

—*Portobello Buddhist Priory*—



A Temple of the Order of Buddhist Contemplatives



Ducks in winter, Harlaw reservoir

Newsletter January-April 2025

Portobello Buddhist Priory
27 Brighton Place, Portobello
Edinburgh, EH15 1LL
Telephone (0131) 669 9622
website: www.portobellobuddhist.org.uk

Newsletter

79th edition
December 2024
(& 39th e-edition)



Please note: the Priory website at www.portobellobuddhist.org.uk has an up to date schedule of events at the Priory. Group visits around Scotland will be arranged on a case by case basis by the Prior.

We'll continue coming together for meditation, dharma and ceremony on the Zoom platform each Wednesday evening. We also physically meet in the Priory on Sunday mornings and—currently—on Friday evenings (once per month.)

Again, please consult the Priory website for the most up to date information.

— Prior's Notes —

Zazen (To sit like a fool)

Dogen's instruction for zazen tells us to 'Take the backward step' and to 'Drop off body and mind': this is to let go of the discriminating self, the focus on 'Me' with its stories, which divides and separates us from the world. We need to be willing to 'sit like a fool' as one zen master put it.

It's not that our intellectual thinking is to be rejected, but it is to recognise how its dualistic movement of dividing and comparing cannot precipitate us into the wholeness of our being. It seems to distract us from finding the 'all is one' as zen puts it, or 'the undivided nature of reality' as R.M. Daishin has said. That which is boundless, and encompasses everything.

The conceptualising intellect is the wrong tool for this: it needs to perform as

a servant and not as the master here, for it obscures what is always here. There is another way of knowing which is cultivated in practice, and we learn how to operate and communicate from that place.

When we sit zazen we are sitting in our primordial wholeness, where you and the entire universe are one thing. You are the entire universe, the entire universe arising moment by moment is you: there's no gap, no separation. This non-conceptual knowing awareness of zazen, sometimes called *prajna* or heart wisdom includes an intuitive faith and trust in the practice of 'just sitting'. It is the wisdom that sees into the heart of things. To sit this way is not to be a beginner or an advanced meditator. All categories fall away; this is just sitting Buddha. An emptying out of self and a flowing in of the world. When there's hearing there's just hearing, when there's seeing there's just seeing; no extra self-identification is needed.

We become no thing and are therefore open to all things. As one teacher put it; 'If you can let go of something as small as the self, you can fall into something as large as the universe'.

If you can sit like a fool then you can be the universe - where sitting like a fool is the not-knowing, undivided mind of zazen, that neither grasps nor rejects, that neither adds nor divides: accepting and allowing everything to arise moment by moment.

In this practice you're nothing special; there's nothing to involve the ego, and where you're being and doing the life of the universe moment by moment. The beginningless and endless life of Buddha. Always going on, always becoming Buddha.

So when you come to sit zazen, sit in the Suchness or 'Just thisness' of your true nature. As it says at the end of the Sandokai scripture; such practice to the world 'all foolish seems and dull, but those who practice thus this law continually shall, in all worlds, Be called Lord of Lords unto eternity - -'

Flowing

Our good friend Rawdon used to say that within everyone there is 'religious intuition'.

Recently I have been reading a book by Ursula Le Guin which is her understanding of the Tao Te Ching. That was the first book I read which really spoke to me about the deeper realities of being when I began to understand that looking within, rather than chasing or avoiding things would be helpful.

Our religious intuition is something that can easily be overwhelmed by the noise of the world. Time and again we are drawn into the maelstrom of thoughts, opinions and feelings which seem so real and yet are just thoughts and opinions, no more. Feelings may be harder to see beyond. Shunryu Suzuki says cutting through intellectual difficulties is like cutting through wood, nothing is left. Cutting through emotional difficulties is like cutting a lotus root and sticky residue clings on.

