



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

Lions Gate Buddhist Priory

NEWSLETTER

May 2021

Issue #131

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.

Joy

Reverend Master Koten Benson

The following is a transcript of the last Dharma Talk of the 2021 Spring Retreat held at the Priory. Transcribed by Michele Feist.

Homage to the Buddha

Homage to the Dharma

Homage to the Sangha

The Buddha taught that there is no refuge in the impermanent, no refuge in the changing and passing moods, and emotions, and feelings that arise from past conditions.

Whether or not we recognize what these causes and conditions are, they influence us. We like particular things, we don't like particular things, we react towards some things to try to get away from them, we are attracted to other things.

One way of understanding this is like a play. You know, Shakespeare says "all the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players, they have their entrances and their exits." It is as if most people are in a play. The plot, as it were, having been written by past karmic conditions. The plot tells us what we should be doing and how we should respond to particular situations and other people.

Not understanding this, is what the Buddha called ignorance. Through meditation we learn how to stop in the middle of the play. And not just act out the role that karma and past conditioning has planned for us.

Through meditation we learn to stop. Through practice of the Precepts we learn to see. That is why when the Precepts are given it says, "in order to make them the eyes of all sentient beings." It is so that we can see how things actually work.

This stopping and seeing in the middle of the play can be called the challenging of karma. Meditation develops the elasticity and flexibility of the mind so that it does not simply stiffly follow past channels of action and thought.

While we are following, as it were, the plot of the play, it is as if we are moving through a smoke-filled stage. We cannot see clearly where we are going, so we simply respond to the stage direction coming from our previous karma and conditioning.

How often have we encountered people or situations that, without having encountered them before, we do not like, or we crave to have, in ways that have nothing to do with the present situation, or even the person or object.

Through training, through practice, through meditation and the Precepts, the smoky ache ceases, and happiness, dependent upon our mood, emotion, and feelings; this happiness ends.

We are used to experiencing and wanting happiness that is dependent upon having and possessing something, whether an object, a person, a mood, a feeling.

This very identification with these things is what the self is.

This happiness that I just referred to is quite different in quality and experience from the happiness and joy that the Buddha spoke of. We do not need to be a saint, a sage, or perfect in order to begin to experience this.

We just need to let go of things as they arise.

How we feel about something may not be the best guide to what is actually going on. Profound stillness and the practice of selflessness causes this joy and happiness that the Buddha referred to, to arise.

But, since it is so profoundly different from what we are used to seeking, it is sometimes hard for us to recognize it at the beginning without laying all sorts of

things like guilt, etc., on top of it. The tranquility and joy that arise are not an award, nor a gift, they are what already exists, but we need to let go in order to experience it.

As I said, this is quite different from the happiness that we are usually seeking because it is not dependent upon the arising of a particular mood or feeling. Nor is it dependent upon a particular situation or the presence of a particular person. It comes from letting go.

Letting go, letting be, not forcing. This is real. It is not something imagined and when experienced it is clear to us that it is not imaginary.

However, the training must be done in order to experience it. And unlike moods of happiness, or feelings of happiness, this joy that I am referring to can occur in the middle of disaster, in the middle of darkness, in the middle of despondency. Our bodies and minds continue to respond to circumstances as they arise, but, because we allow them to arise and pass, and do not hold on to them as they pass, joy can arise.

However, one must not become so busy and so distracted or else one will not be able to see it, if I can put it that way, at the time that it occurs. Or rather, I suppose, if one becomes distracted in this way, one will not be able to practice it.

Sometimes, or often, what the thoughts or emotions, as they arise and pass, are telling us about ourselves, about others, and about circumstances, is not necessarily true. Once you realize this, then it can become easier to let go of whatever arises in the mind.

The focus is upon stillness, but this stillness, developed out of meditation, is not a stillness in opposition to agitation. It is a stillness whether agitation is present or not. We are so used to thinking that what the mind churns up is us.

But that is, in fact, not the case. What the mind churns up is the arising and passing of conditioned thoughts, emotions, etc. They can provide us with information, such

as that if fear arises, there may be something to fear. But of course, there may not be something to fear as well.

We learn when we begin meditation to sit still, as it were, underneath a bridge and to allow the thoughts and emotions and feelings to do what they will, going back and forth across that bridge. And we are told not to chase after them, not to push them away. We are all familiar with this.

It takes a while for people practising meditation to understand that what is passing across the bridge is not us. It is what we have told ourselves is us. But in fact it is a mass of impermanence in which no refuge can be taken.

The remarkable thing about the Buddha's teachings is that, through practice, we go past the place of meaning. When people try to do this in a philosophical or intellectual way they come to the place where everything loses all meaning. It is one of the difficulties of studying philosophy. That there should be a type of meaning that leaves behind all the different "meanings," they do not grasp; no philosophers grasp. So they try to move the self, reform it, change it, move it about, turn it upside down, move it forward into truth, without realizing the futility of trying to do so.

