

Berkeley Buddhist Priory Newsletter

September – November 2009

Weather Conditions

by Helmut Schatz

I was driving a friend of my wife's to a hospital fifty miles away. It was a summer's night with thunder, lightning and rain. At one point I had to almost go off road to get around a large tree that had blown down on to the road. After a few more miles I suddenly saw two cows next to my window and then saw a bunch of cows ahead of me. I slammed on the brakes and to my horror we plowed right into a group of them, as a dozen or so cows filled the roadway. I felt an impact and the hood of my truck folded up into a tent shape and all I could see was a calf walking toward the edge of the road dragging a broken leg. I backed up ten feet or so and saw two full grown cows ahead of me. One was walking away in a group with three other cows and was starting to founder and then she collapsed on the side of the road. Another limped off into the darkness. I had a hard time pushing open my door and when I got out, the calf with the broken leg had wandered into a field and a large cow was still collapsed by the side of the road. She tried to get up but all four legs were broken.

My passenger was unhurt, as was I, but she was crying. When I got out I saw another car there and a man had already called 911. I talked to the dispatcher on his phone and said we needed an ambulance to get my passenger to the hospital plus police and other help for the cows.

It took about twenty minutes for the first crew to get there, then the police arrived and later the ambulance. Needless to say it was a confusing and painful night. I left the scene in the ambulance to go to the hospital with our friend. Then I found accommodation in Spokane and a rental car the next morning; which coincided with our friend's discharge from the emergency room. I was then able to bring her home as well.

I couldn't sleep at all because of the feelings brought up by the incident, and I went through some interesting changes during the night. First a lot of blame and judgment arose about the situation. I was unable to step out of the dreamlike quality of my memory of the experience. On one hand I was still in shock. On the other hand, I had already relegated much of what had happened to a "story", one wherein there was a discrete entity—an entirely blameless and uninvolved being—to whom a totally random series of events had

occurred as a completely unfair and badly timed imposition.

Then for myself, the thinking partook the form of “No good deed goes unpunished, that will teach you!”. Then for my passenger, the thought came up “Why did she put herself into this position of needing help?”. Then for the farmer who owned the cows, he was very thoughtless and negligent. He should have known better and have tried harder. Then, finally, the unfairness of it all. Why me? Why now? What have I ever done to deserve this?

It took a while for these thoughts to sort themselves out. I sat at the edge of the bed and tried to be still. I had a very difficult time with that. I kept putting my hands in gassho, weeping and just feeling sorry, mostly for myself. Slowly as the thinking became less chaotic, the self-pitying feeling began to dissipate.

Some years ago I went through a protracted period where I would often begin crying when sitting in meditation alone. For quite a long period, months, this would happen, and at some point I noticed that the crying was less wracking and that the feeling of self-pity was no longer as strong, and that the crying had more of an aspect of cleansing flow, rather than just sorrow with me as the centerpiece. Something similar happened that night. Furthermore it became clear that this was the karma of this situation, that my feelings were giving me the Dharma. I had to accept that and begin the process towards gratitude. Then, it became apparent too that, even as those cows were driven by fear from the thunder and lightning to congregate on the road and mill about in the darkness, so do we all mill about in fear from the “thunder and lightning” of daily life. We don’t even notice our vulnerability because we are so busy milling about. This vulnerability we have is a “reaction”, as opposed to “responding”. My human reaction was to be fearful and assign blame. I saw very clearly in the early hours, as the sadness overwhelmed me, that my response to this situation would have to come from the soft place of acceptance and love. That I deeply need to let go of the “tough guy” dream and to hold on to the teaching that arose for me in the midst of all of this.

Everything is presented to me as teaching,
I need only recognize that, and then, be willing to move forward from there.
I accept fully the karma of my actions.
I pray that I may hear what is good to hear,
I pray that I may learn what is good to learn,
I pray that I may do what is good to do.
Lightning and Thunder are only conditions of weather.
They are not the real climate.
That, I determine.

Practical Buddhism

by Ben Johnson

I have to admit to a nagging difficulty with certain teachings of Buddhism, in particular that of rebirth. To me it doesn't quite make sense. In the first place there is the doctrine of no separate self: anatta. If there is no separate self, no "soul," how can there be something that undergoes rebirth?

For awhile this was something of a crisis for me, and I found myself wondering that, if I have doubts about this basic doctrine, doesn't that throw all of the teachings of Buddhism into question? Is Buddhism just another religion of fantastic beliefs and wishful thinking that its followers must swallow without question?

