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Scroll of Great Master Keizan at Shasta Abbey

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Trusting the Merit of the Buddha-Refuge

Rev. Master Fuden Nessi

—*Dharmazuflucht Schwarzwald, Germany*—

The following is an attempt to speak about a process, or movement, that is most important in our spiritual life. To start with, here are two diary entries from the past year, slightly paraphrased:

... When I went up to meditate this evening, there was at first just a sense of diffuse suffering, expressing itself in a whole variety of personal images and feelings. I felt deeply sorry for this state of being. As I tried to be there with all of this, as open and still as I was able, something started to shine through what seemed at first like an all-encompassing state of being lost. After a while, there was just deep gratitude that there is the True Refuge. That It does not exclude any states of suffering. And gratitude that we are able to perceive It and bring our life in harmony with It. This in turn gave rise to an offering of merit to beings who find themselves in states of deep fear, and who have not yet found the Refuge for themselves ...

... This morning, when making bows during Morning Service, with my forehead touching the bowing seat, I felt acutely in my consciousness, many residues of things past. It felt almost like these residues were all there was to my life. As I asked for help from the Buddha and looked at the Buddha statue on our altar, suddenly I only felt gratitude. Gratitude for what is now. For the fact of having the possibility in my life to keep turning towards the Buddha within the heart; deep gratitude also for Reverend Master Jiyu, for having shown us so clearly what is needed from us for this to be able to happen. There was the wish to give of myself as fully as I can...

I have related these two diary-entries because for me they express, in a distilled form, something of the profound merit that comes from the Buddha-Dharma, and of the spiritual process that is set in motion in us by this merit. When we recognize the workings of this merit in our life, naturally there arises in us the question of what is asked of us, so that we can keep aligning our life with it.

At the very core of this, is the effort to turn within and be still within what is being projected in our consciousness at any particular time. When we do this, our gaze turns towards the Buddha in our heart. This is not something that

is far removed from us. We keep finding how to do this by doing it, and through that we become more familiar with it.

Particularly at times when we are inwardly under siege and feel lost in life, we may at first only see the images that our habitual mind-patterns generate. When we are still though, something in us reminds us that this is not all there is. It beckons us to look deeper and take refuge at such times: “What your mind is projecting right now is not all there is. Gather your mind and heart – you are capable of doing this. The heart will point you then to its True Refuge.” When we heed this prompting, it is as though a gap appears in our perception of things. A gap that we could not even have imagined was there beforehand. What shines through this opening is the help that comes from Buddha. This reminds me of something a great master said: that when we look toward Buddha, Buddha looks toward us.

I have also observed this dynamic at times when I had a negative view of someone, and at first just believed the wave of corresponding thoughts that went along with this view. How easily do we believe in the validity of such thoughts! If on such occasions we are really intent on looking towards the Refuge after realizing what is going on in the mind, our view is turned around, away from what is a mere distortion. It is as though True Reality prompts us to look towards It: “Don’t just blindly believe and go along with this distorted view. You have seen on so many occasions that there is a much more truthful dimension of reality. Trust it, look for it.” Time and again we see that,

when we follow this prompting, the way we perceive becomes so much more generous, understanding and imbued with empathy.

The principle of not just going along with what the conditioned mind throws up is also crucial when it comes to repentance. Though it is important to look openly at what the mind reflects back to us, without the effort of taking refuge within the heart, it can easily happen that something will try to make us look down and resign ourselves: “Yes, you keep trying, true. But your effort is simply not good enough. This fact has been made clear to you so many times before, has it not? What you are now seeing in yourself just confirms this!” How important it is to counter this voice with the refuge-taking heart, when this happens.

When properly understood, repentance is upward-turned and liberating. Even while we may deeply regret something and even feel ashamed, it softens our heart and points us in the direction of what is good, the direction of the Precepts. It counteracts self-condemnation and our tendency to create or reinforce a negative self-image (or in fact any self-image), which is so unhelpful.

Repentance opens us for the intuition that, what has been confused in the past and led to unwholesome actions, and what may still be confused in the present, is not something solid and unchanging. It is not separate from our

True Nature. The image in Reverend Master Jiyu's book *How to Grow a Lotus Blossom*¹ of a person standing in gasshō within the Knot of Eternity (representing Eternal Love), surrounded by a murky smog, reminds me of this. The smog signifies the seeming uncleanness, which is often all we end up seeing when we only look with the eyes of self and firmly believe in the reality of the self-image we generate. Only if we are inwardly in gasshō and take refuge, as the person in this image, can we intuit the truth of what Reverend Master Jiyu is pointing to here. All the pained and confused parts of ourselves are embraced within the Goodness of Buddha Nature. When our heart comes to know this, even just a little, it is at peace.

All-accepting repentance brings not only peace but also understanding and empathy. Here is an example: suppose as an adult, a person becomes aware of an area in their life where they keep going against the Precepts. Time and again they get caught in this and, although they really don't want this to happen, it keeps happening. The person doesn't understand this and feels more and more ashamed. How easy it is in this state to look down.

Fortunately, rather than just giving in to this downward-turned maelstrom, the person turns within and asks for help: "I see that this keeps happening, and I'm deeply sorry for it. But I don't want to just believe and to base myself on a negative self-image. I so wish to do what is right, what does

not create suffering. I haven't found the way to do this in this area of my life though, and I don't understand why. Please help me, please show me what is involved in all this!"

One day, almost unexpectedly, they come to understand that there is a connection between their difficulties in keeping a particular Precept, and the situation they were in as a child. They become aware that already as a child, they kept losing themselves in the same unhelpful way of acting, although it took a somewhat different form back then. They see that at the root of the behavior of the child was a desperate attempt to find consolation in life, when the child kept witnessing much suffering in their immediate surroundings and was deeply distressed by it.

The now adult realizes that their breaking the Precepts in this area has the same root, in that nowadays too, it tends to happen when they are distressed in seeing people close to them creating suffering for themselves and others. Through having realized this, the person's resolve not to keep getting caught in this habitual pattern has now become stronger. The understanding of the underlying confusion has deepened, and the ability to work on it is strengthened. As the person is now more accepting of their own humanity, their view of others' humanity is kinder too. The roots of our breakages of the Precepts in the present do, of course, often go much further back than just to our childhood.

This example reminds me of something a dear fellow monk once said, along the lines that the suffering of the past

is cleansed within the compassion of the present. For this cleansing to be able to happen, our unconditional “Yes” of the heart is needed, as the suffering is revealed to us, whatever may have happened in the past. When there is a recurring memory of something painful that I regret, I am reminded each time of how important it is to meet it with this “Yes”, and not reject it. This makes it possible to entrust that which is pained to the great compassion in the present.

As our view is more and more imbued with what Buddha shows us through taking refuge, this view gradually permeates our way of living. Genuine concern for others deepens. The wish that they may find how to access the True Refuge within their own heart grows stronger, as well as the wish to do whatever we can to help – even if our efforts may not feel like much to us.

This movement of the heart underlies our offering of merit, and our wish that whatever good may result from our life and from our spiritual effort may benefit others. Sometimes this offering of merit emerges on the most unexpected occasions. I would like to relate here what happened during a night I spent in hospital a few years ago, after a biopsy. On that occasion it was made clear to me in a poignant way, as so many times before and after, how drastically our perception of things is altered when we go to the Buddha and ask for help, rather than just believing our habitual self-concerned thoughts, and giving in to our fears.

In the hospital bed beside my own was a man who was obviously in great distress. He had a noble face and long white hair, was about my age and was very thin. When during the day the medical staff asked him where he was from, he was not able to answer. I had the feeling that he may have been homeless.

Then came the night. All night long he kept groaning in pain, and periodically beat himself strongly on his chest out of desperation. I am a very light sleeper, and because I knew that I would not sleep at all, gradually I got into a real state: “Just now when I so need a bit of sleep! Doesn’t this poor man belong in intensive care? Why didn’t the hospital staff put him there? If I have to spend more nights in hospital, first thing in the morning I will ask if I can move to another room!”

Despite the panic, I tried my best to turn within and asked what was needed from me in this situation. Gradually and to my own surprise, I was able to offer up my fear and panicky feelings. After a while, I found my heart and mind were following in stillness the loud noises the man was making, and almost merged with them, without resistance. It became a long night of meditation and offering merit.

Towards the morning, I perceived the man in the bed next to mine as a real Bodhisattva, a groaning Bodhisattva, who was showing me something so important: that we can indeed let go of our fears and self-concerned mental patterns, and how these then transform into devotion and selfless love.

This love lies dormant in all of us under the surface, sometimes covered over only by an excessive self-concern which, in my observation, often has fear at its root. As I was lying there with an inner gasshō, there was now real gratitude towards this man, who I was perceiving so differently from before.

It is interesting to observe that – even while having selfless love and tenderness in one’s heart on such occasions – one does not feel like a ‘loving person’. If anything, what happens is that our normal view of being a person wholly separate from others starts to disintegrate a bit, at least at its edges. When the heart is in harmony with its True Refuge, it is at the same time in communion with all beings. We sometimes intuit how much we are indebted to all beings on such occasions. The wish to give of ourselves fully, in whatever way we can, then becomes more stable in us.

When Rev. Clementia came to pick me up from the hospital and drove me back to the protected environment of our small temple, there was almost a yearning in me to be back in that overheated hospital room, together with the man in distress. But mainly, in the following days there was deep gratitude for the many opportunities that life presents us with, to listen to and follow our True, Eternal Refuge, as it keeps calling us back to Itself by means of what comes to us in life.

I hope that the above descriptions have made it clear that turning towards Buddha in our heart is a choice we keep having to make, right in the midst of our habitual mind-patterns and all the situations that life brings us. As we find more and more how to do this, a movement is set in motion and nurtured, that includes our taking refuge, repentance, our following what Buddha shows us, and offering the merit of our training to all beings. This most precious spiritual movement confirms, clarifies and deepens our true purpose in life.

Notes

- [1.](#) Rev. Master Jiyu-Kennett. *How to Grow a Lotus Blossom*, (Mt Shasta,, CA: Shasta Abbey Press, 1993) p. 136.

Infinite Gateways of the Dharma

Rev. Master Mokugen Kublicki

—Great Ocean Dharma Refuge, Pembrokeshire–Wales—

This article is dedicated to the memory of my beloved brother Kris, who passed away 4 April, 2020.

At a funeral service it is traditional to place a painting or photograph of the deceased on the altar – a likeness that shows us the life and brightness of the deceased, reminding us of the True Person, the True Reality. From the heart of Great Compassion, especially at such a poignant time, a gateway for a clear heart and mind is offered both to those who remain alive and to those who have died.

Achievements and contributions of a lifetime can be remembered and appreciated. The big moments and the seemingly insignificant, but equally precious, moments of a person's life can be reflected upon. Equally, difficulties of life are not glossed over. Reflecting upon oneself and other, and contemplating the nature of things, the flotsam and jetsam of a lifetime's ups and downs can be recognized, appreciated and let go of... offered up on the stream of

impermanence, and on the stream of compassion. Allowing these things to fall away, or just be, the veils of memory and feeling can waft away on the pure mirror of existence.

Reassuringly, when all else dissolves away, Truth and Love remain on the bedrock of our interconnected hearts and of existence itself – the ‘Eternal Pure’. Looking with a clear gaze of the eye, whether together in life, or at death, or in a photograph, we *can* see universal Truth and loving kindness shining forth from everyone and everything around us: Buddha bows to Buddha with awe and gratitude.

