

Voice of the Amida Order and Friends of the Amida Order: Pureland Buddhism  
Absolute Grace, Total Engagement: Issue 28 Autumn 2012

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# RUNNING TIDE



Issue 28: Bonbu nature

# Running Tide

*Running Tide* offers a voice for faith and practice, as well as critical, existential and socially engaged enquiry within the broad framework of Pureland Buddhism.

We publish short articles, poetry, pictures, interviews, comment and Buddhist resource materials.

Opinions expressed are those of the contributors and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Amida Order, Amida Trust, or other associated organisations.

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- 4 It Never Rains But it Pours**  
*Dharmavidya David Brazier OAB*  
“...but what pours down may just be celestial flowers.”
- 9 Flocks of Finches at Dawn**  
*Saigyo Terrance Keenan*  
The disease of addiction and Buddhist Practice
- 12 Poetry**  
*Saigyo Terrance Keenan and Richard Meyers MAS*
- 14 The Return of Bonbu Corner**  
*Padmaghosa OAB*  
“Now thoroughly puffed up, my vanity made short work of my abject terror”
- 17 How to be Helpful**  
*Modgala OAB*  
“What drove the Buddha out from his castle was seeing someone who was sick, someone who was dying, someone who was dead.”
- 22 An Interview with Peter Levitt**  
“Zen practice helps to keep me more available, receptive, alive...”
- 25 The Best Way Out**  
*Fiona Robyn OAB*  
“I always feel wobbly in new groups.”
- 27 What's On Guide**
- 30 Contact Amida**  
Local group contact information
- 32 The Back Page: Questions and Answers from Honen Shonin**

# Editorial

Kaspalita

This issue is, appropriately enough for one on the theme of ‘foolish beings’, a little late.

What is a Bonbu? A foolish being of wayward passion. It refers to the inextricably deep karma that each of us has, the layers of greed, hate and delusion that prevent us from seeing the Pureland.

Some of these layers we will be aware of. Some of them will be hidden from us, but visible to others, and some will be unseen but propel us into unskillful action in the world – onto a path of self-creation and self-destruction.

When we encounter Amida Buddha (in a spiritual experience, for example) we also experience ourselves more deeply. Our layers of karma are illuminated by the Buddha, and perhaps begin to dissolve. But there are layers and layers.

There are layers that are specific to us as individuals (I am conditioned by the particular configuration of my parents neuroses, for example) and there are layers of karma that feel more universal. In his article over the page Dharmavidya writes that, “We want things but our very wanting may stand in our own way.” Something we can all relate to, I think.

On page 9 Saigyo writes about how Buddhist practice can help with patterns of addiction. Ultimately all of our habit patterns can be seen through the window of addiction, and we are all addicted to ‘self’. Whilst he is writing about his work with addicts of particular substances, I think there will be something here for all of us.

Saigyo is also an accomplished poet, and I am pleased to share a poem of his in this issue. We have three poets altogether in this RT. I share one of Richard Meyer’s poems on page 13, and we also have an interview with Peter Levitt, whose work I have long been a fan of. Peter is also a Buddhist teacher and priest in the Zen Tradition.

We are bonbu beings but we are called to be in relationship with each other, and in compassionate relationships at that. On page 17 Modgala, experienced in compassionate relationships across cultures, talks to us about the art of helping others.

There are also two personal reflections in this RT. Fiona writes about how her bonbu nature was revealed at this year’s Buddhafield festival, and I’m delighted to have Padma back, writing his Bonbu

Corner column. Namō Amida Bu. ❖

# “It never rains but it pours”

Dharmavidya David Brazier

I imagine that we all have some personal adages that we use to make sense of life in a non-scientific way. My mother, I remember, had a great wealth of such statements as "It never rains but it pours" which has no real justification except that it helps you get through when times are difficult or "Too many cooks spoil the broth" which can always be countered with "Many hands make light work" and so on. I don't have a catchy phrase for it but it does seem to be one of the basic realities that things that one longs for seem to happen when one has finally given up on getting them.

This notion does, however, rather chime with the Buddhist idea of giving up attachment. When we want something it seems often to be eluding us, but when we are more accepting it is more likely to come to us. There is perhaps some basis in reality for this due to the psychology of how we interact with others. When we are angling for something others detect this in a subtle way and this often results in resistance or caution on their part. Humans are super-sensitive to being caught out in any way and so are often counter-suggestive. If, on the other hand, one is just open-handed and has a generous disposition toward others, all manner of things naturally gravitate to one.

This produces the conundrum that practising Buddhism generally does make people happy, but practising in order to be happy maybe does not work so well. Real practice does not have a self-serving motive. We want things but our very wanting may stand in our own way. I realised this when I was a very small child. Of course, I still want things, but Buddhism has taught me a little wisdom.

Actually, "It never rains but it pours" maybe does have some justification after all for similar reasons. We all know that Buddhism teaches impermanence and I think many people take this to mean that everything is in some slow continuous process of change. Slow continuous change is probably the



Broken Window by Fred Oswin via Flickr/Creative Commons

exceptional case, however. Glass would be an extreme example. Glass is actually a liquid, but an extremely viscous one. Panes of glass fitted by the Romans are now thicker at the bottom than the top. It has taken a thousand years for maybe a third of the glass to flow down to the bottom of the window. However, the impact of a football will, of course, bring about a much more sudden transformation in a glass window and this type of abrupt change is the more typical case. Things depend upon conditions and they change when the conditions change and when this happens the change may be wholesale. Rapid successions of changes tend to happen until a new equilibrium is found - so it "pours".



This means that one's life can seem much more stable than it actually is for lengthy periods of time and then get completely rearranged by some change of circumstance that has many consequences. Usually there is some precipitating factor that crystallizes the state of affairs. We resist change and resist it some more and then, finally, arrives "the straw that breaks the camel's back" - not a very Buddhist image, but the under-lying moral is sound.

