

The Berkeley Buddhist Priory Newsletter June - July, 2004

Longing by Rev. Kinrei Bassis

(This is an edited version of a Dharma talk given by Rev. Kinrei at the Berkeley Buddhist Priory in May 2000.)

We seek Buddhism when we recognize that there is something seriously wrong with the direction we have taken in our search for satisfaction and happiness. Buddhism points us to deep truths that resonate in our hearts. We are drawn to Buddhism by a deep longing for something real and meaningful.

An image of spiritual life that Reverend Master Jiyu-Kennett often used is that most of us are like a fish caught on a hook. The Buddha is trying to reel us in; the hook holding us is our deep spiritual longing. We spend most of our time struggling, not wanting to be reeled in, not wanting to let go of all the things which we are desperately holding. While we often know that spiritual training will take us in the right direction, we say to ourselves, "But I need to do this," or "I must have that."

When we reflect on our lives, we see that we have been putting a tremendous amount of energy in fighting what the Dharma is asking us to do: to let go and open our hearts; to embrace and accept everything that unfolds in both in our lives and the life of the world.

The anonymous author of the medieval Christian classic, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, describes a form of prayer that also aptly describes the essence of Buddhist meditation:

When you first begin, you will find only darkness, as it were a cloud of unknowing. You do not know what it means except that in your will you feel a simple steadfast intention reaching out towards God. Do what you will and this darkness and this cloud remains between you and God . By 'darkness' I mean a 'lack of knowing'--just as anything you do not know or may have forgotten may be said to be 'dark' to you, for you cannot see it with your inward eye . So if you are to stand and not fall, never give up your firm intention: beat away at this cloud of unknowing between you and God with that sharp dart of longing love.¹

This deepest form of prayer is really just the willingness to be still and let the longing in your heart go out without defining or understanding where it is going. This is faith. Our minds cannot see the goal of our spiritual training. Meditation is the willingness to let go and learn to trust so that we may enter into this seeming darkness. In the passage from *The Cloud of Unknowing*, the writer is expressing the idea that our minds cannot grasp God, cannot even begin to say what God is, yet our hearts are reaching out. A Buddhist way of saying this is that our small minds and intellects cannot even begin to fully grasp or understand the boundless life of Buddha.

In Buddhism, the real ground of reality is the Dharmakaya, the pure body of the Buddha, the Absolute, the One. While this immeasurable reality will always transcend the ability of our minds to comprehend it, there will always be the longing in our hearts to find this real place and to let go of everything else. We need to let go of our opinions of who we think we are, and of all our opinions of what our mind grasps as the Buddha or enlightenment. We need to turn away from our burning desires and instead seek stillness and peace and put our effort into growing this indescribable longing.

But our lack of faith makes us struggle. We say, "Yes, but...." Buddhist training is the process of gradually softening our habitual resistance. The Dharma keeps telling us to open our hearts and let go, but we keep qualifying this letting go, looking for loopholes in the Dharma and searching for attachments we believe will not cause problems. Yet anything we grasp will help to turn our hearts away from this one, true longing.

We often don't recognize that faith in the Dharma means fully accepting ourselves. The most difficult aspect of faith is seeing that we are the Buddha, that all of our delusions are still the Buddha, and that all of our sufferings are the life of Buddha. Our faults and suffering and the world's faults and suffering are not impure; they are simply telling us that we and others are turning away from the light of Buddha. We enfold ourselves in darkness as we focus our hearts on empty desires and empty fears. When we don't accept ourselves, our shame, our pride, and our often hard and critical mind, we are simply increasing the waves of karma. Think carefully about how this lack of acceptance fills our lives. In anger, the whole world reflects our anger; in guilt, the whole world reflects our guilt. These delusions reinforce themselves. While we search to make our lives clean and whole, looking everywhere for what will work, we often fail to recognize that the greatest treasure is already living in our hearts. It takes faith to let go and realize the unimportance of both our pride and our inadequacies and to turn our hearts toward entering this Cloud of Unknowing.

There is no way by effort of will by which we can simply say, "I'm not going to struggle any more" or "I'm not going to have any more attachments." All we can do is be willing to see what we are grasping, what is stopping the longing from blazing up in our hearts. By recognizing these things, we can begin to open up and let go of our demands. It doesn't necessarily mean that we no longer have to face these desires; rather we no longer try so

desperately to grasp them. In *The Cloud of Unknowing*, the author says,

Therefore, if I am able to give a vital and wholehearted attention to this spiritual activity within my soul, I then can view my eating and drinking, my sleep and my conversation and so on with comparative indifference. I would rather acquire a right discretion in these matters by such indifference, than by giving them my close attention.²

Faith allows our hearts to be open and to see what is actually moving through us. It takes deep faith to have such an open heart because this awareness often hurts. It is painful to see what we are doing, to see the wounds that we have in our heart, and to see all the suffering our mistakes have caused others. It is painful to see the suffering that is flowing throughout the world, filling so many beings. Only our deep commitment and acting on our faith allows us to open our hearts and embrace all this pain while trusting that the pain is not a real problem. Faith means to trust that the Dharma is true, that all this pain and suffering is not fundamental. The suffering will be washed away when we are willing to open our hearts and let the waters of compassion flow through us so that we can see that light and purity is enfolding everything.