I decided to take a look at what attracted me to Buddhism in the first place, and to see if after all these years it still made sense to me? Instead of trying to intellectualize the teachings, I decided to contemplate them off and on throughout the day. By contemplation I mean that I would just put a specific teaching in front of me and see what came up.

First was the teaching of anatta: no separate self. As I understand it, anatta can also mean no eternal "soul," but I decided that I would side step this alternate meaning. For one thing I'm not sure what a "soul" means, and I did not want to start an argument about its existence or lack of existence. Instead I was more interested in the idea of no separate self. This seemed straightforward enough to me. We live in world where it is possible to get a very broad perspective, simply by going up in an airplane. We can be 30 thousand feet or more above the earth looking down on a landscape without sign of individual beings. We can get an even broader perspective by pictures from space that gives us a sense of the oneness of the earth.

There is an incredible abundance of information on ecological systems, the interconnectedness and interdependence of everything on earth, the complex interchange of water, air and earth flowing in and out to temporarily make up individual beings. This was a teaching I was already familiar with, and seemed really just to be common sense. I contemplated this throughout the day and found myself thinking that if I truly believe that there is one life made up of individual components, then everything- every being I encounter, every experience of sight, sound, smell and touch-are parts of my life. To take it a step further, this self and all things are the elements of a much greater life. So as events "happened" throughout the day, I would try to enter into the experience within this contemplation, that what was happening was not just something happening to me, but was a confluence of different karmic streams, and this thing I

think of as myself was one of the tributaries.

Second, was the law of karma. This too, did not seem difficult to digest. I took it basically as the law of cause and effect, but then I began to try to see it in the context of the first one, no separate self. I began to see that these teachings are descriptive of different aspects of our one existence. So when things “happen,” in the context of no separate self and the law of karma, an important teaching becomes apparent: what is happening is not personal to me. This thing I call me is part of the ebb and flow, a wavelet on a great ocean, and what appears to be happening is just part of circumstances at a particular moment.

Third, the law of change, anicca. Again, this seems rather obvious. Nothing too difficult to accept here: Things are in constant motion and therefore change. We can see this all the time. Nothing stays still for an instant. If this is so, there is nothing that is permanent including a permanent self.

Having accepted that this seems to be so, I began to contemplate and observe change throughout the day. As I contemplated change, another fact became apparent: I behave most of the time as if change was not a fact of life. In practice I act as if people, events and just about everything are more or less permanent: This person is a bad person. Or, this person is a good person. This situation will never improve. This moment of happiness will last forever. But if I really think about it people and situations change all the time. As someone said: Things are never as bad or as good as you think.

After I had looked at these teachings--anatta, karma, anicca-I decided to look at the Four Noble Truths. The Four Noble Truths were the Buddha's first teaching. I have heard it said that this is the core of all the teachings in Buddhism, that everything else is just an elaboration of this first teaching.

The first Noble Truth is the existence of suffering. This seems so obvious you have to wonder why the Buddha felt the need to mention it. There have been times in my life when I looked back and have been amazed at how much I was suffering. At the time I didn't particularly think so. It was just normal life. But in contemplating this Truth, I began to see how much I was suffering and how much others were suffering. I find this Truth interesting because once I realized that yes, I suffer a lot, everyone suffers a lot, I realized that this Truth also implies that there could be an end to the suffering.

The Four Noble Truths are wonderful not only for their teaching, but because they are all aspects of a whole. I think of them not as sequential or linear, but rather as fluid and changing facets that make up a whole.

The second Noble Truth is that suffering is caused by attachment. At first this teaching annoyed me. I thought that it implied that I was somehow at fault for the suffering inflicted on me by others, and by fate. I admit that I have certainly made mistakes, but I saw the majority of my suffering as things done to me, out of my control, and certainly not my fault. This truth does not cast blame. It just says that it is so.

It is natural that I love my family and want to keep them happy, to not have them angry with me, and for them to stay and not leave my life. It is natural that I want to play that piece of music as beautifully as I can. But to try to keep things the way I remember them will inevitably cause me to suffer, to fall into despair, to be angry and to be afraid because remembrances of things past or ideas of what life should be like are only dreams. "With the ideal comes the actual," and to mistake one for the other will lead to suffering.

The third Noble Truth, that there is an end to suffering, is hinted at by the first two Noble Truths. Since suffering is caused by attachment to ever-flowing, changing conditions, if I can let go of my attachments, then suffering will come to an end. Suffering itself is impermanent. Even when we are unhappy about some situation, the pain comes and goes. Each time we remember what we are unhappy about, the pain then starts up again.

