

—*Portobello Buddhist Priory*—



A Temple of the Order of Buddhist Contemplatives



First sight of spring—Magnolia in Gabrielle's garden in East Lothian!

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— Prior's Notes —

There's a poem by W.B. Yeats:

*My fiftieth year had come and gone,
I sat, a solitary man,
In a crowded London shop,
An open book and empty cup
On the marble table-top.*

*While on the shop and street I gazed
My body of a sudden blazed;
And twenty minutes more or less
It seemed, so great my happiness,
That I was blessed and could bless.*

We too sit, solitary, many of us in social isolation, but also and more profoundly, in meditation with ourselves. Can we feel blessed and able to bless in these changing and uncertain times? The rapid change and insecurity of our times can bring an urgency and give sharper focus to our sitting. The Buddha is said to have stated that sense perceptions and thoughts rest in the mind and that the mind rests in awareness and that awareness rests in the Unconditioned; the constancy within all changing experience. And if we seek security and peace, we should look for it where it resides, in our own being.

We can, in reflective moments, have a sense of our undivided nature but for most of us, such moments are fleeting and temporary . And it is for this rea-

son that not everyone is in touch with and can feel the peace and equanimity which is Its signature.

For many of us, our being is so thoroughly mixed with the contents of our experience: the fears and clinging born of the delusion of being a fixed and separated self, casting about for its security, that while we may sense the potential of our true freedom, we do not know how to live from that 'place' with any stability.

A helpful analogy I find, is that of the wave and the ocean. Our sense of isolation is like that of the wave, viewing its reality only with reference to the ocean's surface, unable to recognise the depth of its ocean nature. But with meditation we practice turning the 'light of awareness' into our depth, into the depth we arise from and have our being. I think Rev. Master Daishin talks about this movement as *Zazen doing Zazen*, where we are involved. Perhaps we could also say that our 'wave' nature is one of the ways the ocean comes to know and express itself in this particular place and time.

And so, if in these uncertain and insecure times we seek true security, we can practice this letting go of our self delusions and turn within, to that which lies behind and indeed pervades all experience.

With practice, Buddhism tells us, we can come to know this for ourselves, sensing its presence in the background, like a constant friend, bestowing its peace on everything that we experience. All that is necessary is to turn towards this True Nature and if we do so, it can gradually take us into itself. When we're in touch with our own being we are truly blessed, for then we are in possession or rather, possessed by, that which is most precious in life. And what naturally flows from this is a wish to also bless, to share this innate peace and sympathetic joy with all beings.

We come to discover we are able to sit in solitary meditation and find nothing is lacking in our connection with others; that at every moment the full life of Buddha is presencing its infinite emptiness in these very beings, as all of us.



My first nine months attending Portobello Priory

'My fears and desires come to look less like obstacles and more like signposts'

(RM Daishin, 'Buddha Recognises Buddha')



(The tree shown here frames Newmains Farm which sits beside the road near the WWT centre at Caerlaverock in Dumfriesshire, Scotland.)

'A tree grows as it can, unconcerned by the obstacles it encounters. Seeing the tree in the picture we are clear about the challenges this particular tree faces. We are not unlike the tree, the challenges of life shape us and our actions just as surely as they shape the tree. But we have a great advantage over the tree; we can come to know, through our fears and desires, these obstacles for what they are, and so help form our lives with this self knowledge. Consciousness allows us to let the wind become a guide, a signpost, rather than an obstacle'

- Colin Bryden, photographer - <https://www.colinbrydon.net/>

It is such a long time ago and I have now been so influenced by my further reading and the experiences over the last nine months that I am not so clear about what initially attracted me to RM Daishin's quote (above), apart from the sense of working with everything that is felt, a wonderfully simple as well as complicated process.

Ten years ago after going through a tricky time I was introduced to mindfulness both for personal reasons and to support my work as a counsellor and social work trainer. At that time my motivation was to deal with my own stress, and enhance my ability to be with the people with whom I was working. I discovered to my own surprise that I became interested in Buddhism and participated in a range of secular groups and Buddhist Sanghas.

The contrast between my previous experiences and the nine months of regular attendance here is the self-restraint and genial respect in the way the members of the Sangha relate to each other. A restraint that at first seemed to be a startling difference from what I became used to in other settings. Although there was a lot of respect and compassion, the focus was very much on using guided meditation and reflection on personal experience as a way of supporting us to get the benefits out of meditation.

