

Berkeley Buddhist Priory Newsletter

March – April 2002

Learning to Listen

by Rev. Jisho Perry

(This article was first published in the July-August 1991 issue of the *Santa Barbara Buddhist Priory Newsletter*)

The fifth law of the Universe is that an intuitive knowledge of the Buddha Nature occurs to all people.¹ When we meditate we are beckoning to that still small voice to speak to us. Responding to this is our way of accepting our spiritual adulthood. We have all listened to this voice from time to time. It is the prompting of this inner urging that brings us to the gates of temple. If it is our desire to know the Eternal, to live at peace within ourselves, then we must continue to deepen this relationship.

From our cultural conditioning we may be familiar only with prayers of supplication as a method of religious worship. We may believe that religion is constantly asking God for special favors. We may not be as familiar with the Buddhist approach which is to listen to the inner promptings of the Eternal. Instead of asking what God can do for us, we need to ask what I must do to put myself in harmony with the Eternal. I remember a story Rev. Jiyu-Kennett told of a particularly talkative monk from a western tradition who went on at considerable length about wanting to have “conversations with God.” When she was able to get a word in edgewise she suggested, as politely as she could, that he may need to be quiet enough to let God talk to him. Most of the time we are not quiet enough to hear anything other than the noisy demands of our greeds, angers, worries, fears, frustrations and the “busyness” of our everyday lives. Our culture encourages a constant input of noise: the music in elevators, or while waiting on the phone, car radios, car phones, television, radios, headsets to wear while exercising. We have a difficult task to find a quiet time when there is not a major input of external noise. Even when we have established a time in our day for meditation, when we can listen to the silence, it is usually anything but silent. It still takes time to let go of the internal noises we generate for ourselves. If we establish a regular practice of meditation we create a situation where the noise and busy mental processes can settle.

The first thing we need to listen to is the fact that we are experiencing the Buddha’s First Noble Truth, that suffering is inherent in the nature of existence. Until we can experience this honestly and admit that there is

tension, fear, greed, anger, etc., we cannot do anything about finding a way to be at peace in the middle of it. We generate a lot of noise to cover up the fact of suffering, hoping that if we can drown it out, it will go away. The other extreme is to look for some escape from all noise or unpleasantness. Neither drowning out the suffering with noise nor looking for an escape from it are effective means to end it. What does work is Buddhist training. We can train ourselves to return to the source of peace even in the middle of a deafening roar. But it takes some practice. There are no quick fixes to the problems of suffering.

Most of the time we associate learning with the getting of external information: books, lectures, videos, or learning from doing something new: action. Neither action nor external stimuli are necessary in the spiritual learning process. Instead we must learn how to bring the ignorance (our suffering is a symptom of this ignorance) together with the adequacy, the intuitive sense of the Eternal. This is one of the meanings of the gesture of reverence, the gassho.

If our experience in school is not particularly interesting, we develop a habit of daydreaming. We may have our bodies in the classroom and our minds thinking about other things. We have learned to divide our attention. We do this in hundreds of different ways. We eat and read simultaneously. In the process of doing two things simultaneously, we do not give our attention to any one thing. We are particularly fearful of giving our full attention to things that are difficult or unpleasant. Learning how to listen is how we learn to convert the ignorance into deeper understanding.

Few of us like to be in a position to confront those things that are frightening, we think we prefer those things that are safe. Then there are those who are constantly risking their lives and the lives of others by doing things recklessly to get a thrill out of the risk. Buddhism teaches the Middle Way. We can train ourselves to relax in the middle of frightening, difficult or uncertain circumstances. We do not need to put our lives or the lives of others at risk merely to feel alive. When we are feeling threatened, or bored, we can relax and open our hearts to learn from these experiences. This is what goes on in meditation. It is the constant gentle process of relaxing and opening up in the face of suffering. The Buddha's Second Noble Truth is that the cause of suffering is attachment to desire. We experience our present suffering as a result of former actions. This is the law of karma. If we learn how to be still and open ourselves up and listen to something deeper in the middle of this clinging, then we can see how our actions need to be changed to prevent future suffering. We can train ourselves to let go of the clinging that creates the present suffering.

Charity is one of the wisdoms most deeply valued by Buddhists. We have to train ourselves to give or relax when confronted by tension. We need to apply that process to giving our attention to the task at hand.

