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Kwan Yin altar in Lytton Chinese Joss House Museum

Winter 2024 Issue

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Editorial

The Journal of the Order of Buddhist Contemplatives was first published in 1986, and has evolved over the years from a subscriber-only printed booklet to the present PDF, E-book and online versions with free access for all.

Its future is regrettably uncertain at present – for a variety of reasons, including the reduced number of monks in the Order, including at Throssel Hole Buddhist Abbey where the *Journal* has been produced since 1998, and the fact that all Order monks now have multiple responsibilities which take up their time.

After discussions among senior monks, and a canvass of monks and lay ministers, we have determined that it is unlikely we can continue the *Journal* in its current form as a quarterly issue. We know this will be disappointing to many readers – the OBC monastics included – however we realize that with almost all temples of the Order presently having their own website featuring Dharma teaching and news, there is no shortage in availability of the kind of content which has been found in the *Journal* up to now.

It is also the case that most temples are offering online retreats or ceremonies using Zoom, so access to Dharma activities within the OBC is greater than it ever has been;

there must be very few people these days who have no access to the internet. For this reason we are hopeful that those who follow and practice in the Serene Reflection Meditation Tradition, as well as anyone who takes an interest in the Order of Buddhist Contemplatives, will continue to find inspiration and guidance from the monks and lay trainees who comprise this Sangha through those very resources.

The Journal's website will continue to be online, providing an archive of articles from at least the past 10 years – since the Journal went digital. And if no new issues are to be forthcoming, the homepage will include links to the websites of all OBC temples where Dharma talks, writing and temple news, including Newsletters which can be subscribed to, can be found.

We can assure readers that the *Printed Annual of Articles* for 2024 will certainly be published and made available via lulu.com as usual sometime in January, and email subscribers will receive a notification in or before March 2025 giving an update on the future of the *Journal*.

There is always the possibility that, if there is sufficient volunteer help, regular issues in some format could be re-started at some point in the future.

With sincere thanks for your interest in and support of the *Journal* and the OBC, and with best wishes for your continuing training.

– Rev. Roland

Working Companions

Rev. Master Vivian Gruenenfelder

— *Still Flowing Water Hermitage, Dutch Flat, California – USA* —

An edited transcript of a Dharma talk given at Shasta Abbey in 2018.

You are perfect, just as you are, but you could use a little improvement.¹

This is a rather well-known, and to me stunning, quote from Shunryu Suzuki Rōshi, who was the founder of the San Francisco Zen Center. I thought I'd start this morning by talking about the 'needing a little improvement' part of this. I'll say, first, I would revise the quote: "We are perfect, just as *we* are, but *we* could use a little improvement" ('we' instead of 'you').

It's easy to recognize how we can use some improvement, and it's a commonplace image in our training and practice, the image of walking a path toward Buddhahood or Enlightenment, somewhere where we don't need improvement. We even call it 'the Path', and capitalize the P. This notion of training as walking along a path from one place

to another, to some kind of goal: this image is embedded in the most fundamental teachings of the Buddha.

After the Buddha was Enlightened, when he gave his first sermon, he talked about the four Noble Truths, which, as most of us know, are that suffering exists; it has a cause; it has an end, which is called Nirvana, and there is a path to the end of this suffering called the Noble Eightfold Path, which has eight aspects to it: right view, right intention or thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness and right meditation.

We also have any number of practices that we do. My Master used to call them the ‘tools in our toolbox’: things like the Precepts – not to kill, not to steal, not to lie, etc; the Paramitas, which are generosity, virtue, patience, energy, meditation and wisdom; the Four Wisdoms – charity, tenderness, benevolence and sympathy; the four Brahma Viharas, which are similar – loving kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, equanimity. All of these are qualities of mind and heart that we can cultivate through practice.

There’s letting go of the defiling passions, attempting to rid ourselves of afflictive emotions: greed, anger, hatred, despair – that sort of thing. As we do these practices, the notion behind what we’re doing is that this enables us to come closer and closer to Buddhahood. So we’re walking this path towards Buddhahood. We could say that delusion is converted into Enlightenment and the ordinary person into Buddha. So, we’re ordinary people, and we need to become Buddha.

Reverend Master Jiyu expressed this very well and famously in her translation of the mantra that comes at the end of the Scripture of Great Wisdom. She translated it as:

Going, going, going on beyond, and always going
on beyond, always becoming Buddha. Hail!

It's normally translated as:

Gone, gone, gone beyond, gone way beyond,
Awakened. So be it!

So you can see how she has taken something that has been placed in the past tense and presented it as something that we are doing constantly for our whole lifetime.

Now I should say – to step back a little bit – that I just listed a number of tools that are in our toolbox, and many of you are familiar with them, and so I'm not going to explain them any further this morning, but those of you who aren't familiar with them can use these as sort of tantalizing nuggets for further discovery and exploration.

Okay, so Reverend Master Jiyu has us 'going, going going on beyond'. In my own daily training, it's like I've got this project going. I'm trying to be mindful all the time. I'm trying to be mindful as to whether I'm doing all those things that I just said we could be doing as aspects of our practice. I'm reflecting on every moment as it passes. "Was I irritable? Did I lack generosity? Could I have done that more skillfully?" And all day, I'm watching my states of mind to

make sure that I'm working towards loving kindness and patience and that sort of thing. Or I'm asking myself, "Has my mindfulness lapsed? Is my every-minute meditation constant? Am I trying hard enough?", etc. So that's my own attempt to walk this path. And this is wonderful practice, isn't it? These tools that we have are beautiful, and it's wonderful to be able to have the opportunity to work on them, with them, especially together with other people. We might think of this as the path of purification, this path from delusion to enlightenment, from ordinary person to Buddhahood.

Recently, a monk of our Order pointed out to me that there's actually a shadow side to this description of walking the Path, and it's something I'd never really noticed before, I found it really helpful to take this into consideration, so I wanted to pass it on to you.

What this person said was that all this trying to be good – this trying to become something so august as Buddha, trying to remove delusion and become Enlightenment, which takes so very many kalpas, eons of kalpas – all this 'trying hard' is a trap. And this word 'trap' resonated with me. All of this is trying to achieve a goal that can never be achieved. Try as we might, we never get there. As we walk toward it, it recedes. It's a little bit like if something's an infinite distance away, any closer you get, it's still an infinite distance away.

In fact, the more we try, and the harder we work, and the more we train, and the more sincere we are, we don't get any closer to this goal, which is ever receding, and we are never good enough. All this trying, and I'm sorry to make things

worse, all this trying to be good – a good monk or a good trainee, a good practitioner – may only be an expression of self, the very self we are trying to tame as we march toward Buddhahood. Our attempts to quiet the self only reinforce it: self-absorption, leading to further self-absorption. You can see how we're in this trap. We're in a pickle. And it turns out that 'being good' is very self-centered. All the time we thought we were being good!

The bigger the self becomes, the more separate we become: a separate me walking the path trying to be good. "How well am *I* doing?" This undermines our attempts to integrate with emptiness or to recognize our interconnection born of our insubstantiality. So, again, all our attempts to be good only undermine the goal. I think of this as an occupational hazard for monks and laity alike, and a recipe for suffering. It creates suffering instead of bringing an end to it. If we go back to the Four Noble Truths, what we're up to is, there's suffering, and we're coming to know its cause so that we can bring an end to it and attain Nirvana, but all our work along the Path seems to be just adding to that suffering as we try harder and harder to be good. And, for some of us, the result of all this is irritation, frustration, anger – all those mind states we're trying to eradicate. Once again, there's the pickle. All this 'trying to become Buddha' leads to exhaustion, to hopelessness, to despair.

But if I make only one point in this talk, this is the point I want to make, and understanding this has changed my whole life of practice. This walking the Path, which is such wonderful practice, has a shadow side to it. Recognizing that

shadow side can be very helpful. This may particularly resonate with me because of my own particular kōan, which I could summarize as me incessantly asking the question, “Is this good enough?” And the answer always being, “No”.

If you’ve got a kōan like that, trying to be good really does become a trap. If you’re on the other end of the ‘pride and inadequacy’ kōan, this might come out differently for you, I don’t know. However, I said that this changed my whole life of practice. The thing that I think is really important is it didn’t change anything that I do. It simply changed my relationship to what I do. I’m not saying we shouldn’t be walking the Path. Of course we should. This is what our training is all about. Right? As Rumi says, “Keep walking, though there’s no place to get to” and ‘there’s no place to get to’ is key. I’ll come back to that point.

I’m not saying that the metaphor, the image of a path, is useless or harmful. I’m not saying that. One of the things we can see as we walk the Path, is that things actually do get better, in a sense, don’t they? Our anger drops away more readily. We do become more generous. Kindness arises – all these wonderful qualities. We cultivate them and the cultivation works, we become more still. We might even be more joyful, happier. But as I said, I think it can really help to be aware of the shadow side of the Path. We don’t need to do anything about it. It’s enough simply to see it.

As I said, I’m not doing anything differently. I’m just seeing something I hadn’t seen before, which has shifted my relationship to what I’m doing. Meditation is an aspect of our

practice which is the balance, or the corrective, to this struggle to be good. Now I'm on the 'you are perfect, just as you are' part of what Suzuki Rōshi said. We *are* perfect just as we are.

Meditation, sitting in the middle of what is, in marvellous stillness, in a vast spaciousness, just seeing *This*, is the balance to the walking of the Path. When I give meditation instruction, I always say that there's no goal in our practice of meditation, that there's nothing to get to, nothing to achieve, nothing to attain, not even Enlightenment, not even Buddhahood – not peace of mind, nothing, not the end of delusion, nothing in particular. We're just sitting with what's there.

So, isn't there a glaring contradiction here? On the one hand, we're walking this Path to attain this awesome goal, and, on the other hand, I keep saying there's nothing to attain. There's no achievement. There's no particular state of mind we're aiming for. Our meditation practice isn't about getting rid of thoughts or afflictive emotions or the pesky self. It's being with what is, as it is, and it's that simple. It's almost, I don't know, disarmingly simple. If that's so, it seems that it would stand in direct opposition to this trying to become something, or practicing to become something. Meditation is an expression of our trust that unborn Buddha nature is right here, right now in everything, just as it is. So delusion and Buddha are not two, and we and Buddha are not two.

How can this be so? The truth with a capital T, this thing we're seeking, and which sometimes seems so far off in the distance, is what actually is right here, right now. It's what

we're right in the middle of right now. It's meditation that allows us to know what actually *is*, which is the truth with a capital T, and stay within it, or sit within it, right in the middle of it.

Reverend Master Leandra, who was the previous Abbot at Throssel Hole Buddhist Abbey, our sister monastery in England, wrote about this in a very helpful way, in a recent *OBC Journal*. She wrote:

In our tradition of Sōtō Zen, as handed down to us by Great Master Dōgen, the core of our practice is to awaken...²

Now that's a lovely, straightforward, simple way to put what it is we're up to. The core of our practice is to awaken.

...that is to say, to find enlightenment *within* [emphasis added, Ed.] delusion. Enlightenment is not about replacing delusion with enlightenment, but in coming to “know” that we are enlightened from the first; however, we still need to deal with, or negotiate, our delusions in a manner that is constantly illuminated and clarified by enlightenment.