Although I still am very grateful to these traditions, at times it seemed that the boundary between Buddhism - and I do know that the definition is multilayered - and Western traditions of personal development became blurred. One of Master Daishin's suggestions is that self restraint is not a restriction but an invitation to generosity (*'Buddha Recognises Buddha'*, p.7) It seems that by being mindful of speech it is more likely that you will be listening wholeheartedly: certainly I have a tendency to be so eager to contribute that it can undermine how I listen to others.

He also suggests that people can develop very intimate relationships through

zazen without knowing each other's personal history (*'Buddha Recognises Buddha'*, p.68-70). This knowledge may come incidentally during teatime conversations but it is not essential. This is an important lesson to me because my own background has almost privileged the importance of autobiography. In my professional life as well as in the kind of family I grew up in personal stories were a very valued part of any developing relationship. Although it still has a not-to-be-underestimated role, the focus that seems more challenging and relevant at the moment is to let go of the clinging to my story, which sometimes has echoes of the complaining phrase *you wouldn't want to be me*.

I appreciate all the support I get from the Sangha and how much I'm learning from every aspect of our meetings. The great struggle is not to be dominated by thinking and talking and to allow the meditation to support the acceptance of whatever comes up without any seeking of particular goals or satisfactions. As someone who has been very wary of any rituals which seem to be similar to religious practices which have often felt alien to me, I struggle with the ceremonies. I have some intellectual understanding of the meaning of some of the Scriptures and there is a sense in which the rituals are a very active way of having a mindful practice. It brings up a lot of autobiographical distractions such as – am I doing it correctly? – I feel uncoordinated and self-conscious! These are examples of my inner dialogue which sometimes makes it difficult for me to engage directly and mindfully with the ceremonies.

The most important learning is that the Sangha really supports loosening attachments to the self as the centre of the world without splitting it off from the oneness of everything. It slips off my tongue easily but I still have a lot of living with my attachments in a more spacious way before I can have more than just very shadowy direct sense of emptiness, nonattachment, and unity of experience.

On rereading what I have just written, ironically I am very aware of my constant use of the 'I' pronoun!

Tom Frank

Thoughts on training – and nothing is as we think it is

I have been re-reading some old Priory newsletters here and am struck by how much teaching there is in these short pieces.

Also great to see the photos of all the sangha, those still here and those who have died or whose training is on a different trajectory.

Rev. Master Haryo's words come to mind: Something like - - we could travel in a spaceship for a lifetime of lifetimes and still never meet exactly this group of people to train with.

Deep bows in gratitude

Opening up

Nothing is as we think it is. Words and definitions. Form and emptiness

We are not what we think.

How to express the dharma? Don't worry

It is already completely expressive Expansive

Fluid and free.

In the tiniest flower

In the vastness of a starry night Letting go

Opening up

Like a flower opening in the sun Our true nature expands us.

Kathleen Campbell



Some Experiences of a Baby Buddhist

It was an experience that I doubt I'll ever forget, simple as it was. I was looking for a way to stop obsessing over the future. I'd spent my whole adult life as a loud, angry punk singer, and it had been wonderful for the large part. The thing is, it wasn't good for me anymore. I had grown, changed. It's a hollow experience to stand on a stage singing angry punk songs when you're just not feeling that angry anymore. You want the stage to swallow you up, yet this is 'who you are' and 'what you do', so you keep booking more gigs. When you've built a life around something and identified with it for 20 years, just letting it go of it is not that simple, is it? Through dabbling with various new projects I became increasingly aware that whatever was going to be creatively fulfilling for me (if anything), would inevitably lead my mind to obsess over it, sending me into a dream-world of scenarios where I was the centre of everything, where my creativity slowly became the core of my entire self-image. Conversations that would never take place would be on loop in my mind whilst I perfected them. The imaginary praises of other people would allure and illuminate my mind. I became aware that real-life - whatever that was - was passing me by.

The awareness that I was living - unhappily - according to a self-image I'd constructed as a teenager wasn't profound, just a product of slowly approaching middle-age and thinking, *do I really want to live like this for the rest of my life?* I looked into ways that I could enjoy the moment a bit more, simple ways of appreciating life *as it was actually happening*, rather than several years later through filtered, distorted and romanticised memories. I certainly was not looking for religion. Religion was one of the things I had been angry about!

