



*"The highest mountains are the abode of the lions;
In the deepest waters the dragons dwell."*

Lions Gate Buddhist Priory

NEWSLETTER

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Lions Gate Buddhist Priory is a branch of the Order of Buddhist Contemplatives (OBC). Our practice is Serene Reflection Meditation (Sōtō Zen) and emphasizes basic Buddhist meditation and the keeping of the Precepts within the training of everyday life.

Rev. Kōten Benson, the Prior since 1986, is a Dharma Heir of Rev. Master Jiyu-Kennett, founder of the OBC, who died in 1996. He was ordained in 1978 by Rev. Master Jiyu, and recognized by her as a Buddhist Master in 1983.

The Priory has three monks in residence and is located at Dragon Flower Mountain, one hundred and sixty acres of land in the Botanie Valley, near the village of Lytton in the B.C. interior. The land is off-grid and conditions are primitive as we strive to plant a mandala of Buddhist training in the mountains. There are regular retreats; visitors and guests are always welcome. Lay members and friends of the Priory meet regularly in Vancouver and Lytton, B.C. and there is a meditation group in Edmonton, Alberta.

The Priory is a registered charitable society supported entirely by donations from members and friends.

Article

How to Meditate: Part V

Rev. Master Koton Benson

The following text is a transcription of the fifth in a series of Dharma Talks offered by Rev. Master Koton to the community of Lions Gate Buddhist Priory in 2016. It was transcribed and edited by Tracy Kitagawa, Michele Feist, Pierre Kohl and Rev. Master Aurelian Giles with minor revisions made for ease of reading.

Homage to the Buddha

Homage to the Dharma

Homage to the Sangha

When Dogen says that if we are as diligent as the Ancestors there is no reason why we people of the present day cannot understand, he is not simply referring to the people in the classical stories in China.

In the time of the Buddha there were many people, hundreds and thousands of them in fact, who had direct insight into the nature of truth. Both lay people and monastics; both men and women from all social classes; both the educated and uneducated; both the smart and the people who weren't all that smart. As Dogen points out in his *Rules for Meditation*, the Dharma has always been for ordinary people.

The Dharma and its practice is not only for people who have studied the scriptures, nor is it only for people who can understand the various doctrines of Buddhism. It is for people who sincerely wish to practice, to do something about themselves, and for people who have a sense that there is

something more they need to know, other than the ordinary around them.

In the Buddha's time, for example, there was a lay woman who, having heard the Buddha teach, practiced the Dharma within the context of her daily life, and came to a profound enlightenment experience while preparing a meal. As she was parching vegetables in her cooking vessel in order to preserve them, she looked away for a moment to attend to something else and when she looked back the greens had completely burnt up, carbonized to a crisp. The woman was immediately struck with the truth of impermanence, having a profound insight into its meaning, far beyond an intellectual understanding. She had a very deep awakening. What is known in Japan as a *kensho*.

There was also a female monk who was simply training and practicing in daily life. She went into her little house one evening and before she sat down she checked the bed behind her to make sure she didn't sit upon something. This was one of the monastic rules but is also an example of watching what one is doing. She sat down and grasped the wick of her oil lamp. (In those days you turned out the lamp, as you do on some modern lamps as well, by turning down the wick into the oil.) As she turned it down and the flame went out, and the light went out, she said the great dark split apart and her mind opened.

The connection between these two stories you will note, is paying attention to what one is doing, to what is in front of one. The female monk looked behind her before she sat down. No doubt she was tempted to think that it was an unnecessary thing to do because she would have known it was unlikely there was anything there, but she took an extra moment to do that which needed to be done and this prepared her mind to be receptive to the teaching.

The same for the woman who was parching the vegetables. It is why Dogen, in particular, emphasizes the training of cooking and preparing food. And to this present day, cooking for others is still an excellent means

of training. This is because the preparing of food for other people is so easy to see as an offering, and because of the necessity of paying attention to what one is doing.

From ancient times then, for lay people and monastics, men and women, prime ministers and peasants, there has been practice and attainment, practice and realization. Again, Dogen emphasized this. So, in our tradition, it is not that there is no realization, or what is called in Japanese *satori* or *kensho*; it is that awakenings arise out of the practice in life as it is in front of us. That is why Dogen says one need not go to other dusty countries.

He does not mean, of course, that one should not travel, or that people should not go to other countries to train. He means that practice and realization is to be found within our own lives in front of us - one could even say within us. Just as Shakyamuni emphasized that the Dharma, the truth of the Dharma, and the realization of the Dharma is to be found in *this* body, *this* mind and nowhere else. Not in extraordinary states that we attain and gather into ourselves, not in far off heavens where we go to obtain some knowledge, but within our *own* body and mind.

We have the deep and profound connection to the truth. Because of this there is not so much emphasis on the separation between enlightenment experience and ordinary daily life in the Soto Zen tradition. Enlightenment experiences, *kenshos*, etc. are quite good and beneficial, and/but the emphasis is on integration into daily life. And that daily life is the proof of the validity of a spiritual experience.

A genuine spiritual experience produces results, the lessening of selfishness being one of the most primary. Lessening of selfishness, and the lessening of greed, hate, and delusion. Increase in faith and the wish to continue to deepen one's training. Humility, knowing that there is much more to do. However spectacular a spiritual experience, if it does not have these characteristics then it is not considered entirely valid within the Zen tradition.

As a matter of fact, it is the *results* of an experience that are observed by the teacher and also the continual emphasis by the student on becoming an ordinary, not extraordinary, human being. Because, after all, that which we are talking about is what Rev. Master Jiyu used to call the birthright of all human beings - our own true and profound nature.

