

Berkeley Buddhist Priory Newsletter

July – August 2002

A Perspective on the Eightfold Path Understanding and Thought
by Rev. Master Daizui MacPhillamy

***(Excerpted from Order of Buddhist Contemplatives'
publications on the Eightfold Path)***

A certain amount of understanding of things-as-they-are is the beginning of the Eightfold Path. Indeed, unless there is some degree of awareness of how things really are in this world, there is no reason for a person to seek truth generally, nor to undertake the remainder of the Path of Buddhist training in particular. There are actually only a few basic things which need to be understood in order to get started.

The Noble Truths

The first of these is that life as we normally live it doesn't really make us very happy or peaceful in the long run. First of all, we're never satisfied: if we don't have something, we want it; if we have some, we want more; and if we have lots we're both afraid of losing it and we also see that there is something even more that we could get, which we then want. This is true not only of material things but also of relationships, reputation, ... most everything. This pull of greed and push of fear leave little room for lasting contentment. Secondly, we actually do lose things, and that hurts: we get sick, we have misfortunes, we are separated from those we love, we die.

The Second Noble Truth is that there is a cause for the frustration and suffering: the fact that we hold onto things, grasp after them, are attached to them. What actually hurts is not that we don't have something; it is that we don't have it *and we want it*. What causes grief is not that we lose something; it is that we are *unable to accept the fact and let go*.

These observations lead directly to the fact that there is something we can do about all this. We can't stop the way the world works (although much of what we do seems to be an attempt at just this), but we can change how we relate to it. If we could just find a way to give up our grabbing onto things, find a way to accept life as it actually is, then peace, contentment, and real happiness would naturally be there. This is the third of the Noble Truths, and the fact that there is a way of actually doing this is the fourth. That Way is the Eightfold Path itself. These Four Noble Truths are the core and essence of Buddhism, the very observations which led Shakyamuni Buddha all the way to enlightenment.

The Truth of Change

It is easier to discern these Noble Truths if we understand a few other things about the world. One of these is that everything is always changing. It is easy to see that some things change: the weather, politics,

what we want for supper. These changes can be seen because they are neither too fast nor too slow for us to observe conveniently. But *everything* changes. Atoms and molecules whiz around inside the ink on this page, but they're so small and fast that we'll have to take a physicist's word on that. The same goes for stars and galaxies: too big and too slow for us to notice without help. Our bodies are never the same for a moment: part of the food on our breakfast plate is now "us", and with our next breath some of what was "us" is now the air. Our minds change, too: we can never go back to the past thought-moment, let alone return to how we were in days gone by. Realizing all of this helps one to appreciate the Noble Truths. It makes clear that our never-ending desires to make the world "behave itself" in the way we wish cannot possibly lead to anything other than frustration. And it leads to a glimpse of a whole other way of being: we could accept what is, and become at home with the flow of change itself.

The Truth of No Self

All of this leads to some very basic and useful questions. For instance, if everything is in flux, *what am I?* Our sense of "me" is that of something stable which goes through life doing things and having things happen to it. That is good: it allows us to cross streets without getting hit by a bus! But at the level we are speaking of here, it isn't entirely accurate. If both body and mind are always changing, where is this stable thing we call "me"? If you consider this for awhile, you will see that "me" is simply an idea. As ideas go, it's a very useful one, because it simplifies how we see life and makes it easy to get the basics done. But as a statement of how things really are, it just doesn't happen to be true. The only thing that is "really there" is an awareness of the flow of change itself. Realizing this makes it much easier to give up clinging and grasping after things, because "I" am the one that wants them for "myself".

Understanding and Acceptance

Understanding of things this fundamental does not come quickly. They can make sense as thoughts, and that is a good place to start, but a full comprehension of them goes much further. Gradually, through the practice of the rest of the Eightfold Path, we come to a direct experiencing of the truth of these basic observations. And the more deeply they are experienced, the more easy it is to let go of our habits of attachment, and with this, acceptance arises naturally. Acceptance is not something which one has to "find" or "make happen": it is simply the natural consequence of understanding. Acceptance is essential to the Buddhist life. If we cannot take things as they really are, what chance do we have of actually doing something about our lives?

The Place of Thought

While thought can be an entrance to understanding, it needs to be clear and honest for it to do any good. Indeed, much of what holds us back from progress in the Buddhist Way (and life in general) are the little lies, fantasies, and deceptions we repeat to ourselves inside our heads all day long. There are two ways of approaching these untrue thoughts. One is to break the habit of chattering to ourselves all the time. That is one of the benefits of practicing mindfulness and meditation, two other aspects of the Eightfold Path. The other is to honestly question the things we tell

ourselves. This is the role of “constructive doubt” in Buddhist training. One of the unique aspects of Buddhism as a religion is its willingness, even insistence, upon allowing honest questions to arise regarding everything it teaches. There is a role for faith, to be sure, but it is what Rev. Master Jiyu-Kennett called “true faith”, rather than the “blind faith” of forced belief. True faith is a trust and conviction borne of experience and the willingness to be open to all possibilities.

