MOUNTAIN SILENCE
NEWSLETTER OF THE DANCING MOUNTAINS ZEN SANGHA
Issue 11: Autumn

Suffering

Chris, Clare, Catherine, Wendy and Carol on retreat at Stoke Ferry, August 2010.

Editorial

by Chris Brown

In this issue, we touch on the immense and sobering subject of dukkha, a Sanskrit word often translated as 'suffering'. Rev Norman Fischer draws on the Four Noble Truths and teachings from Jewish mythology to expound the meaning of suffering as it is experienced in human life. With pointed clarity, he draws

In this issue...

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attention to misunderstandings brought about by this most common translation of dukkha, insisting that dukkha, rather than referring to relatively rare occasions of immense anguish, is simply the basic and often unconscious unsatisfactoriness of our lives. He explains, “We don't live with equanimity. We grasp things that aren't really there; we operate in the world that we want rather than the world that is there; and underneath our daily consciousness is always this anxiety, this fear, this immense longing, because somehow we know that the world is not what we think it is.”

While acknowledging that dukkha is ever-present in human experience, even in our greatest joys, it was still with great pleasure that we welcomed Catherine Gammon, a priest from San Francisco Zen Center, to visit a number of groups around the UK this past Summer. In this issue, Michael describes and expresses gratitude for Catherine’s time in the South West. During Catherine’s stay, she ran a number of “Writing as a Wisdom Project” retreats. Those who attended are welcomed and encouraged to submit their creative writings produced during those retreats for inclusion in the next (Winter) edition of Mountain Silence. Please email any text to Bev Eatwell (beatwell69[at]hotmail.com).

News

Reb Anderson Roshi not visiting UK in 2011

You may have noticed that Reb is not listed in the schedule at Gaia House in 2011. This has been due to a problem agreeing upon dates that suited both Reb and Gaia House. Unfortunately it appears that the next possible date for a visit from Reb will not be until the Spring of 2012. In the meantime, priest Kaiyo Diane Gerard from San Francisco Zen Center is planning to be available to lead a short retreat (three or four days) or a few one or two day retreats in the UK next year, likely around the time of August and early September.

and decisions are made separately via an email list - please contact us if you want to be part of this.

Upcoming Events

Click here for further details of these events. **DM* indicates a retreat using Dancing Mountains forms and liturgy.

November 13- 14
Chan weekend retreat.
Led by Ned Reiter.
Shekinashram, Devon.

November 19- 20
W eekend retreat.
Castle Acre, Norfolk.
Contact Carol (carolhunter135@hotmail.com) or 01366 502106

Local Contacts

Visit the Local Groups webpage for details of Dancing Mountains groups in your area, and the Diary for their regular meeting dates and times.

Donations

Download a printable subscription form for one-off or regular donations to Dancing Mountains.

Dharma Talk

Suffering

by Rev. Norman Fischer

Let me start with the question, what exactly is suffering? On the most obvious level we all understand that suffering is some sort of pain or some kind of trouble, something unpleasant, something we don't like, something we don't want. Suffering seems to be the opposite of happiness. Read more...

Article

Catherine Gammon's visit to Totnes Sangha

by Michael Elsmere

0700, Wednesday 7th July, 2010. Heathrow terminal 1. The United Airlines flight from San Francisco has landed on time and Francis Checkley and I are waiting at arrivals as an interminable stream of world travellers emerges, still perhaps air borne, wide eyed into a hustling world of movement and harsh lights. Eventually she emerges; a small figure dressed in black. Read more...

Article

Suffering

by Francis Checkley

The existentialist writer Jean-Paul Sartre once observed that "L'Enfer, c'est les autres". Hell is others. This otherness is suffering. Early childhood experience, marked by an oceanic and blissful feeling of oneness soon gives way to a growing sense of separation and the accompanying suffering that Sartre alludes to. Read more...