But doubt arises. Isn't this just another idea? Just another dream? Anger still keeps coming up. Despair keeps coming up. Inadequacy keeps coming up. Fear keeps coming up. It seems impossible that there could be an end to it.

Fortunately the Buddha gave us the Fourth Noble Truth: the Eightfold Path. It seems to me that this is meditation, meditation in action, meditation in all aspects of life.

The first of the Eightfold Path is Right View. One aspect of Right View is seeing things as they are: watching things arise, linger for a little while, and then fade away. I know why suffering arises. When it does I don't have to get excited. I can just sit still in the middle of it, even if I feel very uncomfortable. This is the truth of suffering. Suffering Exists. If I am suffering, then I must be attached to something. I am clinging to something I want, some idea I have of how things should be, or should have been in the past. I am clinging to a dream.

The other parts of the Eightfold Path follow naturally from Right View. Right Speech is appropriate to the situation at hand. Right Action adjusts to ever-changing conditions.

I realize that I now have a choice: I can continue in the old way,

acting as if things are permanent, clinging to what I think I want, pushing away what I think I don't want, and acting as if there is an enduring self. Or, I can work at putting the Four Noble Truths into practice, believing that there is more than the greed, anger and delusion.

A monk once said to me: "You can choose the way of compassion, or you can choose the way of madness." To choose compassion I must see it all. Not turn away from the parts that are painful, that I don't like or that are boring. These are the very things that tell me that once again I have become attached to something. For that matter, I must watch carefully those that are really enticing, because this is the birthplace of attachment.

Compassion means seeing that this is how it works for others as well. Out of this comes understanding and forgiveness.

As to the teaching of rebirth, I remembered what Rev. Master Daizui MacPhillamy once said in connection with this (I'm paraphrasing): "One can look at this in terms of moment to moment. At any one moment we are reborn into one of the various conditions of existence according to what we have done at any previous moment. We can slip into the realm of the hungry ghosts, the fighting asuras, the realm of heaven, or that of hell. One can become an animal or a human being with the opportunity to train, according to what we have done either recently or perhaps in the more distant past."

What we are able to understand of the teachings at any given time depends on this. If I don't understand all of a particular teaching, then perhaps there is something that I am not seeing because of an attachment. I must remind myself that there is always more than what I am seeing at any given moment.

What might happen when we die I can only speculate, but the teachings the Buddha has given us helps with the here and now. It is up to me whether I choose the path of delusion, or the path of compassion.

Priory News

by Rev. Kinrei

Rev. Scholastica Hicks, a monk who has trained for 20 years at Shasta Abbey, came down in mid July to stay at the Priory until sometime in early September. Rev. Scholastica was a great help with the varied work of temple. Rev. Kinrei was able to take some much appreciated time away from the Priory. Rev. Scholastica gave many well received Dharma talks and her example of training provided excellent teaching for the Sangha.

Many expressed the hope we will have the opportunity to train with Rev. Scholastica again in the future, both at Shasta Abbey and here at the Priory.

Rebecca Evans who trained at the Priory for many years before moving to Pennsylvania, took the Buddhist Precepts at the Priory on August 22. A deep commitment to follow the Buddhist Precepts is the lifeblood of the Sangha and we rejoice and are grateful for Rebecca's commitment and the commitment of all who have vowed to seek the Buddhist Way.

*Now the universe rejoices, the earth trembles and the
flowers fall. The Bodhisattvas of other worlds ask their
Buddha what this means and the Buddha replies that a
new disciple has been given the Pure Great Precepts of the Bodhisattvas and been
converted to the Truth by the
Master who was given the Precepts before in the teachings of Shakyamuni Buddha
who is the Buddha of this world. The disciple will become a Buddha in the future
through this merit, therefore the universe rejoices.*

From the Ceremony of Receiving the Precepts

Buddhist Services

We had a memorial for Joanne Stimac mother, Eda, on June 27. On July 11, several of the Priory Sangha went to hold a memorial for Robert Abbott at a Tibetan temple in Point Richmond. And on July 12, we held a large memorial for David Powers. It was almost exactly a year before that our longtime Sangha member, David had suddenly and unexpectedly died. It was good to have the opportunity to remember David and offer him merit and it was good to offer merit to all the deceased for whom we hold services for at the Priory.

The Priory held the following animal funerals these past few months. Jeremy, Collette O'Keefe's cat had his funeral on July 11. The family cat of Mary Gray, Brittany, had her funeral on August 23.

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