This giving process is the process of training. As we give of ourselves, we become empty of self and it is then that we can be filled by the voice of the Eternal. It is a constant process, not a one time event. As we give our attention, as we learn to listen, then we train ourselves to be generous in physical ways as well. As we shift the focus of our attention from “what’s in it for me?” to “what can I give here?”, then we can find real fulfillment as a person. The real gift, of course, is giving up something we never wanted anyway, which is the suffering. What most of us think of as giving is usually an exchange, we want something in return for the effort. The selfless gift is the giving without regard to getting anything in return. This is how the selfless gift is made; it represents the Bodhisattva mind. This is how we learn to listen. It is enough to hear the silence.

There is no need to look for a better time or better circumstances before we make some changes in our lives. When people say they want to come to meditate at the Priory when their schedule is less hectic, or when they retire, or some other future event takes place, I hear that they are not likely to make it. We can train ourselves in the middle of our delusions. If some external event has to take place before we can change ourselves then there will never be a right time. The external situation is a mirror of our ignorance, and if we want to convert the ignorance to wisdom, then we need to change what it is we do both physically and spiritually. This changing process starts with listening. We can listen to that still small voice even in the middle of great chaos. There are no barriers except the greed, anger and the delusions of self that we can let go of. Then we need to respond to that still small voice. Sitting still is already responding to the Unborn and getting the process of harmonization of body and mind going: training is enlightenment.

If we wish to be at peace and know the Eternal, then we have to let go of the suffering. If we are fully entrenched in our delusions, we imagine that letting go of the delusions is the most difficult and frightening thing that could be asked of us. Yes, it looks that way. Yes, that is the message that the “self” may give in loud and demanding terms. I know of no other way to be at peace or to know the Eternal. If we listen to the shouts and fears we can make no progress. If we listen to the Buddha’s teachings and the words of those monks who are qualified to teach, then we can make real progress.

We need to listen both to the internal voice and to the external voice. The relationship with a teacher in Buddhism allows you to trust another human being. We need to trust the internal promptings and then an external one. That is why it is important that the teacher be recognized as being qualified to teach. Although the role of the teacher in Buddhism is to provide an example, they are not saviors. They do not take over the responsibility for our actions. Nor would a genuine teacher ever ask one to do something contrary to the Precepts. It is important that we do not put the teacher on a pedestal and worship him or her expecting our idea of perfection from them. If we do this, then we later revile them for not living

up to our expectations. However, we must learn to listen and to trust both the internal and external teacher. We have to first learn how to be our own best friend. We must train ourselves to be still enough to listen to the inner prompting of the heart and distinguish that from the noisy voice of greed and anger. Then we must learn how to listen to others to hear what is really being said, which may be far different from what the surface words may state. When we listen we must learn how to let go of our ideas and opinions based on greed, anger and fear. When we can make ourselves an empty vessel, so the words of the Dharma can be poured into us as water is poured into an empty jar, then we can hear the Truth. *To enter the stream of Buddhism one must just simply harmonize the mind and the body—Shakyamuni said that one must turn the stream of compassion within and give up both knowledge and its recognition.*² This is how we learn to listen.

¹ Roshi P.T.N.H. Jiyu-Kennett and Rev. Daizui MacPhillamy, *The Book of Life* (Mt. Shasta, California: Shasta Abbey Press, 1979), p. 7.

² Great Master Dogen, “Gyakudo-yojinshu” (“Aspects of Zazen”) in *Zen is Eternal Life*, 4rd ed. rev., by Roshi P.T.N.H. Jiyu-Kennett (Mt. Shasta, California: Shasta Abbey Press, 1999), p. 172.

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The Third Refuge

In Buddhism, the Third Refuge is the Sangha Treasure. The Priory has had a Third Refuge Committee in place for several years. It was established to provide a way for Priory Sangha to take refuge in each other, in particular to lend a hand to members who had situations that required some assistance, for example, helping with house moves; assistance for someone who is ill; taking care of a pet if the member was ill or helping someone who was caring for a family member.

On Saturday, February 9, a meeting was held to discuss various issues around providing assistance to members of the Priory. Around a dozen members were present. Mike Lara started the discussion with a reminder about the importance of incorporating service as a vital aspect of our training. Rev. Kinrei mentioned that while the 3rd Refuge Committee is a good idea, in some ways it is more important that the members of the Priory develop a trust and support for each other during other times when there are no critical issues facing a member. Regular attendance at retreats, workdays and other Priory activities is a good opportunity to get to know one another. It is important to interact with the Sangha at other times, outside of the Priory, so that we can get to know each other and learn we can trust and rely on our fellow Sangha members. A spiritual community is based on trust and that can only arise out of getting to know each other and being willing to offer something of ourselves to

others. Then, when the occasion arises, the community can more readily rise up as a natural response to do what has to be done to be of assistance.

