

The Berkeley Buddhist Priory Newsletter September - October, 2004

Previous Newsletters

Nine Beautiful Words (With Apologies to Webster's) by Amanda Snedaker

I asked for a dictionary for my high school graduation present. I expected to need it in college. And I did: the top of the binding is stretched where I've pulled it, over and over again, from a tightly packed shelf, many of the letters have worn off the tabs, and the pages are marked with stray bits of highlighter and ballpoint pen. But I've used it far more since I began to meditate than I have in the previous twenty-plus years. We are searching for that which cannot be described in words, and yet the process of doing so leads me deeper and deeper into exactly what words mean. I sing, "Homage to . . ." a thousand times before I think, what exactly am I offering to the Buddhas, the Bodhisattvas, the Scripture of Great Wisdom? And I pull down the dictionary to see, and to think, and more and more often, to reflect, allowing the skill of the lexicographer (yes! I looked it up) to deepen my understanding. {homage: '(h)am-ij, n, reverential regard, deference; syn, see honor}¹ . Yes.

This poem by Tsung Tsai caught my attention the first time I read it:

Buddha says, "Come, come. I will teach you everything".²

It continues to hold my attention so that now I consider this

combination of nine simple words to be one of the most beautiful in the language. And I've brought Webster's, and, I hope, some reflection, to bear on why I find these few words to be so meaningful.

Buddha says, "Come, come.

We use this word, 'Buddha', as convenient shorthand. Sometimes we mean the historical Buddha, our original teacher, the source of the Four Noble Truths and of the Noble Eightfold Path that leads to the cessation of suffering. And we use 'Buddha' to mean the Eternal, the Buddha Nature, That Which Is, the Unborn. Shakyamuni Buddha offers us the path to understanding the Buddha Nature and of living in accord with It. This dual meaning adds richness to these few words; both the Buddha of this world and our own Buddha Nature, the still small voice within each of us, is talking to us. In a way, He's speaking to Himself.

This Buddha is active, and He's ready for us to respond. He invites us, but does not insist. He beckons us to approach, to move toward Him. This 'come' is the twin to the 'come' we sing in the Litany of the Great Compassionate One: "Come, come, hear, hear". And if we do approach, if we do accept the invitation, the Buddha Nature within us moves in response: "a joy springs up in me". He doesn't say please, but yet we are welcome. {come: to move toward something, approach . . . to move toward or enter a scene of action or into a field of interest, used with an implication of purpose}³ Purpose! {'per pes: intention}⁴ Again, yes. And then He repeats the invitation: He means it.

I will teach you

One-to-one, no separation, no filter, this is big time 'face time', coupled with a promise, a commitment. {will: 'wil: used to express inevitability}.⁵ I can have it for my own if I am willing {'wil-ing: inclined or favorably disposed in mind: ready; done, borne, or accepted of choice; syn, see voluntary}⁶ to learn it.

During a recent sanzen, the monk prefaced his answer to my question with a comment about not being able to do it for me, that it was up to me to do the work of training. At the time, I mentally dismissed this comment as sanzen boilerplate, and simply waited for the answer to my question, which came forthwith. However, just a few days later, a friend made a very similar comment. I was startled, and had to look carefully to see what was I was missing: I didn't think that I was expecting anyone to do the work for me. So I made a little inquiry into the difference between the words, help me and teach me. Teach scares me: I might make a mistake that needs correcting, and that might hurt. But help sounds gentle and kind, someone right beside me. Sometimes help is appropriate, but not always; no one can change me but me.

A quick visit to that dictionary bore this out. Help . . . implies the need of aid, the inability to do it alone. It suggests a weakness or lack in the one helped, and a strength that can be borrowed from the one aiding.⁷ And teach: {'tech: to cause to know a subject; to cause to know how; to accustom to some action or attitude}.⁸ Different, indeed! Really, what I wanted to know was how to deal with the issue I was presenting, and certainly the answer came in terms of accustoming myself to new action and attitude

toward it. No weakness to undermine my effort; no strength to be found outside myself.

Upon reflection, I realized that I have been told before that it is my job to do it, not another's. But I was not able-not willing-to hear it. And not clear, until I got into it with the dictionary, that my effort to avoid suffering (mistakes and the resulting correction) was really leading me to avoid responsibility and was undermining my training.

To teach implies the object, that there is someone who is learning: {'lern: to gain knowledge or understanding of or skill in by study, instruction, or experience, to come to be able to, to come to realize, to find out: ascertain; syn, see discover}.⁹ Learn, discover, ascertain: all active words, requiring an act-or: I will teach you.