We instinctively turn to this Essence when that which is important beckons to any of us – when we wish to fully rest our being in truth and reality, in our True Nature. In life and in death, in life’s uncertainties and changeableness, in our own frailties, in illness and in the complexities of pandemics, the Dharma Door is being endlessly offered. Within all difficulties and upheavals, and in the reminders of the Four Sights¹, *simultaneously* echoes a clarion call of the heart to anchor ourselves in the true refuges of Compassion, Love and Wisdom. It is a blessed relief to do so.

Great gratitude and appreciation can well up from this limitless ocean of True Pure Nature – no matter what the circumstance. When we realize that we cannot take things for granted, when we are faced with sickness or death – all these events and appearances that shake us so that we teeter and wobble can simultaneously help us to relax and fall into the great compassionate arms and anchor of the Eternal Pure.

The Dharma Door is to be found in *this* present moment, *this* present opportunity. In *this* selfless moment of a clear eye is the blessed relief and truth that we do not need to add to the Perfection that IS. We can gratefully bow and entrust ourselves to It.

In all the most important moments of life – a birth, a death, a celebration, a milestone, a joy – we instinctively, and from our very own intrinsic, True, and universally-shared Nature, do not wish to cloud the essence of that which we know to be real and significant and a precious Dharma Door. Distractions, internal and external, can be seen for what they are: irritations and not real comforters or solutions. The endless list of justifications and unhelpful stories that we tell ourselves and others can dissipate and dissolve into the ephemeral chimera that they are. Our future stories have not yet come to be, nor may they ever; and the past is gone. So, held within each and every moment of being – even the most seemingly insignificant – is the same benevolent opportunity to forget the small self and dissolve into the Ocean of gratitude – whatever the circumstance. Gateways of the Dharma are infinite and limitless!

By looking up, whatever we find before us, or wherever we are, no matter how bright or difficult may be the circumstances, we can find the golden thread of the Eternal Pure. By looking down, or fearing, or disparaging, we miss what is true. When looking up with an open and Preceptually-true heart and mind, the profound change of perception and deeper insight opens us to the value and

meaning of even that which we felt was of little or no use, or that which we feared. 'All-acceptance is the Gateless Gate'. We do not need to weigh or judge or complain. Here, we recognize the many blessings that abound. Being still in the heart of Buddha Nature, that which is eternal endures, and that which is transitory and useless to cling to, can fall away and dissolve.

In our humanity we often understandably wish both to avoid suffering and to have the fruits of spiritual life. If, however, we cling only to the seemingly bright, and fear and avoid pains and difficulties, we create a disharmony in ourselves that stands in the way of the understanding and healing of those very pains and difficulties. By turning away or rejecting, we miss the opportunity to find the resolution of our questions and confusions in the acceptance of all within the pure circle of *sunyata* (Immaculacy). Herein, the greatest loving compassion is to be found that heals with the wisdom of Dharma. It is by not turning away from or avoiding the reality of old age, disease and death, that we experience what Reverend Master Jiyu called 'Eternal Life'. Although we generally view the moon as a disc illuminated by the sun, the whole of the moon includes that part of it which is in shadow and faces the rest of the benevolent universe! The whole is Eternal Life! It is the greatest joy to find the Buddha within both birth and death, and to realise that the Eternal Pure and our transitory existence never were in opposition to one another.

In death, as in life, a great opportunity is offered to open the heart fully, let go of the self, and “slip into the shining sea”² of the Love of the Unborn. By not turning away from the presence of suffering or death, and by not turning away from any moment in which we feel self to be dissolving, the heart opens wide in gratitude for Great Compassion, Great Love and Great Wisdom: “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of the death I shall fear no evil...”³ We can rest in confidence that Great Compassion will continue to aid us, our loved ones, and all sentient beings, and that this help will be present both in life and in death.

Although as individuals we have our own responsibilities and our own contributions to make, we are part of an indivisibly, greater, infinitely compassionate Whole. By extending generosity of spirit and opening our heart, not excluding the deepest pains and the suffering of ourselves and of all sentient beings, we can find, and anchor ourselves in, the Compassion, Love and Wisdom that eternally reveals Itself in the workings of the entire universe for the benefit of all.

Notes

1. The Four Sights: as a young man, Gautama, the future Buddha, saw an old man, a sick person and a corpse, which helped him realize the fleeting and unsatisfying nature of existence. He then saw an ascetic hermit, which inspired his own renunciation and compassionate search for Truth.
2. Sir Edwin Arnold. *The Light of Asia*, 1917. (Several publishers)
3. Psalm 23.4. *King James version of the Bible*.

How and Why Spiritual Merit ‘works’

Rev. Master Mugō White

—Throssel Hole Buddhist Abbey, Northumberland—UK—

This article is based on a talk given by Rev. Master Mugō on the 5th April at Throssel Hole Buddhist Abbey. It was transcribed by Rev. Alina and edited by Julius Welby.

We have just completed a ceremony which I think is probably new to the Abbey, called the Dedication of Merit Ceremony, for which I had the honour of being the celebrant. For many, the idea of transferring merit, that is spiritual merit, for those who are in extremity, those who have died, or are suffering, and for their families, raises real questions.

I received an email recently in which a chap asked “Why do we offer merit for those who are dead? How would they benefit?” This question has helped me to focus on the ceremony and also on this talk. His question points to a fundamental issue for all Buddhists which is, as I see it, a deep call to examine our understanding of the fundamental nature of existence, of life and death. This is a question begging to be answered and many a young child has

wrangled with this enquiry and has then lost sight of it in the face of the imperative to get on with life and live it, and rightly so. I for one returned later in life to continue this enquiry. My path was a calling to be a monk. For others that is not their calling, and I feel that they are different yet equal paths.

At the beginning of the ceremony today there was an incense offering and dedication when I, as celebrant, voiced a wish on behalf of everybody. In the dedication, I said that the merit of this ceremony is offered wholeheartedly to all those who have died, all those who are dying and all those who will die throughout all time and all space. So that covers it, I would have thought. It includes all those who have lived, are living and will be born.

We did a new chant today, which I thought went well, called Dedication of Merit. Essentially it is similar in intention to the offertory at the end of all our ceremonies, although we did have a short offertory after the chant. It is, I think, the most uplifting of our chants. It ends with the word joy; in the midst of flux, or change, joy. This is for me the nub of merit and the offering of merit, where the seeming opposites – birth and death, joy and sorrow, right and wrong – collide within dedicated practice and training.

Practice, which many people have many ideas about, isn't quite what we think it is. I'll try and explain what I understand practice and training to be, in short form. I'll

probably use different words at different times, so please think for yourselves, which I am sure you do.

Practice is directing ourselves to our simple and open heart, unstintingly – that would be the short form. That's within the heart of meditation, both in formal sitting, and during the rest of our day, which makes up most of our lives. Meditation embraces seated meditation, working meditation, talking meditation, cooking meditation, cleaning, listening, watching the news meditation. In other words, practice is the wellspring of an intention; that which underpins our lives, to do that which is good, and refrain from harmful habitual actions – which are largely outside of our conscious minds. Often these habits are subtle and come to light in the process of practice, which is to do, and be, good for others. Many of you will recognise that this is the Three Pure Precepts.

We practice kindness, keeping to the Precepts, wholeheartedly present to the task at hand, and generally to be the best person we can be. Perfection is not on the cards, nor is judgement of oneself nor the multitude of others. In the process, forgiveness is the watchword and our companion into wise action – and we humans are wired for action.

So, is it worth it? Is it worth doing ceremonies like this? Is it worth our efforts to offer the merits of our practice, for example? Yes. There is merit embedded in our sincerity of purpose to train ourselves. Good things come from doing good.

So how do we ‘do’ the offering of merit? Practically speaking, the ceremony today is an example of doing this, and the ‘how it works’ takes us to the very heart of Buddhism and the Buddha’s teaching. In the time of the Buddha in India, Hinduism taught the concept of atman, which is the idea of an enduring, eternal soul. The Buddha taught *anatta*, which was a divergence from Hinduism – *anatta* meaning no separate abiding individual self.

So, having established that acting from a clear baseline intention to train oneself is good, and also that putting this intention into action, including the practice of seated meditation, has merit and a positive impact on others – the questions are:

“How does merit work?” Well, we have just answered that, pretty much.

“Does it make a difference? How does it work?” I think these questions are best answered by entrusting oneself to the process of practice and meditation, the process of daily practice, day in, day out.

Some answers come from people who have experienced and received merit when in extremity. I have had reports of receiving merit through my mother, who knew that merit was being transferred to her when she was dying. She called them her revelations, or visionary dreams. That’s interesting.

Answers may come from talking to other trainees about what they understand and how their practice of transferring

merit takes form. It is very individual, there is no fixed form as far as I am concerned. Personally, I don't deliberately offer merit, though I do ask for the full names of people who I hear are in extremity. I keep a private list of names on my altar, and during the day, names come in and out of my mind. I regard this as giving a deliberate 'push' in their direction, – or it may be a pull, to be honest, I don't know – a resonance with the person. They are included in some way in my day and if someone comes to mind very frequently, I will drop them an email.

There has been what I regard as a great call in recent weeks for people to join with others, on-line and to sit together, and many are engaging with this and benefiting, as several people have reported to us. And in response to this great call, we at Throssel have posted videos of a couple of our ceremonies on the Throssel website, and started, for want of a better word, a blog. People have joined in, reading and commenting on the blog, and joining in the ceremonies, which is really great.

We normally encourage people to sit, if they can, with a meditation group, priory or the like because doing so has a positive impact on the meditation of all there. And I will take a side thought here for those who are, for various reasons, not able to sit with others, or for those who sitting with others raises so much difficulty that they find it emotionally or practically intolerable. My heart goes out to those people.

The merit that is generated through communal activity is greater than the solo efforts of an individual alone, and for those who sit with others for any length of time this is unmistakable. They will often report that they find it ‘easier’ to sit in a group than to sit alone at home. So unseen and unacknowledged, the merit of the meditation circulates and supports all present, circulating no less for those now, of necessity, sitting on-line, together with others.

One of the reasons that we ask people to follow the same tradition, our tradition of Serene Reflection Meditation, is that there is a common, unified baseline – to just sit; no add-ons like visualisations, repetitions of a koan or mantra, for example. These are all fine within the tradition they come from, but that is not our tradition. Sitting together, reciting a scripture together, in unison, points to the truth of non-separation, non-division. We talk about reciting scriptures as being with one voice, and to recite a scripture or to sing with one voice means you need to be listening to your own voice and everyone else’s voice. This is the bane of anybody who has directed a choir – to encourage everyone to listen to what is going on around them and mesh in, to sing with one voice. Joining with others in this way alleviates the very real sense of being separate, individual, isolated, different and fundamentally alone.

You could say that a kind of resonance is set up when people practice together in the same place, much like when a bell is struck next to another bell, but not touching it. The vibration passes unseen between them and the second bell

rings. An experiment to try if you happen to have two bells handy.

The ‘great call’ I mentioned earlier is that fundamental yearning of the heart to share in, connect with, and be verified by, that deep resonance shared between those with a common purpose, especially when that is formed in the deepest part of our consciousness.

Yes, people are joining together to sing and dance and exercise and practice yoga and check in with family and friends. And yes, there is joy in a bond which alleviates the isolation and basic loneliness many will suffer. So those acts are of benefit, both for self and others when you join in, and that’s how I see it myself, because I do, will do, check in with my family this evening. The great call, the calling of the heart, is however of a different order, although that may not be clearly apparent, given the social aspect to connecting with fellow sitters, which is a reward in itself. For short, I am calling this resonance effect a merit field, which is unseen and unknowable with the ordinary mind, yet nonetheless real. This resonance cannot in truth be hindered by physical distance, as is clearly confirmed and reinforced currently by on-line connections.