We can't be without all of them yet if we are not careful they can deaden our minds to the ongoing inner search. We want to help make a difference in this troubled and deeply divided world,

both with our immediate family and friends and then beyond to the greater family of the Earth, both human and non-human. Taking time out to meditate and reflect may seem like a cop-out when it seems that we could be doing something more active to actually make that difference. Trusting the heart and offering everything into the meditation over and over again can be daunting.

Knowing that this present moment is the only one we can actually be completely in and bringing our minds back again and again until the will to sit gradually becomes the willingness. Acceptance is not something that we do, it arises in the moment. Just in the same way, once we come back to the present moment in meditation.....what is it that has recognised that we wandered off?

Our religious intuition may be quiet but it is persistent. We are down for a while cat sitting in the Yorkshire Dales. It is wet and windy and there are not the usual distractions and things to be getting on with. Doing more meditation is often possible here. Opening up to inner confusion and the deep problems of the world can't

be turned away from so easily.

Where does the deep wish to help all beings arise from? Accepting our frustration and feelings of powerlessness to help is important. They are also part of that deep wish and not separate. Tears can flow. Going deeper is possible.

Unexpectedly I found Walpola Rahula's "What The Buddha Taught" on the bookshelves here. I have read it before and found the analysis of the five Skandas and the teaching on the Four Noble Truths a little impenetrable and intellectual. This time they seem to

resonate more with me. The dharma is constantly unfolding and we are being constantly opened up whether we realise it or not.

We with all things throughout all of being time are just the flow of universal energy. The Buddha heart/mind flows. We are not separate .

Deep bows in gratitude to all the Buddhas and Ancestors.

Kathleen Campbell



(With thanks to Kathleen for this image)

Indra's Net

The dogs move in the mist
Like phantom shadows.

Moisture on my coat sleeves,
A myriad glistening cosmos.

Raindrops balance on blades of
grass
In the chill of early morning.

Spider's webs sag on the gorse
Betrayed by tiny pearls of dew,

Each drop reflects the other
And every silent world within.

Somewhere between something
And nothing I stand, stilled.

For a moment I am profoundly lost
In this cloud of unknowing.

The bass drone of distant traffic
Hums in the pibroch of birdsong.



David Campbell

Amorphous

This rather obscure word occurred to me during the early part of a week's retreat at Throssel not long ago. It means having no fixed structure or form. It seemed to describe what I was experiencing in zazen. My mind was very active, yet I could not get a sense of what the activity was about. It felt very slippery and rather uncomfortable. I knew I just had to keep sitting, not having a clear sense of what was happening.

To give it a name like "amorphous" felt helpful, as it gave me some sense of what was going on. At the same time, I realised that a label like that cannot fully describe the nature of an experience.

That feeling changed as the week went on. I began to feel more settled. I was also able to reflect on some teachings that came out of that experience.

Perhaps the most important lesson was just to keep sitting. I knew that whatever happens in Zazen can be accepted, and sitting still during zazen is a physical expression of this acceptance. We can have an understanding of this intellectually, but realising it in practice is what brings it to life. It is sometimes said that Zen is action-based, and I think that this is an example of this.

That is not easy to do when there is a feeling of discomfort. It was only later that I began to question what the discomfort was about. I think it was based on some idea of how meditation should be, or at least how I would like it to be: clarity, peace and joy, for example. This didn't mean that the discomfort was wrong, but it was helpful to see some of the ways I was inadvertently adding an extra layer of difficulty.

Another teaching to come out of this was that of surrendering. I initially made efforts to gain clarity and more peace, but these did not have the intended outcomes. Not knowing what else to do, other than sit, made surrendering that much easier. The surrender included giving up a sense of struggling, and there was great relief in this. It felt like putting down a burden.

What was also highlighted is that the content of zazen is quite specific, in the

sense of having a flow of unique sensations and experiences. The mind likes to deal in abstractions, and these have an important role, but moment-to-moment experience is particular: this thought, this sound, and so on. In seeing these, we also sense the space of awareness in which these things arise and pass. We begin to see the unchanging and limitless nature of this space.

