

The Berkeley Buddhist Priory Newsletter July-August, 2005

The Facts of Life by Mike Lara

When we were growing up, there came a time upon entering puberty when, with sweaty palms, our parents either did or didn't decide it was time for us to learn the "facts of life". It came down to trying to let us know that the many changes we were experiencing, including physical, hormonal, even mental, were a natural part of life, a new phase in our growing up. In other words our sexual nature was beginning to manifest itself. Many parents, like mine, who were reticent and/or unclear how to broach the topic, either made broad fuzzy hints or left it unstated in the hopes that we would pick it up somehow. Of course, we all eventually came to terms with the matter, each in our own way.

However, when we begin to train in Buddhism, a larger perspective comes into view about what the "facts of life" are. This was brought into vivid focus when I recently read a statement by one of our leading newscasters. Several months ago, Peter Jennings was diagnosed with lung cancer. Although he had quit smoking for 20 years, he indicated he started again after the attack of 9/11. In a public statement he made after being diagnosed, he said the following: "Almost 10 million Americans are living with cancer. I am sure I will learn from them how to cope with the facts of life that none of us anticipated."¹ As I read his statement I was struck by the last 9 words: the facts of life that none of us

anticipated. This statement speaks volumes about how our society hides from us the realities of life as they relate to the inevitable decline, disease and death that awaits us all. Although Peter Jennings, for close to 45 years, has covered the many faces of war and other catastrophes throughout the world, the fact that now he was on the receiving end of a life-threatening cancer at the age of 66, was, apparently, news he had not anticipated.

Peter Jennings, sad to say, is not the only person who will come to a similar conclusion when struck by a devastating illness. A few days later, I read another newspaper article by a woman who had also been diagnosed with lung cancer. In her case, she had never smoked. Here was her response: "This isn't fair...there's no justice in it. It is the lousy luck of life. Rotten things happen to good people. Who can explain it?"

A Catholic woman once asked a monk if Buddhists had any angels in their religion. He asked what she meant by angels and she replied they were spiritual beings, like Michael the Archangel and Gabriel, who are emissaries of God. He replied, "Oh yes, we have a similar teaching, only we refer to them as the four heavenly messengers: they are an old person, a sick person, a dead person and a monk."² Now, this response might seem laughable to most people. To compare beings of light who come in beautiful white robes and wings with Buddhism's four heavenly messengers seems far-fetched. However, here is the connection: whereas the angels of light are coming from heaven with a message to this world of woe, the four sights, if seen with proper understanding, can lead us from samsara to what the Buddha referred to as nirvana, the cessation of all suffering.

The Buddha first encountered the four heavenly messengers at the age of twenty-nine after living a protected life as a prince in his three palaces. However, after the Buddha encountered the first three sights he said: "When an untaught ordinary man, who is subject to ageing, sickness and death, sees another who is aged, sick or dead he is shocked, humiliated and disgusted, for he forgets that he himself is no exception. "But", the Buddha continued, " I too am subject to ageing... sickness... and death so it cannot befit me to be shocked, humiliated and disgusted on seeing another who is aged, sick or dead. When I considered this, the vanity of youth entirely left me." Then he saw the fourth sight, that of a mendicant monk, someone who had renounced the world in order to seek enlightenment and liberation. This last messenger, the renunciate, awakened in Him the faith and conviction that complete freedom from suffering was possible.³

After these encounters, the Buddha renounced His former princely life and sought after the "unborn, ageing, unailing, deathless, sorrowless, undefiled supreme surcease of bondage, Nirvana." He spent the next six years struggling to find the path to truth. After trying various teachings, as well as severe ascetic practices, he finally succeeded in His supreme quest under the Bodhi tree by returning to the meditation he had discovered as a young boy during a plowing festival. The Buddha then spent the rest of his long life offering the medicine for all suffering, the Dharma, to the world.