Extract

A Handful of Leaves

from Venerable Ajahn Sumedho's book 'The Four Noble Truths'

The Blessed One was once living at Kosambi in a wood of simsapa trees. He picked up a few leaves in his hand, and he asked the bhikkhus, “How do you conceive this, bhikkhus. Which is more, the few leaves that I have picked up in my hand or those on the trees in the wood?” Read more...

Book Reviews

Two novels of exile and loss

by Michael Elsmere

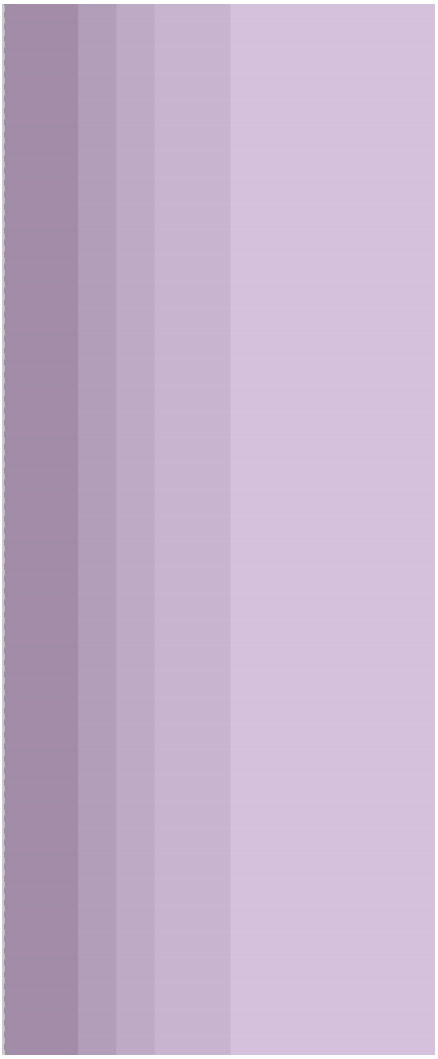
We often hear from politicians of all colours the phrase, “the British are a tolerant people.” Often cited are the various waves of immigration that have taken place into the country most recently from Eastern Europe but before that from Africa, the Caribbean, Jews from Europe and further back in history the Hugeonots escaping persecution in France. There is often a tone of self congratulation about the phrase which is then often followed by “but,” with a long string of reasons why immigration should be reduced or even cease. Read more...

Rotation of Mountian Silence editor role

by Chris Brown

In the interests of democracy and equal opportunity, the roles of officers supporting Dancing Mountains have been proposed to operate on a rotational basis, such that after a period of time each role will be offered to the Sangha as a whole so that someone can volunteer themselves for the position. While Dancing Mountains is still in the process of creating a constitution that would specify how and when this should be done, I take this opportunity to advertise the position of editor of Mountain Silence to any willing volunteers,

having been performing this role for almost 2 years now. The role involves receiving submissions for the newsletter and use them to create web-based articles, using an appropriate HTML editor (such as Dreamweaver). Prior experience with creating HTML documents would be a plus, but can be learnt relatively quickly by someone who is technically minded. Please contact me at chrisb.by.name[at]gmail.com to express your interest.



Next issue of Mountain Silence

Winter edition with a theme around "Birth". We welcome your articles, poetry, pictures, letters, retreat reflections and book reviews! Winter issue publication date: 15th January, deadline for submission of material 30th December.

Previous issues are available on the Dancing Mountains website.

MOUNTAIN SILENCE

Issue 11: Autumn

Dharma Talk

Suffering

A Dharma talk given by Rev. Norman Fischer on Saturday, August 8th, 2009, at Tassajara Zen Mountain Centre, San Francisco Zen Centre.
Transcribed by Frances Collins and edited by Chris Brown.

Let me start with the question, what exactly is suffering? On the most obvious level we all understand that suffering is some sort of pain or some kind of trouble, something unpleasant, something we don't like, something we don't want. Suffering seems to be the opposite of happiness.