Generally speaking in the Zen tradition, particularly the Soto, lay people having kensho is not usually officially certified. That is because the only reason for certifying, in an official way, somebody's spiritual experience is if one is going to train them to be monastic teachers and hand on the Dharma. It is not at all because lay people do not have genuine spiritual experiences - they do, but they are just not formally recognized.

The danger in certifying a lay person's kensho is that if the person hasn't been training themselves for a long time they will grasp after it as an "experience." They will wish to prolong the experience of it, when the experience is actually fleeting. As it says in the Buddhist scriptures, it is like one is walking along a mountain road or climbing a mountain when suddenly there is a flash of lightning. In the lightning flash one sees oneself and the path. So one knows that the path exists and one knows that one is on it, but that does not necessarily move one further along the path.

Such spiritual experiences can produce profound effects in body and mind, and it is very important that people keep on going and not "stop and dine out," which is what Rev. Master Jiyu used to call it, on such an experience. One must continually deepen one's training. One does that by humility, by knowing that there is much, much more to do. By continuing to deeply examine one's relationship with the Precepts and one's relationship with mindfulness.

Such an experience, as I said, produces profound effects in body and mind, but they are not the property of the person who experiences them. This is very important to remember. The way Rev. Master used to put it is

that as one trains oneself, the Unborn can be seen, as it were. As one trains oneself, one becomes more transparent and the light can be seen, but the light is not one's personal possession. We should bear this in mind when people who have, as it were, made great progress on the spiritual path, make major mistakes. This is not because something is wrong with the path or even necessarily that something is wrong with the person. It is because we all train with our greeds, hates and delusions and to the extent that we are able to let them go, is the extent to which the Unborn can be seen. To the extent that we are not able to let them go, is the extent that we obscure the light within ourselves. There is still no less light.

That is why Rev. Master refused to allow us to be judgmental towards people who had made severe mistakes after they had been training for some period of time. She always, just as the Buddha did, emphasized the humanity of people.

Training in the Buddha's way is often not taking the easy way out. It is like proceeding along a tunnel in which at any point one can run away. At any point there are exits and we can decide not to take them. Sometimes the exits are frightening, sometimes the exits are alluring. And we make a decision to continue on.

Sometimes the path is overwhelming. Sometimes we think we cannot continue on. Sometimes things seem to be going smoothly, sometimes things seem to be going chaotically. There is a line from a poem - "no matter how hard and heartbreaking it is to live, yet we must continue on and live out our lives." Training, meditation, and the precepts make this possible.

News

Since the last edition of the newsletter, much has changed at the Priory and in the world. We have closed the Priory to visitors and cancelled all scheduled retreats until further notice, and we have ceased any unnecessary visits to the village of Lytton or anywhere else. We are endeavouring to keep in touch via emails, increased phone calls, and daily Dharma Talks which can be found on our website. Reverend Master Kōten has offered a series of Dharma Talks entitled “Virus.” Please feel free to call us at any time, whether it’s with a specific question or problem, or just to say hello and to feel a sense of connection. Our phone number is: 250-999-3911, and our email is lionsgatebuddhistpriory@gmail.com

Here on the mountain, we are continuing our daily monastic practice of meditation, services, discussions, and ordinary daily life. In the evening before retiring, we always recite Vespers and offer the merit thereof for the peace and healing of all beings in our community and throughout the world.

Spring has been slow to appear this year. We experienced some really cold temperatures in January and February along with winter's challenges: frozen water pipes, vehicles in the ditch, etc. Unseasonable cold temperatures and snow continued until the first week of April. But now the spring has arrived. New growth, robins, flowers...we even saw our first bear the other day!

Even though we are closed to visitors, we continue to observe festival ceremonies, including the Kwan Yin festival, which we held in Lytton at the Chinese Museum in February before the quarantine began. It was well-attended despite the inclement weather.

In mid-March, as the pandemic began to take hold here in North America, Reverend Aurelian and John

drove to Shasta Abbey to pick up Rev. Master Koten from Shasta Abbey where he had been staying. We made it back to Canada just as the border was closing, then we were in complete quarantine for several weeks. We are very grateful to everyone who brought us food and supplies during this time.

IN GRATITUDE

The Priory, its community, and its activities are entirely supported by the generous donations of congregation members and friends. We receive no outside funding from government agencies or the Order of Buddhist Contemplatives. We are very grateful for everything that we receive.

Over the past few months, in addition to monetary donations, we are very grateful to have received the following: a box of apples, jars of homemade chutney, coffee, crackers, nut butter, potato chips, snack food,

cinnamon, Tofurkey, vegetarian ham and other veggie meats, eggs, chocolates, tofu, honey, kale, quinoa, veggie patties, texturized vegetable protein, pineapple compote, olive oil, mayonnaise, ketchup, bananas, apples, pickles, oranges, onions, mushrooms, squash, peas, broccoli, maple syrup, yeast, butter, cheese, cereal, restaurant meals, accommodation for monks during their travels, masks, hand sanitizer, blank books and planners, Lysol cleaners, dog and cat food. Thank you to Leah, a friend of Bob's, who donated four large bookcases for Mandala Hall, and to Berkeley Buddhist Priory for a Kanzeon statue. And thank you to everyone for your generous offerings of money, time, skill and labour, and for your ongoing training, the merit of which is priceless.

Shasta Abbey

Due to the developing spread of the COVID-19 virus Shasta Abbey is having to close its gates for the time being. When they have a date to reopen, they will let us know. (Issued March 14, 2020)