

Finding the Path: Buddhist Monastic Life **Rev. Master Daishin Morgan**

From its beginnings 2,500 years ago in Northern India, Buddhism has had monasticism at its heart, as it is based upon the way of life of Shakyamuni Buddha. Here at Throssel Hole Buddhist Abbey we are part of the Soto Zen school, a tradition that emphasises a particular form of meditation known as zazen or sitting meditation. Our monastic practice has its roots in ancient India, but has been through some modification both in China and Japan. Now that development continues as Zen becomes established in Western cultures.

In a monastic time scale we are in the early stages of becoming established in the West. My Master was Rev. Jiyu-Kennett, an English woman who trained in Japan and then, with the backing of the tradition, went to the US where she founded Shasta Abbey in Northern California and not long afterwards in 1972, Throssel Hole Abbey in Northumberland, UK. She went on to found our Order, The Order of Buddhist Contemplatives, before her death in 1996. Today there are temples and monasteries in the US, Canada, the UK, the Netherlands and Germany. Each temple or monastery operates independently within the Order and is free to develop its own style of teaching within the overall structure and rules of the Order.

We have an active lay congregation who support the monastery and have established local meditation groups which are visited regularly by monks from Throssel. There are also six other smaller temples of our Order around the country. Those who become monks (we use the same term for men and women) will have learned the basics of meditation practice and been part of this congregation for at least a couple of years. The first step is to become a postulant for about a year. Postulants wear similar robes to the monks, shave their heads and live with the community, although they do not enter the monks' meditation hall until they have been ordained.

At the heart of the Zen tradition is the master disciple relationship; we gather around a particular teacher just as in ancient India monks gathered around the Buddha. This relationship centres on receiving the transmission of the Dharma, the teaching of the Buddha, but in this context it means something far more than doctrines and practices. They are the foundations, but transmission is a meeting heart to heart, a deep sharing and mutual recognition that both master and disciple share in the Buddha nature. Receiving transmission marks the end of one's time as a novice, which today averages about five years. The transmission is given when the disciple is ready, rather than it being the outcome of a set curriculum or examination. It is a very personal matter and it marks a lifetime commitment to the relationship with the master.

Our way of teaching is practical rather than academic. Within the moral precepts, one needs to say yes to whatever comes, whether agreeable or not, and to sit still beneath praise or blame. As human beings though, justifying ourselves often feels like a matter of life and death. To say yes, to bow, and go on without looking back is the sign of a true monk. It is amazing how subtle complaint can be, how adept at appearing reasonable and completely justified. While the monastery and one's seniors may not be perfect, it is the training of the monk to look to their own mind, where they can renounce greed, anger and delusion, and not concern themselves with other's faults. In this way one learns not to condemn others or, indeed, oneself. It is a vital aspect of meditation to sit still and accept whatever appears within the

mind. This is necessary, if one would see what is truly there without the covering of opinions, beliefs and fantasies.

For much of the year there is personal instruction with the Abbot each week in the form of an interview. One week there is a private interview and the next week it is held with the community present, each monk having the chance to question in turn. In both forms, the monk asks the Abbot a question or makes a statement that somehow reflects their religious training at that moment. The dialogue is kept brief and to the point. A typical question might be, "How can I really give when I am afraid?" The answer might come, "Accept the fear." Finding the honest question and trusting oneself to ask it in the moment brings much of the benefit.

A lot of teaching also takes place during periods of work. For the new novice, the seemingly constant correction and reminders can at times be hard. Novices and younger seniors sleep communally in the meditation hall, where screens are erected at night to provide separate places for men and women. The lack of privacy, not having your own door to close at the end of the day, means it is hard to find an escape. We have to be careful that people are benefiting from what at times can be a pressure cooker. Sometimes it may feel that no matter what one does, it never seems to come out right. One has to ask oneself, "What am I really seeking?" Deep down there is a sincere wish to respond to the call that is at the heart of life, but in practice we often seek for approval, for reassurance and to be loved. It gets painful as these aspects start to be uncovered. One can feel quite trapped for a while. All this may take several years to work through and aspects of it may continue for much longer than that, but a significant change takes place when the monk says a very deep "Yes" and is able to give him/herself over to the process with much less of a fight. To let go and really trust that which is found in the depth of the meditation is to begin to actualise the potential for enlightenment which we call the Buddha nature, or the nature of things as they really are.

Faith plays a central role. For us it is the willingness to trust oneself utterly to one's life. It is encapsulated in meditation when one trusts oneself to the silence through a deep renunciation. In our minds we generate reassurance when in doubt, fantasies when bored and justification when offended. The path of faith is to let one's feelings be without further comment; to just be still with them. It is the willingness to simply be with oneself as one is without condemnation or excuse. This acceptance is the basis of our life together as a community. Correctly understood, meditation brings a dynamic quality to one's life. For example, to really see one's anger gives rise to compassion and a longing to go on, if one refrains from trying to make the anger go away and does not indulge it. It has a message, a need, that is hard to hear within all the noise it creates. When one does let go, then nothing is lacking. If one realises this, then the path is found and gradually the knots begin to dissolve. **f**