

The Berkeley Buddhist Priory Newsletter January - February, 2004

Musing on Buddhist Comfort Amanda Snedaker

The other day one of the lay ministers gave me some very good teaching. He kindly offered to teach me how to present, to which I replied, "Ack! Let me get comfortable with offering incense first." Then he said, "You need to get comfortable being a Buddhist." I asked him what he meant, and he replied, "Oh, just getting used to what needs to be done at the different ceremonies." This simple comment is turning out to have many layers of meaning for me.

There are indeed many things I need to get used to, like the idea that our hearts are immaculate. Surely it doesn't mean my heart! I've always thought of myself as the exception to the rule. I have these horrible, unspeakable feelings. I've done these awful, hurtful things. I should have known better, should have done better, I should be better, and if I'm not careful everyone will find out what I'm really like!

But, in fact, it does mean me -- a totally revolutionary idea, if there ever was one, so much so that my world is turned upside down. I find myself having no idea how to think about myself because my basic assumption has been knocked out from under me. Instead of saying, "I am unkind, I am arrogant, I am selfish," now I try to say, "I've been arrogant, I've been unkind, I've been selfish." It feels odd, uncomfortable, and strange: I don't know, really, whom

I'm talking about -- and maybe I shouldn't. Because it's not just me whose heart is pure, it's everyone. We're all the same, all human, all making the same mistakes, feeling the same feelings in response to those mistakes, trying to see things clearly and do better the next time.

Which brings to mind another concept that's a challenge for me: Everything and everyone is the Buddha. Recently a man in a wheelchair asked me for help as I was walking down Solano Avenue. I had just started to talk to him when a door opened, and my hairdresser stepped out and asked me to come inside for a moment. She told me that the man had spent most of the afternoon in her shop. He wanted this, he wanted that, he wanted the young girls to help him go to the bathroom, he wanted cigarettes, money, he was difficult and angry and wouldn't leave or pay for services. She never lost her temper, and finally she told him, "Well, I don't know how to help you, but I'll call the Albany police. Maybe they'll know what to do." Of course he left at once. But the tone of her voice had impressed me. She was so kind, so gentle, and she got this man to leave peacefully and under his own power. She'd respected his dignity and kept her own, while protecting her clients and her employees. And she'd noticed me out in front of her shop and tried to spare me a potentially difficult situation. She saw the Buddha in him, and she acted accordingly -- without anger, without fear, without doing any disservice to her own Buddha Nature.

This story leads me to another idea, that the path is the way, that this very moment is enlightenment. This moment - - no matter what is happening, no matter what I'm feeling, no matter what the atmospheric conditions are -- is it. There's no waiting, and no escaping. I can see -- no, I can

live -- this incident of the man in the wheelchair, using his disability to exploit others and vent his anger and hurt. I can blame him and dislike him, or I can see in it what my hairdresser saw: a Buddha, struggling with his karma. I can react with anger and fear, or I can react with kindness and compassion. To react as she did, I have to see the Buddha there, or at least act as if the Buddha is there. This a pretty frightening place for me to be, a place where my proud, inadequate, defensive self is cut away. If even I am immaculate, so is he, and I have no grounds for opinions against him.

This idea of personal responsibility -- the law of karma -- that what I put out comes back to me, beyond worlds and beyond lifetimes, both resonates and perturbs me. On the one hand, I am all too ready to be responsible; nearly everything that goes wrong is my fault, and I am endlessly sorry for it. I wear guilt like a comfortable old sweater; it is just the white noise of my mind. On the other hand, I did the things I'm sorry for because of someone else, and I go round and round in the "He said, she said" cycle, looking for the pinhole that will let me out of my guilt and allow me to blame someone else. Facing a wall, I can see that both ideas are wrong: What goes around comes around, and this is as it should be. The law of karma is the tool that can pry open the lock of non-acceptance: Non-acceptance of self, non-acceptance of others, non-acceptance of what is really happening in the world and in my life.

What really takes some getting used to is that all these ideas -- immaculacy, enlightenment, faith -- are so much bigger than what our minds can grasp or articulate at any given moment. There is so much that we can't know, so many

things on the list of things to simply be accepted, without judgment and without the intellectual understanding that characterizes our idea of knowledge. "Why did she do that?" "How could he think that?" "Why would anyone act that way?" "How could this happen to me?" It's all so much noise disturbing my clarity of mind, increasing my suffering, distracting me from what is really important.

Fortunately, the wall doesn't go anywhere. Bit by bit I'm adjusting to the idea that I can sit down at any time and start trying to accept and let go. Sometimes, I remember to do it. Eventually, I may even succeed! Ever so slowly, I'm getting comfortable being a Buddhist.