I took the dog for a walk in the park. I focused first on my breath, and then on my surroundings. I followed the advice of whatever beginners Buddhist book I'd downloaded - and I couldn't believe it. People don't often talk of big, extreme 'wow' experiences when just beginning their Buddhist practice, but for me, that's exactly what happened. Everything was instantly alive. In that moment, focusing only on

what I could see and sense, my mind looking at everything around me in went right back to basics, to where I awe - the life that I had ignored probably suddenly remembered it being when I bly since I was around eight years of was a very small child. The hairs stood age. Even the tarmac was alive. up on the back of my neck (and all over my body) and I couldn't stop That simple walk in the park changed my life. I got in touch with Rev. Master Favian at the Priory within weeks, grinning.

Several blackbirds popped their jerky, judgemental eyes out from under some shrubs, bobbing forwards for worms and eyeing me up cautiously as I walked past. I didn't 'see a bird' and move on. I saw 'birds' for the mystery that they are. These are strange, beaked, winged creatures who fly about this



land - singing, to boot! (If birds existed only in myth and folklore, they would make elves and unicorns seem positively dull.) In trees, I saw wooden beings, hundreds of years older than me, growing out of the ground and reaching up into the sky. Whatever these wooden beings were doing here together, swapping gases with each other, was a thrilling mystery. I was If all this sounds a bit too romantic and too good to be true as a starting path into Buddhism, that's because it is. Something else happened several months afterwards, which you could call a balancing of the scales in my mind. Following almost half a year of what I can only describe as extreme peace and

feeling drawn to the 'training is enlightenment' message of Soto Zen/Serene Reflection Meditation. I didn't want any more striving in life - but I wasn't afraid of hard work. Striving for some future enlightenment held no interest for me then, and it still doesn't now.

wellbeing (backed up by a routine of screaming. There's nothing unique daily zazen and Priory visits), there about that in itself. However, this came a very dark period mentally. As thought shocks her so much that she the 2017 winter evenings drew in, I begins to get anxious. How could she began to experience intrusive think such a thing? She begins to rethoughts, which became a form of ob- son with herself, telling herself every- sensive-compulsive disorder. Intrusive thing is fine, that she would never do thoughts are nasty little mind-gremlins such a thing, but of course this 'false that show you your greatest fears comfort' just feeds the thoughts even (something that usually shocks or dis- more, and before she knows it her in- gusts you) and get you panicking about ternal life is taken over with a form of what it means about you. The more hell which she is too ashamed to tell that these images shock you, the more anyone about. Every moment from you want them to go away, and the waking to sleeping is filled with fear of the more you start to mentally try little these thoughts appearing, followed by tricks to make them disappear. We all shock when they do, followed by her do this from time to time, and every- trying strange little mental tricks to one has intrusive thoughts, but when make them go away (which they refuse the anxiety about the thoughts be- to do). People with intrusive thoughts comes obsessive and 24/7, accompa- usually obsess over the things they nished by extreme anxiety, it becomes would be least likely to do; the things OCD (OCD doesn't always involve most abhorrent to them - hence their outer behaviour). I prefer not to share power.

the details of my own intrusive thoughts with people, but an example What I came to realise with my own of how this might work for someone OCD was that my mind was clearly is the example of a loving mother who showing me something that it had pictures herself killing her child. She been doing subconsciously since I was doesn't know why; perhaps it starts on a child. Apparently 'sticky minds' can a day of particular exhaustion, and she be hereditary and then exacerbated by the might experience a fleeting thought or certain life experiences. When I began image of hurting her child when she's to practice mindfulness and zazen, for particularly tired and the child is the first time in my life I relaxed and

allowed my mind to be open to every- of thoughts pop into my head. These thing that was happening - and so it days I just allow them to flow on was! Letting go of all of my defences - through with everything else. They are and also giving up drinking and smok- not super-thoughts, just thoughts. If ing - firstly brought about the most I'd never become aware of them, they peaceful and beautiful spiritual experi- would be dictating my behaviour nega- ences of my life. It then allowed the tively in all kinds of ways I wouldn't dark thoughts to flow in too. I imagine even understand. it does that for all of us in our own unique ways. Perhaps for you it was I am three years into my training now - sadness, depression, anxiety, jealousy, still a baby Buddhist compared to most of the Sangha at Portobello! I wanted to share my experiences with anger, grief..... you, as I get so much from hearing from the entire Sangha (older and newer members alike). Sometimes the words shared around the table at the Priory and in the newsletter inspire me as much as great sutras have.