When we stop filling our minds with our habitual, delusive thoughts, an interesting thing happens: other thoughts which have always been present but have rarely had a chance to be heard come to the forefront: thoughts of selfless generosity, compassion, love, and empathy. And these are aspects of enlightenment itself.

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Priory News

Dedication of the New Garden Avalokiteswara Statue

The Priory has been given a beautiful concrete Avalokiteswara statue which has been sitting on the lawn behind the Priory. It is nestled between two very large impatiens plants and in front of the statue is a fountain. Flowing water is always linked to Avalokiteswara and symbolizes how the waters of compassion are always flowing, refreshing and cleansing all of existence.

On Sunday, June 16, we moved our Avalokiteswara ceremony outside, on the Priory lawn, in front of our new statue of Avalokiteswara. We dedicated the new statue, asking for the everpresence of the Buddha’s compassion in our lives. It seemed very good to have the ceremony outside and to have an opportunity to show our reverence to a new and different manifestation of Avalokiteswara Bodhisattva.

Priory’s Wesak Celebration

Wesak commemorates the birth of Shakyumuni Buddha. This is the most important day of the Buddhist year and Buddhists everywhere express their gratitude for the existence of the Three Treasures, the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. The dates for Wesak differ throughout the Buddhist world and the Priory celebrated its Wesak on Sunday, May 19. We had done considerable work in setting up a beautiful outside altar in front of the Priory’s garage. A trellis of silk flowers was arranged, surrounding the Buddha, with all the altar surfaces covered in gold-colored silk. Unfortunately, the weather gods did not follow our wishes and about 45 minutes before the Wesak service, it started to rain. It was an excellent lesson in impermanence and letting go as we quickly moved everything inside and found easy and appropriate ways to move and adjust all our outside decorations to the altar in the meditation hall. The peaceful and fluid manner in which everyone helped made this last

minute change a good demonstration of the Sangha harmoniously working together. At the Wesak ceremony, instead of offering incense at the altar, everyone poured sweet tea over the head of the statue of a baby Buddha. This symbolizes the waters of compassion abundantly pouring over the Buddha and flowing over everything in the whole universe. Rev. Maser Eko Little was visiting at the Priory and during the ceremony all the children bowed in front of him and Rev. Master Eko sprinkled their heads with holy water, which symbolized blessing them with the boundless compassion of the Buddhas. We sang many of the special hymns written for Wesak and the ceremony had a joyous feeling.

After the ceremony, the children gathered for their own Dharma class while the rest of the Sangha had a Dharma talk by Rev. Kinrei on cultivating goodness as a gateway out of guilt and self-doubt. It was followed by an extremely diverse and bountiful potluck lunch. Potlucks at the Priory are good occasions to get to know our fellow Sangha members and they help to build a strong sense of belonging to a community of Buddhists.

New Sewer Line and New Gate and Fence

The Priory had its old sewer line replaced this June. It had been having problems for years and finally it clearly needed replacing. Through the wonders of modern technology, we had a video made of our drain line which showed many problems and an excellent contractor quickly replaced our whole drain pipe to the street. However, it did cost \$3000. Many people have already very generously given the Priory \$1500 to help defray this large expense. We encourage our Sangha to help meet the remainder of this expense.

Also, the Priory has contracted to have a new redwood gate built, replacing the chain link gate to the garage and backyard. We are also having the fence replaced from the gate to the garage, making that area, where we sometimes hold ceremonies such as Segaki and Wesak, much more attractive. There will be a beam spanning the two gateposts and we plan to have two dragons sitting on the beam as temple guardians. It will give the property have a bit more of a look of a Buddhist temple rather than a private home.

Here is another request for help with these new Priory capital expenditures. The new gate and fence will cost about \$2500 and the Priory will be very grateful for any donations to help us with that expense. It should be the type of improvement that everyone sees and immediately says, *"Wow, that looks much better"*.

Memorials and Naming Ceremonies

We held a memorial for Anne Comeliali's son, Alexandre Comeliau on April 25. Jennifer Chinlund's dog, Tahoe, had his naming ceremony as a Buddhist on May 14 and Hattie Fullingness's dog, Doc, had his naming ceremony on June 2.

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 new fountain pump, white ceramic elephant statue, wood stain, plants, paper goods, cleaning supplies, tools, office supplies, and many books. A new wooden altar backdrop for the Priory's new Buddha statue was beautifully crafted and donated.

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. All the very generous and deeply appreciated donations of food provide most of the needs of the Priory. Rev. Kinrei has become aware that he is allergic to dairy products so please try not to donate foods with dairy in them to the Priory. Also, try to give food without garlic as it is considered an inappropriate food for Buddhist monks. Although we are grateful for any gift of food, the most helpful food donations are prepared meals, soy milk, fruit, tofu, vegetarian "meats" and breakfast cereal. You are always welcome to ask Rev. Kinrei what is currently needed at the Priory.

A Southern Californian Sangha member with a 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 to the Priory 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, and we very much appreciate these gifts of books.

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