One of the most astounding facts of human life is that people most commonly think that it's possible to minimize or even eliminate suffering from our lives. I think the general idea is that because suffering is so bad and so unpleasant that the thing to do, should suffering arise - and I think that we think that if we're lucky enough it may not arise - but should it ever arise, the thing to do is avoid it at all costs, push it away, cover it up, think pleasant thoughts, don't dwell on it, move on and so forth. This makes perfect sense, it's a commonplace understanding. Go forward with your life and don't dwell on your suffering. Don't let the suffering stop you from the things you want to do and need to do in your lifetime, and if you would only use this strategy you will have a positive life!

Now to me this is an absolutely astonishing idea. I am really flabbergasted by such a notion. The idea that there is a manageable amount of suffering and that somehow you get past it and go on to more positive things seems to be an incredible idea from my perspective. I think the closer you look, the more acute your observation of human life is and the more suffering you see. Anxiety is suffering; not getting what you want is suffering; being irritated or being angry is suffering; having to put up with stuff you don't like is suffering. Knowing that one day, even though you really don't want to, you're going to have to die and that this fact, whether it is conscious or unconscious, is with you all of the time, is also suffering. Fear is suffering; knowing that you could lose what you think you have is suffering; being ashamed is suffering; feeling

disrespected is suffering; feeling unloved is suffering; feeling loved but not quite enough or not in the right way is suffering; feeling loved but not by the right person is suffering; feeling lonely, bewildered; its too cold is suffering; its too hot is also suffering; bad traffic jams is suffering; having to wait in line when the person at the front of the line is very slow and seems to be obsessed with their own problems to the extent that the line is not moving is suffering.

So I think you get the impression that suffering is not rare but in fact it's pretty pervasive, and it's a daily experience if you really pay attention to what's going on. The experience of suffering is pretty common and even if you don't pay attention to it and try not to notice it, the fact that it's there anyway is registering on your psyche and conditioning your life. Even if you have a very positive outlook and you believe there's not much suffering, it's there anyway. Still the suffering is there and it's conditioning your life and conditioning the way you're living. So the idea which I think is perennial in the human heart, that suffering is a minor problem that can be overcome by a positive attitude, is, to me, the greatest of all human self-deceptions.

Part of the problem is the word *suffering*, which sounds so drastic and makes it sound like a rare occurrence. As I'm sure most of you know, this idea of suffering is central in Buddhist thought and practice. The word used in Buddhism is the Pali word *dukkha* which is most often translated as 'suffering'. But various translators have tinkered with it and tried to do better, while some have translated it as 'dissatisfaction' or 'unsatisfactoriness.' One important translator translates it simply as 'stress'. In fact, all of these attempts at translation are slightly off. I think that ultimately the word dukkha is not a translatable word. It refers to a psychological experience which sometimes is conscious but most often is not conscious; the psychological experience based on a very profound fact about life, about time, about existence - the simple reality that everything is impermanent. Because it is impermanent, it is ultimately ungraspable, ultimately unknowable, unfindable, unseeable, unhaveable, non-possessable. This is actually the way things are, and we think the opposite. We think that we can know or possess our lives, our loves, our identities, our possessions; and the sad fact is that we cannot. The gap between this stark reality and the commonplace approach to life in the human family, that little gap there is called dukkha. It's an experience of basic anxiety or frustration, and it is endemic to human consciousness itself. It's at the centre of our human experience. So suffering is not some extra adventitious issue that may or may not arise that probably, if we are really careful and we have really good insurance policies, won't happen. It's actually built into the nature of the human experience.