One of my ongoing lessons in training is realizing that I should know the things I learn in meditation and training. This is a prime example: I have been treating "learning" as passive, when in fact, I know from my own experience that it is active. Some people learn visually, some orally, some by experience. The best word that describes my learning process is repetition: I must see, hear, think about, write something many times before it is "mine". It can be distressing to realize that I often think I'm more willing than I actually am. Here's another layer to repetition and willingness: I must bring myself back, time and again, to the active work of meditation and mindfulness, of really making the teaching of the Buddha 'mine'.

Many times I have sat in Dharma talks and selected out phrases, sentences, stories that seemed to be for me. We've

all smiled and nodded at things the monk said that were particular to our situation. It's a part of that learn by repetition stuff. But the words I'm picking are not for a particular person, my 'self', but for a point in time: if I can hear it all without discrimination, I will get further, I will have a store of wisdom that is broader, more general, more useful than the words that apply to my particular now. And I will have taken another chip out of the block of self that says, over and over, I-I-I, me-me-me. The 'you' of this poem is not particular to 'me'. The Buddha is speaking to all 'yous', to all of us, to all beings. It is individualÑeach of us must go aloneÑbut not special or particular, not in any way separate.

everything {Everything: 'ev-re-thing: all that exists; all that relates to the subject; a most important or excellent thing}¹⁰
Nothing will be withheld, nothing omitted, nothing hidden; all, complete, entire, whole, full. Buddha says, I will teach you- Me.

Nine beautiful, beautiful words.

¹ Webster's Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary, Springfield, MA: G. & C. Merriam Company, 1969, p.397. All definitions have been freely edited by the author, and any errors are hers alone.

² Crane, George, *Bones of the Master: A Buddhist Monk's Search for the Lost Heart of China*, New York, NY: Bantam Books, 2000, p. 255.

³ Op cit, p. 165.

⁴ Ibid., p. 694.

⁵ Ibid., p. 1021.

⁶ Ibid., p. 1022.

⁷ Ibid., p. 387.

⁸ Ibid., p. 904.

⁹ Ibid., p. 480.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 288.

Priory News

The Priory has been looking for a larger building and a prospect in Pinole presented itself this spring and summer. It has more space than our current building and it has a very beautiful and peaceful setting. However, the distance from our current Albany locatio, about 15 to 20 minutes drive, was further than we had wanted. Many Sangha members visited the property and we had a meeting on whether to try to purchase it on May 25. The feeling of the meeting was mixed with some people feeling strongly for this move and others expressing some reservations. We decided not to make a bid at that point. One issue was that the sellers of the property were asking \$975,000 and it seemed too high a price. The property was still unsold in July and we decided that if we could get the Pinole property at a lower price, we would then try to purchase it. So we placed a bid for \$800,000 and the bid was turned down. The property is still on the market at the end of August and they are maintaining their price of \$975,00. If the price ever drops down substantially, we may again consider trying to purchase it. Naturally, we are still looking for any other potential new locations for the Priory. Everyone's opinions and feelings are very much appreciated in this ongoing search for a larger building.

A long term member of the Priory Sangha, Laurie Ottens, relocated to Mt. Shasta at the end of June. We had a chance to say our farewells and best wishes to Laurie at a wonderful

potluck at her Albany house on June 15. We will miss Laurie's presence at the Priory but it is good that we can still see her and visit with her when we go up to Shasta Abbey. And Laurie will be a much welcome addition to Mt. Shasta Sangha.

Funerals and Memorials

Judy Brown's cat, Ted, battled severe illness for a surprisingly long stretch of time but finally on July 12 he died and on July 13 we held his funeral. It was attended by many Sangha members.

We held a memorial for Nyima Miguel Sorenson on July 16. Nyima, age 26, had been killed on June 25. Both his parents, Madeline Scott and Michael Sorenson attended the memorial along with Nyima's sister.

The next day, July 17, we had funeral for Ruth Richard's dog, Chip.

Buddhist practice and teaching are a great help in facing death and providing us with the teachings to help free us from fear and allow the natural grief to arise and pass.

Three Day Meditation Retreats Sept. 16-18 Nov. 18-20 One Day Meditation Retreat October 16

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.

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 scroll of the Medicine Buddha, a beautiful chair, a new dustbuster, water filter, plants, cleaning supplies, office supplies, stamps, paper goods 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 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.

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.

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 to come to the Priory whenever you can and offer your help. The next work day is scheduled for Saturday, October 2 and Saturday November 27, 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 weekend 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

Sept. 17-19, Oct. 15-17, Nov. 19-21

Feeding of the Hungry Ghosts Retreat

October 26 - November 1

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. 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.