Okay, so enlightenment is clarifying our delusions.

This is an ongoing process of practice which continues, *ad infinitum*. [emphasis added, Ed.]

There's no end, right?

We can come to realize that delusion and enlightenment are insubstantial, in the sense of not having independent self-natures; rather, they are dependent on each other – working companions that benefit one another.

So, delusion and enlightenment are working companions that benefit one another.

Delusion and enlightenment are not two, and coming to realize this is a movement towards understanding what non-duality really means.

That's what Reverend Master Leandra had to say. To carry on from there, I would say meditation and the Path are not two. They are “working companions that benefit one another”. The same is so of ‘we are perfect, just as we are’ and ‘we need a little improvement’. They're not two. They're working companions that benefit each other. Meditation and the Path grow out of each other. We sit in meditation just seeing somehow, miraculously *This*. Just seeing alters who we are and what we do. It changes us and we act differently. We act anew. I notice, for example, hundreds of pesky little critical thoughts, and something in me says, “No, not that way, no, not that way,” very gently, very quietly, almost so you can't hear it, and I change course. I choose another path. In this way, meditation and the Path grow out of each other. They are working companions that benefit one another.

In meditation we need only see there's no need to *do*. And yet the doing happens of itself within the meditation.

Walking the Path, trying to be good – which is, after all, good to do, right? – we see that our very trying undermines the goal, as I tried to lay out at the beginning of the talk. We drop the goal and return to the stillness of meditation and, out of that stillness arises the Path. Being good, i.e. keeping the Precepts, being patient, being generous, actually allows the mind to be still. It helps and supports the mind’s stillness. Our meditation depends on it – really. Our meditation depends on being good, and it couldn’t happen without it.

The question is: “Can we see how inextricably interwoven the still spaciousness of our meditation – which holds everything exactly as it is, all things exactly as they are – and the walking towards Buddhahood of the Path, can we see how inextricably interwoven these two are, and that we truly are perfect already, Buddha, even as we apply ourselves to the hard work of improving ourselves?”

May we never put down walking toward improvement as we sit completely surrounded by, and permeated by, and immersed within, the perfection of Buddha.

Notes

1. *Zen Is Right Here: Teaching Stories and Anecdotes of Shunryu Suzuki*; Chadwick, David Ed. Shambhala Publications, 2007, p 1.
2. Leandra Robertshaw, Rev. Master, *Departure and Integrated Return? A Personal Investigation of the Relationship Between Zen Practice and Psychology in The Journal of the Order of Buddhist Contemplatives*, Summer 2018, P. 33.

My Year with the Precepts and the Dharma of Costco

Megan Conn

— Redding, California – USA —

Adapted from a sangha-led Dharma discussion, February 25, 2024.

It's been about a year since I took the Precepts in May 2023. Yes, I had an idea about what I was doing. No, I had no idea about what "taking the Precepts" meant for me.

I came to practice about five years ago in 2019 in the midst of suffering. I was stressed in my job in animal welfare fundraising. Then the Carr Fire happened here in Redding. Then the Camp Fire in my hometown of Paradise. Then we lost our next door neighbor under really tragic circumstances. The experience was kind of like a hammer bam-bam-bam... and at some point I just flattened into depression.

Fortunately, I was able to find help in a variety of ways – including from the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha – and slowly over time, I got better. After attending Segaki in 2022, there were so many attendees there from all over that said,

“Wow – you’re so lucky to have a Priory near you.” I felt a strong resolve to take advantage of this good fortune and committed to sitting every morning and to taking the Precepts, which I did in May 2023.

Jukai at Shasta Abbey was a powerful experience for me and there was a moment where I felt like my whole world reoriented, like a compass finding magnetic north. I remember towards the end of the week, thinking “This is going to be fun... to see if I can do this challenge and uphold these Precepts in daily life outside the Abbey.”

I got home and had an interesting trio of things happen within one week, including a near-death experience while driving on the highway, a body being found near the canal behind our house, and my mom falling victim to a social security scam. It was like the universe was saying “What was this you said about a fun challenge?” My response was simply, “Woah.”

There was a lot of opportunity to spin out, but I found it more like I was in the middle of a storm and watching things go on around me, with the task to not churn it up more. I was often (not always) able to make a conscious choice not to feed anger. Many people said, “Scammers are terrible! Are you so mad at them?” And yes, there was anger, but also, compassion, as I thought, “What sad circumstances are they in that led them to this as a vocation, and what kind of karma are they generating?”

And at some point around this time, it occurred to me that upholding the Precepts is a series of hundreds of

conscious micro-choices during the day... And that the practice of sitting in zazen helps us look at our thoughts and recognize these moments of decision. And the practice of trying to maintain the Precepts helps us make better choices in those moments. In this way, sitting and the Precepts go together.

Though I mostly work with the kōan of daily life, I recently read a kōan in *The Hidden Lamp: Stories from 25 centuries of Awakened Women* that sums it up:

“Bhikkhuni Kabilsingh Keeps the Precepts:
Thailand, Twentieth Century.”

Venerable Bhikkhuni Voramai Kabilsingh was the first Thai woman to receive full ordination as a bhikkuni. As is required in bhikkhuni ordinations, she took three hundred and eleven precepts. A young man who was visiting her asked, “How can you keep all three hundred and eleven precepts?”

She answered “I keep only one precept.”

The young man, surprised, asked “What is that?”

She replied, “I just watch my mind.”¹

When I took the Precepts, my western mind thought, “What is next? What’s my next goal?” and it has simply been to follow them as best as I can through the situations that come my way. Regular student-teacher sanzen with Rev. Master Helen has been invaluable in working with the kōan of daily life.

Daily life gives us a lot of opportunity for this preceptual challenge. I feel like perhaps nowhere is this more evident than at Costco. The Redding Costco is a great place to practice every minute meditation and the bhikkhuni's 'One precept of watching the mind' ...then make conscious choices to follow the Precepts.

My experience of the dharma of Costco starts before I even get to Costco. As a person who doesn't like crowds, or shopping, my default state is typically "Ugh, I have to go to Costco; how can I put this off or can my husband go?" But the past year, working with "right mind", I've sometimes been able to see that thought and choose to be grateful for being able to shop at Costco in the first place. To be alive, to have the means and the goods available is such a rare privilege.

For those of you who haven't experienced the new Redding Costco, the city built a multi-lane traffic circle in a region where drivers haven't had much opportunity to become experienced with single-lane traffic circles. Just like the drive to the Abbey is the beginning of a retreat, going through the traffic circle begins the Costco experience and is my first signal to really get present in the moment and be as mindful as possible, for my safety and the safety of others.

As an immunocompromised person in the post-pandemic world, I still get nervous going into Costco. But I wear a mask, recall "Om to the one who leaps beyond all fear"² then just try to let it go. Sometimes it's easier than others. I find the 'Serenity Prayer' also helpful in this situation:

God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.

I can't change the fact that people come to Costco when they are sick and cough and put their germy hands on the cart (the Precept of not devaluing others comes into play here) but I can watch my mind and choose to not run away with germaphobia.

My first stop in the store is often the returns desk. I create my own cyclical hell realms and buying and returning clothes that don't fit because there is no dressing room is one of them. Over and over, buying and returning clothes. I recall a poem shared with our sangha:

Autobiography in Five Chapters by Portia Nelson:

I

I walk down the street.

There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.

I fall in.

I am lost ... I am hopeless.

It isn't my fault.

It takes forever to find a way out.

II

I walk down the same street.

There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.

I pretend I don't see it.

I fall in again.

I can't believe I'm in the same place.
But it isn't my fault.
It still takes a long time to get out.

III

I walk down the same street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I see it is there.
I still fall in ... it's a habit.
My eyes are open.
I know where I am.
It is my fault.
I get out immediately.

IV

I walk down the same street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I walk around it.

V

I walk down another street.³

One day I will learn how to walk down another street but for now I think I'm in chapter III; I'm still walking down the same street to the Costco returns desk...but at least I know I'm there.

The way the store is arranged, the next section is home goods and a detour into said clothing section. I find these sections a perceptual challenge in terms of not coveting. Recently, I felt I didn't have enough clothes for a work trip

and got mildly frantic – and majorly annoyed – that after digging through stacks of sweaters, they had dozens available but none in my size. The grasping! There MUST be one in ‘Small’ (there was not). At some point I caught the thoughts and was able to remind myself: you have everything you need. And I did.

I make my way to the food section and boom – impermanence. Costco is expert at carrying a product for a while, then pulling it forever. Clinging, suffering, dukkha... “Why do they no longer have mango habanero chips and eco dish sponges? Are they ever going to get coconut milk back in?” Can I let this coveting go and accept this anicca?

Costco is known for its quantities, and inevitably I’ll come across something on our list that is very heavy, that I know I won’t be able to pick up without back or neck pain flaring up. I beat myself up and resolve to be better about doing PT exercises. Hopefully at some point I recall the flipside of the Precept of not devaluing others, which is to not devalue oneself. There are usually other options like getting a smaller quantity at another store, or making do without, or waiting until my husband can go. In Ajahn Sumedo’s book *Don’t Take Your Life Personally*, he has a very helpful acceptance mantra: “It is like this.” ⁴

The store flow ends with health products and the pharmacy. Waiting in line to pick up prescriptions, I’m struck with first three of the five remembrances:

1. I am of the nature to grow old, I cannot escape old age.
2. I am of the nature to get sick, I cannot escape sickness.
3. I am of the nature to die, I cannot escape death. ⁵

Sometimes I use the time in line to check my phone but if I'm on my A-game, I meditate with gratitude for pharmacists and the Buddha's prescription for reducing suffering by following the Noble Eightfold Path including Right View. In living with chronic illness, I have found it true for myself that all-acceptance is the key to the gateless gate.

The checkout often provides the conditions to devalue and judge others. Wow – that person is buying an entire cart of vodka and chicken wings. If I catch this thought, I can choose another: they may be putting on a fundraiser. They may be serving it at a funeral. They may need some help. Or they may really just like vodka and chicken wings. Perhaps I can offer merit instead of being judgmental and devaluing others.

“Would you like anything from the food court” asks the cashier. For years, it was a tradition to check out with a polish dog and a soda. Now I have the opportunity to think deeply of the ways and means by which the hot dog has come and make a different choice to follow the Precept of not killing. Sometimes that choice is nothing, sometimes it's frozen yogurt. Recently they added a giant chocolate chip cookie to the menu; I will leave you to explore that option.

Sometimes I get home and I realize I bought a gallon jug of ginger citron tea or a mountain of produce that we won't be able to eat before it goes bad and there is an opportunity to

not be mean in giving... Catching this, I can make a choice to be generous and share with family or a neighbor.

When I break a Precept in Costco, or anywhere for that matter, I hope that first I can realize that I've broken it, then accept the consequences and resolve to do better next time. We don't vow to be perfect. We vow to sit and we vow to try to keep up the challenge of following the Precepts and always go on beyond.