My commitment to practice was greatly tested. *If this is what meditation does to me, do I want to continue doing this?* In my worst moments, I decided that I would give up my practice - but I kept coming back. I had experienced mental hell, but I had also seen exquisite glimpses of reality; the mystery and magic of nature and the universe. Buddhism never creates mental health difficulties – but it might highlight them for you. It's then up to you to either run away from Buddha and pretend it never happened – or to get to work. I will be honoured to formally take the precepts at Jukai at Throssel Hole this year. In the meantime, I'll keep on trying to be decent to others and questioning my repetitive desire to be 'something special'. I hope to enjoy life as it is, here, now, as this tiny fleshy part of something too vast and awesome to ever understand.

I have dealt with my intrusive thoughts and I feel great for it. Mindfulness was an amazing help to deal with them, amongst other tools. Now, I'm really grateful to be aware when these kinds

Stephen McCabe

— *The Time We Spring-Cleaned the World* —

The world it got so busy,
There were people all around.
They left their germs behind them;
In the air and on the ground.

These germs grew bigger and stronger.
They wanted to come and stay.
They didn't want to hurt anyone -
They just really wanted to play.

Sometimes they tried to hold your hand,
Or tickled your throat or your nose.
They could make you cough and sneeze
And make your face as red as a rose.

And so these germs took over.
They started to make people ill,
And with every cough we coughed
More and more germs would spill.

All the queens and kings had a meeting.
“It's time to clean the world up!” they said.
And so they had to close lots of fun stuff,
Just so these germs couldn't spread.

We couldn't go to cinemas
Or restaurants for our tea.
There was no football or parties,
The world got as quiet as can be.

The kids stopped going to school,
The mums and dads went to work less.

Then a great, big, giant scrubbing brush
Cleaned the sky and the sea and the mess!

Dads started teaching the sums,
Big brothers played with us more,
Mums were in charge of homework
And we read and played jigsaws galore!

The whole world was washing their hands
And building super toilet roll forts!
Outside was quiet and peaceful,
Now home was the place for all sports.

So we played in the world that was home
And our days filled up with fun and love,
And the germs they grew smaller and smaller
And the sun watched from up above.

Then one morning the sun woke up early,
She smiled and stretched her beams wide.
The world had been fully spring cleaned,
It was time to go back outside!

We opened our doors oh so slowly
And breathed in the clean and fresh air.
We promised that forever and always
Of this beautiful world we'd take care!

*(with thanks to Myra for contributing this poem written
by Laura Gribbons for children —)*

Stepping Out on the 28th March —

How varied it is, how full of surprise when I step out each day from confinement.

Through the gate and out onto the street a cold wind catches me from the North East and I put on my gloves, zip my jacket a little tighter.

Up by the Kirk two young girls, older and younger sister, are walking and talking towards me, looking into a screen. I move to one side to keep the distance, they look up and greet me 'Hello!' they smile. These two have grown a few inches since I first met them down by the Glebe – dancing in fairy costumes outside their house with the two Labradors in attendance. Always greeting with a smile, always a 'Hello'. What a blessing.

I move down the path, one foot following another, enjoying the contact of each foot with the soft give of the ground.

Om mani padme bum fits with the

rhythm.

Daffodils dance, hawthorns leaf and blackthorns offer up patches of blossom.

Over the burn and up the little path to the West, under the craigs, new lime flowering spurges say hello.

At the curling pond I explore the breaks in the reed and rush for frogspawn – none yet, yet the place is there for them when they are ready.

I follow the burn, enjoying the ripples and eddies, reflections and deceptions, movement and flow and am surprised by voices – 'Hello, how are you doing?'

Two figures stand at the top of the bank on the other side of the burn, a couple I don't recognize.

I return the greeting - 'Fine thanks and how about you?'

'All good so far...and good to talk... we're at a safe distance eh? Out to get some exercise. Take care.'

'You too.'

They move on towards the wood. It is so good this contact – friendly greetings and a genuine enquiry after well-being.

I climb over the fence, and step jump over the burn, climb the bank and am on my way.

Further on I come across red tassels on the path. Curious I look up and see some hanging, newly emerged from a bud cocoon. They seem miraculous –

emerging from dark branches to hang out in the springing of Spring.

Later on, as I look down the field slope, I see the big old willow, cracked and broken, dancing now in its new leaf dress. I bow. Such medicine and yet now, all over the world, such suffering. May compassion flourish.

