

# **The Berkeley Buddhist Priory Newsletter July - September 2008**

## **Daily Reflection by Rev. Meiten McGuire**

(This is the last chapter, pages 149–154, in a newly published book written by Rev. Meiten, *Reflections on the Path, Zen Training in Everyday Life*. Rev. Meiten is a very good monk and friend with whom I trained with for many years at Shasta Abbey and this book provides excellent and very accessible teachings on Buddhist practice. The book should soon be available at the Priory.-Rev. Kinrei)

Daily reflection is a very useful adjunct to our formal meditation of “just sitting.” Its purpose is to help us learn from our life experiences by establishing a special time to more actively reflect upon them. When we live our lives more or less on autopilot, more by reflex than by awareness, following old grooves of habitual tendencies long engrained and hence unnoticed, then an unsatisfactoriness, a niggling sense of something not being quite right, can linger, and we may spin around in circles without really coming to grips with it. As one Buddhist master put it, “This is the habit of the heedless mind.” When we are on our precious spiritual journey, we have the opportunity to do better than that and can make helpful changes to replace old patterns. Daily reflection, it seems to me, helps implement these changes. Otherwise, how are we to know which tendencies are valuable and which have lost their value and keep us from living harmonious, contented lives?

Such is our resolve when we begin a reflection period. Many find it helpful to write down these reflections, something I recommend unless one feels an aversion to doing this. It keeps us honest, so

to speak, by allowing us to examine things that come up in meditation or during the day. Some of these things may be disturbing and, because we have to get on with whatever comes next, don't receive sufficient attention at the time. By sitting quietly, we allow things to arise that it may be useful to explore further. We get the hang of doing it through practice.

When something arises that we sense we could learn from, this is where we begin investigation or inquiry—the second factor of the Seven Factors of Enlightenment. We now use our mental apparatus actively, as Sherlock Holmes does in solving a mystery, exploring carefully and fully; we don't want to leave anything out because we might miss an important clue about what “pushes our buttons” or what sort of reaction leaves a dissatisfied feeling in its aftermath. Starting at the beginning and going through to the end is probably best, although we don't want to get stuck with any rigid rules. Just take it from the top. Perhaps an unpleasant interaction with someone will come up, or some disturbing situation. Whatever it might be, the important thing is to have a specific, concrete situation to investigate—since we can't solve everything all at once.

Here are some suggestions on how to proceed.

1. Ask how it began—what you were feeling at the time or just before (headachy, cranky, sad, pressured, insecure, happy, pleased, etcetera). Look back as objectively as you can because helpful information about our humanity is right here.
2. Look at how the interaction actually took place and developed, paying close attention to those small movements of the little self that can be so easily overlooked. Deep-seated feelings of insecurity can be triggered by someone's manner, facial expression, seeming abruptness, or apparent lack of interest. We tend to gloss over these triggers because they make us feel uncomfortable, but that is exactly the way we allow our

“discomfort zone” to increase. Instead of heeding our longing to live harmoniously and buoyantly, too often we give in to little self’s protests of not wanting to see the way things are—not wanting to face our vulnerabilities. We live in a grand illusion. It doesn’t have to be that way, but only we can use the opportunity to change.

3. Review the particular situation as if it were a film playing in slow motion. We can stop at any frame and look more closely. This is informative as an exercise in that it allows us to -stand back from what is being investigated and appreciate just what did happen with all its accompanying unsatisfying results. We learn from karmic consequences that our actions leave a wake, not only for ourselves but often for others too. We begin seeing where we simply fall into old careless habits of body and speech, as well as how these can be prompted by habitual ways of perceiving our world, how our mental activities—our thoughts—trigger our actions of body and speech. The opening lines of The Dhammapada now become a truth we know for ourselves:

“We are what we think.

All that we are arises with our thoughts.

With our thoughts we [create our] world.

Speak or act with an impure mind

And unhappiness will follow you

As the wheel follows the ox that draws the cart.”

Recording faithfully an earlier played-out life situation can be enormously helpful—but only if we do something with it.