Notes

1. *The Hidden Lamp: Stories from 25 centuries of Awakened Women* Edited by Zenshin Florence Caplow and Reigetsu Susan Moon. Wisdom Publications, 2013.
2. *The Liturgy of the Order of Buddhist Contemplatives for the Laity*. Shasta Abbey Press, 1990.
3. Nelson, Portia, *There's a Hole in My Sidewalk: The Romance of Self-Discovery*. Beyond Words Publishing, 1993.
4. Sumedho, Ajahn, *Don't Take Your Life Personally*. Buddhist Publishing Group, 2010.
5. From the *Upajjhathana Sutta*, (*Anguttara Nikaya 5.57.*)

Buddha Bows to Buddha

Rev. Master Kinrei Bassis

— *Berkeley Buddhist Priory, California – USA* —

First published in the April-June 2024 Berkeley Buddhist Priory Newsletter.

The basic teaching in Buddhism is very simple and straightforward. The essence of the Buddha's Dharma is in the Buddha's very first teaching after his great enlightenment — the Four Noble Truths. Yet, although I have been practicing Buddhism for most of my adult life, I still often find it very hard to apply the Four Noble Truths to all the various difficulties I face in my life.

The Four Noble Truths are not a complicated teaching. The First Noble Truth is that suffering exists and that we cannot avoid suffering due to the impermanence of every single condition in our life. The Second Noble Truth is that all our suffering is due to our desires, to our clinging to what we want and pushing away what we do not want. The Third Noble Truth is often translated as the cessation of suffering or attaining Nirvana. The Fourth Noble Truth, the Eightfold Path, is Buddhist training. It shows how we can convert our deluded self into a liberated being, a Buddha, and free ourselves from all suffering.

Applying the Second Noble Truth lies at the core of all Buddhist training: to free ourselves from suffering, all we need to do is stop clinging. Having lived with many Buddhist monks, with Buddhist Masters and teaching Buddhism for forty years, it is actually unusual and a sign of deep Buddhist training when someone fully embraces the teaching that all their suffering is actually flowing out of their clinging. I encounter much Buddhist teaching that clearly states the Second Noble Truth, but then does not take this teaching to heart and actually apply it to whatever they view as suffering. It is wonderful when I deal with someone who has encountered something going seriously wrong in their life and instead of blaming anything or anyone, they recognize that they are choosing to make whatever is happening into suffering. It is our clinging and desires that we all need to let go of. We live with a mistaken view that a good life is getting what we want rather than the enlightened view that a good life is found by wholeheartedly embracing and dealing with whatever life is giving us.

Buddhism would be an easy path if there was some magical way in which we could stop clinging and just let go of whatever is causing us to have difficulties. When we are suffering with significant pain, with strong fear, with powerful desires, with anger, with feeling deep depression, what do we do? How do we apply the Second Noble Truth when we seem to be incapable of not allowing ourselves to be filled and overwhelmed by our difficulties?

Yet all of Buddhist training can be seen as the process of converting these defiled emotions and thoughts into

enlightened emotions and thoughts. However, this means we need to fundamentally change how we relate to almost everything in our life. That is why the Buddhist path is not a short and quick solution for our suffering.

The real underlying reason we meditate in Buddhism is that meditation is actually a practice of learning to let all things go. Whatever we are feeling, whatever we are thinking, the practice of our meditation is to let go of all our thoughts and feelings and come back to being still and present. The pure act of meditation is the same as full acceptance. It is the real meaning of sitting still. We do not need to react to whatever strong feelings and thoughts are moving through us. Our personal karma underlies the patterns of our compulsive thoughts and feelings, which are propelling us through life. The normal human pattern is to try to avoid and push away all our feelings that are painful and difficult. Our normal unenlightened human karma is usually driving us to obsessively try to solve the problems we face in our life and figure out what we need to do.

Buddhism is not teaching us that it is wrong to try to get better feelings and conditions in our life and try to understand and control what is happening to us. But we need to face the reality that much of what we wish to control is often going to be completely outside our personal control. Much of what I face in life, all the thoughts and feelings that arise in me, the conditions of the people in my life, and conditions in the world around me, are all part of an endless flow of karma. Whenever we start battling the conditions in our life, this lack of acceptance will only lead us to create more suffering. If we

choose to be at peace with whatever we are facing and simply do our best to improve whatever we can, this attitude of acceptance will lead us to finding more peace and a deeper sense of happiness.

The real purpose of meditation and Buddhist training is the process of learning to trust that we can find our real unshakable happiness by opening our hearts to whatever is flowing into our lives. The ongoing effort we make of trying to be still in meditation is showing us how we do not need to be moved by our defiled emotions, to react and be moved by our anger, by our fear, by our self-centered desires. Meditation points us to a fundamental stillness that allows all our karmic tendencies, all the importance we give to what is happening in our life, to flow back into stillness. This helps our mind and heart to experience the real purity that is everywhere when we stop seeing ourselves and the world through self-centered eyes. “When you look with the eyes of a Buddha, you will see the heart of a Buddha.” ¹

Most people feel that in being human, there is no way we can free ourselves from being deeply absorbed in our desires and fears. We can feel that something is actually being damaged when we are criticized or treated unfairly. The deluded mind thinks that illness and disability automatically makes us suffer. Having wealth, having success, being admired, is how we can find happiness. Someone is deeply hurt by another’s behavior and they will say it is only human to be upset and angry. Yet the enlightened response is trusting that nothing was really hurt, and then having compassion for both the person who has hurt you and compassion for your

own painful feelings. Buddhism is pointing us to work at having the right spiritual intention, so we try to have the enlightened response rather than the very human but deluded response of filling ourselves with anger and harsh judgments.

Below is a teaching from the Dalai Lama on forgiveness, which is a wonderful example of the enlightened response towards mistreatment.

After he escaped from Tibet, Lopon-la put in prison by Chinese. He stayed there eighteen years. When he finally free, he came to India. For twenty years, I did not see him. But he seemed the same. Of course looked older. But physically OK. His mind still sharp after so many years in prison. He was still same gentle monk.

He told me the Chinese forced him to denounce his religion. They tortured him many times in prison. I asked him whether he was ever afraid. Lopon-la then told me: “Yes there was one thing I was afraid of. I was afraid I might lose compassion for the Chinese.” ²

I was very moved by this, and also very inspired. Forgiveness helped Lopon-la in prison. Because of forgiveness, his bad experience with Chinese did not got worse. Mentally and emotionally, he didn't suffer too much. He knew he could not escape. So, better to accept reality than to be traumatized by it.

In life, we can have a very painful illness, but after we recover, the pain recedes in our memory and usually we are

not traumatized by what had happened. Yet when someone mistreats us, it is possible to remain upset and angry for the rest of our lives. Yet from a Buddhist point of view, a tree falling on us or someone injuring us is really the same. Both are just karma. We cannot blame the tree, so that does not even occur to us, yet we often feel comfortable blaming the person who mistreats us. However, if we can see the full flow of karma, the personal history of the person who is making the mistake of hurting us, we can have understanding and compassion rather than harsh judgements and anger. And we can learn to trust and experience the deeper truth that nothing can ever really be fundamentally hurt.

Pain, if you seek serenity in Oneness, will vanish
of its own accord.³

My Master, Jiyu-Kennett, trained as the only woman in an all-male monastery in Japan during the 1960s. She faced a considerable amount of mistreatment. In her published diaries of her years in Japan, *The Wild, White Goose*, Rev. Master Jiyu repeatedly gave herself this teaching as she confronted the many difficulties she faced: "I must take everything that happens as for my own good, whatever it may be."⁴ This does not mean that all the Japanese male monks who mistreated her were not making a mistake and doing something wrong. However, the conversion of our hearts, which lies at the center of Buddhist training, is we must accept and make positive use out of whatever life gives us, whether it is illness or health, whether we are being treated kindly or poorly, whether we are being treated fairly or unfairly. The very nature of karma is we are always being given both good and bad conditions in

our life. The very core of letting go of clinging to our desires is cultivating an open and embracing mind and heart that is all-accepting. How we deal with all the unwanted conditions in our life is central in transforming our hearts and minds.

A very positive aspect of Buddhist training is that many people will have a serious illness like cancer, and after having undergone difficult treatments, they will tell me that actually having the cancer was a positive experience. The illness had really helped them in their spiritual life to view whatever was happening to them with more wisdom and acceptance. Yet none of them wish for the cancer to return or wish to have any more serious problems. I recently read an essay in the *New York Times* entitled, *Brain Cancer Was Supposed to Kill Me. Instead, It Gave Me a Second Life*.

A devastating diagnosis prompted a reporter to revisit his past — and repair his mistakes.” The author of the account, Rod Nordland, writes “I know it sounds a bit crazy, but as I’ve often told people, my brain tumor is the best thing that’s ever happened to me.”⁵

Rod Nordland’s illness allowed him to drop many of his usual concerns and look much deeper at his life. This is something that we all need to do whether we are facing some enormous difficulties or just dealing with our seemingly mundane and ordinary life. All our difficulties and problems can have a very positive use in that they can help us to have more compassion and wisdom, which then helps us to open our hearts to our own difficult karma and to all the difficult karma that is filling others around us and the world.

“Taking everything that happens for my own good” includes how we view the world. People usually view the world with deluded eyes that are critical and upset with all the bad news. I am fairly certain we will never be in a world that is not filled with bad news since when something goes well, it is generally not a news story. It is important to view all the difficulties that fill the news and the world with wise and compassionate eyes. Just as there are deep karmic reasons that people in your life will make mistakes and do wrong, all the people in the world are also frequently being driven by difficult karma and they are finding it very hard to do good. For instance, people behaving selfishly is actually very normal human karma.

Buddhist training is the process of converting our selfishness, but when we recognize how hard we are finding that conversion, we can open our hearts to a world filled with people who are sometimes having great difficulty in not being selfish. Feeling hurt and pain when we hear about some of the intense suffering in the world is normal and appropriate but we should not just fill our minds with these reports of suffering. We also need to always look with gratitude for all the good that is also around us and occurring in our life and in the world. And we also need to look deeper and see through the seemingly substantial nature of all the suffering and realize all the suffering in samsara is ephemeral. This does not mean we do not do all we can to relieve suffering. For instance, if I am bleeding or in pain, I will naturally try to heal the problem. Cultivating a peaceful and all-accepting mind does not mean I will not still deal with an open wound. Yet even if I am in severe pain or dying, I can also still realize that

all of this life of mine has no more substance than a dream. Buddhism is teaching us to awaken from being lost in this dream of birth and death.

The original Buddhist practice was monks only ate the food that was given to them when they went around the local area begging for food. Although many Buddhist traditions have relaxed or dropped the actual begging for food, Buddhist monks still always receive a begging bowl when they receive ordination as Buddhist monks. The begging bowl became the symbol that monks should always bow and be grateful for whatever they are being given. Spiritually, the deeper teaching is that we need to bow and be grateful for whatever life offers us. Whatever good and bad karma we have, it all goes into our begging bowl. Health and sickness, praise and blame, success and failure, youth and old age, they all go into our begging bowl. The good and bad in the world, war and peace, saving or killing animals, people starving and people overeating, great generosity and great selfishness- it all goes into our begging bowl and we bow to it all.

