather than what we might become further in the future. Perhaps, on one level, *Ithaca* exists to 'give you the marvellous journey' – without it you wouldn't have set out. There might also be an implication that in time, 'journey' and 'destination' lose their meaning and become synonymous.

Anyway – see what you think! It's a fine poem; and in case you wonder, *Laistrygonians* were a tribe of man-eating giants from ancient Greek mythology.

Willie Grieve



As you set out for Ithaca
hope your road is a long
one,
full of adventure, full of
discovery.

Laistrygonians, Cyclops,
angry Poseidon—don't be afraid of
them:
you'll never find things like that on
your way
as long as you keep your thoughts
raised high,
as long as a rare excitement
stirs your spirit and your body.
Laistrygonians, Cyclops,
wild Poseidon—you won't encounter
them
unless you bring them along inside
your soul,
unless your soul sets them up in front
of you.

Hope your road is a long one.
May there be many summer mornings
when,
with what pleasure, what joy,
you enter harbours you're seeing for
the first time;
may you stop at Phoenician trading
stations
to buy fine things,
mother of pearl and coral, amber and
ebony,

sensual perfume of every kind—
as many sensual perfumes as you can;
and may you visit many Egyptian cities
to learn and go on learning from their
scholars.

Keep Ithaca always in your mind.
Arriving there is what you're destined
for.

But don't hurry the journey at all.
Better if it lasts for years,
so you're old by the time you reach
the island,
wealthy with all you've gained on the
way,
not expecting Ithaca to make you rich.

Ithaca gave you the marvelous jour-
ney.

Without her you wouldn't have set
out.

She has nothing left to give you now.

And if you find her poor, Ithaca won't
have fooled you.

Wise as you will have become, so full
of experience,
you'll have understood by then what
these Ithakas mean.

Constantine Cavafy

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