The following letter is a response I wrote a few years ago to someone who was having difficulty letting go of her grief for her deceased dog. Since this problem comes up in many ways for all of us, I thought my response could be helpful. The letter has been edited and also changed to conceal to whom it was written. Kinrei

Dear Barbara,

I am sorry that to hear about your loss of your beloved dog, Trudy. I performed a funeral ceremony for her at the Priory as you requested. The animal funeral ceremony offers the animal the Buddhist teaching and the wish for it to become one with the Eternal. This verse which I said at the funeral is the teaching I was offering Trudy and it is teaching we all need to take to heart: From the beginning, there is neither

birth nor death, because of the accumulation of bad karma, you have received the body of an animal. Discard this karmic body quickly and enter the world of purity.

With regards to your question of how do you learn to let go of those things that you love, there is no simple answer. Within Buddhist training, we want our hearts to be open and to truly love but we also need to see everything in life as clearly as possible. We need to see through the illusions and dreams that tell us that something fundamental is changing, something real is being gained or being lost. When we see what really is, we then can see the fundamental transience and impermanence of everything that we encounter in life. Then it becomes much easier to simply love things for what they are and be grateful for what we have in our lives, without clinging. It also means we need to keep working at accepting the endless changes and the inevitable passing away of everything within our lives, including our body and all bodies. The way to accept loss is learning not to be scared of the future and to trust that nothing can truly be lost in the unfolding of our life's karma. When we feel that what we have had in the past, or have right now, can be lost and will not be found in the future, then we fear what the future may bring and we cannot let things go. Attachment arises from fear, and acceptance arises from faith and trust. If we fear the future, we then cling to what we had in the past or what we can grasp right now in the present. Have faith that the love within your heart that you felt for Trudy is always there. Nothing in the spiritual sense has been lost. When loss and grief arise, let them come, let yourself feel them, and then let them go. It is natural to feel grief but it is deluded to tell yourself that something essential was lost. The real love we seek is always there within our own hearts;

we just need to stop looking the wrong way, looking outside ourselves and then wondering why we feel so empty.

I hope you are doing well. Take care of yourself.

In Gassho,

Rev. Kinrei

Memorial

On Sunday, November 30, we held a memorial for Daisy, Helmut and Linda Schatz's dog who had died recently after a long period of ill health. Daisy had spent a week at the Priory about year ago and her cheerful presence was very much appreciated. It was a privilege for the Priory Sangha to have a chance to offer our merit to the bright memory of Daisy.

Priory Membership

The Priory has no fees for participating in meditation, Dharma talks, Buddhist services, retreats, spiritual counseling or any other services we offer. We are supported by the donations of our congregation and friends. All gifts of any kind, whether money, materials, or labor are deeply appreciated. One of the best ways to help the Priory is to make the commitment to be a Priory Member. What this involves is making a pledge to contribute a certain amount of money to the Priory each month. There is no set or recommended amount; we leave it up to each individual to offer whatever they feel is appropriate.

This commitment is a tremendous help to the Priory because

it gives us a stable financial base. More importantly, deciding to become a member has deep spiritual significance. It means you are choosing to help take responsibility for the continued existence of the Priory. Some of you may only be able to pledge a few dollars a month and think that it is not worth making such an insignificant commitment. Yet it is important to offer whatever you can, and be willing to make a formal commitment to be part of the Priory. The most important help members bring to the Priory and the Sangha is not their donations but their Buddhist training. By being willing to come to the Priory and train with others, we help make the Priory a true refuge of the Sangha.

However, we are not suggesting that everyone who occasionally attends the Priory or gives us donations should become a member. For many people, it is not appropriate to make such a commitment, and we welcome them to join us whenever they wish, help us in any manner they feel appropriate, and be valued friends of the Priory.

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 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 cleaning supplies, a rug, altar furnishings,

software, blank cassette tapes, paper goods, plants and many books.

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 which provide most of the food for the Priory. Rev. Kinrei has become aware that he is allergic to cow dairy products, so please try not to donate foods with cow dairy in them. Although we are grateful for any gift of food, the most helpful food donations are prepared meals, soy milk, goat milk, fruit, tofu, goat or sheep cheese and vegetarian "meats". You are always welcome to ask Rev. Kinrei what is currently needed at the Priory.

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 on an ongoing basis. A steady stream of books seems to arrive at the Priory and all of these generous donations are earning a considerable amount of money for the Priory. We very much appreciate these gifts of books.

Spiritual Counseling

Rev. Kinrei is available to discuss your spiritual practice and to help you to better apply the Dharma to your life. Taking refuge in a senior member of the Sangha is an important aid in gaining a better perspective and deeper insight into our spiritual life. It is also helpful in learning to cultivate openness and trust. You are welcome to either sign the spiritual counseling sheet on the Priory bulletin board, or call the Priory and arrange a time to meet.

Helping the Priory and Work Days

Buddhist training is based not just on receiving the spiritual nourishment that the Sangha offers us, but also our own willingness to cultivate gratitude and to be willing to find ways to give. Offering our valuable time to help with the work of the Priory is very much needed if the Priory is to flourish. During the past few months, Sangha members came by the Priory and helped with many different tasks, such as gardening, cleaning, cooking, computer work, bookkeeping, construction, sewing, and laundry. Please contact Rev. Kinrei if you wish to help; the Priory always has plenty of work that needs doing.