Samsara, this world with so much suffering, and nirvana, this place fully free of suffering, is actually the same place. When we look with deluded eyes it is samsara; when we look with enlightened eyes, it is not that we no longer see samsara but we can see through samsara and see the fundamental purity and light enveloping everything. It is why Buddhism teaches samsara and nirvana are one.

When I was at Shasta Abbey, I often had the job to go to the monastery gate and deal with whomever showed up. Rev.

Master Jiyu used to like saying if someone who is drunk shows up at the gate, you do not let them into the monastery. However, you should still bow to them because they are still a Buddha, even though they are a drunk Buddha. And when they are sober, you can let them into the monastery.

This teaching can be expanded to everything in our life. Whatever we encounter in our life is a Buddha. When we bow to whatever karma we are facing, we are pointing ourselves to enlightenment. Buddha bows to Buddha is the actual truth when we clear delusion from our eyes. Let us try to keep making the effort to bow to whatever we are being offered in life and this will help us to see the light of Buddha in others and this bowing will also help us to see the light of Buddha within ourselves.

Notes

1. P.T.N.H. Jiyu-Kennett, Rev. Master, *Kyōjukaimon and Commentary*, in *Serene Reflection Meditation* Shasta Abbey Press, 2016. p. 66.
2. Dalai Lama and Chan, Victor, *The Wisdom of Forgiveness: Intimate Conversations and Journeys*. Riverhead Books; 2005.
3. *On Trust in the Heart* – Kanchi Sōsan trans. Arthur Waley, from *Buddhist Texts Through the Ages*, Edward Conze (ed.). New York: Philosophical Library, 1954, pp. 296.
4. P.T.N.H. Jiyu-Kennett, Rev. Master, *The Wild, White Goose*, Shasta Abbey Press, 2002.
5. Nordland, Rod, *Brain Cancer Was Supposed to Kill Me. Instead, It Gave Me a Second Life*, New York Times, March 2024.

Sitting With Feelings

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— Norwich Zen Buddhist Priory, Norfolk – UK —

A lightly edited transcript of a talk given online at the Priory in 2020.

These are challenging times we're living in, and we might all find ourselves sitting with strong, persistent, recurrent feelings: fear and anxiety; despair, perhaps also. So it seems good to offer a reminder of how we sit with feelings, what that means and what we do in our practice when feelings arise. This is a basic aspect of our meditation and practice, and it's always good to review these things.

First of all, I just want to say a bit about how feelings and thoughts interact. We're probably all aware of how our thoughts influence our feelings, so the thoughts that arise add fuel to the feeling that's present. We can end up going round and around in our heads, and that then perpetuates the feeling, makes it stronger. And equally, our feelings influence our thoughts. So if we're feeling anxious, that tends to generate anxious thoughts, and then we can get caught in a spiral of anxiety. In addition, how we think and feel affects our actions and how we interact with other people, and then that gets

reflected back at us. So if I feel irritated and I snap at someone and say something unpleasant, then they get defensive and tend to snap back, and then that makes me more grumpy and irritable. And so we set up cycles with our thoughts and feelings. We get stuck in ruts with our conditioned responses, and we end up going round in the same loops, reacting in the same ways.

Meditation helps us to break through these patterns. Meditation is an opportunity to explore very closely the thoughts and the feelings that arise within. The basis of our practice is to explore the question, “What is this in this very moment? What feeling or thought is right in front of me here now?”

Thoughts arise and they come and go. They don’t have to be a problem. And we have some pretty clear directions as to what we do with thoughts in meditation. We don’t suppress them; we don’t push them away. We let natural thoughts arise, but then when we notice that we’re caught in a train of thought, we disengage from that so that we’re not identifying with the thoughts. And then the thoughts come to disturb us less. And it’s similar with feelings: as we explore the feelings that are present, that takes us deep into questioning, “What is this being here? Who am I?”

Feelings have a very strong impact on how we think of ourselves. So for example, if I feel very anxious, then I’m probably not aware of anything much else. That anxiety fills my field of vision, and then that emotion seems to entirely define who I am right now. If that tends to happen often, then

it solidifies further so I think “I am an anxious person”, and then it becomes part of my personality. We all have certain emotions or traits that we identify with and that seem to be inexplicably linked with who we are. We tend to attach to our emotions, even those ones that obviously cause us suffering. In a changing and threatening world, these emotions give a sense of who I am, and it’s reassuring for us to think that we know roughly how we will react in given situations, so that the unknown isn’t quite so unknown. But as we’re aware, feelings are not a reliable refuge. How often are we surprised by our emotions and our reactions? We have to investigate these feelings, and to do so is scary, because who will I be without those familiar emotions and responses?

In meditation, we explore the feelings that arise by just sitting with them. We don’t analyze them with our heads, because that’s a distraction. That’s an attempt to escape from actually being with the feeling right now. So for example, if we realize that we’re anxious, it might be tempting to ask why, because we feel that would help us to understand the anxiety. Well, that answer might be helpful, but searching for this answer is not zazen. And anyway, it’s not uncommon for there to be just free-floating anxiety with no obvious cause. In zazen, we sit with the feeling, whether or not we understand its cause. Insights into that feeling may arise, but if they do, we don’t hold on to them. What’s important is that we keep sitting with the feeling. And similarly, as we sit, we may come to see how one feeling underlies another. For example, beneath anger and irritation, there’s usually fear of some sort. But we don’t have to keep following our feelings back, trying to come to some sort of end point or beginning

point, because that too can be a distraction. At some stage, we have to just sit with the feeling that's present, or the feelings, because actually, there's often a mix of feelings there. It's just that one tends to come to the fore at any one time.

Usually what this means is that we have to sit in the heart of pain or discomfort of some sort, and that's difficult. That's why we tend to squirm away and try and escape from doing this, distract ourselves. In zazen what we do is to just be with what arises. We sit with the pure feeling, right in the heart of it, with no judgment, complete acceptance. We don't get caught up in the thoughts of how we'd like to change the circumstances so that we can be rid of the discomfort. Although obviously, if there's something good that we can do to alleviate the situation, it's fine to do it. But we come to see how the worrying, fearful mind adds to the situation with all the thoughts. So we sit with the feeling, let go of the thoughts that try to coagulate around it, and then we can learn what that feeling has to teach us.

I'll give an example that we can probably all relate to in some way. I'll use for the example a physical feeling rather than an emotion, but it's a similar process with any emotion that arises. Imagine I'm meditating, and suddenly I'm aware of a sharp pain in my abdomen, and immediately I start worrying: "Oh, it's this again. I thought I was over that. Is this something serious?" And then I start projecting into the future. "Will I have to go to the GP? Oh, it's going to be really inconvenient. Will I need tests?" We don't actually need to do all this thinking, not during a meditation period. Though if it really does seem good to get up and go and take some

medication, that's fine. But if we ask, "What is this here now?", we can see that there is some physical discomfort, and there's a lot of worry and mental chattering. We can just be with the discomfort. We don't even need to label it as pain. Just be with the sensation, feel the nerves discharging. Then we may find that, amazingly, in this moment, it's actually not so bad, if we're not worrying about how we're sure it's going to get a lot worse. So we come to see that the discomfort right now, in this moment, is not as solid or substantial as it seemed at first, or threatened to become. Now, the pain probably won't miraculously disappear, but we do get a different perspective on it. And in this moment, the situation is bearable. We can cope with it if we're not piling on the thoughts that the worrying, fretful mind adds to the situation. And then, from this basis, I can go on to see what is good to do next.

I think we can find, as we sit with feelings of all sorts, that we come to see how particular emotions become associated with physical sensations. For example, if I'm anxious, that might feel like a sort of a fizzy fluttering in the stomach. Shame or dread can sometimes be experienced as being like a cannonball sitting in the stomach. With these sorts of experiences, if there's a feeling that's around quite a lot for me, then I can become familiar with that sensation, and it almost becomes like an acquaintance. "Oh, it's that again." We don't need to try and describe or analyze the sensation.

With any feeling that arises, we don't have to label it. So we might call it something, for example "pain", for the sensation that I've just been describing. But we have to be

careful, because any word, any description, brings with it associations that colour our experience and then solidify things further. And in this area, an important lesson that came to me was to see that if, for example, I'm sitting with anxiety or dread about something that might happen in the future, there's a certain energy there. But equally, if I'm sitting with excitement or looking forward to something in the future, there's the same sort of energy there. In both cases, there's a similar sort of sensation of having a knot in the stomach. The main difference between the two things is the types of thoughts that are associated with the feeling.

As we go on, we come to see that even with difficult emotions like fear and anger, if we can just be still with them, we can sense that there is an alright-ness to the presence of that feeling. It is 'just this'. And then, much of the time in meditation, we're willing to sit with non-specific feelings, perhaps just a sense of unease, and these 'low grade' feelings can be subjected to the same wordless exploration of zazen. In meditation, we're not going searching for feelings to sit with. There's plenty to sit with without doing that!

As we go on further, and we become that bit stiller in meditation, we become more familiar with feelings arising and dissolving. We can recognize more readily our habitual patterns, what triggers our reactions. And much of the work of meditation is seeing, "Oh, it's that again", and then we keep letting it dissolve. The feelings are part of *what is* right now, but we don't have to identify with them and be driven by them. And it is absolutely vital that we don't judge the feelings, we don't get into, "They shouldn't be there."

Whatever is present we allow to be there. Don't hold on to it. Don't push it away.

It's interesting to see those times when we do something that we might feel a bit ashamed of, or when we feel we've done something that's unacceptable. If we look closely, we see that what's unacceptable is really our behaviour more than the feeling, how we acted on the feeling. So perhaps if we behave in a petty way towards someone because we're irritated, when we look at the feeling, it may seem that, alarmingly, I feel as though I really hate that person. But if we explore that more, we see that that's just a label that we are applying to a strong emotion. The strong emotion itself can be accepted. The important thing is that we don't act on it in an unskillful way.

It's really important to stress again, that it is okay that feelings and emotions arise as we continue in our practice. We can uncover surprising things about ourselves, and meditation brings to our notice feelings and tendencies that we weren't aware of. This can sometimes be extremely uncomfortable, and it can threaten the image that we have of ourselves. And this is a very important part of the process, part of questioning who I am. As we sit and look at the wall, we come face-to-face with precisely what we need to see and work on. And we can come to know that whatever is present when we sit is part of this, and it is fine as it is, the feeling can just be there. There's no need to try and change it into anything else. The feeling, if we sit with it, will show us its nature, which is that it is empty, impermanent and insubstantial. The feeling is not the whole story. However fearful or angry, etc we may be,

there is more. And meditation points us to that more, that bigger picture. By accepting difficult emotions, those feelings that we wish weren't part of us, we are taking a step in the right direction. To embrace the feeling in meditation can be a very helpful step forward in letting the feeling be as it is, to know that it is fine as it is. Mind you, we have to go on from this.