The spiritual life is no different. What is enlightenment? It is seeing the reality that we do not want to see and experiencing a change of heart that, without even realising we were doing it, we have been resisting for a very long time.

Recently I went to view a performance by a talented group of young people making music and dance. They have been doing the same show for sometime now. Actually the show as a whole is not that good. The performers put a wonderful energy into their work but the production leaves something to be desired. Reflecting afterwards, it struck me that sooner or later this show is going to face failure. When it does, the group may break up or some part of it may stick together and find a new venue and a new performance. That, of course, will be the time when there is the maximum likelihood that they will do something really creative. They are never going to become famous doing what they are doing now, but when it fails it might just happen that their real talent will find just the niche that it deserves. Life is full of paradoxes and reversals like this.

I go on practising and investigating the Buddha's message because it has, bit by bit, brought me a wonderful life. In the course of my life I have had many "failures" and this has changed me hugely. Buddhism has helped me to accept those changes and benefit from them. I have learnt how even sequences of change that start out seeming to be bad news often turn into something creative if one is willing to keep one's eyes open to the possibilities that emerge. Buddhism has given me the help I needed to find my way to a position in which I have happiness.

Over the years, however, I have come more and more to realise that being a good Buddhist is not necessarily a matter of following the form of "being a good Buddhist". To walk the path means to meet the miscellaneous circumstances of life with a generous spirit and be open minded and open hearted. Things will then happen. The things that happen will not always conform to popular stereotypes of what a Buddhist life is supposed to look like, but they will be genuine. Openness is most tested when things seem to be going wrong. Buddhism, however teaches us not to be easily taken in by immediate or surface appearances. If we act in good spirit, that is what is genuine and things will work out.



lotus by Sky Noir via flickr/creative commons

In the last couple of years I have changed house, country, organisation, and relationship. I have coped with conflicts and losses and I have been doing a job in which my life has extensive public exposure. According to the rating scales I should be dying of stress. Actually I have never felt so content or creative. I could not have reached this enviable position without the wisdom that Buddha points out. It is on free offer so do follow my recommendation and take advantage of it. It never rains but it pours, but what pours down may just be celestial flowers.

Namo Amida Bu. ❖



# Flocks of Finches at Dawn

## The Disease of Addiction and Buddhist Practice

by Saigyo Terrance Keenan

“All beings are ill, therefore I am ill.” Thus spoke Vimalakirti to Manjushri. It is a statement of compassion and vulnerability, for there is no real compassion without vulnerability. Yet, how can we be compassionate toward someone with a fatal illness who cannot admit he is ill at all? How can we be vulnerable in such a situation?

As the adjunct Buddhist chaplain at Johns Hopkins Hospital I was “on call” rather than on a daily roster. This meant that when I did get a call I was being asked to see someone in desperate straits, very often terminal. The doctors knew it, the nurses knew it, and finally the patient knew it. The old policy of sparing the patient the anxiety of facing death had been dropped. Each of us knew the situation at hand and were prepared to share the ultimate questions. But I have found that when one enters a rehab for those suffering from addiction the attitude is quite different for both the patients and the care-givers. Despite the fact that alcoholism, for example, is an incurable, fatal disease that can only be arrested, there is a tendency to regard the condition as serious but not desperate. Part of this stems from the fact that until the final stages of addiction there are some real things that can be done to arrest the disease. Further, current neurological research is showing ways toward something like a cure. Yet there is also the hidden element of blame and the subconscious belief that the patient is at fault and should be able to do something about it. The terminality of the illness and the ruins of a life it has wrought need not be shared or confronted in the same way as they are with other diseases.

It is still sadly common in our sophisticated culture to think of a person with substance abuse problems not as someone who is ill, but as a failure of some kind. A moral failure, a social failure, a failure of will power. If only they would get their act together, toughen up, be strong, do the right thing, learn to say no, get some moral fiber, stop being cowardly and weak. It is a long list. There was a time when similar things were said about a person with TB. It was a shameful disease because it came from the slums, was an illness of the lower orders, was a sign of a life without the integrity to rise above reprehensible circumstances. Of course,





Flock of Redpoll finches by puntypics via flicker/creative commons

we do not say such things about a person with TB today, not only because we know its true cause, but also because it has been largely eradicated. Nor do we condemn or judge someone with diabetes or cancer. The big 'C' continues to have the stigma of a death warrant, but that is because we see our own death there. We recognize, nevertheless, that these are diseases that have nothing to do with an individual's rectitude or will power. But we do not treat persons with addictions, particularly alcohol, in this way. Despite the evidence to the contrary, we are acculturated to view addiction not as the disease it is, but rather as a personal aberration for which the sufferer has total responsibility.

This situation is exacerbated because the alcoholic and addict think of themselves this way too which makes the first step towards healing almost impossible (the success rate for someone going into recovery, even combining AA, therapy and medical attention, is less than 10%). They condemn themselves to hopelessness because they see no way out and cannot by themselves change their behaviors. When you condemn someone with a judgment or an opinion you rob them of their life. They develop a twisted dependence on you and the society

which bred you. Your definition of them becomes their definition of themselves and bars any access to the real vulnerable human beings they are.

This is where I believe Buddhist practice, the life of compassionate being, can support the many things necessary to assist those suffering from addiction. I focus on alcoholism because that is the addiction with which I am most familiar. And I have the advantage of being a recovered alcoholic. I can see the suffering from the inside because I still live with it. But really, I think any of us whose calling is to enter the Bodhisattva's way, to respond to the thousand million cries of the world, can enter into the suffering of others. Don't we each share this indivisible being, what we call our Buddha nature?