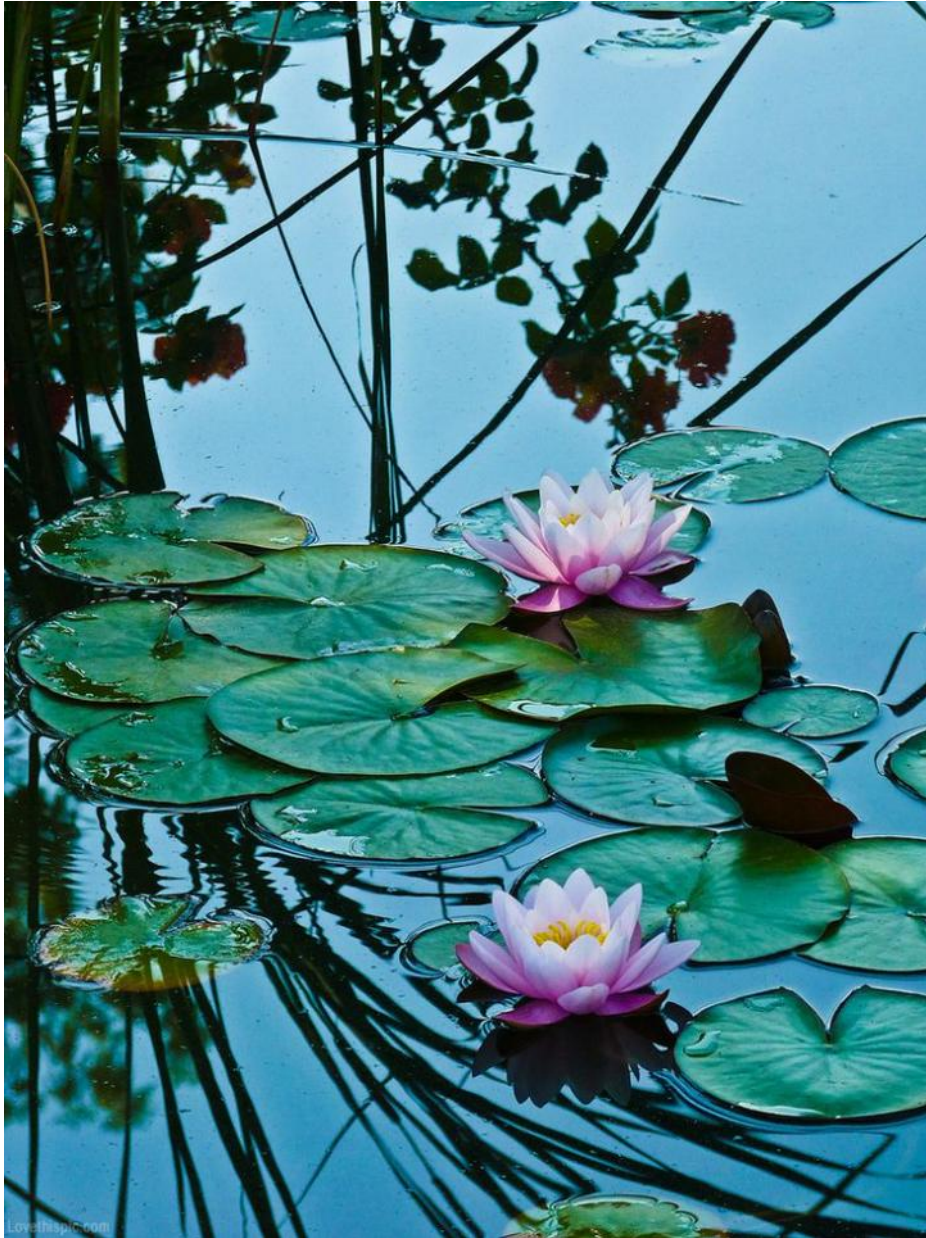
Jerry Simcock



Red Alder catkins—Jerry's tassels

Aprile —

(‘Aprile’ is the Italian word for ‘April’, Sheila’s chosen title for her article—Ed.)



*‘What a lovely image, an image of peace, tranquillity and clarity.
Immerse yourself in the beauty’*

During the present home confinement I have experienced real peace and tranquillity. The daily treadmill suddenly stopped; no more rushing to catch the next bus or worried about missing an appointment. Suddenly there was nothing to rush for and nowhere to go. Underneath the continuous chain of speeding traffic is an almost silent world; the whole experience is just so relaxing.

I didn't think that was possible for someone who spends life mostly in libraries and hardly at home. Will I return to my previous habits? No, not completely, being at home has shown me just how much time I was wasting on my daily treadmill, kidding myself on I was making progress.