The concentrated practice of a retreat can highlight this process, but they are features of practice more generally. For example, we can sense this during a period of *zazen*, or can see it working in everyday life when we take a moment to reflect.

This episode illustrates to me the meaning of faith. We don't know what it is that we have faith in, but we do recognise the openness and willingness it entails. With this openness, clarity, peace and joy do indeed come. We can't control them or make them appear. Rather, these qualities and others are uncovered naturally by giving ourselves to *zazen*, and everyday practice.

Neil Rothwell



Bathing in the Now



The kids (now in their thirties) and their partners are very thoughtful in choosing presents for Christmas. This year my eldest and his girlfriend gave me two books on the outdoors. I was delighted to receive them but quickly realised that they had been chosen so thoughtfully that I had previously bought both!

However, I also realised that I had read neither, so – having hidden the previous versions in a bag to take to the Oxfam shop – I took their second appearance as a prompt to start reading...

So the book that I'm going to take as a

launching-off point is *Walking in the Woods* by Professor Yoshifumi Miyazaki (previously published as *Shinrin-yoku*). It is about the benefits and the practice of 'forest bathing'.

Whether or not you have heard of this, you will almost certainly have noticed that immersing yourself in a forest, in nature, leaves you feeling better, calmer; this is forest bathing. The 'bathing' aspect seems to refer to letting the experience wash [over] you.

Two things arose as I began the book. The first, the know-it-all thought that of course such an experience would be of benefit. The second, some bitter-

ness that I'm not getting out to the woods so much these days because of a painful hip.

But the wonderful thing about reading is what arises later and shortly afterwards, whilst shaving, I realised that I was immersed in this activity. Which was followed by the realisation that

when meditating it is the same, one is immersed and emerges cleansed. And this is available at any point in the day.

I suppose you could call it Bathing in the Now.

Alasdair Hosking



A Sangha Christmas: four poems

Lights float in the breeze
Amidst the festivities
Woodland fills the home
Temporary happiness
That lasts multiple moments

Rain falls in the dark
Enriching the soil with life
Unnoticed blessings

A legend stands tall
Surveying the bright city
Crags of enjoyment
No present goes beyond
The gifts up in Holyrood

What brings such a joy
Ruling crowded stores or streets
Or just existing;
Gratefulness to each being
For sharing this day with us

Elisha Ager



from the series, *Stillness and Occurrence* (Portobello Seascapes) 1995 - 2000
(with thanks to David Williams)

Tightness and looseness in training

A friend recently told me of a family she knows. The father, terminally ill, was a Buddhist, and told his family that he didn't wish to receive any pain-relief medication, as he wanted to approach death with clarity of mind.

Unfortunately, he died in agony, which caused deep distress to his family. While wishing to honour his wishes, their final memories of him were of his pain and suffering; and what most affected them was that it had been avoidable.

I could well understand his wish to approach death with mindful clarity. And yet I could picture all too clearly the distress of his loving family, their final moments with him indelibly stained by his all-too-evident agony.

Where does a very understandable wish or aspiration begin to harden into an incapacity to appreciate the bigger picture, a blindness to the needs or feelings of others; a dogged determination not to see anything other than the principle or belief to which we're wedded?

And yet it can be such a fine line. It does feel that there is a place for resolute, focused determination; and who is ultimately qualified to judge when the line is crossed, especially in the territory where death approaches?

In a recent dharma discussion at the Priory around a piece of text, one particular line stood out for me:

'So where in this present moment, do we cling to our views? - - No longer caught in the self-centred story, we can share our life with others.'

It was a reminder of the question of how we hold to beliefs or decisions - do we do so with a tight, perhaps even rigid focus, or with a wider, more spacious, more open-handed provisionality? The quote seemed to imply that the former might have more of a danger of a clinging, self-centred quality; as part of a 'story' we tell ourselves.

I was reminded of this at a recent group event where there was much discussion about fathers and sons, and their (frequently complex) relationships. Mulling over the conversations, I became aware of a long-held resentment I had stored within me about something my father had said to me when I was much younger.

