

The Berkeley Buddhist Priory Newsletter January - February 2007

When It is Hot, Be Completely Hot When It is Cold, Be Completely Cold by Rev. Kinrei Bassis

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"One day a monk asked Great Master Tozan, 'How can we avoid hot and cold?' Great Master Tozan said, 'Why don't you go somewhere that is neither hot nor cold?' The monk asked, 'Where is a place that is neither hot nor cold?' Great Master Tozan replied, 'When it is cold, be completely cold; when it is hot, be completely hot.'"

This response of Great Master Tozan has the appearance of being one of those puzzling Zen type answers: the way to not be hot is to allow yourself to be hot. Yet this is not an illogical answer but one that points us in a very direct way to one of the most important spiritual truths. We all face the suffering of being too hot and too cold. What does it mean to "be completely hot"? The deepest solution to all the problems we face lies not in changing and manipulating the

external circumstances of our life, but in finding the Buddha within everything.

The normal human response to suffering is to try to find a way to escape; when we are hot and not comfortable, we seek to be more comfortable by finding a place which is cooler. It is obviously a good thing to eliminate unnecessary suffering, yet the problem in life is that we cannot stop the hot and cold of suffering from frequently enveloping us. I can remember having a difficult and depressing job. I would come home from work and desperately try to find a way to distract myself. I would often immediately fill my apartment with music, so that the music occupied me and obscured the feelings of emptiness and uneasiness that would arise when I was silent and still. I was always trying to be doing something, doing anything: watching television, reading, hiking, socializing. Keeping myself compulsively busy with work or entertainment allowed me to avoid having to confront the seemingly depressing reality of my life. Yet it is not surprising that I would live in this manner since I was following one of the most basic principles guiding behavior, to try to avoid pain and to seek pleasure. If being aware of suffering seems to only increase my feelings of suffering, why should I not try to avoid looking at all my suffering? And why should I not try to seek to find all the pleasures and enjoyment that I can in my life?

The Four Noble Truths help explain Great Master Tozan's answer, and why seeking pleasure and avoiding pain does not help us to solve the problem of suffering. The First Noble Truth is "suffering exists". Awareness of this fundamental fact of life is that which brings people to look for a solution

in Buddhism. Some of us have confronted great trials and enormous pain in life. Others have experienced just a cold emptiness, a lack of heartfelt meaning or hope.

The Second Noble Truth is suffering is due to attachment. The normal human way to escape suffering is to build a life which maximizes the situations we enjoy and minimizes those we find bothersome or unpleasant. Yet what Great Master Tozan told the monk was not to avoid hot and cold but to find the place that is neither hot nor cold. We try holding on to that which brings us pleasure, but this is no solution, for uncontrollable change moves through everything, leaving us no true refuge in which to escape suffering. Birth places us in a cycle that inevitably brings disease and death. The fact that we cannot control the universe means our relationships with other people, our livelihood, the overall social and political climate, all of these may become unpleasant or even monstrous, and we, as individuals, cannot control everything and make our existence and our world into what we desire. Everything can and will fall apart: our bodies, our loved ones, the entire world. And this fact is a burning truth that is always gnawing at the edges of our life, pointing out to us the very precarious nature of everything we hold so dear.

The Third Noble Truth is there is a cessation of suffering; Nirvana exists. There is this place within our hearts that no fires can touch and no cold can penetrate. This is the place of true

freedom from suffering, and awakening to this Truth is the true promise of Buddhist training.

Yet even if we have the faith that Nirvana exists, how do we find this Truth for ourselves? When the fires of suffering are burning us what can we do to find relief? The Fourth Noble Truth gives us the answer: to follow the Noble Eightfold Path. The Eightfold Path is really just a description of Buddhist training. And what Buddhism teaches us is to learn to accept everything, both the very hot and the very cold. It is pointing us to a very simple solution for suffering, but one which can be very hard to do when we are burning. We need to be still with an open and all-accepting heart and mind. By pushing nothing away, no matter how frightening or unpleasant, we learn that there is nothing that fear, that our True heart will not be damaged by the fires of suffering. We also do not need to grasp after anything, no matter how desirable or joyful, for all those pleasures are fleeting and do not provide a true refuge from the storms of our suffering.

There is a place within us that no suffering can touch, that fulfills our heart's deepest needs no matter what external trials life takes us through. It is a deep act of faith to sit still in the midst of suffering and not run away, and it is that faith that unlocks our hearts and allows us to open ourselves to the Unborn. We all need to be willing to accept the "hot" and the "cold" and have faith that nothing in our lives, or in the entire world, is outside the Buddha.

¹Dogen: Shobogenzo, Vol. 2. Translated by Kosen Nishiyama [Sendai, Japan, Dihokkaikaku, 1977, p. 33]

Thoughts and News from Rev. Kinrei

As the last few months have very busy for me, this newsletter, which should have been the January-February newsletter, was unfortunately delayed and became the February-April newsletter.