I have established a more positive way to live, at the same time achieving more. Two changes I have made recently, going from one extreme to the other. I climb 69 steps all at once and can now do that in 40 seconds because I believed I could. The other is peacefully listening to various programmes and talks.

One example is a talk about Achalanatha, 'The Immovable Lord', by RM Myoho who is based at the Place of Peace Dharma House in Wales. At one point RM Myoho said: *"It is not about forcing yourself to do something. It is not the will of the individual self; it is the will of the Unborn and our own will coming together. This does require effort on our part, but it is not the exertion of human will that is intended, it is a deep trust that everything is Buddha and that all will be well"*.

After listening to RM Myoho's talk a number of times, I decided to ask for help as I had physical problems getting up and down from the floor, making it difficult to do my bows at home. Once I started to ask for help from Achalanatha and all the Buddhas I have found I can do my bows more or less as I used to. Each time I do my bows I am filled with wonder.

On one of my earliest visits to Throssel between 1997 and 2000 I heard the words; "Everything is always working to your advantage". Those words are embedded in me, and help to give meaning and hope in this unusual time in which we are living.

Sheila Anderson

Compassionate Action

At times of widespread difficulty, like we are experiencing at present, there is a natural wish to offer help. Questions may arise like *how can I help?* or *am I doing enough?*

In the *Shobogenzo*, in the chapter on Avalokiteswara, Dogen relates an exchange between Ungan Donjo and his brother, Dogo Enchi, who was also a monk (both subsequently became Masters, and Ungan is in our Ancestral Line):

Ungan: *What does the bodhisattva of great compassion do with so many hands and eyes?*

Dogo: *Like someone reaching back for the pillow at night.*

Avalokiteswara is often depicted with an eye in the palm of each of her many hands, in order to see and respond to the myriad forms of suffering. Dogo's answer is very specific, describing a single action. It is a simple and seemingly trivial action. Why do we reach back for a pillow at night? Usually so we can adjust our position in order to sleep better. If we sleep better, we will have more energy to function well and thereby be effective in the help we can offer. So, if we wish to help, even a small action can have compassionate consequences.

There are several other characteristics of this action. It is an immediate response to a situation, not something that is thought out or premeditated. It is very ordinary and unremarkable. We are unlikely to give it a further thought. Afterwards, we might fall back to sleep, or lay awake for a while. In other words, we go onto the next thing. We probably don't think about whether what we did was right or wrong, it is just what was needed. If our attention is drawn to it, we would probably realise this; it was the appropriate thing to do. So there is an implicit recognition of the rightness of the action. On the other hand, if we did an unhelpful action, for example, an angry response to not sleeping, something in us would recoil.

I find this teaching useful in looking at bigger decisions. Thinking about how to help comes from a compassionate place, but the actual act of compassion always takes place in the moment. Acting from this perspective can take pressure off ourselves and enable us to let go of overthinking about what to do. There have been many times that I have been apprehensive about how I would cope with a particular situation, but in the event, I have acted in ways I could not have predicted, which turn out to be helpful. Sometimes it's unhelpful, and I can learn from that and move forward. And sometimes what seemed unhelpful subsequently turns out to have been helpful, or vice versa.

The response of the moment is infinitely varied. It may involve making plans, or it may be sitting still with an uncomfortable feeling. By responding from the awareness of meditation, we can trust that what we do will be enough.

Neil Rothwell



*Debbie's 4-year old niece practises meditation
which she's taught at nursery —*

A chance to dig a bit deeper into practice and work on the craft

About the time Edinburgh University was beginning to close due to the COVID-19 outbreak (I'm a student so I suppose this was a significant time for me), I was in contact via email with Rev. Daigen from Throssel, who I'm sure most of you have met. He said something that has stuck with me for the past few weeks, an invitation to investigate the meaning and application of training through daily life. He said;

'Something I'm taking from this is a chance to dig a bit deeper into practice and work on the craft if you catch my meaning. It's like the whole world is giving you this space to go slow and focus.'

This touched me in an unexpected way. Amidst the confusion and uncertainty of what the next few months hold, this line offered a kind of finger pointing at the moon, a re-grounding in what we are actually doing as trainees of the Way. Reflecting upon training as 'craft' I feel as though Rev. Daigen is touching upon a wonderful metaphor, perhaps it's because I'm an art student and have experience with

trying to craft, but I feel as though we can all get a sense of what is meant here. As I understand it, training as 'craft' suggests a simple and graceful trying that involves the will and effort to see our whole life from the perspective of meditation, while also accepting that we can never be perfect.