Thus it is that trainees act as spiritual anchors and touchstones for one another; to make that connection, I would like to say, in emptiness. As I see it, the monastery, priories and individual monks function in this way too, as anchors. It should be understood however that while such

anchors are encouraging, they are not essential to our practice, which is just as well, since our trusted internet can fail us at any moment. And if it does, well then what? We are thrown back on our own resources.

As in other times of difficulty, we are constantly being thrown back on our own resources. I am glad to be here in the monastery and to walk through my days with others, following the same schedule of activity including formal meditation and the daily round of ceremonies and getting on with my responsibilities, as best I can. However well-intentioned it might be, it is a mistake to set up the lives of monks and the monastery as a kind of 'gold standard'. Each of us, within the physical setting and form we find ourselves in, share equally within the life of the trusting heart of practice. I will repeat – share equally within the life of the trusting heart of practice. We have an equal capacity to engage fully with what is being asked of us, moment to moment. Indeed, different forms, different lives – same heart, same mind.

Some of the religious forms can be adapted and used wherever you are, and many of you will be doing that already. For example, before eating you can say the mealtime recitation, the text of which recently was posted to our blog along with a recording. If you are in circumstances where saying the whole recitation is not going to work for you, you can say just the Five Thoughts which come at the end of that long recitation, or you can say it silently to yourself – and that does include if you are eating with your

non-Buddhist family, please don't burden them! You can recite or think it at the start of the meal and end with the blessing verse at the end. This can re-anchor us to the baseline intention, running in the background of one's being, and really that doesn't hurt to be reinforced. Our religious forms generally, I believe, serve as a re-anchoring to that baseline. In certain settings, a café for example, I will just mentally lift my plate of food and think 'thank you'; that is the minimum. There are many such ways to re-anchor and the sangha is likely to come up with many brilliant ideas. It does. You do.

So, I have done my best to explain spiritual merit as I have practiced and understood it, so you now perhaps have a deeper perspective, a wider one, a more informed one and an appreciation of the Buddhist teaching that underpins merit.

At the risk of being tiresome, I will recap:

The Buddhist truth embedded in anatta, no separate individual selves, means merit can't help but circulate freely because there are no 'gaps', no gaps between what we like to think of as ourselves and others. Indeed, no gaps between any THING. And merit is generated through enlightened action informed by the Three Pure Precepts. If you like, 'good' comes from doing 'good'. Like it or not, believe it or not. So there are no individual selves involved in the deepest level of our appreciation of ... life actually. While at the same time, and this is very important, our

individual lives and expressions are deeply important,
deeply significant.

“Out beyond right and wrong, birth and death, joy and
sorrow, there is a field, I will meet you there.”

Paraphrase of Rumi

Loneliness

Rev. Master Daishin Morgan

—*Throssel Hole Buddhist Abbey, Northumberland—UK—*

In recent years I have spent much of my time in solitude and would like to offer some thoughts on loneliness, especially now when many of us are having to live in isolation. Most of the advice going around at the moment addresses loneliness through keeping up contact with family, friends and neighbours on various media and so on. This is good advice but what can be forgotten is the value there can be in allowing ourselves some space to explore the actual feeling of being lonely. Loneliness, the ache of the heart, impels us towards other people. The more I explore that feeling the more I can see how interwoven it is with the whole of my being like a rope of many threads. The wish to connect with others involves love, compassion, fears, doubts, desires, and more. Loneliness exposes us and that is part of its discomfort. On the other hand it is an opening.

Once we begin to turn towards this complex experience, we may try to analyse all those threads. That can be productive in its way and to a degree it is probably necessary but it is also where we get bogged down. To just

be lonely is a whole experience. There will be strands that are obvious and in our face and others that we become aware of more gradually but loneliness is the teacher. Recognition and acknowledgement of what we are actually feeling is essential for being at peace with ourselves. If we look carefully we see that experience is a whole that is experienced altogether and at once. Analysing our experience, the teasing apart of the threads, has its uses but its role is limited by the sheer impossibility of coming to a resolution. One thread on its own is never quite true because of all that has had to be pared away to examine it as a single thread; we are not really made of parts, we are 'just this'. 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. If we trust the immediate experience we will see that it is not blind to complexity. It is multi-layered even as we experience it all at once. Direct experience is not serial. It is not a oneness in which all the detail is submerged and lost. All the threads are the endless subtlety or quality of a whole. When the threads are separated they become abstractions. Reality is the whole in its infinite quality just now.

Loneliness rests on a sense of separation. Are we the rope or the thread? The answer is to delve into the quality of the present. We are profoundly involved, as separate beings and as a whole. Zazen is the whole aware of itself; zazen doing zazen in which I am involved. We don't have to make anything or hold anything together, we need to trust enough

to let conditions reveal their reality which they do without intervention. Our actual experience is not made up of parts, even while we recognise this being here and that being over there. Loneliness paradoxically can reveal undividedness, it then takes on a different cast; it is no longer about lacking anything. There is something profound going on that it is not meaningless to call loneliness, but it is not at all what it seemed to be before.

At first loneliness is chaotic and it is tempting to grasp at solutions. I think that is often what makes us adopt someone else's understanding. We may be able to tame loneliness with a strategy and keep it captive but it keeps escaping. Loneliness is valuable for its obduracy. We have to spend time with the chaos. I can offer some reassurance that being lonely, far from being some failure of practice, is a thread leading out of the maze.

Loneliness as a guide starts with what it really feels like. The purpose is not to make the loneliness go away but to know it so that when we are lonely we can let ourselves be lonely. If we deny that part of ourselves it is no wonder we get lonely; it hurts until we accept its heart. We have no way to know if our loneliness is more or less than anyone else's. Assessing its quantity is a hopeless business. We must let our experience stand as it is.

As we sit, thoughts about loneliness will occur but they are about loneliness, when the real matter is loneliness itself. For something so challenging it can be surprisingly elusive

and we have to learn to be with the way it can be absent one moment and acutely present the next. Take a holiday from judgement. It helps if we don't set this up as an ascetic challenge; it is like listening to complex music.

Our actual experience takes us beyond ourselves to where we and the loneliness are not two things. In the same manner we and our feelings are inseparable from all the rest of existence. To be this is to be undivided, the whole world. Where is loneliness then? Please take this as encouragement to engage. When you are lonely, to know your loneliness is to be in touch with reality and that is the longed-for gift offered to the part that aches. Even precious memories of being with someone we love are not well used if we make them a shield to hold between ourselves and loneliness. It is not you and your loneliness; it is the whole of being, endlessly unfolding.

I can still be lonely; this is not about becoming impervious. One of the expectations many people have of practice and training is that it is like weeding a garden; that if you persist you will eventually have a garden without weeds. In the end we have to come to know the weeds, because weeds reveal the truth as much as the lilies. Reality is sufficient and liberation resides in reality, not in becoming some more acceptable thing.

Space is a poor analogy for emptiness,
It is the lightness of things being free.
Being in a room is the same

If the door opens easily or I am locked in
But so completely different.
Remorseless positivity is only pretending;
The cries must be heard, you must enter the room.
The lightness is not the condition of the door.

Finally, a word about distraction. I have come to appreciate the role of distraction in keeping some equilibrium. When on your own it is usually not a good idea to spend many hours in zazen as you might do on an intense retreat or sesshin. We can rely on conditions for the intensity. Enjoyment is important. I once had a dog who would chase his tail, distracting him with a biscuit would usually help.

Just Walking

Rev. Master Myōhō Harris

—*The Place of Peace Dharma House, Aberystwyth—Wales—*

This article is taken from a talk of the same name that was part of the May issue of the Dharma Reflections From The Place of Peace, CD series. It is offered in gratitude for the life and training of Reverend Master Teigan Stevens, who died recently. The 'just walking' described here refers to a person's steady, natural pace, and should not be mistaken for the slower, more precise walking of kinhin, which is done between meditation periods.

After hearing that Reverend Master Teigan had died, I made offerings at the altar, then sat down to quietly reflect, and be with him. What came to mind was a memory from the 1970s, when I was a young novice at Shasta Abbey, where he and I trained together under Reverend Master Jiyu. It was the end of a long hot day. I was walking up the cloister, feeling stressed and anxious, when I saw Reverend Teigan (this was before he had been named as a Master) ahead of me. He was in work clothes, covered in sawdust from cutting firewood, and had his trusty dog, Tiger, by his side. The pair of them were walking in such a calm and steady way. The sight of him, so contained and complete within the

meditative movement of ‘just walking’, entered into me. I noticed his feet steadily connecting with the ground, body and mind together in harmony; fully present, at ease with himself and the world. I let my eyes rest upon the gentle sway of his back muscles, and, as he ‘just walked’, the stillness within him touched the core of stillness within me, calling it forth, and calming my churning mind.

Buddha bows to Buddha and Buddha recognises Buddha, in so many simple, yet profound ways. We never know when help will come, only that it will.

Quietly, because he did not know that I was there, I brought the rhythm of my steps into harmony with his and ‘just walked’ with him. All the stress fell away, and I too became calm and still. By the time he reached the house where he lived, and turned off the cloister, I felt like a different person.

Ever since then I have never failed to find that ‘just walking’ is a direct way of ‘returning unto the source’. If the mind becomes restless, or drifts off, we gently bring it back to the steady motion of walking, so our body is not in one place and our thoughts are somewhere else. This draws body and mind together, stilling and harmonising the physical heart and lungs, enabling the mind to rest in that innermost place; it is both physically and mentally helpful, and aids contemplation.

When we rush around, we create tension that stresses body and mind, hindering our ability to be still. If we are too

slow and lethargic, then we create a dullness that is negative and clouds the mind.

To find our natural pace is to walk the razor's edge of training, which is the Middle Way. When our pace is activity that flows from stillness, then it will be effortless, and will improve the quality of our life. Although we only sit in formal meditation for part of the day, if we follow the practice, and 'just walk', as we go about our daily business, we never have to leave our inner sitting place, because every step we take, will be our home. ¹

The Buddha said we should be as a lamp unto the world, and on that day Reverend Master Teigan was showing how we become that lamp, when we live in an unselfconscious way, from our original purity. It is *how* we are that matters, how our feet touch the ground, how our eyes rest upon what we see, how we handle objects and treat others, how we move, and the place our words come from when we speak. The simplest of everyday actions can convey and teach so much, because they become as Buddha's touch, calling us back to (spiritual) life, by reconnecting us to the source of our unchanging pure essence.

There are many examples of this in the Buddhist scriptures.

We are told that the Buddha carried his bowl in such a way, that seeing him inspired another to take up the robe.

There is an account of how a young man, who had been rather wild and often in trouble, helped the great poet monk, Reverend Ryokan, to put on his sandals. Kneeling at

Ryokan's feet, and being so physically close to him, the youth felt the 'goodness', the purity of the man, and it awoke the seed of goodness within him. It made him want to be a better person, and he changed his ways. Just as when I encountered that same 'goodness' and purity of movement in Reverend Teigan, it inspired me to change the way in which I walked.

In training, emphasis is put upon doing what is 'good' to do. What is the best that can be done, what is in keeping with the Precepts and the living Dharma of the moment. This has the same source as the deepest form of human goodness. I am not talking about being a 'do-gooder', or of thinking of oneself as 'a good person', or of trying to be good, but of selflessness, and the tender quality of stillness that manifests when someone lives, in an unselfconscious way, from that pure essence, with no thought of personal identity, desire or achievement. This is a precious thing, and when I encounter such a person, the way they are tells me a great deal about Buddhism.

