



*"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 VI

Rev. Master Koten Benson

The following text is a transcription of the sixth in a series of Dharma Talks offered by Rev. Master Koten 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

The third Chinese ancestor says in his writing *On Trust and the Heart*, “try not to seek after the true, only cease to cherish opinions.” This is one of my favourite lines and yet I have found throughout the years that when I make use of it, people often don’t understand what I mean by opinions, and ideas.

There is a story in the Zen tradition called the First Principle, which talks about a person visiting a teacher of Zen in Japan. The visitor goes on and on about their various ideas of what Zen and Buddhism are. Meanwhile the teacher is pouring tea for the visitor who is going on to such a degree that they don’t notice to say that they have enough tea in their cup. The teacher continues to pour until the tea overflows, in order to illustrate the point to the person that their mind is too full of ideas and theories and opinions. It is called the First Principle because it is actually the first thing that people are asked to address when they come and train with a teacher in Zen.

I once had a conversation with a Vietnamese abbot who is a friend of ours, and it was about the difficulty of getting students to let go of ideas and opinions. He gave me an illustration saying that because he is Vietnamese he was having a hot pepper with his meal. He had earlier offered me some and I said “no, they don’t agree with me”. He said “it’s like this,” and he held up the pepper. He said, “I like this, I think it benefits me. I think it would benefit you. And you do not think this”. Then he said, “These two

things can exist in the same space without interfering with one another as long as one does not hold onto or insist.”

This is a very interesting point. A lot of our ideas and opinions are about other people and what other people should do. A good majority of these opinions are about things we know nothing, or things we can do nothing about.

The ideas and opinions that one needs to drop are characterized by a form of magical thinking. By magical thinking I mean the sort of views that one does not examine and that one accepts or rejects because they either stroke the mind or they cause the mind to feel rough and irritated. Many people decide their views of things based upon this effect on the mind.

This is why one of the things that a Zen teacher teaches students is not what to think, that would be silly, but how to make use of the thinking processes in order to clarify. When people practice religion and spiritual training one of the side effects is that they become naive and open. That is fine and not particularly a problem but they do not want to become fools. If one is led around by ideas that make the mind seem more comfortable and one runs away from ideas that make the mind seem uncomfortable then one will be prey for any foolish ideology that comes along.

It is very important, particularly as practitioners of meditation, and of Buddhism, that we not do this.

I continually tell people training with me up here not to succumb to ordinary views. Many people pick up views like viruses. They will read books or see newspaper headlines and they will pick up ordinary views, the run of the mill, the default views from other people and they will not think for themselves. Many people think that their ideas and opinions are originally arrived at insights. However, if you are training people and you press them, you discover that they have derived all these ideas and opinions that they consider to be insights from reading a particular book at a particular time in their lives. They have then clung to these views and find it very, very difficult to give them up, even though circumstances have changed. This is why books on diets, or political views, or conspiracy theories become popular and people find them so very attractive. But they are only popular for a while and then they disappear. This is particularly true in areas of

health and diet.

Ideas and opinions change. Meditation helps to develop what Dogen calls the soft and flexible mind. The soft and flexible mind knows that it need not derive its identity from other people's opinions and views. Although it does help to know something about these subjects in order to not be taken in by the various ideas and opinions, we cannot, no matter how much we study, know everything.

Turning our attention inwards and learning through meditation and the practice of the Precepts actually gives us greater insight into what are false and useless ideas and opinions.

One of the characteristics of ideas and opinions is their changeableness, while at the same time having the appearance of permanence. In other words, if you examine a particular view you will see that it doesn't last and at the same time there is the tendency to view it as permanent, as a permanent fixture.

Another aspect of ideas and views, in the way that I am referring to them, is that they ignore the laws of change and the laws of cause and effect. Ideas and views connect up things that are not actually connected.

This is an important aspect of opinions and ideas to watch out for - they connect up things that have no connection to one another. Conspiracy theories are very much like this because they collect up various particular bits of information, insufficiently and wrongly understood, and form a conclusion.

In Buddhism the difference between what the world generally calls mental illness and most people's ordinary state of mind is simply one of degree. Not of kind.

This is an important point to remember.