Rev. Kinrei also mentioned that it is spiritually important for members of the Sangha to learn to ask for help. While sometimes it can be difficult to admit that one needs help, it is necessary that we develop a trust in one another that allows us to reach out as the occasion requires. Please feel free to contact Rev. Kinrei if you need help.

It was decided that a small announcement would be placed on the bulletin board to remind everyone, particularly newcomers, that members of the Sangha were available to help each other. From time to time, a small reminder will also be placed in the Newsletter.

New Priory Buddha Statue

The Priory bought a beautiful Thai style Buddha statue. It is a wooden statue, covered in gold leaf, decorated with many small jewels. The statue, when bought, had some cracks and was very dirty and missing some gold leaf. It was beautifully restored by someone who specializes in restoring antiques. A temporary backdrop was put into place which consists of exquisite Chinese embroidered silk. On Sunday, February 17, the Priory had a ceremony to dedicate the new statue, with the Sangha coming up to the new altar and expressing their gratitude to the Buddha. The compassionate and serene presence of new Buddha helps to points us to how we all need to be still, bright and compassionate.

“Before us is the golden body of the Buddha; may we pay homage to this enlightened form so that we can open our hearts and minds and see the golden body of the Buddha wherever we look. May the Buddha who sits with us in this Meditation Hall point us to seeing beyond this dream of birth and death and help us to find what is real. May all who gaze upon this enlightened form, abandon their deluded ways and awaken the desire to seek the Buddhist Way and realize their true body. Let us all pay homage eternally to the Buddha.”

(Excerpt from the offertory at the ceremony to dedicate the new Priory Buddha statue.)

Work Days

On February 2, the Priory held a work day. We have been regularly

scheduling work days at the Priory and they have been a great help with fixing up and maintaining the Priory and its grounds. Buddhist training is based not just on receiving the spiritual nourishment that the Sangha offers us but our own willingness to cultivate gratitude and to find ways to give. Offering our valuable time to help with the work of the Priory is very needed if the Priory is to flourish. Also, helping at the Priory is not limited to work days. You are welcome and encouraged to come to the Priory whenever you can and offer your help. Each work day is scheduled from 9:30 to 3:00, but we welcome everyone to help for whatever part of the day they can come. Working together as a Sangha is a way of both giving to the Priory and sharing in the brightness of our fellow members of the Sangha. The work days include a lunch at the Priory which is a relaxed meal. The next work day is on Saturday, March 30. Please try to let us know if you can attend as it is helpful in planning the work and lunch.

Animal Naming Ceremonies

Joanne Stimac's family's dog, Maggie, had her naming ceremony, at the Priory, on January 6. Mary Gray's five animals all had their naming ceremony at Mary's house on February 6. It was a harmonious ceremony, with Rev. Kinrei giving the Buddhist blessing and refuges to Mary's two dogs, Sofi and Ashley and her three cats, Fionna, Bob, and Dave. Mary had some friends attend the naming ceremony and then all shared tea. During animal naming ceremony we offer the animals and ourselves the teaching that *"From the beginning, there is neither birth nor death, because of the accumulation of karma, you have received the body of an animal; discard this karmic body quickly and enter the world of purity."* It is a great joy to practice in Buddhism which explicitly embraces all beings. Whether dog or human, we all want to awaken to the Truth and find what is our real and deepest longing.

With Gratitude

Charity is one of the four wisdoms and demonstrates the Bodhisattva's aspiration. Deep appreciation and gratitude is extended to all those who contribute their spiritual practice, money, time, energy, and various generous gifts to the Priory. The generosity of the entire Priory Sangha is what makes it possible for the Priory to exist and for the Dharma to be offered.

In recent months, we have been given many generous gifts, including an altar shelf, plants, books, fabric, gasoline, software, ceramic bowl, building materials, pots and paper goods.

Providing monks with food is the traditional offering given when coming to a Buddhist temple, and we appreciate all the generous food offerings we have been given. Generous and deeply appreciated donations of food provide most of the needs of the Priory. Rev. Kinrei has

become aware that he is allergic to dairy products so please try not to donate foods with dairy in them to the Priory. Also, try to give food without garlic as it is considered an inappropriate food for Buddhist monks. Although we are grateful for any gift of food, the most helpful food donations are prepared meals, soy milk, fruit, tofu, vegetarian “meats” and breakfast cereal.

A Southern Californian Sangha member with a bookstore has offered to try to sell any books that the Priory is given. We encourage Sangha members and friends to donate any unwanted books to the Priory on an ongoing basis. This has earned a considerable amount of money for the Priory, and we very much appreciate these gifts of books.

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