It's worth remembering that it's not just difficult emotions that we explore in meditation. We have to be willing to question and let go of *all* feelings, even the pleasurable ones, and that includes contentment and joy. These feelings, of course, we have less tendency to question, but we have to subject them too to the same wordless exploration in *Zazen*, because if we hold on to them and we're not willing to let them pass, then we get trapped in a one-sided understanding that ultimately is a dead-end. So yes, positive emotions will arise as we go on, but it's by no means a straight equation that the more we meditate, the happier we'll be. Positive emotions are a by-product of meditation; they're not the aim of meditation. They're not the refuge. And we have to be careful not to set up an ideal of spiritual maturity where we aim to remain serene as we go through all of life's challenges and situations. It is not about trying to get beyond the feelings that arise in us, to get to some sort of higher self. If we try to leap too quickly in this direction, rejecting what arises, then we can cut ourselves off from our feelings, and we risk becoming numb, uncaring, indifferent.

If we try to stamp out our feelings, they just seem more powerful, because by trying to combat them, we invest them

with a solidity that they don't have. And if we try to ignore our feelings, we are denying ourselves access to the very gateway that we have here now to come to know the truth. So acceptance is the key, as well as great patience and gentleness with ourselves. And then, as we continue, we can become more confident that we can just sit with whatever arises. We also come to see that holding on to our feelings is actually our choice, even though it can be difficult to acknowledge that. So for example, it can be that we're more comfortable holding on to some long-standing resentment, because if we were to let go of that resentment, it would seem like a huge climbdown. It could feel like a great chunk of me was falling away. And actually this is what is required of us at times, and indeed on occasions like that, we can see very clearly what is meant by letting go of the self. To surrender to a situation like that isn't easy. In fact, it's very scary, so we may prefer to hold on to our suffering, because even though it's unpleasant, at least we're in familiar territory. As we watch our feelings dissolving in meditation, we find that these feelings that we would do almost anything to avoid, we can actually be with them. Sit still with them. We might be afraid that we won't be able to cope with what arises. But in the present moment, as we meditate, we can be still with whatever is here.

Now, it's when we look beyond the present moment that we can't cope. We lose focus and we fret about the implications of the future. Here now we can realize that the feeling isn't solid. It's flimsy, insubstantial. It dissolves into space. We can note that it is empty, and then the feeling may coalesce and reappear in the next moment, but we can just be

with it, let it dissolve again, and then it doesn't matter if the feeling goes or stays, it doesn't disturb us like it used to. And then we can begin to see the insubstantial nature of these feelings. It's a little bit like looking through a tattered curtain when we meditate, it's often like we're looking through the holes in that curtain. We can clearly see that the feeling isn't real. But then we leave our cushion, we go into daily life, and the feeling seems to be still there and continues to trip us up. It's like we're still seeing the fabric of the curtain, rather than the holes. But we keep going, because that's what we need to do.

We can't doubt what we have experienced in Zazen. We're heading in the right direction. We have to keep meditating, but then we can go further with exploring the feelings, so that we're not looking at them from the outside, from a mind of duality. There is 'me' here, watching the feeling 'there'. We have to let go of the one who observes and the one who meditates. It's not quite enough to sit with the feeling as we meditate, we have to *be* the feeling. And that's not the same as identifying with the feeling that I was talking about earlier, because we've moved on from there. To *be* the feeling means there's no separation between me and the feeling. So when the feeling dissolves, who am I then? And this step comes about by taking acceptance and trust to a deeper level. There is just meditation – just the experience, not chopped up, labelled, divided and separated. There's no gap between me and the experience of meditation. And if the feelings are insubstantial, then the me that seems to exist in the middle that's doing the feeling is also less substantial. And

phrases such as, “I am afraid” or “I am angry” have less meaning, and as we keep wearing away at the self, in this way, the edges of the self blur.

Feelings can arise quite strongly still, but they don’t have to coalesce to form a ‘me’. There can be more space around the feeling to dissolve into, so that there’s an opening out – no limits or boundaries to the meditation. So the feelings dissolve, and we still keep exploring, what is this?

What I’ve been describing isn’t easy, and it’s a continual unfolding, a continuous process of being with the feelings that arise in each moment, being those feelings, letting them dissolve. And it really doesn’t work to try to shortcut or bypass the process. We can’t say, “Oh, well, I’ve seen that fear is insubstantial”, and the next time try to leap to a place where we’re not afraid. Because, as we’ve seen, we’re then imposing a concept and pushing away what has actually arisen. We’re not actually accepting the fear that is present now. Each time, we have to allow the feeling to be what it is, and to dissolve, and then there is just one flowing movement of being.

Necessary Fictions

Sarah Whiteside

— *Edinburgh, Scotland – UK* —

In a recent article, written to mark the centenary of American writer and civil rights activist James Baldwin's birth, Kenan Malik states that Baldwin: "...had to confront not just the fact of being black in an oppressively racist world, but also of being gay in a world steeped in homophobia, not least within black communities."¹ Malik, a British academic and science writer, tells us that after moving from America to France – seeking and failing to find, like many black writers and musicians of his generation, a less racist society there: "Baldwin began to grasp that identities are necessary fictions helping us locate ourselves in the world but also trapping us within it."

In his first major work after moving to France, *Everybody's Protest Novel*, Baldwin wrote: "We take our shape within and against that cage of reality bequeathed us at our birth".² Malik argues that there is a tension at the heart of Baldwin's work: "the tension between embracing black identity as a riposte to, and refuge from, a hostile, racist world, and recognising that a 'new' society could be constructed only by transcending such identities." According

to Baldwin, freedom is not something people can be given: “Freedom is something people take, and people are as free as they want to be.”

Recently I have been thinking a lot about my own identity. After learning my son was autistic, three years ago now, I slowly came to recognise that I am autistic too. Finally I had an explanation for many of the struggles I had faced throughout my life. I had always felt out of step and I was often overwhelmed by sensory and social demands. I used to blame myself for that. Now I had a way to understand myself that didn't frame my differences as deficits. Reading and listening to the voices of other autistic adults, there was the relief of recognition. I could locate myself. I finally knew where I belonged.

But as a meditator, and hearing Dharma teaching, I was confused. If life was undivided and free, as I was learning and sometimes glimpsing for myself, then why did it feel so important to define myself this way? Like James Baldwin, I wondered how I might embrace my identity without it becoming just another cage.

Over the months and now years, I have looked at this question through the lens of neurodivergence. But I think it probably applies to any identity: by which I mean anything about us that affects how others see us, or how we see ourselves. Regardless of the specifics – regardless of gender, ethnicity, class, disability status, age, or even whether we live as a layperson or a monk – our identities can both help and hinder. How might we engage with these identities in a way

that helps us better understand ourselves, find our kin, and build lives that work, without being limited by them?

There's an exercise sometimes used in creative writing workshops. Participants are given a picture of an unfamiliar night sky, taken in the Southern Hemisphere, and asked to find constellations in it. Looking up at night here in the UK we know the names we've been told – Cassiopeia, Orion's Belt, the Plough – and it's easy to think of these as real. Looking at a new sky, the process by which we find patterns is laid bare. We make fables and monsters where there are none, perhaps based on the contents of our own minds.

Autism is a concept, human-made. Like any concept, it is a heap of disparate parts that we put together and give a name. In the face of the infinite, what does it mean to say "I'm autistic"? Asking this left me feeling uncomfortable; zazen offers the possibility of resting in an open, undivided state and we are exhorted not to waste time splitting the world into 'this' and 'that'. But then it occurred to me: one way to divide the world is to take what is particular and human and decide it is beneath our attention: to try to split the ocean from the wave.

Autism is made up, but only in the way a table is made up, or the idea of love. It's a constellation. And like those constellations, striding gigantically across the sky, such words and ideas have power. We use them to make up our world and we must choose them carefully, choose what kind of world we hope to make. Autism gave me a new way to look at myself and at the world too; for the first time it felt like I

was looking through my own eyes and that changed what I saw.

However, in a recent article written for this *Journal*, Reverend Master Daishin Morgan wrote that, “To define ourselves is to isolate ourselves”.³ Also, “There is that which is free, even free of being itself”. And, “To divide the world into this and that is not to just see. In just seeing there are no categories”. I read this article in the midst of the excitement and hope that came from discovering my own neurodivergence and it brought me up short. I could feel straight away that it was true. But I also knew that defining myself had, in some ways, connected me with others and with life. That, in becoming ‘myself’ I felt more free, not less. I couldn’t see how to reconcile these two apparently different views.

I’ve had the experience so many times in practice now: thinking I’ve understood something only to have the rug of my understanding pulled from beneath my feet. Perhaps that’s what practice is. The removal of rugs. The upside-down tipping. The fall. The starry flight. I keep trying to get to the bottom of it all but I suppose, really, there is no bottom; I suppose that’s partly why we’re all so much in love with it.

I sometimes hear autistic people talking as if the problems in their lives are the fault of non-autistic people. This is understandable; it’s a human impulse to split up the world this way, particularly after a lifetime of the daily micro-traumas, stigma and misunderstanding that autistic people often face. Within the autistic community there can be a

suspicion of practices not specifically designed for us because so many of these, if applied without an understanding of neurodivergence, can be ineffective or downright harmful. All this sometimes leaves me reluctant to talk about practice in autistic spaces.

Conversely, I've heard meditators minimise the experience of autistic people, perhaps out of a sense they don't want to label, in case such labelling solidifies a fixed sense of self, thereby keeping us from the truth. And this can leave me loath to talk about neurodivergence in these places.

I know I have internalised this split because, though I write about autism and about Buddhist practice, I have been struggling to bring them together. How might I heal this apparent split in myself?

There's a famous passage from Great Master Dōgen's *Genjōkōan* that has always spoken to me and it's helpful here:

To study the buddha way is to study the self.

To study the self is to forget the self.

To forget the self is to be actualized by the myriad things.⁴

As I understand it, this isn't a list of jobs to do one after another. The 'is to' seems to say a lot: it's as if studying the self and forgetting the self are one: the same, instantaneous thing. In order to seek the truth, we don't need to turn away from who we are. To do so would be counterproductive. In reality there is no split between the individual selves we seem

to be and a life of practice. We can pull the rugs, but only when we're standing on the ground.

But, like so much of Dōgen and so much of practice, this apparent reassurance soon evaporates and I end up more confused than when I started. When he says 'study the self' I'm pretty sure he doesn't mean 'limit the self' or 'label the self'. He leaves us nothing more than the moment-by-moment experience of our lives, coming to us through our senses. But, as I've learned from reading about neurodivergence, even sensing isn't neutral. Autistic people are commonly a mixture of hyper- and hypo-sensitive, so that for one the world might be unbearably loud or bright while, for another, it might be difficult to sense hunger, or anger, in the body. The sensory landscape is different for each person and at different times. What we see and hear and touch is no truer than our concepts and, in this way, our selves are not available to our senses. Though this is particularly evident in autistic people, it must be true for all of us. We rely on our senses. And our senses are unreliable.

And yet with my 'eyes' turned 'inward', I get a glimpse of 'who I am' and there's no need to define it as autistic or non-autistic, as male or female, or as young or old. It isn't personal at all. It is wholly vital and embodied, not separate from me, yet limitless and free. To see this, it's not necessary to reject any identity.

I'm on uncertain ground here (those rugs again). This is not yet a landscape I know well. But it seems likely to me I'll only see through the fixed idea of self by looking closely at it, not by trying to peek around the side.