Dogen says, most people are deluded within enlightenment. Deluded within enlightenment means that the Buddha Nature is all around us and within us and yet we do not see this and act contrary to it. This is being deluded within enlightenment. This is the state of most people, including ourselves,

to varying degrees. When Dogen talks about being deluded within delusion and when Nyogen Senzaki talks about putting a head on top of one's own head, which he tells people to carefully avoid, they are both talking about the same thing. Meditation shows us how to encounter things as they are without having to have an idea or opinion about them.

What we learn through practicing sitting meditation we can take out into the world of our daily experience. We do have to have views and we do have to recognize that those views are not the absolute truth. Things may be different than they appear to us, and yet we are often asked to have an idea or view about something. It is the basis of voting, it is the basis of determining what we are going to buy. However, it is through meditation that we learn that these things are not absolute truth. They are helpful and can be a helpful means of negotiating life. For example, when we go to buy a car, whether this car is better than that car. I am sure we have all realized through doing research before buying a product that opinions and views vary widely due to some people's good and bad experiences with that same product.

The important thing is to let go; to loosen the stickiness of ideas and opinions.

Now this problem of ideas and opinions is very common. It seems to be almost essential to the koan of western people. When I say the koan of western people, I do not mean that there are innate characteristics of western people versus Asian people. It has nothing to do with innate characteristics, particularly since Buddhism teaches that fundamentally there are no innate characteristics. Fundamentally we are not either the family or ethnic group, or even gender that we were born into. We are more than that.

We should be careful of solidifying ideas of what we should and should not be. Self judgment is very, very powerful. In the west this derives from the idea of an unbridgeable gulf between ourselves and the divine.

This idea arises out of the solidification and materialization of the contents of the world and our minds. This is very, very influential in the west. Very, very influential. It underpins our philosophy, our psychology, our prison system. The idea of permanence, that people are always as they were at

one time, is so firmly fixed in the western mind that it inhibits many people from deeply practicing the Dharma because the viewpoint of the Dharma is quite different, given that it is based on understanding impermanence.

Impermanence doesn't simply mean, and Dogen emphasizes this point, impermanence doesn't simply mean time flies. The teaching of impermanence isn't only meant to be a skillful means for urging us to strive. That everybody knows.

One of the most profound meanings of impermanence in Buddhist training is that people change. If one doesn't see much change in a lifetime there is infinitely more going on than that. I tend to think that it is very difficult to practice the Dharma without having a fundamental understanding of before and after. I think this is essential. When we sit down to meditate for the first time, there is a before that we bring into it and that causes and conditions it.

There is the idea in the west that when a child is born they somehow emerge immaculate from somewhere even though this is completely contrary to everybody's experience - as a matter of fact this is an example of what Dogen means when he speaks of delusion within enlightenment. We continually believe things that are completely contrary to our experience. We have all seen that when children are born they carry already certain characteristics that they did not inherit from us. Rev. Master Jiyu used to say that what parents basically need to teach their children is how to live in this particular world with which the new born children are not familiar, but it is a mistake to assume that they do not already know things. There will also be an after.

A very kind gentleman at a flea market in Yale came up to me and, because he knew I was a monk, gave me a little jade carving that he had among the things that he was selling. It is a jade carving of a cicada. It is very important to me because it teaches such a magnificent lesson. In China the cicada is an insect that spends the majority of its life underground, in a larval or pupa state. After some period of time it emerges, climbs up the trunk of a tree and turns into a flying insect.

This jade carving shows the cicada emerging from its shell, because the cicada, like a butterfly or dragonfly, sheds its skin and emerges as

something new and different. This is a type of death, and the little carving of the cicada shows the insect emerging from its old shell. But as it is coming out of its old shell the front of it resembles a person. The little appendages, the little legs are carved in such a way that they resemble a person bringing the hands together in gassho.

What I take from this carving is the profound illustration that any going out of existence is another type of coming into existence. Be it illness, change, loss of self or other, or death, the most useful way of greeting this is the putting of the hands together in gassho; the emerging from the known into the unknown with one's hands together in gratitude for what was the past, and emerging with faith and trust into the future.

Sometimes this is illustrated by the mayfly which lives but for an afternoon. This insect lives as a type of grub in the water for most of its life before it emerges up a stalk. If you are ever near a pond you can look at the stalks at a certain time of year and you will see these cast of insect casings, resembling a sort of very fierce grub. The grub climbs up, splits its skin and emerges as a flying insect of great delicacy. It then has to split its skin once more in order to be able to eat and to breed. Then it dies that afternoon.