There are three instruments from my practice as a monk that I find particularly helpful with alcoholics. The first is my daily personal mantra: no blame, be kind, love everything. It is important for a suffering person to know you come to them without blame, that you do not blame them or their illness. And it is important to help them remove blame from their own hearts: no blame for them, for their disease, for their mistakes, their lives. Though no blame is not the same as no responsibility. Each of us is responsible for what we have done and for what we must do to heal. Of course you wish to be kind to a person suffering, but that can easily look like pity if it has a goal, a concept of what should happen. Kindness shows itself in an effort to listen, to just listen without an agenda or a teaching or advice. If something must be said, kindness is the truth. But can you help an addict who hates him or her self, hates the disease, hates the world, who is ruined and afraid of everything, who is filled with the mind-twisted delusions brought on by the chemical changes in the brain, help them to love themselves, much less love everything? You can at least begin to by opening your own heart with unconditional love. Not everyone will respond, but you have to do it. Unconditional love is not what we usually think it is. It is not the greatest-most-intense-love-for-one-person-or-thing-but-none. It is love without conditions, without blame, hope, expectation, demand, desire, or fantasy. It has nothing special in it. It is the great compassion.

The second instrument I use is zazen. I teach the most basic kind without any dogma or proselytizing. It is very practical. It teaches the most basic way to be in the present without values or expectation. You just follow your breath, counting each one. It forces you to be in the present without any force. You can't breathe yesterday or tomorrow, only right now. If you are a person obsessed with where the next drink will come from, with the damage your

addiction has caused in the past, with how you will survive the days ahead, it is almost impossible to stay in the moment where you can begin to heal. Zazen helps. It is not magic, but it helps.

Finally, when I am talking with an addict I try to help them be aware when they are themselves and talking as themselves and to recognize when their disease is talking. With practice you can see it in their eyes or when the language subtly shifts to self-justification or rationalization for their behavior. From within, an addict simply cannot see this for him or her self. Their disease has changed their consciousness so radically that their focus is always upon the substance, however indirectly it may seem to you. Sometimes, especially when a strong emotion such as fear or anger rises to the surface, I tell them to ask themselves two questions: Who is it who is experiencing this emotion? And then, Who is it who is asking this question, “who is experiencing this emotion”? These questions create a break in the stream of substance driven thinking and feeling. They allow a person to see that in the second question they are bigger than the emotion. They can own it rather than be owned by it. When you own something you can let it go. When you are able to let things go you are able to move toward freedom.

I have a figure of the Buddha on my altar at home. He holds up his right hand, palm out. It is a gentle gesture. In the early days the hand was the symbol for Buddhist practice itself. It means Don't be afraid. It is at the heart of what we can give back to the world. As another monk said, the greatest gift we can give someone is freedom from fear. ❖

Nothing to prove  
Who sees me by form,  
Who seeks me in sound,  
Wrongly turned  
Are his footsteps on the Way.  
-- Diamond Sutra, verse 26



# From St. Nadie In Winter

We come to spring  
both the stakes and the gambler,  
putting our lives on the table  
as if life were ours.

The light of suspicion in our eyes  
recalls our own faithless breaths.

Swayed by words  
we wander the wind  
bewildered, looking for evidence  
of something not quite there,  
a face proof we are not alone.

You are not alone my beloveds.

You cannot be alone.

There is no such thing as alone.

You are the air I breathe  
and I am your very breath.

Because of you

I cannot be sad in this world.

And what with breakdowns and so on  
who would say it hasn't been hard going?

Do you look up at Death there  
by the roadside

jingling chips of your fate  
in his pockets,

watching us under the cutting north wind,  
the brilliant moon, the wild white clouds,  
not so much there as beside the point?

And if you ask whether I regret starting out  
my voice rises like flocks of finches at dawn  
and blows across the deep blue sky.

by Saigyo Terrance Keenan

# Questions:

In terms of the Pure land  
Where is it -  
Somewhere west of Crouch End  
Or a matter of opening my eyes?

Search out a word which will act  
Like a torch & light my path  
Through a blighted land in  
a place of incomparable beauty

Who has the faith... which 'I' is able...  
How?

Just Nembutsu  
Only Nembutsu  
Being heard by Amida

Nothing extra

Even then although we are late  
For the train we can sit back  
And enjoy the ride

This is sometimes hard &  
sometimes easy

Friendship helps  
God knows how much  
Love of our brother & sister

Oak tree by the road  
Arrow of geese overhead

A friendly face that smiles  
A guard on the train  
That says to you  
You can sit there  
The seat is empty  
The restaurant car is open

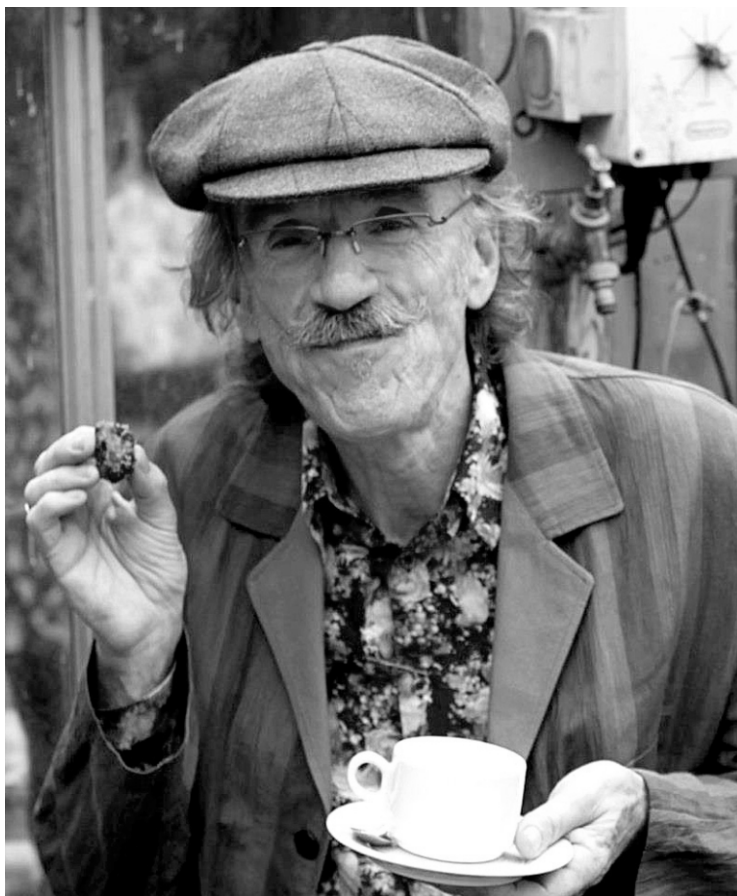
The coffee is hot  
The milk cold  
Honey on the toast.