Far too often I see my own training as a means to an end, however, over time I have come to see this as just a dead end. Training as 'craft' suggests that practice is something alive and present, asking that we actively engage within it moment to moment. This reminded me of something I recently read within a Shobogenzo interpretation by Brad Warner, a student of Nishijima Roshi, said by Dogen Zenji :

'This is not a once and for all realization, it appears dynamically moment after moment.'

By the terms 'This' or 'it' I feel as though Dogen is pointing to both the appearance of our life in this moment, and the appearance of the world we are experiencing, and how these come into harmony through Buddhist training. He is suggesting that we don't suddenly get enlightenment through

hard effort and then it's ours forever, but rather we must meet our life and the world together through the vehicle of our training in a 'dynamically' present way. It is from this perspective of life that I have come to see (even if it's only a little) why, As Rev. Master Daishin put it in his recent article on loneliness; *'weeds reveal the truth as much as the lilies.'*

The term 'craft' is a great metaphor, it really points out what we must do for what is actually the rest of our lives, in order to be of help to others while being truly at peace within ourselves. I'm grateful to Rev. Daigen for giving me this advice; it's led to a deeper investi-

gation of training in my daily life activity, as well as my own sitting practice.

I'd like to finish with a short poem I wrote about a recent experience of confusion and a sensation of being lost in life, and training with the arising of just that. I suppose it doesn't directly link to the above, however I get a sense that, in a way, these things are interwoven. Perhaps this poem is about the process of meditation.

I don't know,
I don't know,
I don't know,

Lucas Priest



*Sculpture on Portobello beach
(with thanks to Myra)*

Taking the short cut —

Rev. Master Haryo gave a talk at Portobello Priory, I think in 2005. In one section he said:

“Driving down the road at night and it says no left turn, and you think; I want to turn left here, no-one’s around, no-one is looking, I can make a left turn – but something says; ‘No, you shouldn’t do that – just go down the next block and turn left’. Active meditation is just letting go of all those options that the self throws up, and doing the plain old boring thing of doing the right thing. Not fighting that wise way of living, in a way that doesn’t create unfortunate consequence, but just accepting that flow.”

I remember having a guilty sense at the time, and thinking; ‘Well, I’d just take the left turn – why not? What’s the point of not doing it if it saves time and doesn’t hurt anyone?’ Like a number of fragments of talks I’ve heard over the years, it would return to my mind from time to time, a reminder that there was something here I couldn’t quite digest.

It would sometimes surface when, for example, I watched myself mounting the pavement on my bike, if there were no pedestrians, in order to bypass a red traffic light & go down a side street, rather than waiting for the lights to change. Freedom. Freedom and the short cut and the sense of flowing, a kind of mild cycling version of parkour. There was a faintly gleeful quality to this game of keeping moving, unimpeded by restrictions, and an awareness that cycling is where a submerged delinquency in me can emerge. There’s a pleasing vagueness about whether a bicycle is a vehicle, or so I assure myself: I’m not really bound by the rules that govern other road users, am I?

Early on in the coronavirus situation, I read an article which patiently laid out the science and public policy considerations connected to the emerging pandemic, and concluded; ‘Facts give us necessary information. But how we should respond to those facts is a moral question.’ And it was clear that he meant both societally, and as individuals.

The author was well aware of the costs of social distancing - of cancelling valuable events and perhaps of crashing the economy – but thought they were justified. It was the first time I'd seen the response to Covid-19 being cast explicitly as a moral question; that it should be approached with a conscious effort to shift the focus from me and my disappointments and changed plans, to what serves the greater good.

Later, when distancing and indeed self-isolation had become official policy, I phoned my daughter who has two teenage sons, my grandsons, and offered to meet them on The Meadows, a much-frequented large grassy area of Edinburgh near to where they live, to kick a football about. “It’ll give you and them a break”, I said; “Fresh air, and we’ll keep our distance”. I was looking forward to seeing them; and being outside; and the fun of kicking a ball about with them.

There was a pause, and much to my surprise she said she didn’t think this was a good idea. She explained that she thought it would set an example, and that others might be encouraged to think it was fine to start playing football, and congregating - and where would that lead to? It clearly wasn’t in tune with the policy direction of the government.

I was taken aback, a sense of being unexpectedly thwarted: Oh come on, I thought, let’s get a sense of proportion here, what harm can it do? There was an exchange of emails, and a grudging well-I’ll-just-have-to-go-along-with-it acceptance by me.