As young monks we were told that the highest form of training is to 'just live'. This is expressed by the line from *Rules for Meditation* that states, "To live by Zen is *the same*² as to live an ordinary daily life". When training is so natural to a person, that the ordinary activities of their daily life become the life of Buddha manifesting in this world, then all beings benefit, including those yet to be born. That day, I felt a tender understanding for myself flow in through my eyes,

as they rested upon his back. It was a beautiful example of how selfless training helps others, all by itself.

Reverend Teigan did not need to know that I was behind him that day, because he was not ‘just walking’ to help me, or to teach anyone anything. He walked that way because it was the fruit of many years of training, and it came naturally to him. When someone lives in this unselfconscious way, from the purity of their original essence (Buddha Nature), then that essence ‘speaks’ through them, catching our attention, and giving us direction. It sings Its own song, and those who are ready to hear, respond. This has a beneficial effect, not only upon them, but also upon the one within whom it flows, bringing them contentment, and an inner sense of clean spaciousness, for which we are so grateful.

Many years later, when we were both seniors, Reverend Master Teigan visited Britain, and I invited him to co-lead a retreat with me here, at The Place of Peace. During his stay, I talked to him about that day at Shasta, and said how much it had helped me. Saying nothing, he looked at me and smiled, in the same steady and contained way as he had ‘just walked’. There was no self-consciousness, no ego, just a smile. I smiled too and, once again, two became one within the completeness of the Great Mystery.

Walking with Reverend Master Teigan that day is a memory that has never left me. It is said that a picture conveys more than a thousand words, and there I was, being shown stillness within activity and activity within stillness, in the most direct way, by personal experience.

As the years passed, I have found how profound is the teaching that comes from ‘just walking’. In opening ourselves to the depth of teaching that Buddhism has to offer, we sometimes mistake intellectual fascination and interest for profound insight, and miss, or dismiss, the depth of knowing, the quality of being, that can come from something as simple as ‘just walking’, because it does not intrigue, or give us anything to ‘figure out’. What it does, is enable the restless, ever-thinking mind, to cease. It silently fills us with an inner knowing that we can trust, and give ourselves to, in full surrender, so we are not bound by the constraints of a mind that is lost and alone, disconnected from its source.

Abiding in, or merging with, the purity of unselfconscious trust (for there is no separation between what we are, and that trust), we no longer find a need to fill the spacious stillness of inner reflection with our own ideas and strategies. When we discover the chasm of difference between taking Refuge in Buddha (meditation), and trying to be our own refuge, it changes us. We become an open receptacle, ready to receive whatever the Master in the Heart brings; we become one who can be taught. This is what ‘just walking’ helps make possible, and I thank Reverend Master Teigan for unknowingly introducing me to it that day.

Notes

1. The words, “every step we take will be our home” come from a quote by Great Master Dōgen:

But do not ask me where I am going,
As I travel in this limitless world,
Where every step I take is my home.

Heine, Steven. *Zen Poetry of Dōgen: Verses from the Mountain of Eternal Peace*, reprint edition (Dharma Communications Press, September 25, 2005).

2. The italics are the author’s own.

Distancing

Paul Taylor

—Lancaster, UK—

In our current Coronavirus-affected time, I find myself being careful in observing guidance on ‘social distancing’ and see it is necessary. But, at the same time, it raises spiritual questions for me about what ‘distancing’ means.¹ Such questions clearly can’t be resolved in a one-size-fits-all way, as our life experiences in the current situation are so various. I live in a town and this necessarily affects my perspective and how this unfolds for me.

I find it tricky at times to find my way through what is going on. What I know is that I am grateful for our practice. It points me to sitting still and, each time I topple over, to coming back.

A line from one of our scriptures, *The Most Excellent Mirror Samadhi*, which really resonates for me right now is: “This is as if a giant fire-ball; never come too close nor put yourself too far away”². We offer each other space, the gift of non-clinging, and at the same time we keep faith in our fundamental interconnectedness, the gift of non-rejecting.

And in this way, like a giant fireball, we allow the warmth of the Dharma to support, nurture and guide us, or we may feel burnt if we cling, or cold if we turn away or reject.

On occasion I feel the need to draw someone's attention to when they are not keeping an appropriate physical distance. At times this feels in self-interested, survival mode – that another person's carelessness could have potentially devastating consequences for me. And sometimes it seems to come from a broader wish, not to spread infection around – that we all can look out for each other.

I've noticed the way I say this can have great impact. 'Please' helps. Tone of voice definitely helps, particularly if it is a quick warning. 'Thank you' (when meant) helps. Also, trying not to obsess when someone walks too close helps. Most of all paying attention to what is here, now, truly helps – in feeling out how to respond in this situation, even if a sudden response. Sometimes I am the person who needs to step aside, whether this feels fair or not, say when a parent is struggling with their kids or someone is just plain dopey. It is fruitless complaining in my own mind – its chuntering just burns me. And I need to take the responsibility for my choice that I am out walking for exercise too.

At times it seems good and friendly to say 'hello' as someone walks past and particularly to acknowledge the 'hello' of others. I've noticed that quite a number of passers-by seem to be in a self-enclosed world or walking around looking down physically. We never know why this is: it

could possibly be their way of coping, or taking time out from intense circumstances at home. I suspect we all recognise and sympathise with the potential to get locked into our own world, especially at this time. Small acts of connecting seem important, say when walking, or when queuing at a safe distance, maybe in being aware of someone struggling. In some circumstances the appropriate response seems to be in saying ‘hello’, in others it seems to be in allowing others space. We don’t need to view ourselves as rescuers.

It feels particularly important to notice and accept with kindness when I feel locked in by anxiety myself. I find my not doing this has the potential for me to unleash an abrupt (even rude) response when someone feels too close. Yet such noticing may be easier said than done at times, particularly when panicky feelings are around. After too abrupt or overzealous a response we can apologise. But there are times when we have to live with what has happened without apology, and it may be that no apology is necessary or possible. I do know that I wish to hold to my aspiration to respond from the connected place of *Zazen* and not from fear, even though I fall short of this.

A helpful image for me is that of Indra’s Net in Hua-Yen Buddhism.³ It speaks to me as a profound metaphor for fundamental interconnectedness:

This royal net is entirely made of jewels, and...
the clear jewels ... reflect the image of the other

jewels, infinitely interpenetrating each other. All the jewels appear in each individual jewel and, in the same way, each individual jewel appears in all of the other jewels at the same time... It is the infinite within the finite... a splendid, grand, and immense true mutual reflection without causing damage to the jewel in which they are reflected. If someone were to sit in one jewel, then he would also be sitting in all the jewels in all directions at the same time... In this way, all jewels exist in each individual jewel...⁴

In the context of this article, this conveys to me that fundamental and intimate interconnectedness is inviolable and can never be taken away even when we're physically or socially distanced or physically alone. Our actions and intentions necessarily impact on and connect with everything else and we are impacted by everything because we are connected with everything. That all resonates with all, always.

If we focus too much on protecting ourselves and our uniqueness, we can lose our inner sense of origin and interconnectedness. Our vision, for now, does not take in the reflection of all the other jewels. Yet if, for example, we try too hard to overcome distance by drowning ourselves in various tempting avenues of externalised connectedness, we can mask or fail fully to appreciate and reflect our unique contribution. We may overlook, for now, that we and our life are a clearly reflecting jewel too.

It may be that in a fundamental sense there is no distance, but in an everyday sense distance may be essential to help us find our way, our vocation, our place, in order to fulfil our responsibilities and to cultivate and realise a generous heart to those who are not us.⁵ In whatever way we may come to appreciate this, it loosens our desperate need to defend an isolated and separated-off self and helps us see how we pull together, and in this come to recognise our common root. There is one Net and yet each jewel fulfils its reflective purpose fully when it is in the position it needs to be in, in relation to the other jewels.

The spirit of the gasshō resonates with this: it is a mudra of gathering what is scattered and, at the same time, of respecting that each of us has the capability to do our training if given space. Whilst it may not always be appropriate to make gasshō physically, its spirit of drawing together differences and at the same time respecting difference, is of great value, I feel.

Some words of the Buddha may help us in seeing our practice, and distancing, in terms of protecting ourselves and each other:

Protecting oneself, one protects others; protecting others one protects oneself. And how does one, in protecting oneself, protect others? By the repeated and frequent practice of meditation. And how does one, in protecting others, protect oneself? By patience and forbearance, by a non-violent and a [non-

harming] life, by loving kindness and compassion
[So] protecting oneself, one protects others;
protecting others one protects oneself. ⁶

For me too, the Bodhisattva ideal⁷ exemplifies and expresses the deepest concern for the true safety and well-being of all beings, including ourselves.

Trusting and following the lead of practice helps us not to come too close or put ourselves too far away here and now; and we can trust ourselves to make whatever adjustments are needed. When appropriate we can take refuge in those more experienced than us in this wonderful practice. May we find opportunities for expressing kindness and compassion, no matter how seemingly small, and for supporting each other at this time.

With many thanks for helpful comments received on this article.

Notes

- ¹. This article focuses on the social distancing aspects of our current situation rather than its social isolation ones. See the article 'Loneliness' by Rev. Master Daishin Morgan [here](#).
- ². This Scripture written by Great Master Tozan Ryokai, is recited in Morning Service at the monastery, and can be found in *the Scriptures and Ceremonies* books used by the Order of Buddhist Contemplatives.
- ³. The Hua Yen school of Mahayana Buddhism developed in China in the Tang Dynasty, 618-970 and has had a significant influence on Zen Buddhism. Its major focus is the *Avatamsaka Sutra*, *the Flower Ornament Sutra*.

4. *Common Buddhist Text: Guidance and Insights from The Buddha*, (Bangkok, Thailand: Mahachulalongkornrajavidalaya University Press, 2017) pp. 333-334.
5. In Rev. Master Leandra Robertshaw's second talk on the *Heart Sutra* in the series of talks given recently on the Throssel Hole Buddhist Abbey website, she talks about and discusses absolute reality and tentative reality (sometimes also called relative reality) and the middle path, which opens to both aspects. See <https://throssel.org.uk/throssel-blog/the-heart-sutra-talk-2/>
6. *Majjhima Nikaya* Vol 1. p. 45, *Essential Teachings of Buddhism*, Brown & O'Brian ed, (London: Rider, Ebury Publishing, 1989) p. 65.
7. The Bodhisattva ideal combines the vow to realise the deepest and most profound understanding with selfless practice for the benefit of all beings, whilst recognizing that all beings fundamentally are not separate.

The Fine Art of Social Distancing

Anonymous, UK

The weather is “perfect”. You know that day when the sky is deep sheer blue, and it’s warm and windy and delicious and you’d be a fool not to be out there in it?

My COVID-19 lockdown walk takes me past houses on one side of the road, along quite narrow pavements, then along a country path. Both these locations require all of us whose paths cross to practice the fine art of communication: we need to create safe distance, establish mutual consent, wait and watch to cue each other in, maintain civility. It’s pretty complex. And we’ve only been doing it for a short while. And nobody taught us how to do it.

You’d think one or two of these little encounters would go wrong. You’d think it might get awkward. But today you’d be wrong. Everybody I meet, and must keep at a safe distance, smiles warmly. Either of us waits for the other to pass within two metres, each of us smiles and greets the other. One woman walks her dog down the middle of the road to allow me enough space. I thank her, and she says “You’re welcome”. I shuffle into a driveway to allow a man

coming the other way to pass, and we exchange reassuring smiles. The young woman and her small child smile, and give me room to pass by.