A key to cultivating faith is not letting ourselves to indulge in doubt. We should view doubt like any other emotion, such as anger, worry, desire or fear. Without cultivating doubt, or grasping it, simply recognize that it is only a wave of thoughts and feeling sweeping through us. In the same way that there is no reason to be angry, there is no reason to doubt. There is no reason to doubt the Buddha, there is no reason to doubt the Dharma, and there is no reason to doubt the Sangha. Just as there is no reason to doubt ourself or to doubt others.

Work hard at learning to trust that the unfolding of all karma is all

right. The fact that there is suffering, beginningless greed, hate and delusion, is not a reason to doubt. The faith is not that there will not be any suffering; rather that under all of the suffering is the compassion of the Unborn and that is always there. Nothing is ever really hurt; the hurt is simply waves of feeling sweeping through our bodies and minds. If you do not cling to them, nothing is really being hurt. Suffering is a Dharma lesson that is pointing us to the Truth. To see karma, to see cause and effect, is not a reason to doubt.

If we wish to see what is real, we need to have faith in the Dharma and work at accepting whatever life is offering us. This allows our hearts and minds to be peaceful, and then we will find something much deeper calling us.

Meditation is a way to learn to hear and respond to the call and the longing that is flowing out of the stillness in our hearts. There is a love that keeps looking the wrong way, mistakenly trying to grasp whatever seems to help us be happy. Then there is real, unshakable love that is the ground of Buddhism, a love that demands nothing and is open and embraces everything. This love is calling us and this love is our true heart, the Bodhicitta, the boundless heart of Buddha. The depths of this love is unfathomable, and it will wash away all the barriers we face. What we need to do is to be still, whether we are on a cushion or going about our daily lives, and allow that deep and inexpressible longing to grow. This longing is the Buddha calling the Buddha, and it will open our hearts and free us from the seeming darkness of our passions and confusion.

¹Translated by Clifton Wolters, *The Cloud of Unknowing and Other Works* (Penguin Books, 1978) pp.61, pp.66, pp.76.

²ibid, pp. 110

Priory News

This newsletter should have been a May-June newsletter but since it is late, it became the June-July issue. I hope this delay has not caused any difficulties.

There was a meeting of the Priory Sangha on April 17 to discuss our search for a larger building. There was a clear consensus on our need for more space. Although, at that time there are no properties that we interested in, there was a general discussion on the various locations and options. The discussions led to a sense that we need to be willing to look at possible properties even ten to twenty miles from our current location. A finance committee was formed. The committee will help with the various difficulties we could face, such as the possibility that we may need the purchase price for a new property very quickly and our ongoing need to improve our finances.

We had a wonderful Wesak ceremony on Sunday, May 9. Wesak commemorates the birth of the historical Buddha. We set up a beautiful outside altar in front of the Priory's garage. A trellis of silk flowers was arranged, surrounding the Buddha, with all the altar surfaces covered in gold-colored silk. At the Wesak ceremony, instead of offering incense at the altar, everyone poured sweet tea over the head of the statue of a baby Buddha. This symbolizes the waters of compassion abundantly pouring over the Buddha and flowing over everything in the whole universe. Another special element of this Wesak was a stereo system which a Sangha member had just donated. We played a tape of the Wesak hymns and the Priory's Sangha singing merged with the taped singing and it sounded very harmonious. More

than fifty-five people attended the ceremony and the large numbers added to the sense of it being a very special day.

After the ceremony, the children gathered for their own Dharma class while the rest of the Sangha had a Dharma talk by Rev. Kinrei. It was followed by an extremely diverse and bountiful potluck lunch. Potlucks at the Priory are good occasions to get to know our fellow Sangha members and get a better sense of belonging to a Buddhist Sangha.

On April 30, Rev. Serena Seidner had hip replacement surgery in Berkeley. Rev. Serena was a longterm member of the Priory Sangha before she went to Shasta Abbey to be a monk seven years ago. Her surgery went well and she went back to the Abbey after spending a week at the hospital and then a week at the Priory, recuperating. It was a pleasure for the Priory Sangha to have our old friend down here for awhile and it is wonderful that such amazing medical procedures can be done these days. The picture below shows Rev. Serena at our Wesak ceremony, blessing the children with holy water.

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 beautiful new altar shelf, stereo system, solar garden lights, cleaning supplies, office supplies, altar furnishings, fabric, paper goods, stamps, 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, goat or sheep cheese and vegetarian "meats". You are always welcome to ask Rev. Kinrei what is currently needed at the Priory.

A request from the Priory is for a new dustbuster or other brand of cordless hand vacuums. The very handy one we have been using is broken.

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.

Taking the Buddhist Precepts

Three members of the Priory Sangha, Jack McDonough, Kathleen Wothe and Jill Hough, took the Buddhist Precepts and became lay Buddhists at this March's Keeping of the Ten Precepts Retreat at

Shasta Abbey. A deep commitment to follow the Buddha is the lifeblood of the Sangha and we rejoice and are grateful for all who have vowed to be part of the Sangha.

Now the universe rejoices, the earth trembles and the flowers fall. The Bodhisattvas of other worlds ask their Buddha what this means and the Buddha replies that a new disciple has been given the Pure Great Precepts of the Bodhisattvas and been converted to the Truth by the Master who was given the Precepts before in the teachings of Shakyamuni Buddha who is the Buddha of this world. The disciple will become a Buddha in the future through this merit, therefore the universe rejoices. From the Ceremony of Receiving the Precepts

Meditation Instruction

Meditation instruction and an orientation to the practice at the Priory are offered each Thursday at 6:45 pm. 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.

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 and laundry. Please contact Rev. Kinrei if you wish to help; the Priory always has plenty of work that needs doing.