4. The next step is to consider how it could have gone differently. Here it is not helpful to dwell on what the other person might have done; that’s up to him or her to look at and is really not our problem. As my Master would say, “Each man his karma makes and must carry for himself.” It is even more important to stop our painful habit of judging ourselves as terrible for having done whatever is revealed, or justifying ourselves for the perceived lapses in how we “should” be. The challenge is, without letting

the judgmental mind to get in the way, carefully to consider what we might have done differently so as to avoid carrying around the repercussions. This is a challenge because whatever we did at the time was what seemed the natural or obvious thing for us to do. Now we give ourselves the chance to see that such behavior is never written in stone, that we have other options, and that the natural response feels natural only because in the past we opted to do it. We need to examine whether we really need to 'be defensive, guarded, or whatever. It is important that we don't get hung up on the past. The past is of use only when it throws light on the present. We might find that there is something we can do now that will heal the situation for us. If there is and it seems good to do, then do it and let it go. We want to get on with life, not get stuck. If nothing comes up as good to do, be assured that another opportunity will arise. That's just the way life is.

The true wonder is that we really can change, that we can learn to make constructive choices that help us become who we want to be. We consciously choose by our Right Intention to clean up our old karma. The waves from habitual, unhelpful actions and reactions gradually lessen because we no longer stir them up. And we learn to recognize (re-cognize) our Buddha Nature, the still, small voice of our True Self. We experience in our own lives the wonderful metaphor of True Self as the sun that is always there when we allow the passing clouds to float on by without attaching to them. We live a more enlightened life that is indeed a lighter way to live. This effort of daily reflection—which is a companion to our foremost spiritual effort of formal meditation in which we cultivate the pure awareness of being fully present—brings much fruit and helps us to live in the present. More and more, we come to see those subtle movements of the little self as they arise. and in seeing them we pause before reacting. By pausing, we have the opportunity to respond more appropriately to the situation. We let karmic distortions appear without being so threatened by them because we learn how deceptive our

perceptions can be and come to know that we don't have to act upon them; they lessen directly by our precious awareness of what is happening. We don't need to read a book about it or go to classes—we just need to do it and learn for ourselves what is valuable for us.

This is very liberating, and we learn we really can, as the Buddhist ordination ceremony tells us, “live in the world [with all its demands and challenges] as if in the sky [of our Buddha Nature].” We don't need to get rid of anything. There is a natural transformation as our True Self lightens our lives—as the defilements of greed, hate, and delusion, which characterize our karmic little self, gradually and naturally turn into compassion, love, and wisdom, which characterize the true nature of life. It is wonderful! We just keep at it; we keep going in good faith, knowing that this wonderful process of practice and training is working for us all the time. And it is!

## **Priory News**

Two members of the Priory Sangha, Peter Townsend and Walter Bank, took the Buddhist Precepts and became lay Buddhists at this March's Keeping of the Ten Precepts Retreat at Shasta Abbey. The commitment to follow in the footsteps of 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.

The Priory was honored to have an extended visit from the Head of the Order, Rev. Master Haryo Young. Rev. Master Haryo was here from April 8–14. It was very good to have his wise presence at the Priory and also his great ability and enjoyment in using his mechanical skill to restore functionality to what was broken.

Alice Van Geffen and Beth Gong's little and venerable Chihuahua dog, Willie, after surprisingly staying alive with a bad heart for a longtime, finally died on May 18. We held Willie's funeral at the Priory on May 19. It was good to offer our Buddhist blessing and farewell to the little friend.

We celebrated the Buddha's birth at our yearly Wesak ceremony on May 25. The weather turned very nice for the day, a surprising large amount of people attended and a very bright and joyous service was held at an outside altar. The morning ended with a potluck lunch which many additional family members and friends attended. It was wonderful to have the Sangha together to express our gratitude to the Buddha and enjoy this Buddhist holiday.

## **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 bench for the back porch, a Buddhist scroll, toilet paper, incense, a hand carved dragon and paper supplies. 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 a number of prepared and take-out meals, soup, soymilk, salad, salad dressing, olive oil, eggs, coffee, tea, bread, teas, breakfast cereals, Peet's gift card, tofu, vegetables, fruit, vegie meats, fruit juice, nuts, cheese, ice cream, chocolate, cookies, pies, cakes. You are always welcome to check with the Priory on what foods are currently needed. We encourage all our Sangha and friends to offer writings to this newsletter. We all have our own special experiences and understanding and it is an act of spiritual generosity to be willing to offer and share them with others.