So much smiling. So much unforced courtesy. Limitless co-operation. You'd think humans were designed to be generous of spirit, to co-operate, to consider and help each other. Maybe we were. Homage to the Sangha.

Dealing with Fear and Uncertainty during the Covid-19 outbreak

Rev. Master Berwyn Watson

—*Throssel Hole Buddhist Abbey, Northumberland—UK—*

Everyone has been deeply affected by the CV-19 outbreak. One of most difficult aspects of the situation has been that our natural wish to help others has been thwarted by the need for ‘social isolation’. For example one concerned person said to the BBC: “We’re all reaching that critical point now where we have to take stock, seeing that “if I go to my parents I could be carrying something that could kill them. That’s the reality of it.”

I regularly visit one of the monks in a care home, and in early March got a call to say they were closing for all but essential visits. I haven’t been able to visit since. Normally we have an illusion of being in control; that we can plan things, but reality isn’t always like that: sometimes stuff just happens or has already happened. And we need to sit with the gut-wrenching that comes with that.

There's a tension between our natural wish to help – which is part of the *bodhicitta* – the wish to help all beings that is innate for us; and the fact that, we can't physically be there for people. It's impressive that many have found creative ways to support more vulnerable people; for example by ringing them and arranging to drop off essential supplies, or just keeping in touch via the various apps that allow video calls. But even when we are able to do something, one of the most difficult things to deal with is the ongoing uncertainty, and the anxiety and fear that can lead to. I find that if I'm not careful thoughts can go around in a loop considering the options, trying to get more information. Initially I ended up listening too much to the news, or checking it all the time on the web. In some ways it just made things worse. Eventually I had to question my impulse to keep checking for updates on the news: will it really help? Am I feeding a kind of excitement? What information do I need? Surely a couple of times a day is enough?

We do live in a time where almost infinite information is available from many sources, and the CV-19 outbreak has perhaps highlighted both the benefits and the pitfalls of this. I was reminded of the poet T S Eliot's phrase from the *The Four Quartets* when he says modern people were becoming "distracted from distraction by distraction." This phrase takes some unpicking, but it points to a state where we become so distracted, we don't even notice were using distraction as an avoidance technique. As long as we keep whirling around we won't have to stop and see the painful and difficult stuff. At some point we have to face these

deeper underlying fears; the fear of loss of control, the fear of the deaths of loved ones, the fear of our own death.

Often fear itself is our worst enemy. We can even become fearful of the fact that we may not be able to face our fear! Distraction can be an attempt to avoid looking, but maybe it is the very avoidance that generates fear. We often imagine there is some ‘thing’ to be afraid of, but often fear is just nebulous: imagining there must be some ‘unlookable-at-thing’ lurking there that is impossible to face. But we haven’t stopped and taken time to ask “what am I afraid of?” and to see “is there anything there to be afraid of?”

These are the very times when we should “cease from erudition, look within and reflect upon yourself” as Great Master Dōgen puts it in *Rules for Meditation*. The translation says ‘erudition’ but it could also be translated as ‘speculating with words and ideas’, so we need to cease from generating that whirl of thoughts that relies on seeing words and concepts as the only reality.

There is something deeper – but how do we find it? We can ‘reflect within’ as Dōgen puts it, which in practice means making the effort to put aside some time to be quiet. Then to ground ourselves by feeling our place of sitting, our feet on ground, our natural breathing. At first anxious thoughts and worries may seem to increase, but this is just us becoming more aware of what was actually going on (sometimes, there is so much noise in our heads, we don’t even realise it’s noisy).

So don't give up if worries seem to increase, but sit patiently, not holding onto them, not pushing them away: we don't need to judge our own thoughts and feelings: we don't 'consider right or wrong' when sitting.

If we don't hold on or try to push away these thoughts and feelings, they will settle and we'll become aware of something deeper: something 'underneath' that just keeps sitting. The sense of anxiety can become more like a physical sensation at this point: this is not a problem but just means we are becoming more aware of how we are 'holding' the tension in our body and then it is clearer what to do. The sense of worry in our guts can be allowed to relax as we become aware of it.

What arises for a person as they go deeper is just what is needed at that moment: there are no 'rights and wrongs' – so we don't need to 'aim' for a state of mind.

When I make this effort, over time I seem to become aware that the worry or concern is part of a deeper connection with other beings and existence. Although I feel unable to help, the very wish to help is what connects us.

Although the wish to help is at heart pure, it can get distorted by anxiety and a wish to control things too much. When this happens I find I often underestimate the spiritual resources others have. But if I keep up my own practice there is a deepening trust, that what I find within myself – the deeper 'self' that just keeps sitting – is not a personal thing,

but shared with all beings. The Truth is ‘with’ me in an intimate way, and somehow we know that Truth is also ‘with’ other beings – in fact it is so close that we are often not aware of it.

This is the beginning of a trust that this refuge is available to each individual and responds to their needs, and recognising this starts to take away that sense of over-responsibility, that driven sense that ‘I must always be doing something to help’. We cannot control whether loved ones live or die, but we can have a deeper trust that they have their own intimate access to the truth. If we show this trust when we are with other people they can learn to trust it for themselves. In trusting that we know the Truth, we can trust that the Truth is ‘there’ for other beings.

Poetry & Zen Practice

Alex Reed

—Hexham, Northumberland—UK—

This is a revised version of a talk given in February 2020 on a Retreat at Throssel Hole Buddhist Abbey, which included an exploration of poetry and contemplative writing.

The American poet and Zen practitioner Jane Hirshfield has described poetry as a “potential path of awareness”.¹ In this article I’ll discuss some of my own experiences of reading and writing poetry and reflect on why this has become important in my life. In doing so, I also hope to highlight some of the ways in which poetry has become relevant to my Buddhist practice.

But first, I want to issue a disclaimer: although I’ve written poetry and practiced Zen for several years, I don’t lay claim to expertise in either. Perhaps it is a feature of both activities that one always feels like a novice? So what I’m about to share are just a few observations and reflections from my own limited viewpoint.

I've always enjoyed writing. When I first started, this was mostly academic articles relating to my work in mental health services. After a while I began to feel this academic style was a bit dry, that it lacked emotional resonance. Working in psychiatry was a privileged situation in that people would often share their private fears, hopes and dreams with me, sometimes speaking of things they'd never said out loud before. I wanted to find a more personal way of writing about this intimate work, a form of expression which had a greater sense of being, as Jane Hirshfield has said of poetry, "dipped in the mind of openness and connection".²

Also during this period my late wife Jan was becoming increasingly disabled by multiple sclerosis. The experience of living with the uncertainties and losses that accompany long-term illness can be confusing, difficult to navigate from day-to-day, and hard to talk about for fear of amplifying pain by over-focusing on problems. It was during this time, about fifteen or twenty years ago, that I started writing poetry.

As with Zen practice, it is difficult for me to explain precisely what it was about poetry that felt important. I imagine that many readers have at some time been asked by a curious friend, "Why do you meditate?" And often, this is followed by a related question, "Does meditation help you?" Now there are several answers we might give to these very reasonable questions. But while I find that the answers I hear myself giving are more-or-less accurate, none of them seem to adequately convey exactly how it is.

When Jan died, a close relative would often ask if my Buddhist practice, “brought me comfort?” It was difficult to say, but generally, I’d simply answer ‘yes’ so as not to appear obtuse. But this simple question opened up other questions that I found myself reflecting on: *Does a practice in which we try to face the actuality of life bring comfort in the midst of grief?*

Well, yes – in a strange way – but perhaps not in that way my kindly relative meant. And was it even ‘comfort’ for my ‘bewildered self’ that I was seeking? Yes and no. More than any other experience I have encountered (possibly apart from witnessing the birth of my two children), grief revealed to me very directly the essential mystery of life. Practice provided a way of being inside this mystery without (completely) drowning; paying attention to our lives by sitting in meditation seems to me to have a **clarifying** effect; and this clarification seems to reveal what is to be done, and just as importantly, what it might be wiser not to do.

And returning to poetry, when I first started writing there may have been a basic therapeutic benefit in externalising my inner thoughts and feelings by putting them down on paper. But it’s difficult to honestly say whether writing about loss made me feel ‘better’ or ‘worse’. I think Cynthia Fuller put it well when she wrote that poetry can ‘make us feel better’, even when it doesn’t allow us to, pretend that we’re ‘all right’.³

As with sitting in meditation, poetry may help us to view our lives a little more clearly and deeply, and this act of intimate witnessing seems somehow to be sustaining or even affirming. Jane Hirshfield writes,

“We turn towards poems in times of loss or despair, toward their writing or their reading, because even poems that face darkness carry the beauty of original seeing. A good poem is possibility’s presence made visible.”⁴

Or as the American poet Galway Kinnell has said, “the secret title of every good poem might be ‘Tenderness’”.⁵

One of the things that intrigued me (and continues to do so) was that I found I was often surprised by what I’d written. It wasn’t simply a matter of expressing what I already knew was going on, inside me and around me. Through writing, I discovered new things about what I thought and felt. And occasionally, on a very good day, it seemed possible to say something about very familiar, day-to-day experience in a way that felt both new and more ‘true’ than might be easily said in conversation.

The poet Linda France writes:

“Perhaps the most important teaching of a poem, as a time-based art form, is impermanence – both in the writing of it and the reading. It’s a time to stop time briefly and say, ‘this is what this is like’, to

investigate experience and translate it into words – to create a simulacrum of that experience, not the experience itself; in Buddhist terms, a finger pointing at the moon.”⁶

So perhaps both poetry and practice provide a sense of clarification, of seeing that ‘this is what it’s like’ in a particular moment.

I’ve also found that writing poetry, at least in the early stage, before all of the seemingly endless revision and shaping needs to be done, as with meditation, requires finding a way of somehow ‘getting myself out of the way’ so that my mind is more still and receptive to words, images and connections that seem both unusual and true.

This stilling of the mind relates to what John Keats described as negative capability, in a famous letter to his two brothers written in 1817.⁷ Keats said of a mutual acquaintance that he was, “a man who cannot feel he has a personal identity unless he has made up his Mind about everything ... he will never come at a truth as long as he lives; because he is always trying at it”. Keats remarked that negative capability, by contrast, requires us to be, “capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason – you have to get into that state of mind.”

Following the advice of more experienced poets, I’ve recently experimented with getting up very early to write.

This is a time when my mind is still relatively uncluttered by the business of the day and seems to be floating in some liminal place between dreaming and wakefulness, in which, as Basil Bunting has said, “We know neither where we are nor why.”⁸

Again, this is similar to the experience of early morning meditation, when the mind seems cleaner and more still.

Another aspect of writing poetry that makes the activity compelling for me is to do with a sense of vulnerability and risk. With some poems I’ve written I’ve felt, “I can’t say that – it’s too near the grain”, or “what would people think of me if they were to read this?”

Here’s an example:

Woken by your cough

More in spite than in hope
of sleep, I skulk to the spare room,
leaving you to the restless
rhythm of your breaths.
Too tired to search for sheets,
my bare shoulders itch
against the mattress
of this makeshift bed.
Thoughts of where we’ve ended up,
and of dragging ourselves through
those bleary tomorrows –
I wish it was different.

I wish you were not ill.
It dawns – flame licking dry wood –
I live in a state of rage.