When Shakyamuni Buddha taught for the first time, to the five companions, what happened is called Turning the Wheel of the Dharma. What many people do not realize is that it is not the Buddha's words that are doing the turning of the Wheel of the Dharma. The Wheel of the Dharma turns when somebody understands. It was because somebody that was listening to the Buddha understood, that the Wheel of the Dharma turned and since then, down to the present day, this is so. The Dharma is transmitted from person to person, through the understanding and practice of it.

Lots of things help. Scriptures and practices all can benefit. Nice meditation halls, kesas, all these things are not empty. They can benefit. And yet, one must not miss the profound lesson of the Buddha, that what he taught is about doing something

about ourselves. Doing something about ourselves within the context of our lives as we find them.

This does not mean that we do not try to change our lives or that there is some problem in doing so. But we need not wait to change our lives before we can do something about ourselves.

We can do something about ourselves by continuing to try to be still when we do not wish to. By continuing to try to listen when we wish to be elsewhere. What you must realize in addition to what I said about doing something about ourselves, what you must realize, is that this, the teaching of the Buddha is not speculation or some form of psychological mind improvement. It is the profound turning about, at the deepest seat of us. And as Rev. Master Jiyu said, emerging out the dark to find the universe as fair and wondrous as the morning star.

Homage to all the Buddhas in all worlds
Homage to all the Bodhisattvas in all worlds
Homage to the Scripture of Great Wisdom

News

May 2021

We experienced a fairly cold and snowy winter this year, and our snowplow saw much work. The propane furnace that we installed in Mandala Hall kept us warm even during the coldest weather. Spring has now arrived, and we are all glad to see the new green growth, wildflowers and songbirds.

We are still closed to overnight visitors. The Provincial Health Officer recently announced a re-opening schedule, and following the government guidelines, we have begun to welcome a few local congregation members for evening meditation and Vespers at 7:30 pm on Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday. On Sunday, May 30, we had three people here for our Wesak Ceremony. Chanting and singing in

religious services are still prohibited, so we played a recording of Wesak hymns while circumambulating three times, each person offering incense and pouring water over the Baby Buddha. It was good to see people, the first time we've been able to do so for many months.

Our bi-weekly Zoom meetings have been well-received, and we have plans to continue them even after the pandemic is over. If you are not on our email list and would like to receive invitations to the Zoom meetings, please contact us. We have also enjoyed having informal "Zoom teas" with people. If you'd like to visit us in this way, let us know!

Our new website is up and running! We have been working on this for many months. Thank you to Rev. Leon, the Prior of Portland Buddhist Priory, who has been indispensable in helping us with this, and also to Dharmamitra Aksentsev, who has been tirelessly transferring the old files into a new, easily searchable format. We are very grateful to Victor Stepan, who has maintained the website for over a decade.

On Sunday, January 17, we held a merit ceremony for peace in the USA following the violence and unrest in Washington, DC earlier in the month. And on Saturday, April 10, Reverend Master Aurelian gave the Buddhist Precepts to Kun Wang, who lives in Calgary, in the Ceremony of Lay Ordination. Because of the pandemic restrictions, this ceremony was done via Zoom over the internet, the second time we have done this ceremony like this. Our congratulations to Kun for taking this important step in training.

We kept busy this winter with various projects: clearing underbrush along the roads and burning the wood piles, preparing and cutting firewood for next winter, as well as the various small maintenance and repair jobs that continually arise. Rev. Master Koten and John painted the repaired lotus blossoms and the plinth around the large Kwan Yin statue, and the colour that we chose matches and blends in with the colour of the granite quite nicely. We have planted our vegetable garden with tomatoes, potatoes, radishes, carrots and lettuce. Our "second-year" crops of onions, parsley, and parsnips are flourishing.

IN GRATITUDE

The Priory, our community, and our 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 months, in addition to monetary donations, we are grateful to have received the following: crackers; chips; chocolates; mixed nuts; cookies; desserts; tofu; potato chips; milk; eggs; halvah; squash; walnuts; apples; carrots; prepared meals; cake; cheese; kimchee; olives; veggie burgers; butter; water; restaurant meals; chocolate Easter bunnies; coffee; cheesecake; mangoes; croissants; sour cream; apples; bananas; pizza; evaporated milk; primer and paint for the statue; precious stones for the statue; a cold-storage grocery bag; hotel accommodations; medical treatment; votive candles; incense; a portable shed; a dog house; lumber; saline solution for Net Pot; rubber gloves; vitamins.

Thank you to everyone who support us through their donations of money, time, skill, talent and labour, and for your ongoing spiritual practice and training, the merit of which is incalculable.