by Richard Meyers



# The return of bonbu corner... Bonbu on the telly

by Padmaghosa Tony Danford



It started innocently enough, with a phone call. A very pleasant sounding young lady asked for me by name, saying she understood I was a Buddhist and could she ask me a few questions? 'Where did you get my name from?' I answered, maybe a little too suspiciously but something told me this was not someone in desperate need of spiritual support. 'Oh from a website' she said. I was going to ask which one, but she went on to say 'I'm from 'The Big Questions' on BBC1, you know,

the debate show on Sunday morning. Do you watch The Big Questions hosted by Nicky someone?' 'No' I said. 'Nicky who?' This was not going well at all.

'Can I ask you your views about heaven?' she said. What did Buddhists think?

Realising dimly now that she was not about to sell me a new phone deal or a chair lift (I am cruelly targeted by cold calls from Stannah Stairlifts) I launched into a lengthy peroration, my vanity now expertly caressed by the charming young lady who said things like, 'ooh, that's very interesting', and 'oh really, how wonderful', and 'could you say a bit more about that, please?'

'What about the idea that heaven is just a fairy tale?' she said, after I'd stopped going on about the Pureland and whether this was a place we go to after death, a state of mind, how the world really is once we drop our endless self-concern, or all three, or neither, and what about enlightenment. I blustered about Steven Dawkins, or was it Richard Hawkins, and pronounced that whether heaven exists or not, belief in it was one way of coping with the existential fact of death, and that this was not a weakness but a very human way of providing meaning and support at a very difficult time. Now thoroughly warmed up, I continued in this vein for some considerable time, saying that us humans can't face much reality, that we all need a refuge from the utterly overwhelming joys and sorrows of life and that it was all very well for someone like Steven Ditchkins to dismiss heaven but he would leave a significant legacy when he died to ensure his place in eternity what about the rest of us who die unremarked? What solace do we have?

'Would you like to be on the show?' she asked.

Too late. Now thoroughly puffed up, my vanity made short work of my abject terror and after a weak attempt at deflection ('Have you tried ringing Modgala, my mentor?') I said, 'Oh, alright'. Maybe not the overwhelming enthusiasm being looked for, but she said she'd report back to her team and ring again. When I then let slip during another interminable rant that I am a bereavement counsellor, her tone (flagging) suddenly picked up and she pronounced me virtually a dead cert.

Well. Being a TFB, a fabulous fantasy future of fame, fortune and flattery was suddenly and resplendently revealed before me. Yes! I would be the Buddhist version of Rabbi Lionel Blue, loved by all, sought out by all, rejoicing in selfless and sanctified celebrity, bestowing the benefit of my wisdom and compassion wherever I went for a considerable fee. Of course, the money would be given away to Worthy Causes after I had satisfied my modest requirements. A cottage in Cornwall. A little flat in a more fashionable part of central London. A full suite of the very latest Apple products. Nothing



too greedy. Fame! At last!

But what's this? No follow up phone call? No confirmation of acceptance? After a day of thoroughly and flagrantly enjoyable self indulgence, my new life – by now, all but inevitable – abruptly collapsed into a morass of deeply dismal Eyore-like misery. Well, what was I thinking of, anyway? Who'd want me? I am a load of rubbish, doomed to complete non-entity, I'll never come to anything, nothing like that happens to me ever etc etc...

Ho hum. Subsiding back into (un)happy obscurity, my relief at being released from the terror of TV ended when a phone message was left the day before the show, assuming I had agreed and giving me directions. A mere phone message was not quite the level of respect I had come to expect in my short time as a major celeb, but never mind. I drove to Croydon, that crucible of media-opportunity, and presented myself.

Listen. I am an idiot. How was I to know that the whole show was stage-managed, that I was in the second, nay third, rank of participants and not a central player (the bare-faced cheek of it), that I had been invited on to give a specific view at a specific time orchestrated by the great Nick, and that I would be utterly ignored until that time arrived, all 15 seconds of it? My views had been thoroughly canvassed, they knew what I would say, and on cue I sang like a canary ... and all I got in return was a cup of tepid tea and a snub from the Great Man Himself. If my pride had been damaged before the show, it was now in tatters. Never has my non been so plussed.

But now what? Despite the extreme brevity of my input, friends and family said how wise and sensible I had been, how calm, how compassionate, a voice of reason in a sea of over-reaction. Can it be that despite my pride, foolishness and idiocy, I had actually said something sensible? Apparently so. My self-respect staggered back on its feet. It's lost count of the number of times I've pronounced it dead, anyway. Namu Amida Bu! ❖

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Whether I am falling to hell  
Or bound for the Pure Land,  
I have no knowledge:  
All is left to Amida's Vow.  
"Namu-amida-butsu!"

Saichi



# How to be helpful

by Modgala

*The following is an edited version of the presentation Sister Modgala made on International Development at Lambeth Palace on the 8<sup>th</sup> of May this year. The talk was offered to people working in charitable projects overseas, but there is much for us all to learn from Modgala's own experiences working on overseas projects, and from how she draws on her faith to hold her when things get difficult.*



Sr. Modgala teaching in Delhi, India.