We are very much like this.

Once when I was in Edmonton walking in a park near a large lake, I noticed some flying insects. People thought they were mosquitoes and were trying to brush them away. I decided to observe these insects for myself. The mayflies were coming up from the pond and they landed on everything, including me. There were thousands of them. They would land, split their skins and emerge in a new flying form in a matter of seconds. The one thing I noticed is that they didn't turn around and look at their split skins. Not even for a moment, not even a pang of regret or a looking back to see what became of their former selves. They simply landed and split their skins. The skins turned ash coloured in a matter of seconds, and blew away as if the insect was dying. Then it emerged as a new flying insect, and immediately took off.

The following poem by Louise Clifton is, in a sense about this, and thus is about the practice of meditation as well.

the leaves believe
such letting go is love
such love is faith
such faith is grace
such grace is God
I agree with the leaves

There is also an essential, very short, very brief poem from the Japanese
that I have always found to be very helpful regarding meditation.

It goes something like this:

Repose faith,
Let go
Flowers fall
Just so.

Repose faith - let go. This is the way it is.

Shasta Abbey schedule

- Aug. 16 - 22 (offered via internet; please contact the guestmaster)
 “Training with the Issues of Our Times: Help and Healing from the
 from the Buddha’s Teachings”
- Sept. 18 - 20 Introductory Retreat
- Oct. 1-4. “Training With Aging”, Continuing Practice Retreat
- Oct. 29 - Nov. 1 Feeding of the Hungry Ghosts Retreat

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Seeing with the Eyes of the Dharma

by Rev. Kinrei

We are now all living through the first pandemic in our lives. We are also confronting as a society the racism that so clearly was evident in the killing of George Floyd. In these difficult times, the Dharma points us to deep truth that we can find a peaceful heart despite all these problems. It is helpful practice to keep trying to bring ourselves back to the stillness of the meditative mind rather than allowing ourselves to constantly be filled with the problems of the world or with our personal problems. This does not mean we are not bringing a full awareness of what we need to do to maintain our health during the pandemic. Nor does it mean we need to ignore the many difficult problems that we as a society need to deal with. Rather it is just bringing a deeper perspective to all these problems so we can see them in their true light.

The Buddha decided to become a monk when he fully recognized the universal problem of old age, disease and death. This pandemic is making us much more aware of our vulnerability to disease and possible death. For most of us, we have usually become accustomed and somewhat oblivious

to our normal vulnerability to disease and death. As I write this article, the official Covid-19 death total in the United States is about 129,000. To put this danger in perspective, last year there were 647,457 deaths in the USA from heart disease and 599,108 from cancer. The total amount of deaths in the USA last year was 2,813,503. Right now it seems highly unlikely that Covid-19 virus will cause as many deaths this year as cancer or heart disease. However, one of the reasons the death rate will hopefully be lower is all the ways we are trying to prevent the spread of the virus and all the medical interventions that are saving large numbers of lives. Without them, the death total could be in the millions.

I wrote the above so we can just have a better perspective on the pandemic. Until modern times, when diseases swept through societies, there was very little medical intervention available and large numbers of people would just get ill and often die. This was a normal part of the human condition. For instance, until the availability of antibiotics in the 1940's, any minor infection of any part of our body could potentially lead to death. Modern medicine has made us feel much less vulnerable than people in the past and this virus is just reminding us how we are still very vulnerable beings.

We are all witnesses, via the video, of the brutal and tragic death of George Floyd. As appalling as it is to see someone treated so inhumanely, it also brings us the reality that there was nothing special going on in this treatment of George Floyd. This mistreatment of black Americans by police is just a reality that all black people have had to live with since slavery. It has been a reality for black Americans our whole lifetime. We, as

a society, have been willing, in endless ways, to both mistreat black Americans and ignore the problems that have perpetuated their economic and social woes. I do wish to offer bows and offer merit to George Floyd and all those who have encountered such awful and inhumane treatment. Yet I find something positive in that this seeing in the video of the clear and unmistakable way, how George Floyd was senselessly murdered has opened millions of minds to the reality of the prejudice and hate that black Americans are routinely facing.

