

The Berkeley Buddhist Priory Newsletter March-April, 2005

Looking Down by Rev. Kinrei Bassis

The expression looking down is very expressive of what I am doing when I get caught up with my suffering and despair. When something goes wrong in my life, I just keep looking at the mess and not seeing much else. That is looking down, all I see is what is wrong.

Rev. Master Jiyu used to tell people who looked like they were down in the dumps and feeling miserable, that they needed to look up. When someone is having a hard time, they often literally keep their eyes downcast. However, looking up is not just raising our eyes but directing our attention towards the Buddha, looking at where we are going in our spiritual life. It is very easy to be completely absorbed and lost in what is happening right now. It astonishes me how I can be so fully absorbed with my troubles, my worries, my fears. My problems can fill my life and color everything. In looking down, we focus on what is lacking, what appears to be getting in our way.

I did not understand for a long time that looking down also means to be absorbed in my joys and my pleasures. I can fill myself with the wonders and pleasures of life. There is nothing wrong with enjoying something but Buddhism teaches, wherever we look, we should see impermanence. Let's say I am enjoying a delicious meal or pleasurable company. I should see it as an unimportant, fleeting pleasure. When I encounter something attractive, I need to

cultivate nonattachment-it is no big deal, nothing special. The Buddhist path is seeing the emptiness of both worldly joy and worldly suffering: to see the dreamlike and insignificant nature of the ups and downs of our daily life. When I encounter something that raises aversion, worry, fear or anger, I should see it as Buddha and work on patience and compassion for this piece of difficult karma. When I meet something that seems neutral, something I do not seem to care about, I need to work on bowing to it and see both its sacred nature and its pure emptiness. When I approach my daily life in this way, everything becomes open and positive, everything points me to the Bodhicitta, the boundless heart of Buddha.

Instead of using the expression looking up, I like to think of it more as looking forward, looking for my next step on the path to Buddhahood. Instead of getting completely caught up with this little self, the drama of our life's story, with its triumphs and failures, a Buddhist takes refuge in the Three Treasures. The Three Treasures are the heart of Buddhism and a vehicle of liberation. For me, looking up means to maintain equanimity with the endless ups and downs of my daily life and to put my effort and heart into taking the next step forward on the Buddhist Way.

When I take refuge in the Buddha, I am saying everything I want, everything my heart desires, is not found in this world of change but is only found in the depths of my heart, in this place of peace and stillness. When I open my heart with kindness and compassion to whatever I encounter, I find everything has brightness and everything has goodness. The Boundless exists within all of us and is our True Heart. Finding that place is our deepest and most fundamental

longing. When I take refuge in the Buddha, I am pointing myself to that completeness and to a fearlessness that knows that nothing can ever be fundamentally hurt.

When I take refuge in the Dharma, I am saying that all I need to do is follow the teachings of the Buddha and everything will be taken care of. The Dharma is telling me to purify my heart and let everything go, so taking refuge in the Dharma is seeing what I am holding, what I am demanding, what I am asking for, and focusing my heart and mind on doing only what the Buddhist Precepts and my mindfulness directs me to do. When I encounter obstacles or suffering, I need to let go of my expectations and desires, and trust that there is no problem, that everything is complete right now. All acceptance is the key to the gateless gate. I am not taking refuge in the Dharma when something in me is believing, "This is unacceptable, this is wrong." When these doubts arise, I need to compassionately embrace them like a mother soothing an upset child, giving the Dharma like medicine to my upset or frightened heart. I need to keep reminding myself, there is no problem. Every step I take on the Buddhist Way is leading me to my Real Home.

Taking refuge in the Sangha is the key in keeping my Buddhist training going and most importantly, keeping it going in the right direction. Trust is the ground of the Sangha Treasure. To trust a senior member of the Sangha; to be willing to be open about what you are experiencing, your difficulties, your doubts. This openness is based on a trust that there is nothing wrong with us, nothing we need to hide. I have often felt I need to keep some of my difficulties and failings secret because I was ashamed of

them. I would think that I know what I need to do, it seems so obvious and I will be open about myself after I have changed. Yet it was so liberating when I was willing to be open with someone I could trust and talk about my dark, secret messes. Then I could see myself through the reflection of much wiser eyes that had compassion for my struggles and still saw a pure heart within me. Also, it is very deluded for me to think I always know the right direction. The deep wisdom of the Sangha can point me in the right direction when I go astray. This experience and wisdom is what allows me to trust my next step since I know that if I am mistaken in my training, the Sangha will see my mistakes and will help me to find my way back on the Path.

One common form of delusion is the feeling we are special and unique. Whenever I feel ashamed or believe that there is something is wrong with me, I can look around and see how I am like everyone else, struggling with my passions and fears in this very difficult world. To let go of my efforts to be someone special frees me to put my efforts into following the Dharma.