I won't discuss the detail, but it had hurt me deeply: it had felt like a 'crossing the Rubicon' moment; a deep betrayal - and I realised I had never forgiven him for it. It had lain there inside me, all those years; a tight, hard, impenetrable object, as if with a 'do not approach!' sign attached to it.

Sitting on the edge of my bed that evening after the group discussion, the memory was very clear to me. And without warning, unbidden, I found laughter arising in me; a kind of belly-laugh, a cosmic amusement at the ridiculousness of the positions we human beings can end up in. Here was my father, a highly intelligent, sensitive and accomplished man defending his ego by attacking me on patently nonsensical but deeply hurtful grounds, after I had given him some mild if unwelcome feedback.

It was irresistibly comedic, if I stepped back and saw it from a different vantage point. And not funny in the sense of mocking him - just funny in the way that we humans are, with our defences and pretences, and squirrely little comfort-and-security-seeking ways. And not just him - me too, storing it up over all those years, this hard, tight burning knot of resentment. Like the line in the poem Tam O'Shanter about '*nursing (our) wrath to keep it warm*'.

With that unbidden, unplanned wash of amusement there was a feeling of loosening, of expansiveness; of a dissolving. A healing sense of relief.

In the following days, a deep sense of compassion seemed to emerge from that initial, so-freeing wash of humour. My father, locked into a prison of sorts, defending a fragile ego. A phrase of Rowan Williams came to me; '*The real hell is never to be able to rest from the labours of self-defence*'.

I thought of my father's history, and I could see the chain of cause and effect. And me too, how I had been made; the disappointed, 'saddened love' which

RM Jiyu talked of in the context of karma. Seeing all of this laid out, as it were, what else could truly be felt, for either of us—indeed for all of us—other than compassion?

In psychology, there's a phrase '*response flexibility*' which means that instead of helplessly responding to a particular hurt or emotional wound with a pre-programmed, instinctive response such as anger or rejection or huffiness, we manage over time to develop the capacity to respond in a different, perhaps more nuanced and less 'imprisoned' way. One writer described it as choosing "vulnerability over victimhood".

I can't claim to have *chosen* to respond to this old hurt with cleansing humour, because it arose spontaneously.

But I would like to think that our training over the years, facing a wall and our self, and with the ceaseless practice of letting go, does help to dissolve our rigid attachment to past wounds.

Rigidity and tightness seem to me to be the core of the 'clinging' so often referred to in our teachings: I have the image of a clenched fist. By contrast, lightness, expansiveness, open-handedness, freedom seem to characterise that looser, more flexible and accommodating way of holding our beliefs, which gives the feeling of air and light being let in.

Whatever the process is that turns that tight hardness into a looser, freeing expansiveness, there can't be a timetable attached to it, I sense, nor is it something that can be made to happen by direct effort of will. But the direction of travel seems very clear if it's the direction in which we're willing to face.

And as for the cleansing, freeing gift of humour - humour without malice or cruelty - to wherever that comes from, I offer the deepest of bows.

Willie Grieve

Ways of Being

Last year I read this amazing book that fascinated me so much I've re-read it once already. I was drawn to it because I wanted to find out more about AI - the moral arguments around it, and the different types of dangers it poses. But the book isn't actually so much about artificial intelligence; it's more an investigation of the nature of intelligence itself.

The author of the book - James Bridle - argues that, as humans, when we try to think about the intelligence of non-humans - plants and animals for example - we subconsciously end up measuring their 'intelligence' by comparing how similar they are to humans. The more similar to us they seem to be, the more 'intelligent' and therefore higher up the evolutionary hierarchy we consider them to be. With humans sitting right up at the top of that hierarchy. But in fact this is quite ego/human-centric and also quite inaccurate and doesn't allow for other very different ways of being.

As well as arguing that we have no clear definition of what 'intelligence' actually is and how to measure it, the book goes on to challenge our idea of how intelligent other living beings are

by giving us many surprising examples of intelligence in other species.