“

Hello. I'm not a professional speaker and I'm terrified of it! Fifteen years ago I ordained in Amida Trust because I wanted to help, and I was given the name Modgala [which means to speak with joy] to help me speak out.

I know there are lots of dangers in the idea of helping. I also think - and I'm going to lay my cards on the table from the beginning that I don't like the terminology 'spiritual capital.' I feel it feeds into the capitalist systems. I would far prefer the terms 'spiritual resilience', 'resource', 'strength', 'creativity'. I think this is what our faiths give us all, and this is what we share with people with whom we live and work.

I also question what development means in the spiritual sense, and how



we can measure it. Terminology is needed - we've got to work with people, but when we talk about 'goals' too it makes me feel a bit limited. When development needs to be 'measured', this can limit us and the people that we're with. Okay, we do need to look at the work that we do; practically we do need measures. I come from a psychological background and I very much believe we do need quantitative measurement - but we need qualitative information too. We need to look at how things are done, and I think that starts with ourselves and what we take out to the places where we will work.

And this is what Buddhism starts with. What drove the Buddha out from his castle was seeing someone who was sick, someone who was dying, someone who was dead. He also saw the pain of people who don't have what they want and don't want what they have. And he saw the suffering that we add on, that all of us add on, to the initial afflictions by hiding from and not facing the reality. That's Dukkha - the first truth of our lives, the first reality, that is often translated as 'noble truth'. 'Noble' means that this suffering is nothing to be ashamed of - this is the reality of life. And we all make things worse when we try and hide.

So, this is at the heart of Buddhism. When I became a Buddhist, it was mostly about meditation, improving oneself, without coming into the other bit, the reason that we do these practices. All our practice is so that we can go out into the world a bit wiser and a bit more compassionate. We start by learning from ourselves.

The act of becoming Buddhist is to take refuge in Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. In simple terms this is the teacher, his teachings and the community that practices. The Buddha was born 2,600 years ago, and went searching to find out the cause of suffering and how we can go beyond it and find liberation and freedom. I loved the Archbishop's term, 'interior liberty'. This is beautiful, and that's what I think 'spiritual capital' (I'll use the term) is. It is this and it is helping others discover this liberty so they can find a way forward.

Dharma is the teachings. The Buddha had 45 years of teaching to all kinds of different people, of different classes, from kings to barbers to the very, very poor. He found many ways of expressing how they can find this liberty.

Buddhists are concerned with compassion. It can be a very commonly used term, but they mean 'wise compassion' not 'idiot compassion'. And that's why the third refuge - Sangha, community, is important. Together, we can find good ways forward, and we can learn.

The ideal way of living is summed up in the Buddhist teaching of the

four immeasurables or jewels - love, compassion, sympathetic joy (the joy of others) and equanimity. Being able to be a rock in a storm, being able to stand there, is so important.

I remember after the terrible tsunami, being in the south of India with a group of young people who were training to become the leaders of the future. I was in India with a project that the Amida Trust had started in Delhi. Before the tsunami I had been invited to go all around Tamil Nadu to speak, as a way of encouraging others to speak, and especially for them to see a woman speaking. To show people that you can do things differently that you can find the courage, the confidence, faith; this is at the core of what I do. Anyway, I was in this big hall with a bunch of young people and I started talking about one of our practices which is to walk and chant, bringing body, speech and mind together. Like a tree growing in the earth, rooted, grounded, yet able to bow, that's equanimity. They wanted to practice it straight away. It's terribly important for them to have equanimity because of the oppression and the way the Dalits (the ex-'Untouchables') are treated. To be able to remain calm while you're being abused and not rise to it and make things worse, and yet to stand firm and not cower beneath it, is tremendously important for them. And to find a voice!

So at the heart of Buddhist teachings is taking refuge, finding a refuge for one's self when one is working in difficult conditions and being able to share this with others. If we're working out there in the field where you see such oppression and when you see, as in Bosnia, awful despair and anger, you need a refuge. When I worked in Zambia the most difficult thing was the apathy and the dying - I was involved in a primary health care project where people with HIV and AIDS had hardly any help at all out in the bush villages. When you see friend after friend dying (and that's the point I came in at, when many of the founders of the project were dying); that is when I needed a refuge and that is when I realised the importance of faith and spirituality. If I hadn't had that connection with something much bigger than myself, the teachings that held me, and with my community back home, I would have broken down. The first person that went out there actually did run away after six weeks, because it was too much. When she got ill she took flight and went home. You can't avoid getting ill over there.

I remember one night sitting on a log in the middle of the night just crying my eyes out because friends were dying. Then I started chanting, particularly bringing to mind one of the major figures in Mahayana Buddhism,



Avalokiteshvara, Quan yin, “Hearer of the cries of the world” . Her symbol is the moon. So, sitting on this log and seeing the moon and feeling the compassion that she engenders, and remembering my community back home, and seeing that this was one sky and that I'm not alone - this held me.

Another time, I was with someone who had to make a huge decision about whether or not to have a biopsy to see if it was TB in her lymph glands which could be been treated to give her more time, or if she was dying of AIDS. She had to make a decision. We sat, praying together, drawing on the strength of the moon above us - just waiting and sitting and listening. Often what's needed in the world is just to listen, and provide conditions where people can truly share. Eventually, all the fears came out that were holding her back from taking the step of going to the hospital. The main fear was of dying like her husband; she'd sent her children away because she expected to die. But actually she did go to the hospital, was treated for TB and did have another good year with her children. And in that time that hope spread from her through the community.

So, this is important - being able to sit and listen. We take vows in Mahayana Buddhism that are huge - “innumerable are sentient beings; I vow to save them all.” It's huge, too big; in fact all we can do is what we can, where we are. That's why we also have the teachings of the precepts - the ethical base that is necessary to work from, the guidelines that we all need. They are very simple basic precepts - not to cause harm, not to be caught up by greed or by sexual misconduct, not to steal or to take what is not given. And Right speech. What is good speech? We all make mistakes. It's important to think about what we say and how we do things. This is vital in overseas projects.