On the weekend of November 5, Shasta Abbey held a special memorial weekend to commemorate the 10th anniversary of the death of our founder, Rev. Master Jiyu-Kennett. Rev. Karuna, myself and many members of the Priory Sangha went up to the Abbey for the weekend. It was an honor to be with the whole community of Shasta Abbey who did a wonderful job of hosting this very large gathering. Monks and lay people came from all the North American temples of our Sangha, and it was moving to see everyone coming together to honor Rev. Master Jiyu's memory. On Saturday, November 4, there was a slide show of photographs of Rev. Master Jiyu and it was accompanied by music she wrote. That evening, everyone gathered in the Buddha Hall and shared their memories of Rev. Master Jiyu, and it was very moving to hear the profound ways she had taught and helped people. On Sunday there was a beautiful memorial ceremony followed by a wonderful Dharma talk given by Rev. Master Haryo, Head of the OBC. This weekend reminded me of my deep gratitude to Rev. Master Jiyu for her teaching and example. Flowing out of her example and wisdom is this gift of our Sangha, which is an immeasurable Treasure.

On Sunday, November 17, the Priory Sangha held our own memorial to remember Rev. Master Jiyu. It was also a time for the Sangha to celebrate my 27th birthday as a Buddhist monk. The Priory had a very large gathering and it was moving to see all the gratitude for Rev. Master Jiyu and for the gratitude that was expressed towards me. Also, the Sangha showed great generosity in the dana that was given to me and I am deeply grateful for all that I have been given.

Rev. Bernice, a monk at the Abbey, came down in mid-October to visit with her brother, Richard Sykes, who had terminal cancer of the mouth. She came back in November to join with her family to help him. A number of Priory members also helped with his medical situation, such as getting him admitted to a hospital and then hospice. Also, due to his ill health, Richard needed help with some of the practical aspects of his life and its imminent end and it was wonderful to see all the help the Sangha provided. Rich died on November 21. He faced his death with a peaceful heart which is a great gift. It was an honor for the Sangha to have an opportunity to help him. Helping the dying gives wonderful teaching on how to live. The real purpose of a Buddhist temple is to provide a spiritual refuge for people and no situation requires that help more than the process of dying.

Richard left the Priory his 1992 Nissan Maxima which the

Priory is keeping as a replacement for the Priory car which had a serious accident in September. He also left the Priory many other items, including books, a bicycle, and two electric guitars. Richard's family gave his MacIntosh laptop computer to a Priory member, who then donated the computer to the Priory where it is proving very helpful.

I, myself, spent much of the last few months confronting death, in my case, the death of my father, Bouris Bassis. My father died at the age of 91 on January 2. In the past year, his health had declined, including a small heart attack this past August. On November 20, my father had a larger heart attack and the next day I flew back to New York to be there with my family. My father did not regain consciousness for a few days, and then it took him a few more days to regain enough strength to hold a conversation. My 86 year old mother, who has many serious health problems, was suddenly alone for the first time in 65 years. It was good to be with my family, my mother, and my brother and sister, as we all faced this dire situation. Although very ill and weak, after a few weeks my father was medically stable and I returned to the Priory. It was fortunate enough to be back here for the celebration for the Buddha's Enlightenment on December 10. It was a moving ceremony and then we all shared in wonderful array of foods at the potluck. It was good to celebrate this auspicious day with this large and warm gathering of the Sangha.

Soon my father became ill with pneumonia, a very common complication in the old and infirm, and after being back in

Berkeley for only two weeks, I returned to New York. My father's condition had worsened and he was clearly dying. Soon he was on palliative care, the doctors just treating the pain and trying to make his dying as comfortable as possible. My father had recently expressed he had no regrets about his life and he was willing to die. This is very good karma, to look back at one's life without regrets, and I was very lucky to have this good hearted man as my father. He was mostly concerned with my mother as he was her main caretaker, but he said he would trust that his children will find a good way to take care of her. My father quietly died on January 2.

It was very meaningful to have the opportunity to spend all this time with my father as he was dying. I would spend much of the day in the hospital with him, helping him if I could, being with this physical body of my father that was clearly falling apart. This is what Buddhism is all about, that we can be at peace with change, particularly the changes we do not want. As my father was moving from life to death, could I find peace with it? Could my father find peace with his dying? Waves of grief and non- acceptance would sweep through me, and yet the Dharma was there, pointing me to let go and take refuge in the Buddha; let go and not get caught up in what I was seemingly losing. As nothing can ever really be lost, can I let go and open my heart to the everpresent Boundless Heart?

Exhausted, I came back to the Priory on January 8. On Sunday, January 14, many of the Priory Sangha joined me in

a memorial service for my father. Throughout this whole process, I was aware and deeply grateful for the large flow of support and merit that Sangha was giving to me and my family. The Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha were my support and refuge from all the suffering that was happening around me and within me.

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 a Nissan Maxima car, a MacIntosh laptop, printer, bicycle, many books, tools, smoke detectors, toaster, potted plants, acupuncture treatments, kitty litter, shoes, meditation cushions, office supplies, dishwashing detergent, toilet paper and large quantity of assorted items from Richard Sykes's estate.

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. During the past few months we have been given soymilk, eggs, milk, coffee,

teas, granola, tofu, vegetables, fruit, vegie meats, nuts, peanut butter, fruit preserves, apple cider, olive oil, canola oil, cheese, rice, pasta, chocolate, corn chips, cookies, cake. You are always welcome to check with the Priory on what foods are currently