In her book *Neuroqueer Heresies*, autistic activist and scholar Nick Walker, a Zen practitioner herself, argues that autistic experience is best seen as a ‘horizon of possibilities’. While she recognises that it can be useful for people to identify as autistic or otherwise neurodivergent, she says that, “we shouldn’t allow our conception of neurodiversity and its potentials to be constrained by such categories”. Furthermore, she sees the possibilities characterised by neurodivergence as open to anybody, autistic or non-autistic. For her this is a fundamental openness to life expressed through ‘subversive and transformative practices’ that stand against the impulse to conform with an idea of ‘normal’:

The already neurodivergent can reconnect with and cultivate previously suppressed or undeveloped capacities, in order to more fully manifest their potentials for beautiful weirdness, and those whom we call neurotypicals are just potential neuroqueer mutant comrades who haven’t yet woken up and figured out how to unzip their normal-person suits.⁵

This positive view of neurodivergence is refreshingly radical in the light of a cultural understanding that still views autism as a set of deficits. It is thanks to such neuro-affirming research and scholarship that, for me, learning I’m autistic has helped me find my place in the world and to feel less unworthy. Although it is suffering that gets us practising in the first place, I have a feeling too much unworthiness doesn’t help. I need to know that I can do this, just as any other person can.

Perhaps it was something like this that Dōgen was referring to in *Genjōkōan*. In my confusion and pain I was holding myself back from life, trying to act like everybody else, trying not to make a mistake. Not wanting to be found out. Through the lens of neurodivergence, I see things differently: there never really was anything wrong with me; I never really was unsafe. I can trust life; I can trust myself. Dōgen shows me I don't need to choose between this particular life and life itself. I don't have to choose between the ocean and the wave. It's paradoxical, but it has to be both.

I keep getting to this place where it's clear that I really don't know anything. I'm not in control. My poor old brain can't do the sum.

I give up.

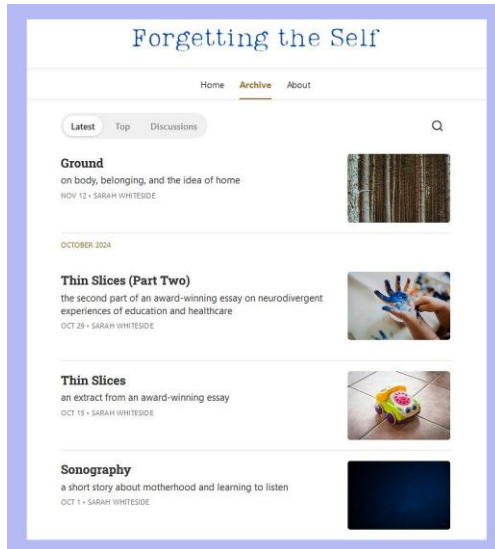
And yet here I still am, typing these words, making my constellations, trying to get to the bottom of things. This is the freedom of self-forgetting that happens at the unfolding edge of experience. In order to be free of yourself, you first have to fully be yourself. The only place to do that is in the moment-by-moment practice of your life.

Notes

- [1.](#) Malik, K., *James Baldwin taught us that identities can help us to locate ourselves. But they trap us too.* Observer, 28th July 2024.
- [2.](#) Baldwin, James, *Everybody's Protest Novel: Essays*, Beacon Press, 2024.
- [3.](#) Morgan, Rev. Master Daishin, *I, Not I, and Beyond*, in *The Journal of the Order of Buddhist Contemplatives*, Spring 2024, p 6.

4. Dōgen, Great Master, *Actualizing The Fundamental Point, in Enlightenment Unfolds: Essential Teachings Of Zen Master Dogen.* Kazuaki Tanahashi, ed. P 87.
5. Walker, N., *Neuroqueer Heresies: Notes on the Neurodiversity Paradigm, Autistic Empowerment, and Postnormal Possibilities.* Autonomous Press, 2021.

The author writes about about identity, neurodivergence and Zen practice on <https://forgettingtheself.substack.com/>



Upright Presence

Rev. Elinore Agnew

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

A transcript of a Dharma talk given during a meditation period at Throssel's Segaki retreat in October 2024.

In the chapter of *Shōbōgenzō*, “*Shōji*”, or “*Birth and Death*”, Dōgen says the following:

This birth-and-death is the life of Buddha. If you try to exclude it, you will lose the life of Buddha. If you cling to it, trying to remain in it, you will also lose the life of Buddha. Only when you don't avoid birth and death or long for it will you enter the Buddha's mind.

However do not analyse it or speak about it. Just set aside your body and mind, forget about them, and throw them into the house of Buddha; then all is done by Buddha. Seek nothing else.¹

It seems that the way is long. There can appear mountains and great rivers. There may be a profound sense of

need; an experience of lacking something. We search – near and far. We may try to find connection through relationship, or through experience or attainment. It seems to elude us. There is an urgency in the need to know. Aspiration continues. We drop the searching, and all that drives us. Nothing can be attained in this way. Every aspect of the person that we have become – it is just that. We let it be seen – and fall away.

We honour the silence. Each day returning. The quieting down of all that we may have carried for so long, and all that we believe ourselves to be. The still and empty heart. We throw ourselves in, and leave it behind. Allow the depth to reach all things. Forget – completely forget – and let zazen be.

One of the first chapters of *Shōbōgenzō* is an essay that Dōgen wrote soon after returning from China called *Bendōwa* or *On the Endeavour of the Way*. It was his first attempt to express his thinking in the Japanese language.

He says the following:

When even for a moment you sit upright in Samadhi expressing the Buddha mudra, the whole world of phenomena becomes the buddha mudra and the entire sky turns into enlightenment....

...This being so, the zazen of even one person at one moment imperceptibly accords with all things and fully resonates through all time. Thus in the past,

future and present of the limitless universe, this zazen carries on the limitless transformation endlessly and timelessly. Each moment of zazen is equally the wholeness of practice, equally the wholeness of realization.²

This seems extraordinary, and it is challenging to us. Can we engage as wholeheartedly as this? Are we willing? What about this that I may believe is holding me back? We are exploring practice and realization completely. We must leave behind all ideas about it along with all that we assume that we are. Zazen is not something that we are making happen. It eludes all attempts to understand and describe it. Every judgement and opinion falls away here. Definitions disappear. Fear and desire cannot be sustained. This is not to deny that great effort and careful study of ourselves is essential too.

Often we have a sense of ourselves in relation to others, influenced by all that has happened to us, and all that we do. There is a way that this seems necessary in our daily lives. But we need to explore how this conditions us at the deepest levels. In zazen, it is not actually like this. Going on exploring this opens up a different way of being. We could say that all our experience and conditioning is not substantial in the way that we believe. We could also say that form is empty. Whatever we say, we must continue looking. Being there. Words fall away. It cannot be defined.

As soon as we come to zazen, something is known. It can be as if we acknowledge what we most long for, and are in the presence of what is most deeply known. For most of us,

as we go on, everything that seems to stand in the way appears at different times and in subtly different forms. All our fears and desires pull in many ways, and we sit still. Past hurt or trauma, things that we have done and not done, and all that is there for us to give in this moment, play themselves out. The choices we make, our many layers of judgment and opinion, and all that we hold close, or turn away from, ask for attention.

In zazen we don't do anything. Judgement cannot be sustained. Something takes our focus and its form continues to change. Maybe something is shown that is helpful. Perhaps we need to do or say something – or refrain from doing something. Then this is gone too. We can wander long in the desert – feeling lost. We have times of inspiration and clarity. There can be deep levels of grief, sometimes without an obvious cause. There can be joy, great lightness, and times when it is very much about being with others. There can be solitary and lonely places, and sometimes we can't easily meet others or find connection. Maybe we talk a lot, and have much to say. Then there can be deep silence, when no words come. We need to be able to be with others like this too, without judgement.

We may think that we move steadily from darkness towards light; from the isolating feelings of hate, fear and grief, towards love, compassion and wisdom. We can easily measure ourselves like this. This is not how the way seems to be, nor the human condition. In zazen, there isn't a need to compare, or for one thing to become another; nor a need to resolve anything. We let it be as it is. The restless searching

and comparing may continue, but there is boundless existence. This becomes the ground.

Are we casting off body and mind, or are we holding on? Often we go back and forth. We see ourselves getting involved. This is often enough. What is our aspiration? We are changing habits gradually, seriously, over time. “No, I don’t wish to do this anymore. I can respond differently”. We cannot deny the presence of hate, and our deeply felt prejudices; likes and dislikes. To really see this is not to want to continue it. But there is more letting go; always. Why do I feel threatened by something or someone? We can just see this. Why do I turn towards comfort or love, and grasp after something or someone? We see this too; but don’t judge. There is usually more that we need to feel in coming to understand the roots of what is painful to us. Much kindness is needed. It starts with accepting it in ourselves, and this can enable the possibility of understanding others. We wish to be able to help beings, and respond with compassion. We can feel drawn to many causes where action seems to be needed. This is admirable, and often very unselfish. Sometimes this involves risk to ourselves. But there may be a silent call, usually very close to home. Can we hear this? Zazen allows this depth of hearing. There can be a response that is not what we might expect. It is to do with real connection; not coming from the mind that is dealing in opposites. This is where we sit, and the offering that can be made if we hear like this, involves all beings.

We can spend much energy distracting ourselves and finding reasons to doubt. We just see this, and go on. Often

there may be something that needs our attention, or possibly something that we best not continue doing. It is natural to ask, “Am I enough? Am I doing enough?” or feel, “If I wasn’t like this, would it be different?” All of this matters less as we go on. It is not answered by that mind. There isn’t an answer to these concerns; a right amount; a right person to do it; nor right conditions. The conditions are the ones that are present; the person is the one that we are, and the need depends on our ability to see what is already here.

In Tanahashi’s translation of *Shōbōgenzō*, he comments on *Bendōwa*, and explains the following:

Using a set of imaginary questions, Dōgen responds to doubts and skepticism by those accustomed to conventional Buddhist practices. One question is as follows:

Home leavers are free from various involvements and do not have hindrances in zazen in pursuit of the way. How can the laity, who are variously occupied, practice single-mindedly, and accord with the buddha way which is unconditioned?

Dōgen answers:

Buddha ancestors, out of their kindness, have opened the wide gate of compassion in order to let all beings enter realization. Who among humans and heavenly beings cannot enter?...

...This just depends on whether or not you have the willingness. It does not matter whether you are a layperson or a home leaver. Those who can discern excellence invariably come to trust in this practice. Those who regard worldly affairs as a hindrance to buddha dharma think only that there is no buddha dharma in the secular world; they do not understand that there is no secular world in buddha dharma.³

We just do what seems to be good. Unselfish. We go on, and the choices that we make change. We realize that it is becoming less to do with what we want, and more for the benefit of others. There is always further to go, but we become aware of a genuine wish to live in accordance with, and to help beings. This means not indulging like and dislike. It means feeling the consequences of acting against others, or not considering the effects of our speech and action.