I haven't chosen to include this poem because I think it's particularly good, but rather as an example in which I found I'd written something that felt 'true' but hard to admit to myself, never mind to others. What was expressed in the poem went against the conventional stereotype of 'selfless' caring. I had a sense that if I was going to say something about the experience of being a carer that went beyond cliché, I needed to be willing to risk saying those things that aren't usually spoken of but might be familiar to others who have been in a similar situation – many carers will have experienced those frequent nights of broken sleep. I also took some reassurance from novelist Jonathon Franzen's remark that to create good work the writer always risks shaming themselves.⁹

And is this not also so with practice? That to go 'deeper', we must take risks in facing those aspects of ourselves we would prefer to keep hidden away? That arriving at "a condition of complete simplicity", as T.S. Eliot wrote, costs "not less than everything".¹⁰

There are many different kinds of poems, of course, although most tend to be fairly brief, using a concentrated use of words to 'capture' experience. A poem therefore requires a slower, more attentive or meditative reading (as with Dharma writings), and many poems can seem cryptic

or puzzling on first reading. But it's also poetry's capacity to express something familiar in a concentrated and unusual way, to 'tell the truth but tell it slant' which makes it precious, and this may be why many of us turn to poems in times of extremity – when we fall in love, for instance, or in moments of crisis or loss. We live in a death-denying culture where it can be difficult to speak about the complexities of grief in an open and straightforward way. Poetry can speak to us in a powerful way about our intimate and difficult to express experiences.

The arranging of words in unusual ways, and the often-fragmented form and mood of contemporary poetry can be off-putting for many. But this strangeness or oddity can also convey our experience in a more authentic way than is achieved through more conventional modes of expression.

A more oblique, apparently less 'logical' way of writing is also characteristic of some Buddhist texts, of course. This seems particularly true in the work of Great Master Dōgen, whose writings have particular significance for our tradition. Now, I am no Dōgen scholar, and a deeper appreciation of his work requires a lifetime's study, but I find that when read in the way that one might approach a poem – slowly, with a less analytic, more meditative mind, his rather convoluted, paradoxical statements convey a sense of what non-dualistic perception or 'original seeing' may be like:

“Flowing is like spring. Spring with all its numerous aspects is called flowing. When spring

flows there is nothing outside of spring. Study this in detail.

Spring invariably flows through spring. Although flowing is not spring, flowing occurs throughout spring. Thus, flowing is completed at just this moment of spring. Examine this fully, coming and going.”¹¹

Through the medium of language, Dōgen points to a way of experiencing life which is prior to, or beyond language and fixed conceptions of time.

With both poetry and Zen, I find that I’ve become committed to practices that are, in a sense, fundamentally mysterious to me. This is perhaps the very reason why both feel necessary and enlivening.

Notes

1. Jane Hirshfield, *Felt in its Fullness: An Interview*. Tricycle Magazine, <https://tricycle.org/trikedaily/felt-its-fullness>.
2. Jane Hirshfield, *Nine Gates: Entering the Mind of Poetry*. (New York: Harper, 1998), p.209.
3. Cynthia Fuller, *Preface*, in Julia Darling & Cynthia Fuller (eds.) *The Poetry Cure*. (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 2005), p.9.
4. Jane Hirshfield, *The world has not yet become ash*. Interview with Jai Hamid Bashir, 2020 (<http://columbiajournal.org/interview-jane-hirshfield>)
5. Galway Kinnell, cited in Jane Hirshfield, *Nine Gates: Entering the Mind of Poetry*, p.211.
6. Linda France, *Heartwork*. (Glasgow: Playspace, 2012), p.4.
7. John Keats, Letter to his brothers, 21 December 1817, from <http://www.mrbauld.com/negcap.html>.

- [8.](#) Basil Bunting, *Briggflatts*. (Northumberland: Bloodaxe, 2009 edition), p. 40.
- [9.](#) Jonathon Franzen, Introduction to *The Best American Essays 2016*. New York: Harcourt.
- [10.](#) T.S. Eliot, *The Four Quartets*. (London: Faber, 2001 edition)
- [11.](#) Great Master Dōgen. *Moon in a Dewdrop*, (New York: North Point Press, 1985), p.80.

A Donkey's Lesson

Fer de Deken

—*Apeldoorn–Netherlands*—

I love donkeys. They so belong in the Spanish landscape. A little dreamy and very willing, until you overstep their boundary. Then they will show you how stubborn they can be and that is no laughing matter. I recognise myself in them, but I never expected that a donkey would give me the most important spiritual lesson of my life.

This is how it began. In 2005 I walked from Vezelay to Le Puy, a rarely used path with every 4 days or so another pilgrim. So lots of space to walk in silence. It happened near Issy-l'Eveque, where I experienced a oneness and wholeness with what is and a knowing that all is fundamentally well. At first I was so shocked that in my mind I consulted a diagnostic psychiatric reference book. What was happening to me? It was sweet and beautiful and confusing at the same time. Three weeks later I finished my hike and got on the train in Cahors and realised that this was the most wonderful moment that had ever happened to me. It took me half a year before I dared to talk about it with Rev. Baldwin. He reassured me that this was no psychiatric disorder but an

experience of wholeness that can occur when we are training for a while. This was an early experience in my case as I did not yet know of a context in which to place this experience; hence my shock.

The experience was so beautiful and overwhelming that I thought: “I want this again!”

In 2007 I got that chance. I was walking the Camino de la Plata from Seville onwards. Now I did understand that some conditions were necessary to make these kind of experiences possible. Becoming still, emptying the mind, letting go of the concerns about home etc. Usually this happened as a matter of course to me after a couple of hundred kilometres. After starting out, the well-known pilgrim’s life became familiar once again. Eating, sleeping, a bit of washing and each day around 25 km of walking.

After about 200 km I thought “Well, this is it, it can happen now. I am ready for it.” But no, nada, nothing. Yes, I was enjoying the walking and the contacts, but experience ... nothing. After 250 km I thought “It should really come now, I have met all the conditions!” But nothing happened. Of course, I thought “It’s because I am expecting it to come. So, expect nothing!” To the rhythm of my steps I now had the mantra ‘ex-step-pect-step-no-step-thing’. For kilometre after kilometre. I was quite busy in my head with that. After 15 km I realised: no, this also doesn’t work. There must be silence so stop thinking. After 5 km I found out that this intention did not work either. Now what?? I felt desperation

coming up. This was never going to work. And then the thought “forget it, nothing will come from this whatever you do, give it up” arose. Stop wanting something, forget it. Enjoy the walking! But these commands also did not have the required result. Meanwhile I had arrived at the Embalse de Alcantara, which has a beautiful new inn. It was early in the year so I phoned the caretaker. He told me: “You’ll find the key on the flat pebble roof underneath three stones”. It sounds easy but try and find three stones in a labyrinth of thousands of others.

The next morning, after having put the key back, I peacefully walked out of the valley up to the blue sky in the direction of Canaveral. Having arrived at the top I saw three donkeys standing in a fenced-in little meadow. The mother had just given birth to a foal. With hair as soft as a newly hatched chick’s down. With colours from beige to deep dark brown. And his stiff legs, still locked, emphasising with each step his wobbliness, makes him so comical and invites me to stop and feed him some stale bread. I put my hand with the bread through the fence and start sweet-talking. How beautiful he is, how lovely his mom, his legs, etc. My attention is below my belly button and then spreading, I look somewhat passed him. Without thinking I let the words roll out from my lower abdomen and let them come together in many coloured beads on a cord winding around his upright ears. Ears that in the early, still low morning light have a sort of halo in their fine hairs. In that atmosphere of kindness he felt free to explore and with stiff steps he comes closer. Though it is not the bread but my hand that tempts him and

with an unreal warm soft snort his nose touches my hand.
When I look surprised the moment has passed immediately
because of the act of looking.



The donkeys and foal

For me this is a key metaphor for what I have come to understand:

Don't look for anything, because if you do, it disappears.

Don't try to understand it, because by grabbing with words, it dissolves.

You cannot force it, because it comes whenever it pleases to.

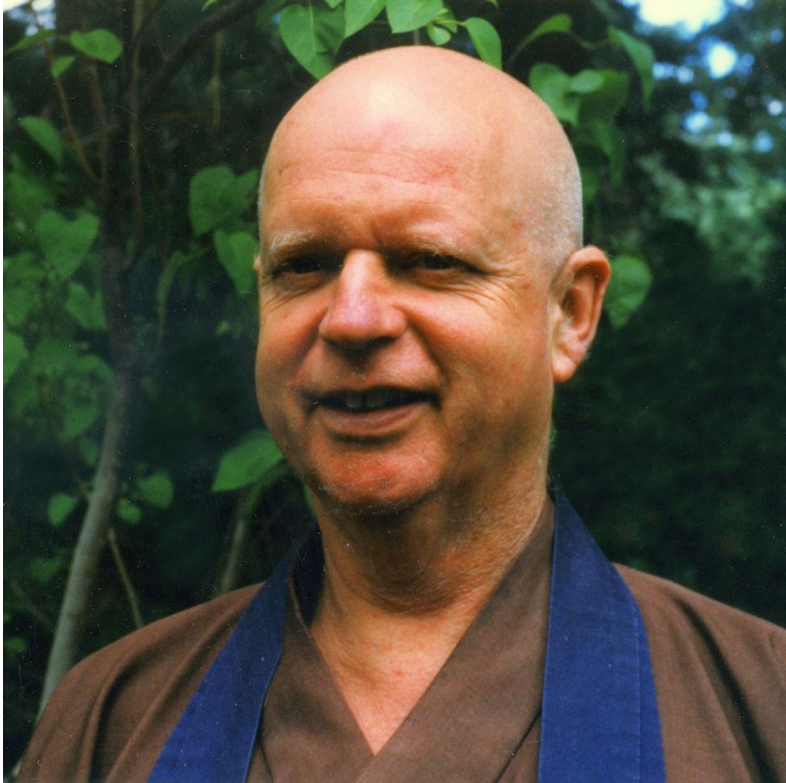
You cannot tempt it, because it is insensitive to temptation.

The only thing you can do is to attentively take the position of being and being aware.

Translated by Nanette Idzerda.

News of the Order

Obituary for Rev. Master Teigan



Rev. Master Teigan

Rev. Master Teigan Stevens passed away peacefully on the 21st of April, 2020, in Jenkintown, Pennsylvania, from complications related to Alzheimer's disease. He had lived the past few years at the Rydal Park Medical Center, near his sister, Mary. He was 86.

Rev. Master Teigan first came to Shasta Abbey for an introductory retreat in September of 1973. He took the Buddhist Precepts in March of 1975, and became a postulant in March of 1976.

Rev. Master Teigan was ordained by Rev. Master Jiyu on 10 April 1976 and transmitted by her on 1 December 1977. He spent a year in England as Prior at Throssel Hole Buddhist Priory, together with Rev. Master Rokuzan Kroenke, from September 1979 to September 1980. Upon his return to the States, he was certified as a Teacher of Buddhism in the spring of 1981 and moved to the Berkeley Buddhist Priory to be the Prior there. Many people may remember his kind and friendly presence as Prior; it was a time when a number of people lived at the temple working outside jobs and saving money to become monks at Shasta Abbey. During his tenure, the Priory moved from its location on Telegraph Avenue in Oakland to its present home in Albany on Marin Avenue.

In the spring of 1984 Rev. Master Teigan returned to Shasta Abbey and took up the post of Bursar. Rev. Master Jiyu named him a Master on 27 April 1987. He also served as Chief Precentor and choir director at the monastery, and many may remember his singing of festival offertories in his deep, rich bass voice. He also worked with the choir giving elementary instruction on how to read music, which improved the quality of the chanting and laid the groundwork for recording some of our ceremonies for sale in the gift shop and mail order business.