For example :

- Scientific experiments showing that plants can 'hear' the noise of caterpillars approaching, and protect themselves and their fellow plants accordingly;
- That trees migrate (very slowly) and are currently migrating upwards and northwards because of climate change;
- That trees and fungi in forests are networked to share food and information;
- Octopuses escaping their tanks by spurting water at light bulbs and then setting off the fire alarms in the aquarium (and many other amazing Octopus escape stories);
- Goats being able to sense an earthquake at least 24 hours earlier than any human-made earthquake predictor is able to;

...to name but a few.

Bridle argues that the intelligence of other beings is almost impossible for us to perceive because of their difference to us - particularly for example considering the intelligence of a tree. But like a Venn diagram there is a

shared space where we are similar and can begin to perceive another living being's intelligence.

Of course I read this book for my own enjoyment, and not to learn about Buddhist doctrine. But I think it did help a little to deepen my understanding of some Buddhist principles – even if only intellectually. For example, the teaching that we should have proper respect for other living things and that we are part of a community of human, animal and plant life for which we are responsible for caring. This book is effective in making us humble by reinforcing how we are just one species in the diverse living intelligence on this planet, that we have evolved together with but mistakenly tend to consider ourselves to be superior—rather than equal—to.

The book really strengthened my sense of the Buddhist teaching of our interdependent existence with other beings and non-beings. Not only by giving examples of animals and humans relying on each other – an example of this Bridle provided was of a tribe that works with a particular bird to find bee hives and access the honeycomb for the mutual benefit of bird and human . (There is a particular bird call that an African tribe uses to call a wild bird to help

them find a bees' nest. The bird calls back to the humans when they have found it, the tribespeople crack open the bees' nest and share their spoils with the bird...)

The book also describes how humans are actually made up of communities themselves – all interdependent on each other. He talks, for example, about new research on human origins, the latest of which suggests that our human cells actually began as a tiny community of different organisms that decided to work together. And as humans in the present day, it could be argued that we are actually a walking assemblage of other beings – with the bacteria in our gut having a massive effect on our own well-being and intelligence. In many ways, he argues, to speak of ourselves as individuals has become more difficult!

Bridle argues that we have spent too much time looking out at the world and asking 'how are things like us?' rather than asking 'what is it like to be you?' His book asks us to start paying better attention to things beyond ourselves. His message is that we will find our way out of the current crises we face by showing greater solidarity with other more-than-humans.

But the most striking thing about the book for me was the statement he took from the evolutionary biologist Lynn Margolis: ‘We are all equally evolved’. In a podcast I listened to that inspired me to read the book, he explains what’s meant by that:

‘Everything has been on this planet for the same length of time as everything else. Nothing is more evolved than anything else. Everything has been unfolding and becoming for the same length of time. We are all unfolding together.’

This was striking for me in the same way as for him – it was a way of equalising our relationship with other beings on this planet. We are not at the top of the evolutionary chain, as we like to think – we are equally evolved with everything in this planet and indeed in this universe.

I listened to this podcast interviewing the author on a long bus journey to visit my dad down in Wales. When it had finished, I put on a second podcast – Rev. Master Daishin speaking on the anniversary of Throssel Hole last year.

Although they were talking about slightly different subjects, I was struck listening to them back to back by the flower imagery Rev. Master Daishin

used. Bridle’ quoting ‘we are all equally evolved’ and evolving and unfolding together seemed to be echoed in Rev. Master Daishin’s description of how we can understand space and time in a non-linear fashion, and our place in that movement. Rev. Master Daishin says:

‘It’s like a flower opening. Each moment is like a flower opening. It is completely itself in its opening. We are completely that flower. Existence IS time and space. The opening of the flower is the whole of time and space. Being the whole of time and space it is utterly undivided and utterly sufficient’.

It left me with a beautiful image of the universe evolving together, deeply interconnected and unfolding like a flower opening.

I’ve not really done the book justice here, but this is a great book that I would recommend reading. You are very welcome to borrow my copy:

James Bridle, ‘Ways of Being: Animals. Plants. Machines. The Search for Planetary Intelligence’.