It can appear as not feeling the way that we used to, when the usual causes are there. Not creating the same thoughts; or not doing things that strengthen doubt and confusion. It can be that we are fine with a situation that we never would have chosen; or can be still in the presence of suffering. Maybe we respond compassionately in the midst of anger and threat. We realize that we just don't see it in the way that we used to. However much pain there is, it cannot remain so in zazen. Great joy is not a lasting state either. Nothing is fixed in any way, and this understanding opens up as we go on.

There is no denying the need to do the work that is here now. We may fear what might happen if we let go, and so we

continue to hold on, or push away. This appears to limit our understanding. We can feel that we need a lot, so we cling. Or we deny, so we reject. We are getting used to a sense of ‘no thing’, or ‘nothing’, in the most positive of ways. We will only partly perceive this if we are insisting on our own perspective; the perspective of ‘me’. This has to go, and in zazen we cannot hold onto it because it is not truly there. We return, and look. “Is there a self in the way that I believe, or not?” There is constant change, and nothing of that nature that we can define as such. It is the action of observing; seeing things come and go; moving across the inner landscape as a myriad different forms.

Dōgen says,

Know that the practice of zazen is the complete path of buddha dharma, and nothing can be compared to it.⁴

We go on in darkness and light, and the way appears. It is in the falling away that this becomes apparent. Something guides us, if we can allow; if we can be quiet enough to see and hear it. There can be a sense of stillness, where we hear the silence; the empty place where things take form; and where nothing begins or ends.

The lessening of self-concern and all that comes from this is a direct result. Always further to go, and more to see. Humility may be one of the most essential qualities. So vast, in relation to me. All beings teach us; all circumstances show

the way. Maybe too difficult sometimes; maybe not fair. We bow, and go on.

Understanding a presence which is not limited to me, frees us from the limiting perception of the mind of discrimination. This mind has its place, and will continue to function as needed. But it can't reach our complete existence because it can't perceive in this way. Until we see its constraints, we are obscuring our inherent connection with all things.

We know compassion, love and wisdom – in ourselves, and in others. The same with greed, hate and delusion, or fear and desire. There is no opposition here – we need to know this too, otherwise there is always a tension that we feel we can't resolve. We observe this. Today I see the action of hate, and can hear myself justifying and defending. What is there still to see, and am I willing? Return to the work within this heart, and do it. There may be something I am not letting in. It is very subtle to move off on a habitual chain of behaviour and thought, in the way that we always have.

Sometimes this is demanding; we don't know what is holding us back. We can feel lost, and lose faith.

It is very significant that we are here. We acknowledge that meditation is the gateway, and we wish to go. As the way opens up, we become more able to see how we turn away. When we do, there may be a call which can be hard to ignore. It will be difficult too, and it is not to do with anything that we want it to be, or think it should be.

As the senses continue to become quiet, there is something that cannot be known in the conventional way. No matter how far we search. It cannot be done by doing.

Meditation reaches beyond thought and words. The discriminatory mind cannot understand. It falls into silence. This is where we sit, whether we know it or not. There is action that comes from here. It is less affected by conventional views of right and wrong, good or bad, should or shouldn't. It comes from a depth of hearing that is not conditioned.

It makes a profound difference to start the day with zazen; before speech and action begin. Day after day, we come to know a strong and unbreakable foundation. We can return here. This is present, and through zazen we come to know it. In the midst of feeling lost; in the depth of despair and difficulty, we can affirm our true intention. We face ourselves, and all beings. Just be with it. "I will be here"; "I can bear this".

We begin the day with six bows. We bow to the Buddha; we bow to each other – all beings. We bow because we wish to let go. In the falling away, something is being realized. We bow to allow it; to join it, and to go on ceasing to obstruct it. We join – with gratitude, when it is there – and humility. We bow, whatever we are feeling; however it is. It doesn't matter whether we want to, or whether we feel like it. We are relinquishing the one that I believe that I am.

The few words in *The Scripture of Great Wisdom* say everything. It is our endeavour to understand suffering. Kanzeon knows. The deepest wisdom is there in the heart. The five skandhas are void, unstained and pure. We are empty.

...what is form is pure – and what is pure is form.
The same is also true of all sensation – thought,
activity and consciousness.⁵

Look and see. Regardless of how it seems. Never mind how certain we are – look again. Great humility is needed. That is why we bow. “I might be wrong”. It is never actually this. We are finding a way to live that allows this ever-changing nature to find expression.

If we only know form, there is a vast dimension that always eludes us. Depth and meaning seem to be beyond our reach. As we sit, form is always changing. Emptiness is there in all things. Form breaks up, and together form and emptiness find expression.

“For here there is no suffering.” It is in the depth of being that we let go of pain, memories, and things that we have felt for so long. They all have a place here. We go on – acknowledging what we feel. It is here that suffering can rest. In the realization of what is present, so much ceases to exist. In this cessation there is all that we need.

Dōgen said:

Spreading the way of buddha ancestors does not depend on place or circumstance. Just consider that today is the beginning.⁶

Notes

1. *TREASURY of the TRUE DHARMA EYE: Zen Master Dogen's Shobo Genzo*. Tanahashi, Kazuaki. Ed. Shambala, 2012, p. 966.
2. As above, p. 62-64.
3. As above, p. 74.
4. As above, p. 69.
5. *The Liturgy of the Order of Buddhist Contemplatives for the Laity*. Shasta Abbey Press, 1990. P. 73.
6. As above (Tanahashi), p. 80.

News of the Order

Head of the Order Retires

On 22nd October Rev. Master Haryo Young announced his retirement from his position as Head of the Order of Buddhist Contemplatives. He will be continuing his monastic training as a member of the Shasta Abbey community. We wish to acknowledge our gratitude to Rev. Master Haryo for 20 years of service to the Sangha.

The Order is being administered temporarily by a four-monk 'Head of the Order Council' which is fulfilling the usual responsibilities of the Head of the Order. The Council can be contacted at hofo.council@obcon.org

– Head of the Order Council

(Rev. Master Oswin Hollenbeck, Rev. Master Daishin Yalon, Rev. Master Mugo White, Rev. Elinore Agnew.)

News of the Order

Europe

Throssel Hole Buddhist Abbey

— Northumberland, England — UK —

Green Energy Developments: We're glad to let you know that in the Myrtle Bank Extension building we've switched from using an oil boiler to heating provided by air source heat pumps. As the oil boiler was coming to the end of its life, we looked into all the other heating options, including the possibility of bio-fuels and ground source pumps, but decided the air source heat pump solution was the best for us.



It was up and running after four days of fitting new radiators and putting in new pipework. We are pleased with the results so far; even on a frosty morning the bedrooms and offices are pleasantly warm. It is encouraging that new technologies seem to work, even in our famously harsh Northumberland weather. This gives us hope that we may be able to replace our other fossil fuel boilers in the future. We are grateful to the installers who did a great job, and of course for your support that makes everything we do possible.

October's Segaki Retreat was led by Rev. Elinore, with help from Rev. Daigen. The teaching they gave is now on the

[Dharma talks page](#) of our website, and the first one is also transcribed in this Journal. We were glad to see so many lay trainees join us for this regular calendar event, and are glad that the weather was mostly fine for the time of year, enabling us to have a crew of ‘garden & grounds’ helpers working outdoors for almost all of the work periods. The retreat concluded with the customary Feeding the Hungry Ghosts (altar below) and Toro ceremonies.



New Postulant: We are pleased to announce that Ritsuko Okamoto entered the Community as a postulant on 26 September. Originally from Amagasaki, near Osaka in Japan, Ritsuko has lived in the UK for over 30 years. We extend her a warm welcome, and wish her well with her training.



The Lay Ministry Retreat was held in mid-November. Rev. Master Mugō travelled up from Telford and spent a long weekend teaching and facilitating the various classes and discussion which proved to be very helpful for all. Rev. Master Berwyn also gave a Dharma talk which was much appreciated.

Festival of the Founder: We held our annual festival to express our gratitude for Rev Master Jiyu's life and teaching on 3rd November with a ceremony, a talk by Rev. Kyōsei and a celebratory social buffet meal. This year we were joined for the first time by a group of local Scouts and Cubs, aged between 6 and 10, along with their group leaders. These youngsters learn about religions as part of their program of events, and as they only meet on Sundays, we invited them to come to the festival. After the ceremony Rev. Lambert gave them a tour and showed them how to meditate. They were a pleasure to have with us – were quiet and respectful – and they asked lots of questions.

The Buddha's Enlightenment Festival in December brought to a close a four-day retreat led by Rev. Wilfrid. In addition to our usual local congregation we welcomed a group from the local Plum Village Sangha. Some of them had been here before, others joined in for the first time to enjoy the ceremony, some meditation, a Dharma talk and lunch. After this joyful event the monastery closed for the monks' winter sesshin.

—*Rev. Masters Roland & Alina*

The Place of Peace Dharma House

—*Aberystwyth, Wales*—

Over the past few months we have kept a steady pace, with meetings and talks being offered. In August we enjoyed a visit from Rev. Sanshin of Throssel Hole Buddhist Abbey. Having another monk in the Meditation Hall is appreciated. In September the temple altars were changed to reflect the autumnal season. In November offerings were made in memory of those who have died or suffered because of war, and we stood in meditation during the traditional one minute silence.

Later in the month Andrew cut the hedges back in preparation for winter and, at the time of writing this, work has begun on a new drive. This will be paid for with money donated by the late Dilys Harris (Rev. Master Myōhō's mother), who was

pleased to be able to help support the temple. We offer gratitude for her generosity. We also offer gratitude to Wayne Birchall, who donates eye drops for Rev. Myōhō, and to Steffan Jones for his help with computer issues. John Adams is, as always, invaluable in offering help and expertise with financial matters.

— *Rev. Master Myōhō*

Turning Wheel Buddhist Temple

— *East Midlands – UK* —

Festival of the Buddha’s Enlightenment and 10th anniversary celebration: The temple first started renting a property in Leicester on the 1st of December 2014, so this December is the tenth anniversary of the temple's founding. We celebrated the Festival of the Buddha's Enlightenment on Saturday the 7th of December, and that was also be a very fitting opportunity to celebrate the temple's tenth anniversary together.

It was lovely to have seven people here in person for the festival and tenth anniversary celebration, despite the stormy weather over the weekend, as well as half a dozen or so people online. This was our first Enlightenment festival since we have had the Mount Sumeru altar which came from Reading, and below is a photo of the meditation hall, illuminated by the festive lights.



The next photo shows a close-up of the picture on the altar, which was painted by Kevin Commons and given to the temple as an Enlightenment Day card and gift.



Thank you to Kevin, and to everyone who made the day so enjoyable and such a success. We hope that we and the temple will experience many happy returns of the day.

Autumn Day Retreat in Nottingham: It was lovely to meet with members of the Nottingham group for a day of meditation and practice at the Day Retreat in Chilwell on Sunday the 3rd of November. There were ten of us there altogether and the building was nice and quiet as the library which shares the building with the community centre is closed on Sundays. The photo below shows the main room during one of the morning meditation periods.