After Rev. Master Jiyu's death, Rev. Master Teigan moved to the North Cascades Buddhist Priory and then in July of 2005 on to Bainbridge Island in Washington state to be the meditation group chaplain there. He also spearheaded a "Third Refuge" initiative, which entailed traveling and meeting with people in North America and Europe who were interested in co-housing/cooperative care for the sick and elderly and generally fostering a spirit of care and assistance among Sangha members at individual temples. A core group continued to meet with him at Pine Mountain Buddhist Temple for many years afterwards. In the Spring of 2016 Rev. Master Teigan returned to North Cascades Priory for rehabilitation from an injury. A couple of years later he moved to Pennsylvania to reside at a care center near his sister.

We gratefully remember his many years of service to the Sangha and his kind friendship and spiritual guidance to many trainees, both lay and monastic.

News of the Order

USA and Canada

Shasta Abbey

—*Shasta Abbey, CA–USA*—

Monastic Visitors: Rev. Master Kōten continued his visit until 16th March, when he had to return to Canada (Rev. Master Aurelian and John Hruska drove down to pick him up). He spent a week at Berkeley Buddhist Priory, and Rev. Master Kinrei brought him back and spent two nights with us. While with us, Rev. Master Kōten offered a number of Dharma talks and spent time with individual monks. We were also glad to welcome back in residence Rev. Master Haryo, who returned on 12th March from England and a family visit.

Coronavirus: We offer merit and sympathy to all those affected by the coronavirus pandemic. In keeping with local health department regulations, the monastery closed to visitors on 14th March and cancelled our annual Jukai retreat. In order to make good use of a quieter schedule, we added a 4:00 afternoon sitting. We are grateful to all who have offered their support and assistance in many ways.

Because of the closure, we began making use of online video conferencing programs for talks and discussions. Our first attempt was with the local book group, who are studying this term Master Hsing Yun's commentary on the *Diamond Sutra, Describing the Indescribable*. The Saturday afternoon class was our next effort, and has proved popular, sometimes as many as 40 viewers and many from some distance. On 3rd April Rev. Master Meian hosted a meeting of all those who had registered for the Jukai retreat. Many people have expressed gratitude for these new teaching venues, and we anticipate continuing to use them in some

manner. We wish to thank Friends of Shasta Abbey for a kind gift of a new computer that can be dedicated to this purpose.

The closure of the monastery also motivated us to begin videoing our Sunday Dharma talks and posting them online as YouTube videos. Rev. Master Meian did the first one on 15th March. In recent months the monastery has also been posting recorded Dharma talks from our online archive. All these talks may be found on YouTube under [shastaabbeydharma](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCshastaabbeydharma) talks.

Ceremonies: A lay resident, Mike Foster, who was already here at the time of closure, received the Precepts from Rev. Master Meian on 24th March. Mike had come for a several month stay leading up to Jukai.

We continued our schedule of annual ceremonies, including the festival memorial for Great Master Keizan (see photo) on 19th April, as well as Wesak on 17th May. We also offered several transfer of merit ceremonies, from which merit was dedicated to all affected by the coronavirus.



Great Master Keizan scroll

We also held two funerals, one for Rosemary Dyke, a long-time Mount Shasta lay minister well-known for her love of rescue animals and feeding of feral cats, on 9th May.



Rosemary Dyke altar setup

Then on 22nd May we celebrated a funeral for Rev. Master Teigan Stevens, who spent many years in residence at the monastery (see [obituary](#) in Order News) We plan public memorials for both once the virus restrictions have been lifted.



Rev. Master Teigan funeral

Postulant Re-entry: Mike Summers of Portland, Oregon, who had been a postulant here for some months last year, re-entered the postulancy on Tuesday, 12th May. Rev. Master Leon, who will be ordaining Mike, wishes him to undergo some of his training with our community.

Hermitage Improvements: We have made some improvements at our Compassionate Friend Hermitage, finishing the renovation of the original cabin, which provides two additional bedrooms and toilet facilities.

—*Rev. Master Oswin*

Lions Gate Buddhist Priory

—*Lytton, British Columbia—Canada—*

As with everywhere else, much has changed here. We have closed the Priory to visitors and cancelled all scheduled retreats until further notice, and we have ceased any unnecessary visits to the village of Lytton or anywhere else. We are endeavouring to keep in touch via emails, increased phone calls, and daily Dharma Talks which can be found on our website. Reverend Master Kōten has offered a series of Dharma Talks entitled “Virus.” Please feel free to call us at any time, whether it’s with a specific question or problem, or just to say hello and to feel a sense of connection. Our phone number is: 250-999-3911, and our email is lionsgatebuddhistpriory@google.com

Here on the mountain, we are continuing our daily monastic practice of meditation, services, discussions, and ordinary daily life. In the evening before retiring, we always recite Vespers and offer the merit thereof for the peace and healing of all beings in our community and throughout the world.

Spring has been slow to appear this year. We experienced some really cold temperatures in January and February along with winter’s challenges: frozen water pipes, vehicles in the ditch, etc. Unseasonable cold temperatures and snow continued until the first

week of April. But now the spring has arrived. New growth, robins, flowers...we even saw our first bear the other day!

In mid-March, as the pandemic began to take hold here in North America, Reverend Aurelian and John drove to Shasta Abbey to pick up Reverend Master Kōten from Shasta Abbey where he had been staying. We made it back to Canada just as the border was closing, then we were in complete quarantine for several weeks. We are very grateful to everyone who brought us food and supplies during this time.

We are very pleased that we have finished construction on Mandala Hall, which is at Fearlessness Peak opposite our large Kwan Yin statue. Now that the weather is warmer, we have begun using the hall regularly for ceremonies and meditation. Many evenings we go there for meditation and to recite Vespers. On Sunday, May 10, we recited the *Shurangama Litany* and circumambulated the statue.

—*Rev. Master Aurelian*

News of the Order

UK and Europe

Throssel Hole Buddhist Abbey

—Northumberland, England—UK—

The monastery closed for guests and retreats on 12th March in response to the coronavirus pandemic requirements. We have been maintaining our practice and schedule and have been looking for ways to maintain contact with all who are now unable to come and visit. In addition to our usual phone calls and emails we have started a blog, extra talks on our website, filming/ recording some talks and ceremonies and use of cloud-based conferencing services. We were especially sorry to cancel our family weekend and Jukai for this year. We continue to keep the situation under review and will open again for visits as soon as we safely can and for retreats at a later time than that.

Monastic news: Community life continues and we have been delighted to welcome two new postulants while we have been closed. On April 18th Pete Corbett entered, followed on the 25th by Max Zorzan. Pete is from Guildford in Surrey, and has been attending retreats at Throssel since the early 2000s. He is also well-known at Reading Priory and Great Ocean Dharma Refuge. Max, born in Ethiopia, has Italian nationality, and until recently was living and working in Leicester where he was introduced to our practice at Turning Wheel Buddhist Temple.



Max and Pete

In May, novice Rev. Zenshin Dijker decided to return to lay life. He plans to find work in the Netherlands and to go to university next year. We thank him for all he has done in his two years as a novice and wish him well for the future.

On May 10th, during monks' sesshin, Rev. Kanshin Lucas completed his Head Novice's Dharma Ceremony. He successfully answered questions from the community on the following verse:

One day Master Kyozan Ejaku asked Master Isan Reiyu on Mount Isan in the Tan District: "When hundreds, thousands, and tens of thousands of circumstances are coming at me at once, what can I do?" Master Isan replied: "Blue is different from yellow. Something long is different from something short. All beings have their own position in the Universe. They do not have any interest in us." Master Kyozan prostrated himself before the Master.

We congratulate Rev. Kanshin and thank him for his training and example during his head novice term.



Rev. Master Leandra with Rev. Kanshin

On 30th June, postulant Charlie Swallow was ordained by Rev. Master Leandra and given the name Rev. Myōren, meaning Excellent Lotus. We offer her our congratulations and good wishes for her continuing training.



Rev. Myōren with Rev. Master Leandra

Festivals and Ceremonies: We have continued with our fortnightly Reading of the Precepts ceremonies and our monthly festivals and celebrated Wesak as usual on the first Sunday in May, with decoration of the Ceremony hall and cloister with flags and a beautiful altar. The absence of guests, and particularly families and children was particularly felt; the ceremony was recorded for others to be able to join us remotely, along with Rev. Master Berwyn's [talk](#) after.



Wesak Festival

We held a Memorial Service in May to transfer merit for all who have died and are suffering during the pandemic. Rev. Master Mugō was celebrant for the service and gave a talk afterwards which was transcribed and is included in this Journal [here](#).

Memorial service: Rev. Master Teigan died on 21st April in Pennsylvania, US. He was one of the monks who served as prior here in the early days of Throssel, just three years after his ordination by Rev. Master Jiyu at Shasta, and had visited here in later years. An obituary for him is included in this Journal. We held a memorial service in remembrance of him on 24th May led by Rev. Master Mugō who had known and trained with him for many years. Our sympathies go to his family and the many of our sangha who knew and trained with him.



Memorial Service

Community events: While we have been closed we have been coming together as a community more often; once a week for a meditation afternoon and on Friday afternoons for community work in the grounds and gardens. This has involved a range of work due to the flush of early summer growth and some felling of trees weakened from being too close to others. Getting them to fall safely is quite an art – and also sometimes needs some brute force. Here are a group attempting to topple a tree caught in others’ branches.

De Dharmatoevlucht

—*Apeldoorn, The Netherlands*—

Like most countries in the world, The Netherlands was affected by the coronavirus crisis and the country was put into a ‘mild’ lockdown mid-March. Although we could have chosen to stay open, as most shops and public places stayed open during the lockdown and few restrictions with regard to mobility were enforced on the population, we decided to close the temple as a precautionary measure as the situation was quite tense in the beginning when the virus was spreading rapidly. We closed two days after we celebrated the ‘official’ opening of the temple at the

new location and stayed closed for a period of 7 weeks. We opened our doors again on Tuesday the 5th of May, which is the day in which The Netherlands celebrates Liberation Day (the end of the 2nd World War), so it felt like a very appropriate day.

As the coronavirus crisis in The Netherlands is coming to its end but not yet completely over, we will have to keep social distancing for the coming months which means that a maximum of 6 people at a time can come to the temple for meditation, ceremonies and social gatherings. As the temple has a reasonably large congregation, we have put in place a pre-registration system so that every Sangha member has the opportunity to come to the temple once or twice a week. We are glad that the virus has made no fatal casualties in the Dutch Sangha.

During our closed period we have been live streaming 4 meditations a week on our YouTube channel which was very much appreciated by the lay congregation and we plan to keep this going now at a rate of 2 times a week. We also set up a digital platform in which Sangha members can stay in contact with the temple, the meditation groups and with each other. It is a kind of private Facebook and is one more pathway in which the Sangha can stay together. The Utrecht meditation group continued their Monday evening meditation evenings by means of Zoom.

As face masks have been made mandatory when travelling by public transport and abroad, one of our Sangha members has made some for us; they bring home the unusual times we live in.



Buddha statue at the temple with new fountain

—Rev. Master Baldwin

Dragon Bell Temple

—South Zeal, Devon—UK—

Times change and with them their demands.

With the news that our Temple had to close for some time due to the epidemic, members of the congregation asked if we could do some things online. As an initially reluctant participant I am grateful to David Fry for setting up our Skype community, and for people joining in with patience through the usual glitches.

An elderly friend of the Temple, Wendy Ruthroff, who was a member of Reb Anderson's Sangha had asked that we conduct her funeral and when she died in April, Devon Ashwood, her good friend, set up a Zoom call that the south west members of that Sangha could join in.