The Sangha Refuge is also the willingness to be with others, to put up with and learn to trust and love the ordinary, flawed people that comprise the Sangha. My heart often opens to the immeasurable gift of having the company and the support of all these varied members of the Sangha, all walking the Path to Buddhahood with me.

I still find it very easy to look down and can find myself dwelling on what is wrong with me, wrong with others, wrong with the world. Letting go is the Way yet letting go can sometimes feel so hard it appears impossible. In the mind of the Bosatsu who is truly one, the obstacles dissolve.

I need to just keep coming back to the stillness within my heart, to just accepting, to stop asking for things to be different, and then the Way opens. Sometimes it appears as a little glimmer of light in the darkness. Sometimes just as a sense that this suffering on which I dwell is not completely real. Sometimes the problems completely fall away, and I look with astonishment that I have so enveloped my life with darkness in the midst of such overwhelming light.

Priory News

We had the pleasure of a two week visit to the Priory, this February, of Rev. Master Haryo Young, the head of the Order of Buddhist Contemplatives. Accompanying him was Rev. Scholastica, who is also an officer in the Order. It is a very difficult and important job, the Head of the Order, and we deeply appreciate all that Rev. Master Haryo does for our many Sanghas and all the members. Rev. Master Haryo had spent many summers down at the Priory with Rev. Master Jiyu and his skillful workmanship is all around the temple. Rev. Scholastica is another old friend of the Priory and she generously was willing to give a very well received Dharma talk to our Sangha on February 16.

There was a major remodeling and reconstruction done to the Priory's downstairs bathroom this December and January. The tile shower floor had been leaking for a very long time and the underlying floor and structural members were rotten. We had a contractor take out much of the floor and remove the existing shower stall and small tub. We put

in a new bathtub with a shower head, a sink, and linoleum, on the mostly rebuilt bathroom floor. The contractor was a pleasure to work with and we deeply appreciate his careful workmanship, thoughtfulness in minimizing the construction's impact on temple life and his generosity. The construction did have a downside, the fumes of the glues and other building materials did become a serious health problem for some people.

Looking for peace is like looking for a turtle with moustache. You won't be able to find it. But when your heart is ready, peace will come looking for you.

- Ajahn Chah.

Beginner's Class- January 22 (10am - 12:00pm)

We offered this class for the first time in January and it was well attended. This class is designed to be a follow-up to the basic meditation instruction that we offer every Thursday evening. It will include a short talk on meditation practice, then a period of meditation and then another short talk on bringing mindfulness and compassion into our daily lives. There is no charge for the class. Please try to register in advance as space is limited.

Meditation Retreats: March 10-12, April 9, and May 5-7

Retreats are an excellent way to deepen our meditation and training. For the three-day retreats, since many people will not be able to free themselves to be here for all three days, it will be fine to attend these retreats for just one or two days. Please register in advance and let us know which days you can attend.

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 have 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.

In addition, the Priory has been having regular work days which have been a great help with fixing up and maintaining the Priory and its grounds. You are welcome and encouraged to come to the Priory whenever you can and offer your help. The next work days are scheduled for Saturday, March 26 and May 28, 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. Work days include a lunch at the Priory which is a relaxed meal. Please let us know if you can attend as it is helpful in planning the work.

Funerals, Memorials and Naming Ceremonies

We had a funeral, on January 2, for Mischa Wendel's dog, Jonas, a 10 year old golden retriever. We held a memorial for John Felix's father, Steven Clarkson, on January 9 and for Mike Lara's sister-in-law, Carol Gardenal, on January 30. Fred, Judy Brown's ailing cat, had a impromptu naming ceremony at her house on January 19.

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 1990 Mazda RX7 car which the Priory sold, candles, a zabuton, incense, charcoal, medicine, paper, cleaning supplies, hardware 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, eggs, soy milk,

goat milk, fruit, goat or sheep cheese, decaf coffee. We also have an ongoing need for such paper goods as toilet paper, paper towels and tissues. You are always welcome to ask what is currently needed at the Priory.

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.

Priory Membership

The Priory has no fees for participating in meditation, Dharma talks, Buddhist services, retreats, spiritual counseling or any other service we offer. We are supported by the donations of our congregation and friends. All gifts of any kind, whether money or 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 as we leave it up to each individual to offer what he or she feels 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 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, to help us in the manner they feel appropriate, and to be valued friends of the Priory.

Meditation Instruction

Meditation instruction and an orientation to the practice at the Priory are offered each Thursday at 6:45 pm. Please arrive a few minutes early so that we can begin promptly at 6:45. The instruction is followed by a 7:30-8:05 pm meditation period. We ask all people new to our practice to attend this instruction. The meditation instruction is free, as are all the activities at the Priory. If your schedule will not allow you to come on Thursday evening, you are welcome to call the Priory to try to arrange a different time for the instruction.