I remember setting up a project in India, and as always I thought, “What am I going to do? I'm not a teacher.” They wanted teachers of English as a foreign language to help them get a step up, to help them take advantage of further education, to find jobs. But what I did was start conversation classes. And the most important thing there was how I held the group - there were some who needed to speak more, and some who needed to speak less, and above all for all the group members to go beyond the fear and say anything at all in this foreign language.

Here is one of our practices (I think pinched from the Native Peoples of America). I had a talking stone (rather than a talking stick). This is a powerful practice because it not only helps you to speak, holding the stone, it also encourages all the others to listen. That's the other half of the practice. Being

with these young people and seeing their faith and their confidence grow - that is what working out in the field is all about.

But we can go things that go terribly wrong. While in Bosnia back in 2003 I visited a lot of different agencies who were really concerned that people weren't going beyond the initial healing. I talked to them at a conference at the university, and they were saying, "What can we do with our traumatised children?" A lot of people had gone out there to help. Many good things were done. But now all the organisations were drawing out. And as I got to know the people there, I discovered an underlying sense of anger at how the help had been offered and how things had been done. How the wrong people had been listened to. And other things that, maybe, we wouldn't even think about. One of the things that made them very angry was the waste - the waste of food, the waste of electricity, the lack of respect for these resources and the lack of respect for people. So things can go very wrong. What I'm saying is that it's very important how things are done.

My work has often been very practical - just doing what was needed - driving, giving massages, holding conversation groups. Often I have offered workshops sharing the teaching of the four Noble Truths. I have offered them in several different countries including India, Zambia, and Bosnia, helping people to face up to their suffering and to go beyond avoiding the realities of their lives. I focus on the third Truth which is about learning how to stop. In response to suffering, we all get into habits of avoidance. All of us. If we stop before reacting then we can do things differently. This is the Noble Path in Buddhism. And our work in Amida Trust is about providing conditions where people can find ways to stop and do things differently.

If we *stop* we can go on from a little vision to a big vision. And take all the steps along the way. This the fourth noble Truth of the path. If we stop going into our usual reactions we start to think differently, speak differently, act differently. We do things in a more reflective way and we ultimately have a bigger vision. We can all learn to do this, and learn from each other and from each other's faith, too. Then we can help create a better world. We can draw out the potential from ourselves and others, we can inspire faith and confidence. And we can help people to find a voice. ❖



# An interview with Peter Levitt: Writer, poet & Buddhist teacher



Running Tide is delighted to introduce Peter Levitt. He was born in New York City in 1946 and is a poet and Buddhist teacher. His nine poetry books include *Within Within*, *One Hundred Butterflies* and *Bright Root, Dark Root*. He has also written and edited various other works including editing Thich Nhat Hanh's classic, *The Heart of Understanding*, *Jakusho Kwong's No Beginning, and No End: The Intimate Heart of Zen*.

In 1989 Peter received the prestigious Lannan Foundation Award in Poetry.

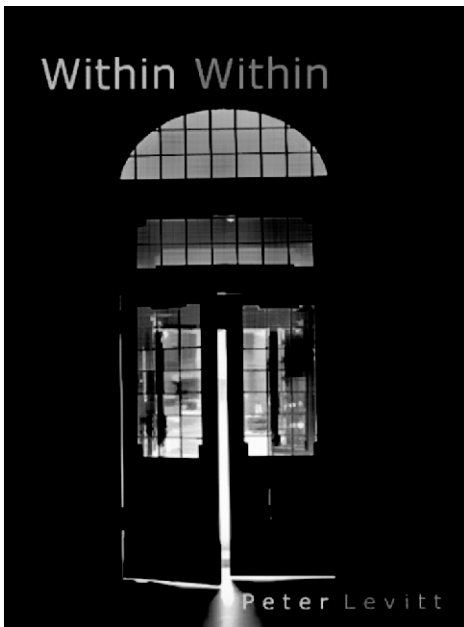
He is the founder and guiding teacher of the Salt Spring Zen Circle on Salt Spring Island in British Columbia.

## Running Tide: What drives your creative work?

Peter: A very dear friend of mine, now gone, was US poet Robert Creeley. At some point he wrote this lovely phrase ie "I'm given to writing poems." It's the same for me. Either I was born without the ambition gene, or very much of it, or my nature comes with a more primary disposition to spend a lot of time just wandering around, taking place with the world in a sort of mutual and intimate engagement. It's this 'taking place' that brings the work forward, and it's always been that way. Hopefully, since no engagement is planned, nor could be with all the particulars intact, something of the spontaneous nature of the experience makes its way into the poems.

## How does your Buddhist practice affect your writing and the rest of your life?

Zen practice helps to keep me more available, receptive, alive in the engagement I just mentioned, and the same is true during what might be called 'the act of composition' when I'm actually writing a poem or piece of prose. I did write before my practice began in the late sixties, and the disposition toward the world I began with was nourished by Zen practice, with the ability to be even more intimate with what was right before me a noticeable side benefit of practice. Practice also tends to soften and inform



Where you are going  
and the place you stay  
come to the same thing.  
What you long for  
and what you've left behind  
are as useless as your name.  
Just one time, walk out  
into the field and look  
at that towering oak -  
an acorn still beating at its heart.

Peter Levitt

the heart, so to speak, so clearly this has had a great effect in every aspect of my life.

**Have you ever found a conflict between your Buddhist practice and your creativity?**

Quite the reverse. It's a marriage of the most profound kind.

**What would you say to yourself if you could go back in time and meet yourself at the beginning of your creative career?**

Continue to know nothing. Keep the edge. Don't lose this beginner's mind.