A few days later we held a funeral at the Temple, for Chnea Lim, the brother of Hooi Geok Lim, a long time South West Sangha member. Our custom, that we can have a funeral service and offer for the deceased without the body having to be present is an act of compassion, highlighted in our present circumstances.

We have set up a Skype class on Sunday mornings, following our usual festivals and ceremonies, and on Wednesday evenings we have a class to explore our morning service scriptures. This seems to be working well. We also have a drop in lunch times Monday to Friday for half an hour, to keep in touch, a way for us to very basically take refuge in our sangha.

We have all physically sat in the same room together before setting out into this new form, and there is a sense of trust coming from that experience that enables us to work with this recent form.

Possibly the concept of a much larger room is being shown.

—Rev. Master Myfanwy

Great Ocean Dharma Refuge

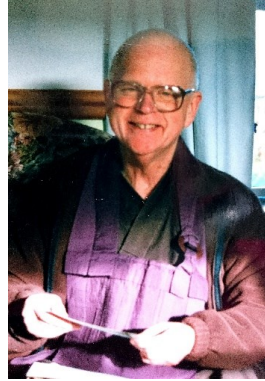
—Pembrokeshire–Wales—



In late November Reverend Caitlin travelled to Shasta Abbey for an 18 month stay. We thank Reverend Master Meian and the community there for their warm welcome, and for extending this opportunity to Reverend Caitlin.

In May, a service was held at Great Ocean Dharma Refuge for Reverend Master Teigan Stevens, one of the most senior members of the Order,

who had passed away in the USA. The service was held on the day of his cremation in Philadelphia. Shortly after Great Ocean Dharma Refuge was founded, he came for an extended private retreat. A part of his personal, daily routine was to circumambulate the Temple building in walking meditation. This always felt like a blessing for the Temple and for all who live and train here. We will remember and be grateful to Reverend Master Teigan for the example of his gentle-hearted training, and for his friendship and support.



In late March, Rev. Master Mokugen spent three weeks with her family in Lincolnshire to be with her brother Kris who was ill, and who passed away on April 4th. A public funeral was not possible at this time of pandemic, but private services were held at the time of his death and continued at Great Ocean Dharma Refuge at the time of cremation. Grateful thanks are offered to all those whose kindness and support was of great help at this time, and also for the support Rev. Master Mokugen received at the time of a routine operation and convalescence – thankfully now recovered from.

At Great Ocean the warmest and sunniest spring on record has cheered us during this complex time of the Covid-19 virus. We have continued to offer the merit of our meditation and training to all those who are ill and in distress due to the effects of this virus.

We look forward to the Temple being open without restrictions, and meanwhile please feel free to continue to contact

us for Dharma support and sanzen by phoning or writing to Great Ocean Dharma Refuge. We are very grateful for your continued support which is so helpful at this time.

With bows, and wishing that all may be well and healthy.

—*Rev. Master Mokugen*

Norwich Zen Buddhist Priory

—*Norwich-UK*—

The Priory closed to visitors on 17th March, in response to the coronavirus pandemic. It seem that there is no news as such to report, but actually the altered landscape of our training in ordinary everyday life during this extra-ordinary time probably merits the description “news”.

The life of the Priory has continued, with a near-normal schedule of meditation, ceremonies, teaching and Sangha meetings being maintained and shared online, using the Zoom app. We have been meeting together for morning meditation and Short Morning Service on five days a week. We have also continued with our usual meetings on the evenings of Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday, as well as on Sunday morning. Details of these events have been shared through the Priory’s email group. We have also been able to offer newcomers introductions to our practice online.

Indeed, the Sangha seems to be flourishing in this online form, with all events being attended by considerably more people than were able to come along to the Priory in person. Not only have we welcomed newcomers, but we have also been able to resume connections with people who had been part of our Sangha but then moved away from Norwich. So well-received have these online meetings been that we are planning to maintain a Zoom element to all our events after people can once again attend the Priory in person. So it may well be that our way of holding events

at the Norwich Priory will be changed forever by this pandemic and we can continue to welcome an extended Sangha.

Although the Priory has been physically closed, there has been much one-to-one contact between the Prior and Sangha members, usually via video calls. We are grateful that the technology has enabled us to remain interconnected at this time of physically isolating from others.

Sangha initiatives: It was a pleasure to see, early in the lockdown, a couple of initiatives from the Sangha here. The first was to form a network of practical support for those Sangha members who needed to self-isolate. Thank you to everyone who volunteered to be part of that. Secondly, as a way of bringing a sense of connection to our individual home-based practices, the Sangha shared photos of their home altars online. These have been consolidated into [a gallery page on our website](#).

Thanks: With people no longer coming through the door of the Priory, there is not the opportunity to leave donations in our Alms Bowl at the end of an event. So I am extremely grateful to everyone who has started to offer financial support to the Priory online and to those who have continued with their regular online donations. The work of the Priory in offering the Dharma seems to be more needed and appreciated than ever just now. We depend entirely on donations for our ongoing existence and so any financial support that is offered is greatly appreciated. Thanks also to those people who have left food offerings for the Priory.

It has been inspiring to see the Sangha's commitment to practice during this challenging time and it has been a privilege to be able to offer support and train together.

—*Rev. Master Leoma*

Telford Buddhist Priory

—Telford, Shropshire—UK—

Many of us are trying to provide our congregations with some continuity of practice through online meetings. The picture below shows evening meditation and evening office at Telford Buddhist Priory. The altar with lit candles and incense is shown on people's screens and during the meditation periods one of the gongs can be heard being hit gently every five minutes.



Rev. Saïdo used to sing the Office but lately plays an MP3 version of the *Rules for Meditation* at the beginning of the period and Evening Office at the end. We are very grateful to Throssel Hole Buddhist Abbey for putting these on their website so they can be easily downloaded by anyone. The photo was taken using a remote control by the Prior (the lockdown rules have not been broken).

We have also celebrated an online Wesak for the first here at the Priory with Karen Richards presenting in her house in Telford and Chris Hughes singing the offertory in Audlem with

the help of Liew Teh who co-hosted from another part of Telford. The picture shows the altar and the lotus petals scattered by the celebrant on his own in the Priory Meditation hall.



It is strange doing this in a state of isolation but hearing a variety of voices helps. It is notable that many people attend the online meetings and now that we are used to them, they will continue after the lockdown ends. It makes it possible for people who are far away or have difficulty physically getting here to practice together. Another experiment has been to have a private online meeting for someone to see an offering being made at the Priory or just to have a virtual tour. It can help with the isolation people are experiencing at the moment.

—Rev. Master Saido

Turning Wheel Buddhist Temple

—*East Midlands—UK—*

Like many temples, we closed our doors to visitors in mid-March. This has been a very challenging time for all of us, and even though people haven't been able to visit, it seemed particularly important that we try to help and support each other and stay connected, and to help each other keep up our practice.

Although the local Sangha haven't been able to meet face-to-face, we have been able to keep in touch by email and phone calls. In addition, like many organisations across the world, we have been having online meetings via Zoom. This has included morning meditation and morning service five days a week, as well as our Wednesday and Thursday evening meetings.

Meeting online is certainly not the same as meeting in person, but whilst we are not able to do that it is an excellent way of keeping in touch with each other and with the practice. It has taken us a while to find out how to best arrange our meetings, and no doubt that will continue to evolve.

One of the unexpected advantages of switching to online meetings is that people can join us from wherever they are, and are not limited by the geography of being near to the temple. So as well as Sangha members from Leicester and the surrounding areas, we have also been regularly joined by members of the Nottingham group, as well as Sangha members from Chesterfield and elsewhere in Derbyshire, from Leeds, and even from the Wirral.

Now that we have started having online meetings, it seems clear that we will be carrying on with them, even after we are able to meet in person, so that those who aren't local can still join us. We are not sure at the moment quite how we will combine physical meetings with online participants, but no doubt there will be a way!

Anyone familiar with our practice is very welcome to join us, and if you contact us via the temple website, (www.turningwheel.org.uk) we can let you know the meeting details.

Celebrating Wesak Together Online: It was lovely to have so many people join our online celebration of Wesak, the Festival of the Buddha's Birth, on Saturday the 9th of May. There were 20 of us altogether and we started the morning with two meditation periods, with walking meditation in between. For the festival itself, Rev. Aiden was celebrant in the temple's meditation hall as usual, and we had a 'backing track' which was played so that everyone could join in from where they were. This started with the gongs for the initial candle offering and dedication, followed by the ringdown and signals for the six bows. We then had a recording of the community at Throssel Hole Buddhist Abbey reciting the *Scripture of Great Wisdom*, followed by recordings of the community at Shasta Abbey singing two of the Wesak Invocations, so that we could all join in with these. The reading of the Festival Offertory came next, and then the ceremony ended with six more bows, followed by the three gratitude bows.

The ceremony was followed by a Dharma Talk about some of the teaching that is contained in the story of the Buddha's Birth, and this was then followed by an opportunity to ask questions and to discuss the issues that were raised.

Building Project Update: You may remember from previous issues of the journal that we are hoping to have some building work done at the temple. The main reason for doing this is to change the layout of the downstairs rooms so that we don't need to go through the Meditation Hall to get to the kitchen or the stairs. We have continued to work through the planning and preparation phases of the project during the lockdown, although of course things have been progressing rather slower than they might have done.

We have recently received Building Control approval for our building plans, so we can now go ahead and contact builders. Our architect gave us a list of building contractors who have successfully completed projects like ours, and we have contacted each of them and sent them the plans. Several have been to visit the property, and we are now waiting to receive quotes or estimates from them.

We have some funds set aside to help with this work, but it seems likely that the actual cost may well be quite a bit higher than this. Once we have an idea of the sums involved we can start looking into how we might be able to raise the additional funds.

Shed Renovation: The shed at the bottom of the garden looks quite good from the front, but the mould and damp on the inside showed very clearly that there were problems with the other three sides. The plywood cladding was in a very bad condition, with the different layers of the plywood separating, rotting, and falling off. It was in such a state that the only solution was to re-clad those sides. At the beginning of March, a few weeks before the coronavirus restrictions began, Rev. Aiden hired a van and picked up some cladding boards and other materials in order to do this.

The recent warm and dry weather has been ideal for doing this sort of work, and the outside of the shed is now pretty much complete; all of the old plywood has been removed, and replaced with tongue-and-groove cladding boards. A concrete footing has also been laid around the bottom of the shed walls, to stop animals from burrowing underneath it.

Below is a before-and-after photo of the back corner of the shed, showing the original disintegrating boards and the new cladding. It's certainly looking a lot more weather-resistant now!

The next step will be to upgrade the inside, and then a lot of the items that are currently stored in the garage can be moved to the shed, in preparation for the building work.



The back corner of the shed, where the worst of the damp was

A big thank you: We are very grateful to all those who have continued to support the temple whilst we are closed. This has enabled us to continue covering our costs during the recent months of the lockdown, and is very much appreciated.

Thank you to all those who are so generously supporting the temple through your financial donations and food donations, in addition to the support of your practice.

We look forward to welcoming you back to the temple as soon as we are able to.

—Rev. Master Aiden

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For details of meditation groups, your nearest priory, contact the Guestmaster at Throssel Hole Buddhist Abbey, or in the US, Shasta Abbey.

Further Information

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As Buddhism grows in the West, we wish to share the Buddha's Teaching through our Journal; we also share our experience of practicing the Buddha's Way, thus encouraging and supporting each other's training. Lastly, the Journal helps to keep friends and members informed of activities and events.

The views expressed in these pages are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of the Order as a whole.

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