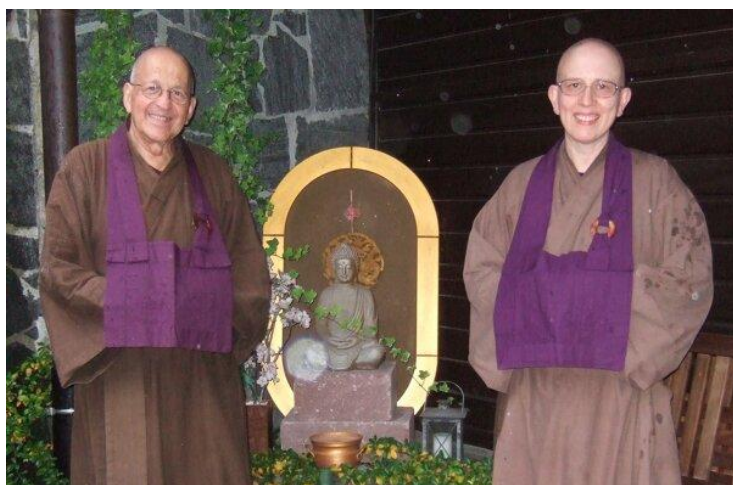
Thank you to all those who helped organise it and make it happen, and for all your support and donations in many different ways. We hope to hold another retreat at the same venue next Spring.

— *Rev. Master Aiden*

Dharmazuflucht Schwarzwald
— Gutach (Black Forest) – Germany —

Reverend Caitlin's and Lay Minister Paul Taylor's visits:

In autumn, Rev. Master Mokugen's disciple, Rev. Caitlin, spent some time on retreat in our temple. We were very glad and grateful to have Rev. Caitlin here with us. She was already well familiar with our temple, had also come several times to our previous temple in the Black Forest, and has helped us on many occasions. Earlier on, Lay Minister Paul Taylor came to spend some time in our temple. He has been coming almost every year to see us, and it is always a great pleasure to have him here for a while.



Outside retreat: Rev. Clementia led a retreat in a small town nearby, where Lay Minister Irene Mueller-Harvey lives. It was attended by members of the meditation group Irene had started earlier this year. Some members of the group have now also come on retreat to the Dharmazuflucht.

Segaki: In the last week of October, we had our week-long Segaki retreat, which was attended by four of our lay ministers. The actual ceremony was held on the 2nd November (photo on next page).



Peter Haller: Our long-term congregation member Peter Haller, who had been suffering from cancer for quite some time, died on December 10th. A few weeks before that, Rev. Clementia went to visit him in the hospital in Bavaria where he was staying. Peter had spent time at Throssel Hole Buddhist Abbey on a variety of occasions in the past, and he had also visited Shasta Abbey many years ago. The photo below shows Peter in 2022, shortly before he received the cancer diagnosis, standing between Lay Ministers Susan and Andreas.



Visit From Members Of A Local Mosque: In November, a protestant pastor visited us with some of his congregation members and several members of the mosque in a nearby town, who wanted us to speak to them about our practice and the life in our temple. We were then invited to an inter-religious dialogue that will be happening this coming February.



Yearly event in the Buddha Haus Stuttgart: Like every year, we will be giving a public talk and leading a day retreat in the Buddha-Haus city center in Stuttgart towards the end of the year.

— *Rev. Master Fuden and Rev. Clementia*

News of the Order

North America

— *Mount Shasta, CA – USA* —

New Postulant: On September 5th welcomed Donald Hart of La Crescenta, California, who entered the Community as a postulant. Donald is a disciple of Rev. Master Daishin Yalon. We wish him well as he takes this first step in his monastic life.



New Novices: On October 19th, Reverend Master Meian ordained Nancine McDonald and Trinity Treat into the monastic Sangha. Nancine received the name Hōun Dara (Compassion in the Dharma Cloud), and Trinity received the name Hōun Audrin

(Noble Strength in the Dharma Cloud). We are happy to welcome Reverends Dara and Audrin as new monks, and we wish them all the best as they continue their monastic training.



Animal Blessing: On October 12th, Casey Mallard requested a blessing from the monks for her special friend, an elderly Lhasa Apso dog named Jack. Casey and her father Arthur brought Jack to the Jizō shrine, where Rev. Master Enya and the dog Jack became immediate friends. Jack seemed very happy to receive the blessing, which Rev. Master Enya celebrated informally with a special offertory, the Three Refuges, and an asperge, assisted by Rev. Valeria. This was followed by a walk around the central garden together with Ranger, the Abbey’s new canine resident.

—Rev. Master Oswin

Redding Zen Buddhist Priory

— Redding, CA – USA —

Rev. Helen participated in the traditional Shasta Interfaith Thanksgiving Service held on November 24 at the First United Methodist Church in Redding (CA). She offered text from Great Master Dōgen's teaching in Chapter 5 of the *Shushōgi: Putting the Teaching into Practice and Showing Gratitude*. 300 people attended and shared social time after the Service. Lay Minister Laurie Ottens, who participates in the Mount Shasta Interfaith group, also attended and stayed overnight at the Priory.

22 Sangha members and friends participated in the Enlightenment Day Retreat held on December 6-7 at the Priory and on Zoom. Rev. Helen and Alexa Singer Telles explored how the Buddha's Enlightenment invites us to see, strengthen and share our own Buddha Nature in the confusion and uncertainties of the darkness and the light of our current world.

— Rev. Master Helen

Still Flowing Water Hermitage

— Meadow Vista, CA – USA —

On 9 November 2024 Rev. Vivian gave the Precepts to John Sealander on Zoom. John is in North Carolina, and unable to travel to California. It was a little different to do the ceremony over Zoom, but it went well – and it was attended by members of the Bear River Meditation Group, members of John's family, and members of a Sōtō Zen meditation group on the east coast that John sits with daily. It was very moving to witness the melding of these Sanghas and be a part of the feeling of family that infused the ceremony. We wish John great joy as he continues on in his training.

At the end of September, thanks to a generous donor, Rev. Vivian was able to return to India, to McLeod Ganj, above Dharamsala, in order to hear the Dalai Lama teach. He spoke on

Tsongkhapa's *Three Aspects of Practice*, which are renunciation, bodhicitta, and emptiness (shunyata). It was certainly a privilege to see him in person and to hear these valuable teachings 'live.'

— *Rev. Master Vivian*

Wallowa Buddhist Temple

— *Joseph, Oregon – USA* —

Snows have come again to the Wallowa Buddhist Temple, after a long warm, wet autumn which allowed us to wrap up many useful seasonal chores around the buildings and grounds.

Fall Activities: Again we have found ourselves splitting and stacking firewood, clearing downed branches from the woods, and preparing our snow-clearing equipment for winter. In mid-October, four friends kindly lent willing hands during a work day to rake up a carpet of fallen pine needles from around the buildings. In November, Rev. Clairissa completed construction of a sturdy shed roof to keep deep snow off our recycling containers and ATV snowplow. Our two autumn guest horses, having done such a great job of grazing down the grasses on the forest floor, moved on to re-join the rest of their herd; their friendly presence on the temple grounds is missed.

Monthly Day Retreats: Our first-Saturday Day of Serene Reflection continues each month, with meditation beginning every hour on the hour from 8 am until 3:30 pm, with Mid-Day Service and a short sitting ending the retreat day. A regular flow of local congregation are stopping in one-by-one for part of each day retreat, with one or two choosing to join the entire schedule. Those who stay for most or all of the retreat bring a vegetarian sack lunch, taking a mid-day sitting period to eat their lunch in silence.

Festive Segaki: On October 27th, a goodly number of people joined in our Festival Feeding of the Hungry Ghosts, celebrated by Rev. Meidō and followed by a bountiful and convivial vegetarian potluck. In addition to our local congregation, we also welcomed one friend from Union, Oregon, one from Detroit, Michigan, and

one from France (see photo below). As usual, work assignments were handed out to those who came early to participate in the set-up of the Segaki altar and a temple-cleaning period. This year a new trio of kwatzers bravely rose to the task of playing the temple instruments during the ceremony (including an impressive set of cymbals kindly loaned to us for the festival weekend by our nearby high school marching band). Once again, Erin's homemade cream buns were greatly enjoyed by all, and quickly disappeared following the ceremony.



Retreat Guests & Buddha's Enlightenment: The temple hosted a retreat guest from Washougal, Washington, for six days in November. Then for the first week of December we were joined by a retreat guest, Erica, from our local congregation, for a week-long commemoration of the Buddha's Enlightenment (Rohatsu), culminating in our Saturday day retreat on the 7th, and followed by the Festival of Buddha's Enlightenment during our Sunday Morning Retreat on the 8th. During the Rohatsu retreat, Reverend Master Jiyu and the wider Sangha of our Order felt very close, and deep gratitude arose for the precious practice we all share.

Individual Meetings: In addition to our monastic practice and weekly services, both Rev. Meidō and Rev. Clairissa are available to meet individually on a daily basis with those who stop by out of curiosity or goodwill, those who are inquiring about our practice or the temple's function, those who request instruction in meditation, and those who take refuge for pastoral and spiritual counseling. Travelers drawn to this beautiful Eagle Cap Wilderness area are surprised to discover a Buddhist temple here, and often decide to include a visit with Buddhist monks as part of their adventure.

We also welcome congregation, neighbors and friends of the temple who come to say hello, or bring offerings of food, or pitch in with a work project. This year, we enjoyed hosting first the local Catholic priest and then the local Methodist minister (both of whom are new to the area in their respective positions) for tea with the monks here at the temple, by way of wishing them each well and getting to know one another. From time to time, we visit those who request us to sit with them in the hospital, or in a care facility, or at home. We occasionally receive vegetarian meal offerings from local restaurants, or accept invitations to join temple friends in their homes or at a restaurant for a vegetarian meal. And we are glad to respond by phone and email, as well, wherever our friends may be, new or old, near or far.

In this remote and sparsely populated corner of Oregon, our meeting one-to-one and in small groups comprises the majority of our interactions with beings who range widely in age, outlook, and circumstances. Both of us feel blessed to be able to open our hearts in this way.

Podcast: We continue to offer a temple podcast, Serene Reflections: From the Heart that Seeks the Way. Over ninety gentle, intimate Dharma reflections from Rev. Clairissa are available for listening or download on the [Serene Reflections Podcast](#) page of our website, or by subscription without charge via a number of popular podcast apps.

Individual Retreats: One of the main purposes of the Wallowa Buddhist Temple from its beginning over two decades ago has been to offer individual retreats. If you are opening to the possibility of a future retreat here in our guest house, you are most welcome to contact us directly via our website, at: <https://wallowabuddhisttemple.org>, where you also can find more information about the temple.

— *Rev. Master Meidō and Rev. Clairissa*

Further Information

The Order of Buddhist Contemplatives was founded by the late Rev. Master Jiyu-Kennett. The Order is dedicated to following the tradition of Serene Reflection Meditation (Sōtō Zen).

The main offices of the OBC are at the two training monasteries in the Order, Throssel Hole Buddhist Abbey in England and Shasta Abbey in the USA.

More information can be found via the Order's website at: <https://obcon.org/>

Information on the whereabouts of the Order's temples and meditation groups, with their website and contact details, can be found at: <https://obcon.org/temples-and-meditation-groups/>

The *Journal* has a website, where current as well as past issues can be downloaded, and articles can be read online: <https://journal.obcon.org/>

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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