**How do you keep creating when things get difficult?**

As I see it, there's no conflict between life's difficulty and the ability to create. In some way, the worse it is, up to a point, the better, because of what it takes from a person in order for them to get through life's rigour. I don't subscribe to the idea that great art needs suffering in order to be wrung from the artist, so I don't suggest that if people find themselves just too happy they go on a suffering hunt, but given that we're talking about writing and Buddhist practice in the same conversation, I'm reminded of what Suzuki Roshi said: A big block of ice makes a lot of water. And then, of

course, there's the convenient imagery and fact that the lotus itself cannot grow unless its roots are planted in mud. Practice can be found right here, too. When things get tough, if we just take care of what is right in front of us, we find the creative means jump forward.

### **How does your creative work affect the rest of your life?**

For better or worse, as I experience it, there is no 'creative work' vs. 'the rest of [my] life.' This sort of division is not really a accurate statement of my situation or, if I may be allowed to say so, anyone else's. We're just not divided up in this way, though if we think we are, we create an almost unbridgeable gap where none exists.

Once we realize that we are whole, and always have been from the beginning, we can start to find ways for this wholeness to function and be expressed, which tends to heal the unnecessary cutting up of this one life into what seem to be irreconcilable parts. I'm sure you've seen it yourself ie we don't have one heart and mind, being and life, when we write, and another when we do something else. If we think we do, we might do well to look again, or more deeply, at what we are. We are an enormous resource of energy and creativity, and it is just waiting to be used in every way it can. So, finding how self flows through self to self in all its various expressions becomes an important part of living as a whole person, no matter the nature of the activity. Practice helps with this. Writing helps with this. Making love and even making breakfast help with this as well.

### **What was the best advice anyone gave to you?**

Well, and I mean this: the Buddhist eightfold path is a good start. It certainly points the way for a wonderful, useful life that helps the wholeness of life I just spoke of to emerge. It also helps to nourish this wholeness in life wherever we meet it. Often, people think of precepts or discipline or vows in a somewhat negative light, but really these are just ways to love the world as it deserves.

### **What is your favourite part of your Buddhist Practice?**

Zazen. And, during our more formal retreats, the Zen form of eating called *oyroki*, which is often translated as 'just the right amount.' That phrase, and the practice to which it refers, really says it beautifully for writing and for practice. I like to think of it as Buddha in a bowl. ❖





# The Best Way Out

by Fiona Robyn



“The best way out is always through”~Robert Frost

This July Kasper & I were at our first (mega-muddy) Buddhafield festival in Devon. We were there representing our Buddhist Order and had been invited to join the Dharma Parlour team in place of our colleague Modgala.

I always feel wobbly in new groups. I want strangers to know how brilliant I am, to feel that I am contributing something valuable, & to love me. I can wait around five minutes for this to happen.

This can be challenging if they have already known each other for



many years, or don't really need anything, or are human beings.

Despite the team's warm welcome, as the day went on I felt increasingly 'new'. I was the only one who didn't know what I was doing. I felt guilty about getting into the festival for free & then not 'earning my keep'. I felt unimportant and useless.

Things came to a head on Saturday when we sat in our first workshop on mindful writing and nobody came.

I knew this was probably because we hadn't advertised it in the right place, but it still left me on the edge of tears. We walked through a patch of woodland and tried to make sense of what was happening and why I was feeling the way I did.

I had a cry and considered running away home. I sat with the feelings of rejection and uselessness. Something gradually shifted. (A Buddhist festival is a good place to face the size & particular audaciousness of your ego.)

I decided to share how I felt with the organiser. I lowered my expectations of myself and of how quickly we would become 'useful'. And we went back to our team campfire.

One of the team painted my face with luminous yellow & pink dots. I made another a cup of tea and chatted about the mud. Another three of us shared terrible jokes that night around the fire. I attended my first puja with another. Another gave me his crazy hat to wear as a kind of 'crazy-hat prescription'.

The next morning, as I sat round with the same group of strangers at our daily 'check-in', I saw that they weren't strangers any more. I shared my crisis of the day before. They listened. That afternoon we had another workshop and twenty people came. We enjoyed it. It went well. I was deeply grateful.

The best way out is through. I wish it wasn't. But if you don't go through, you'll just end up at the same gate again before too long.

Take the first step. Ask someone to hold your hand. You'll be at the other side before you know it. ❖

# What's on guide

## Events in the Amida world

### **ZEN THERAPY WEEKEND - THREE DAY SEMINARS**

**October 19th - 21st**

*Sukhavati, Finsbury Park, London*

Friday: 'The Buddha as a fully functioning person' with Manu Bazzano

Saturday: 'Dharma as a way of being' with Fiona Robyn

Sunday: 'Sangha as encounter' with Fiona Robyn and Jnanamati Williams

Contact: [jnanamati@amidatrust.com](mailto:jnanamati@amidatrust.com) or <http://www.instituteforzenththerapy.com>

### **STUDY GROUP - THE FEELING BUDDHA**

**October 27th**

*Birmingham, UK*

Reading and talking about The Feeling Buddha, plus the usual meditation, tea, and cake.

With Richard Ollier and Adrian Thompson

Contact: [richardollier@hotmail.co.uk](mailto:richardollier@hotmail.co.uk)

### **STUDY MORNING: HONENS WRITINGS**

**November 4th, 10am to 12pm**

*Malvern, UK*

An informal opportunity to look at a Buddhist teaching in more depth and a short period of practice. You can join in the discussion or just listen. We will look at a recent translations of some of Honen's teachings.

With Kaspalita, Fiona Robyn.

Contact: [kaspalita@amidatrust.com](mailto:kaspalita@amidatrust.com)



## **LONGING OF THE HEART**

**November 9th - 10th**

*Oud-Turnhout, Belgium*

We often talk about following a path in Buddhism. This is a way of describing our relationship with the spiritual life. A symbol to describe something that transcends the physical journey that meanders from birth to death. In this retreat we will explore together, through practice and sharing, how we relate to this spiritual longing and how its influence may weave its way into and influence our daily lives.