This recent focusing on racism did point out to me how although I thought I had a reasonable understanding of the problem of racism, reading and hearing some of the recent personal accounts of what black Americans have experienced, made me much more aware of many different aspects of severe problems black people face in growing up and being black in America. I do feel strongly that I and the rest of society should do whatever we can to help improve this situation. And I also recognize that there are deep historical reasons for these racial difficulties, and it is not a problem with a simple solution. How can we change the hearts and minds of people since that is what is needed if we want a real transformation with the problems of race? And it is difficult to know what is the right approach that will help us find a solution.

However, I also recognize that there are many other problems in society and right now, I am undoubtedly oblivious to many of them. For instance, one injustice that I am aware of that receives very little attention from mass media is the conditions of Native Americans. There have only been four visits by American presidents to Native American reservations in our US

history. This points out how they have been neglected and ignored by our politicians. The reservations generally have living conditions far more appalling than in the worst inner city slum. The poverty rate of Native Americans is the highest of any minority group in the country. I bring up Native Americans only as an example of something that is being ignored by our society. However, although we should try not to be oblivious to the wrongs in society, it is inescapable that we will not be open and aware of everything. We need to realize both the limits of our awareness and try to have the intention to do our best to stretch those limits and open ourselves to seeing deeper into what needs to be done and what is good to do.

The Buddha emphasized that we should be at peace. The question for all of us is how to find this peaceful heart in a world filled with delusion like racism and frightening difficulties like pandemic disease. One way we find peace is recognizing the problems but not allowing the problems to fill and obsess us. We need to be responsible and deal with the difficulties from the pandemic, both health difficulties, practical difficulties and financial difficulties. We need to try to do our best with racism, both in our personal lives and in our political choices so we can help positive change to happen. But we also need to learn to keep letting go of all these problems and bringing ourselves back to the mind of meditation, of just trying to being present and to be grateful. For instance, as we eat dinner and wash our dishes, we do not need to be filled with worry but instead work at letting go of all our worries and just try to be present and grateful for what we are being given right now. Suffering does not come from the arising of difficult conditions, it comes from our unwillingness to let go of the difficult conditions. We need to fill our hearts and minds with the Dharma and not

just with our problems. We find a peaceful mind by trusting that there is nothing to fear in the unfolding of our karma and the unfolding of the world's karma.

The nature of the world is good and evil; delusion and enlightenment always exist. We can wish for a realm in which there is only good and enlightenment but that is not this world. If we strictly focus on just the racism or other evils in our world, we can blind ourselves to all the good in the world. I was listening to accounts of medical staff dealing with Covid-19 patients and it was heartwarming to learn about all these real life Bodhisattvas doing all they can do in order to help these seriously ill patients. We should try to bring both the people who are doing good and the people who are doing bad into our hearts and into our minds. In all our lives we meet, we know, we interact with many people who are living good lives and doing good for others. We should cultivate an awareness of the many people in the world who are behaving as Bodhisattvas in the service of others. We will also have to personally deal with and hear about many deluded beings who are harming themselves and causing harm to others and living painfully deluded lives. We should be open to their suffering and offer them our goodwill, merit and whenever possible, our help. Buddhist training is not avoiding seeing and confronting delusion, whether it is our own delusions or the delusions of others. Buddhist training is grounded in our intention to help dissolve all delusions, whether it is our personal delusions or delusions in the world that is leading to suffering.

If we concentrate too hard on the news of the world, it can fill us with the problems of the world and make us lose sight of all good in the world.

News is about disasters and problems and is rarely about all the people living good non-newsworthy lives. The news naturally concentrates on what is going wrong rather than what is going right. A good example of this is the crime rate in America has been dropping dramatically for the past twenty years but the TV and news media have more crime news than they did twenty years ago and most Americans do not know that the crime rate has been dropping very significantly. And people generally have more fear of crime than they did when the crime rate was much worse. Yet I am not saying to ignore the news but also be aware of the Middle Way, be aware of the news but keep the bad news in perspective and not obsess on all the things in the world that are going wrong.

Whether it is Covid-19 or racism - they are all worldly conditions. As long as we live, our lives are going to be dealing with both good and bad worldly conditions. Buddhist training is being open to all these worldly conditions so we can know them, deal with them in a skillful manner but we also know that it is vital for us to keep letting them go, and to keep letting them go. Instead of filling our minds with world conditions, we need to fill our minds with the Dharma. "When you look with the eyes of a Buddha, you will see the heart of a Buddha." So Buddhism is based on trying to see with the eyes of a Buddha so we can find this deeper place that is not bound by any worldly conditions. And each time we let go of our worries and fears and then open our hearts with trust we are pointing ourselves to this fearless, unbounded place in our hearts.