If you would like to listen to the ‘On Being’ podcast with Krista Tippett interviewing James Bridle, to get a feel for whether you’d like the book (I

would recommend 'On Being' as a podcast series too!) here's the link: <https://onbeing.org/programs/james-bridle-the-intelligence-singing-all-around-us/>

Jane Herbstritt



The weight of intellect
(Original bronze sculpture by Thomas Leroy)

"Celebration... is self-restraint, is attentiveness, is questioning, is meditating, is awaiting, is the step over into the more wakeful glimpse of the wonder—the wonder that a world is worlding around us at all, that there are beings rather than nothing, that things are and we ourselves are in their midst, that we ourselves are and yet barely know who we are, and barely know that we do not know all this."

Martin Heidegger

Zazen and distraction

Starting zazen

sitting comfortably and attentively
intention neither to try to think nor try not to think
evaluative idea this is not going to last
annoyance appears
back to body and breathing in and out
a sense of going with the flow thoughts coming and going
sudden idea of fear that it is going too well
fear that it is too good to bear
avoiding fear, I'm starting to plan for the day ahead
catching the distraction
a moment of peace
investigating the distraction
recognising the fear of change
the RM Daishin voice - make the effort to investigate the distraction and not go
with the story
another revelation - self-criticism is so self-making
the inner voice warns not to be proud
back to home and appreciating allowing feeling sensation to flow
slight impatience arises
desire for the bell to be rung
last few moments before the bell rings a bit messy

The above is a slightly idealised version of elements of my zazen in the last months. This has been influenced by the Wednesday Dharma talks and discus-

sions. Much gratitude to the Reverend Masters Favian and Daishin as well as the Sangha for providing a wonderful support to my experience of zazen. After writing this piece, I recognise elements of the recent teachings. The self-making and 'poor me' as well as the arrogance emerges and disappears. There is a certain pattern of lack of distraction followed by happiness which is appreciated but not trusted. There is a lot of disturbance such as a sense of 'not good enough' followed by joy when engaging for a moment or two interrupted by a feeling of triumph; 'I have made it'. Rev. Master Daishin describes the opposite to the hindrance of agitation and worry as freedom from slavery. The entanglement is under the surface. My tendency to dwell in my autobiography seems to be resistance to change: I'm familiar with impermanence as a concept without applying it to the way in which I see myself. This is illustrated by a frequent fantasy that I have been offered an opportunity to go to a supermarket of disabilities to swap my form of disability to another one which might be less disabling. I always leave with my own disability – whatever disadvantages of having been born with cerebral palsy I know them and I have learnt to take advantage of them. The lack of feeling worthy might sometimes be at the core of distraction and in turn can easily flip into a kind of arrogance. The word acceptance is missing in this description. Acceptance is a big challenge in my practice. To be able to stay with whatever arises without evaluative comments is a difficult habit to eliminate. In daily life I make critical judgements about people I just pass by in the street or noticing fellow passengers on the bus. The phrase used by RM Favian – letting the changing sensations, thoughts, and experiences flow by – is very helpful, and at the heart of this process is Love when the self no longer interferes. What seems to be important is to value the moments and not be as eager as I am sometimes to make these moments last longer, another helpful teaching from RM Daishin.

I am somewhat embarrassed to admit with a sheepish smile that what I have just written has been part of my distraction in zazen over the past month.

Tom Franks

Gift Aid Declaration

To: **Portobello Buddhist Priory**

Your Name _____

Full Home address _____

Postcode _____ Date _____

Please reclaim tax on my donations as follows (delete as appropriate):

I want to Gift Aid any donations I make in the future or have made in the past 4 years.

I want to Gift Aid my donation of [amount] given on [date]

You must pay at least as much income tax or capital gains tax as the amount of tax that we would reclaim on your donations and remember to notify us if this changes.

If this declaration applies to future changes, you are entitled to notify us of the cancellation of your declaration at any time.

Signed _____

Date _____