Contact: [jnanamati@amidatrust.com](mailto:jnanamati@amidatrust.com)

## **CREATIVITY AND AGING RETREAT DAY**

**November 17th 10am-4pm**

*Amida Mosaic, London, Ontario*

As the years go by, we can either settle into a status quo mentality or recognize that all has been a preparation for a time of generativity and spiritual growth. There are challenges to be faced and possibilities to be considered. This retreat will focus on this call and the various ways of responding.

With James. \$80.00 including lunch.

Contact: [jschmeis@uwo.ca](mailto:jschmeis@uwo.ca)

**BODHI RETREAT UK****December 5th - 9th***Sahishnu's house, Derbyshire*

The event which celebrates the Buddha's enlightenment including Dharma talks, 24 hour chanting (from Fri-Sat) and advancement and ordination ceremonies on 8th December. Open to all. You may come to all or part of this retreat.

Contact: [sumaya@amidatrust.com](mailto:sumaya@amidatrust.com) or call 0207 263 2183

**BODHI RETREAT BELGIUM****December 5th - 9th***Oud-Turnhout, Belgium*

Running simultaneously with the UK event, and also featuring our famous 24 hour chanting, dharma talks and advancement ceremonies.

Contact: [jnanamati@amidatrust.com](mailto:jnanamati@amidatrust.com)

**BODHI DAY RETREAT CANADA****December 8th 10am - 8pm***Amida Mosaic, London, Ontario*

Celebrating the Buddha's enlightenment with all day chanting, dharma talks and ceremonies, followed by a potluck supper.

Contact: [mosaicretreats@gmail.com](mailto:mosaicretreats@gmail.com)



# Contact Amida

## UNITED KINGDOM

**Amida London** hosts regular day retreats and other events. As well as a Dharma centre it is also the home of **The Institute for Zen Therapy**, the psychotherapy training arm of Amida Trust UK.

Sukhavati  
21 Sussex Way  
London N7 6RT

Telephone: 0207 263 2183  
[sumaya@amidatrust.com](mailto:sumaya@amidatrust.com)  
[www.amidalondon.org.uk](http://www.amidalondon.org.uk)  
<http://www.instituteforzentherapy.com/>

**Amida Newcastle** has regular weekly meetings in Gosforth.

[sujatin@gmail.com](mailto:sujatin@gmail.com)  
[http://lotusinthemud.typepad.com/amida\\_newcastle/](http://lotusinthemud.typepad.com/amida_newcastle/)

**Amida Sheffield** have weekly meetings.

Telephone: 0114 272 4290  
[amidasheffield@blueyonder.co.uk](mailto:amidasheffield@blueyonder.co.uk)  
<http://pureland.wordpress.com>

**Amida Malvern** have weekly & monthly meetings in Malvern.

Telephone: 01684 572 444  
[kaspalita@amidatrust.com](mailto:kaspalita@amidatrust.com)  
[www.malvernsangha.co.uk](http://www.malvernsangha.co.uk)

## EUROPE

**Amida Belgium** has regular meetings, with a retreat open to newcomers once a year. The head of the Amida Order is based here.

<http://www.namoamidabu.be/>

### **Amida Israel**

Amida Israel Sangha meets on the 3rd Sunday each month, 20:30 - 22:30 for practice & sharing.

[ymatri@gmail.com](mailto:ymatri@gmail.com)

## NORTH AMERICA

### **Amida USA & Amida Hawai'i**

The Amida USA is a non-profit church based in Hawai'i created to further the spread and practice of Amida-shu Pureland Buddhism.

<http://www.amidausa.org/>

### **Amida Mosaic (Ontario, Canada)**

The Amida Mosaic Sangha is a community of spiritual friends. Amida Mosaic Sangha activities are held in London Ontario under the leadership of Prajnatarā T. Bryant, a Gankonin with the Amida Order.

[amidamosaic@gmail.com](mailto:amidamosaic@gmail.com)

<http://amidamosaic.com>



### **Friends of Amida**

Blogs, discussion, groups,  
photographs, video & audio  
teachings - come talk about  
Culturally Engaged Buddhism



<http://amidatrust.ning.com>



# The Back Page

## From Honen's *Ippyaku-shiju-gokajo mondo* One Hundred Forty-five Questions and Answers

*Can we be reborn in the Pure Land if we just pray to Amida Buddha wholeheartedly, even if our hearts are not completely reformed or we are not well trained?*

The fluctuation of the mind is a natural thing for ordinary people; so it is impossible not to fluctuate. However, if you chant the nembutsu from the bottom of your heart, your defilements will disappear and you will certainly be able to be reborn in the Pure Land. If you continue to chant the nembutsu, even the heavy defilements which can generate delusions will disappear.

*Is it true that when a corrupt person dies, Amida Buddha will go back without taking him to the Pure Land?*

Why does Amida not return without taking the person, just because that person is corrupt? For Amida, there is no difference between a righteous person and a corrupt person. The corrupt may be seen as righteous and the righteous be seen as corrupt, depending on one's perspective. The nembutsu is the only important thing. Even if you are clean, you will not have divine favor if you do not recite the nembutsu. Just chant the nembutsu casting aside all the conventional ideas. There is much evidence to prove this.

*Is it better to recite the nembutsu abstaining from doing evil and doing only good, or to recite the nembutsu believing only in the true vow of Amida Buddha?*

Abstaining from evil while doing good things is the total admonition of Shakyamuni Buddha. But for us, living in the real world, we disobey the admonition, so by believing from the bottom of our hearts in the real vow of Amida Buddha to save all kinds of people, we are able to say "Namu Amida Butsu". Amida Buddha will lead all into the Pure Land without any discrimination between people with or without wisdom, or between those who can or cannot keep the precepts. Please keep this in mind. ❖