In parallel, my wife and I had begun to meet the same daughter, again in the Meadows – keeping our distance, but just seeing each other face to face rather than on a screen was a real pleasure. At our second meeting, I sug-





Daffodils in The Meadows

gested that the next time I should bring along camping chairs, and then we could take the weight off our legs, as standing talking for a protracted period was quite tiring. Again, she demurred; perhaps not a good example to set, she thought. Making social gathering look OK, so why shouldn't others do it? I did the internal version of eyeball-rolling. For goodness sake, daughter of mine – get over yourself - -

However, I began to reflect when I got home; chewing over what she had said, and trying to lay aside my instinctive reactions. She was aware of my exasperation at her stance, and it had upset her. There was something I needed to look at here.

Yes, of course it's possible that sometimes restrictions and rules can be too strictly interpreted, and that there can be a killjoy quality about it. There's a wonderful verse by GK Chesterton¹ where he inveighs against soulless, rule-following bureaucracy:

*'They have given us into the hand of new unhappy lords,
Lords without anger or honour, who dare not carry their swords.
They fight by shuffling papers; they have bright dead alien eyes;
They look at our labour and laughter as a tired man looks at flies.
And the load of their loveless pity is worse than the ancient wrongs,
Their doors are shut in the evening; and they know no songs.'*

Did this in any respect describe the mindset of my daughter? No, profoundly not. So what was going on here? Was it good enough simply to measure my behaviour in the context of whether or not it was causing immediate harm, and ignore the wider implications? Weren't there indeed more general considerations that I had been pushing away, as RM Haryo put it, by hanging on to the options that the self throws up? Wasn't she right about setting an example?

Yes, and it was true that my motives were mixed: the wish to give my daughter & son-in-law a break by taking the boys out was genuine, but there were more selfish motives too. However, as RM Daishin said recently in his article² on loneliness, the endless process of pulling apart & analysing the threads which comprise the rope of our experience has limited value: *'We can tease the threads apart but putting them back together results in a reconstruction that we have to keep trying to hold together. It will always lack the authenticity of immediate experience.'* Over-analysis or self-punishment didn't feel like a fruitful path.

So what am I trying to say here in relation to these relatively trivial incidents (having been looking at this page for some minutes)? Well, if I'm honest, here's what's on my mind:

- I have a sense of astonishment at my initial incapacity to see what in retrospect seems a reasonably obvious ethical point. I'm supposed to be a Buddhist;
- at 70 I'm still discovering blind spots in me, including some elements of an unreconstructed teenager (how embarrassing);
- my own daughter can be my teacher.

And all of the above, strangely, seems OK. It's just the way it is.

And for the sake of completeness, in line with Oscar Wilde's mischievous observation that the pure and simple truth is rarely pure and never simple, I still do think that some rules are foolish and unnecessary; and that I should approach the gleeful delinquency with a kindly eye, rather than as Witchfinder-General. And the next time I cycle up to that red light, well - - -

And finally, I should add that in normal times, I may simply have glossed over these minor incidents of life; but one of the valuable aspects of this slowed-down period of life which Covid-19 has brought is the reflective quality that can emerge, and for that I have a genuine sense of gratitude.

Willie Grieve

¹ *From The Secret People – GK Chesterton*

² *Loneliness – RM Daishin Morgan, 2020 (and with thanks to RM Favian for pointing out the connection.)*

Leisure



W.H. Davies

What is this life if, full of care,
We have no time to stand and stare.

No time to stand beneath the boughs
And stare as long as sheep or cows.

No time to see, when woods we pass,
Where squirrels hide their nuts in grass.

No time to see, in broad daylight,
Streams full of stars, like skies at night.

No time to turn at beauty's glance,
And watch her feet, how they can dance.

No time to wait till her mouth can
Enrich the smile her eyes began.

A poor life this if, full of care,
We have no time to stand and stare

With thanks to Myra, for this poem, and for :

- her helpful link for hard-pressed parents to [free audio stories](#):
- a welcome touch of humour to lighten these days: [we can help each other by simply keeping in touch!](#)

(Both links can be followed on most computers by clicking on the highlighted text.)

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Sort code: **80-18-31**
Account number: **00569808**
Bank: **Bank of Scotland**
Account Name: **Portobello Buddhist Priory.**

Donations from people who pay tax can be gift-aided, where the government contributes an extra 25p for every £1 donated.

A gift aid form is on the following page.

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*Thank you to all the contributors to this issue of the Newsletter.
Deadline for next issue is mid-August 2020*



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