We are indeed fortunate to have made this precious connection with Buddhism. While all beings will experience ageing, illness and death, these facts of life are more than

just depressing realities we cannot avoid; for those who have entered the path of training, they are really a wake-up call that this precious human life should not be wasted. Bodhidharma reminds us in his Outline of Practice that our present suffering, whatever form it takes, is not a mystery; it is a result of our turning away for countless eons from the essential to the trivial. It is one thing if our lack of merit does not allow us to hear the teachings of the Buddha. But having come in contact with the Buddha, the Dharma and those who have made the teaching true for themselves, the Sangha, it is incumbent on us to practice wholeheartedly ...for who knows when this opportunity will come again?

It is interesting to me that my first job at the age of 14 or so growing up in New York City was as a delivery boy with a messenger service. Since I recently turned 71, we could say I am back in the messenger business. After being a Buddhist for over 30 years I am also on the receiving end of getting at least one message: that whatever befalls me, in whatever time I have left, I cannot complain that it was not anticipated. The Buddha's teaching points to the reality of life as it truly is; a reality that, contrary to common understanding, tells us that this fleeting world encompassing grief and sorrow as well as elation and happiness is but a fantasy and a dream; that no matter how our karma unfolds, we have never been separated from the boundless light of wisdom and joy that embraces the universe. May we all come to realize this Truth for ourselves.

¹ S.F. Chronicle, 4/06/05; Matea Gold ² Bikkhu Nanamoli, The Life of the Buddha, (Buddhist Publication Society, 1978), p 9

³ Ibid, p 10

Let go of the past.
Let go of the future.
Let go of the present.
With a heart that is free,
cross over to that shore
which is beyond suffering.

--Dhammapada, verse 348

Priory News

Rev. Karuna, who had a severely broken ankle eighteen years ago, recently developed some serious problems with that ankle and underwent surgery for it on June 13. The operation and her recovery seem to be going well and we hope this will solve the problems in her ankle. Rev. Karuna deeply appreciated all the merit and help that have been offered to her.

Jet, the Priory's beloved three legged black cat, has continued to have serious health problems. She stopped eating for several weeks and we thought that she was dying but then with forceful encouragement and medication, her appetite recovered. We are grateful that Jet is going to be with us for a bit longer.

The Priory celebrated Wesak, the celebration for the birth of the Buddha, on Sunday, May 15. We had pleasant weather which allowed us to hold the ceremony outside. It was good to see the Priory filled with the Sangha and many of them were children. After the joyful service with the chanting of the Wesak hymns, Rev. Kinrei gave a Dharma talk on the importance of contemplating happiness. We need to use wisdom to find what brings true happiness and so that we can learn to keep our hearts and minds positive and grateful. We then had a wonderful potluck in the garden with an amazing array of vegetarian dishes and desserts. It

is a gift that we can come together and offer our gratitude to the Buddha and have our hearts warmed with the company of our friends in the Sangha.

Meditation Retreats July 7-9, Aug. 13, and Sept. 15-17

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, July 30, 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.

Shasta Abbey Retreats

Attending a retreat at Shasta Abbey is an excellent way to deepen one's Buddhist life by living and practicing together with a large community of monastic and lay members of the Sangha. The introductory retreats are the recommended first step in practicing at the Abbey. For more information, you can go to their Web site at www.shastaabbey.org or contact the Shasta Abbey Guestmaster at (530) 926-4208 or at guestmaster@shastaabbey.org.

Introductory Retreats - July 12 -17

Young Adults Retreat - August 4 - 7

Loving Kindness Retreat - August 14 - 21

Naming Ceremony

On June 16, Tuva, a little black kitten who has been given a new home with Mischa Wendel and her family, had a Buddhist naming ceremony at 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 several large collections of Buddhist books, human and animal medicines and medical supplies, Buddhist artwork, several plants, cleaning supplies, building materials, 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. Although we are grateful for any gift of food, the most helpful food donations are eggs, soy milk, goat milk, fruit, goat or sheep cheese, decaffeinated coffee, and herbal tea. 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.

A Southern Californian 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.

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.