News

Since mid-March, the Priory has been officially closed to resident guests. We have had a few visitors and a few people from the local area coming for meditation and services. We have been careful to maintain social distancing and the recommended protocols. We have cancelled all retreats for the year.

We have been offering Zoom meetings with various groups and it seems to be working out quite well. Our first two were a Board of Directors' meeting on May 14, and the Annual General Meeting on May 16 with 14 people in attendance. At the second meeting, chaired by Rev. Master Koten, financial statements were presented by the Treasurer, Rev. Master Aurelian, followed by questions and discussion. The finances of the Priory are in relatively good shape at the moment, and we were able to embark on several projects in 2019, including the finishing of Mandala Hall. The financial reports are public documents, and anyone can contact us at any time for details or if you have any questions. At the meeting, Rev. Master Aurelian acknowledged the hard work of the Assistant Treasurer, Rev. Valeria, who does most of the monthly bookkeeping. The current Board of Directors were unanimously elected to continue as directors for the coming year. It was encouraging to see so many people attend this meeting.

Having successfully navigated the technology, we held Zoom Dharma meetings with meditation groups from Victoria, Vancouver, and Edmonton on Saturday afternoons in June. The meetings took the form of an informal discussion to see how everyone was doing, followed by a Dharma Talk and discussion.

The format seems to work quite well, and we have received positive feedback from a number of participants. We are planning further meetings for the future. We are grateful to Rev. Master Leon, the Prior at Portland Buddhist Priory, who patiently helped us set up our Zoom and advised us on how to use it.

We are pleased to have completed Mandala Hall, except for a few minor issues. Someone donated four large bookcases which work well for storing Scripture books, statues, sacristy supplies, and other items. We set up an altar in the centre of the hall with a stained-glass lotus base and a large Kanzeon (Kwan Yin) statue as the central image. Recently from Nepal we obtained four statues of the Buddha-Mothers. They were cast in copper with exquisite detail, and we have placed them on the altar around the central statue, one for each of the four directions. Mandala Hall is bright and airy and has a spacious feel to it, and we have begun to meditate and do services there morning and evening.

One of the finishing projects we are planning for Mandala Hall and Fearlessness Peak is a brickwork border, extending out about four feet all around the building, and a walkway from the building door to the statue. Our neighbour Dave Turley, who did such a beautiful job last year with the steps and platform around the statue, has agreed to do this further work for us this summer.

Although during this time it is difficult if not impossible to meet with people in person, we want everyone to know that they are always welcome to phone, email, or write to us, whether it is with a specific spiritual problem or question, or just in order to say hello and keep in touch.

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: bananas, steamed buns, banana loaf, apples, tofu, chickpeas, croissants, tortellini, Cheddar cheese, butter, peanut butter, Brie cheese, vegetarian chicken, vegetarian ham, vegetarian chopped meat, vegetarian fish, spring rolls, cottage cheese, crackers, cookies, ciabatta buns, snack bars, almond flour, gluten flour, Yorkshire cheese, vegetarian sausage links, Tofurkey, Parmesan cheese, vegetarian burgers, soy butter, coffee, evaporated milk, dry cereals, potatoes, cucumbers, turnips, yogurt, blackberries, onions, Feta cheese, soy milk, canned lentils, canned beans, canned peas, canned corn, sweet potatoes, monk fruit sugar, coconut milk, condensed milk, lemonade, granola, gluten-free noodles, chocolate cake, sour cream, canola oil, atta flour, lettuce, vegetarian pork, lemons, oat bran, potato chips, instant coffee, wax beans, coconut tapioca pudding, texturised vegetable protein, oranges, jams, grapes, shepherd's pie, cake,

pine mushrooms, papayas, muffins, lychee fruit, melons, cherries, corn, ravioli, vegetarian sausage, vegetarian hot dogs, Chinese dumplings, durian fruit, pasta salad, pizza, whipping cream, grapefruit, watermelon, chocolate, eggs, Chinese bitter root, blueberries, cabbages, Swiss chard, potato chips, prepared meals, broad beans, beet greens, strawberry plants, canned salmon and other foods for the dogs and cat, a Kwan Yin statue, dish soap, agarwood incense, a Buddha batik hanging, hens-and-chicks plants.

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.