Dukkha is every moment. Every experience of our lives is coloured by it, not just the things that we would say are terrible or awful or suffering, but every moment. In fact, on a deep level, loss and pain and suffering is really built into the nature of our consciousness. Let's take a moment to actually examine this in our own experience. Let's, if you would, return your awareness to the body right here and now, bring awareness to sitting up a little more straight. Become more aware of your posture. Bring your attention to your breathing; feel the breath coming in; feel the breath going out. See if you can pay attention to each and every breath going in and out, being with the whole of the inhale and the whole of the exhale. Now pay particular attention to the exhale and to the end of the exhale when the exhale seems to come to a conclusion as the next inhale begins. See if you can catch that precise moment, that exact moment when it's no longer exhale but now it's inhale. Maybe you can feel that the closer you look the more elusive it is. Now notice whatever thoughts or feelings come into your mind and see if you can grab hold of a thought and make it stay there, not repeat the thought again but make the thought stay there… or the sensation, or the feeling. It's a little hard to do. You can't be sure even what it means to make something remain; to tell when something ends and something else begins.

So this is how it is! We are always breathing and thinking and feeling and experiencing sensations. None of these things can be exactly discerned in the way that we think they can. The thing is that if you're sitting in meditation as we are now you can experience this with equanimity and it's very peaceful. It doesn't feel like something painful or unpleasant at all. That's one of the great advantages of meditation practice. In meditation practice you can experience dukkha with equanimity. So it's a great thing if you have strong suffering to sit down in meditation. It can be really helpful depending on the circumstance, and so on. Somewhere, Suzuki Roshi says that a real Zen student is one who has sat down in the middle of terrible suffering and pain. If you do that usually there is some equanimity even if the source of the pain and suffering is still present. Meditation has the great advantage of bringing acceptance and equanimity. In meditation you're not striving to eliminate the sensation or thought or situation that you're contemplating, but rather simply to receive it with equanimity. Then you might say that dukkha is no longer dukkha if you receive it with equanimity. Then impermanence is really not painful or difficult. It's just life coming and going and actually it's quite peaceful, even very beautiful. But in daily life, in the swirl of activity and desire, we lunge forward and force action.

We don't live with equanimity. We grasp things that aren't really there; we operate in the world that we want rather than the world that is there;

and underneath our daily consciousness is always this anxiety, this fear, this immense longing, because somehow we know that the world is not what we think it is.

Even though it may not be conscious, somewhere within us there is the dread of knowing this is so. Dukkha is the basic fact of our lives. At the end of a life, when dukkha becomes absolutely inescapable, our whole lifetime of denial of dukkha comes forward one way or another; and at that time we will have no choice but to grapple with it directly. We're better off starting a little earlier.

I'm always delighted to be here at Tassajara. Those of you living here now maybe could already sense that, even after you leave Tassajara, and after many years go by, it will be engraved on your heart and you will feel as if you've never left. When you come back it will be as if it was just yesterday that you lived here. So for me it's a pleasure always to come back. But unfortunately I am here for a very quick trip and I have to leave tomorrow. I feel like I just got here and now I have to go already. I was supposed to be here for the weekend. On Sunday evening I was going to be joined, as I am every year, by my good friend and colleague Rabbi Alan Lew and we were going to do what we always do and have a weeklong Jewish retreat, when we always have lots of fun with singing, praying and meditating together. We put it on the calendar about a year ago but it was not meant to be, because on January 12th he was at a meditation retreat, out for a walk, and he fell down on the ground and died. So we lost our dear friend and we lost this beautiful annual Jewish meditation retreat that was really wonderful. So I thought tonight that I would quote from his book because one of his books talks about suffering. Since that is my topic and since he is not here, I thought that if I read from his book, he can give the lecture for me anyway. That's the great advantage of writing, or nowadays, audio files. You can speak even when you're dead! It's wonderful. So this is from his book, ‘Be still and get going - a Jewish meditation practice for real-life.’ It's a wonderful book and this is the second chapter that's all about suffering. Now it's going to be a little bit funny that I read for you from my friend Rabbi Lew’s discussion on the four Noble truths of Buddhism. So he begins:

Most of us, I think, tend to think of the spiritual path in terms of the high points: a birth, a death, that moment of transcendence we felt during a great storm or standing by a waterfall or viewing a sunset on a trip to the mountains. But the truth is that neither thunderbolts nor visions of pink clouds are the primary engine of the spiritual quest. Suffering is! Certainly Buddhism recognizes this; suffering is central Buddhist theology and practice (although it's debatable whether there's such a thing as

Buddhist theology, but anyway…).*The most fundamental doctrine in Buddhism is the four Noble truths. The first Noble truth is that suffering is endemic to human existence. To be human is to experience suffering; nor do you have to be a Buddhist to recognize this truth. Whenever I present this to Jewish groups there is at first a wave of recognition and heads nodding all over the room as people acknowledge that suffering has certainly been central to their own lives, followed closely by sighs of relief and the almost audible thought, "Thank God it's not just me!"*

You know this is one of the most commonplace things. It's a strange thing but everybody thinks that secretly they are really in a pickle, really suffering and that their life is a real wreck and everybody else is fine. So it's a little embarrassing to be the only one and so you never really mention it. People go through their entire lives with this sort of secret feeling and they never mention it to anyone, because it's such a shameful thing to be the only one on the planet who is a mess. I often tell the story of one of the most beautiful moments in my life when I had just this experience because I was just like that. It's not that simple because sometimes you think well that's not really true and then other times you think it really is true. So it goes back and forth.

I was at a time when I was convinced that this was really true when I was living all by myself in some second growth redwood forest in Northern California, in the days when you didn't have to work. So I didn't work and I had time to contemplate my miserable situation. I remember reading a book about Buddhism in a clearing in this redwood forest, and I remember there was a stump of a tree there and there was a huckleberry plant growing out of the stump of this tree. Because it was a clearing there was a shaft of sunlight shining down on the huckleberries, red in the sunlight. I was reading in this book about the first Noble Truth, that central to all existence is suffering, and all of a sudden I thought, "It's not just me? This is the general case?" This was a tremendous liberation. I don't think I have ever had as relieving a moment as that.

So that's what he's saying here when he tells the Jewish audience and they say well thank God for the Buddhists!

"Birth is problematic, aging is hard and dying is also hard to bear," begins one classical formulation of the Four Noble Truths. But that is only the beginning of the bad news! So pain, grief, anger and despair are all both inevitable and oppressive. Having to put up with the things that we dislike is painful but no less than being apart from the things that we do like. Not getting what we want is extremely unpleasant; but, not nearly as unpleasant as getting what we want and then discovering it's a great

disappointment. It turns out that it's not what we thought it would be; or, it is what we thought it would be, but now the fear of losing it is much stronger than any pleasure that we might derive having finally achieved it. In short, our experience is irredeemably unsatisfactory. The second Noble Truth tells us why we inevitably experience life as unsatisfactory and as suffering, because we are afflicted with an inherent desire to have things be otherwise. No particular state is inherently afflictive. A physical or mental state only becomes so when we want it to become some other state. If we have a pain in our leg or in our back (I think he is talking about here about this poor guy who has had pains in his legs and his back in meditation over the years) *it only becomes suffering if we wish not to have that pain. This may be a perfectly reasonable wish but it's not a necessary one. We might just as easily choose to see the sensation in our leg as just that, as a sensation, in which case we would not experience it as suffering. Our life consists of an endless procession of sensations, thoughts, feelings and impulses. It is only our desire to hold onto some of them and to get rid of others that causes us to suffer. Yet we do desire these things and we suffer as a consequence.*

As I mentioned earlier, we can sit with the difficult with equanimity. Being with something and not wanting to hold onto it or push it away… that is what equanimity means. You just accept what is there in that moment. If you can sit with something with equanimity it isn't suffering anymore.

So far the front is pretty grim! Both suffering and the things that cause it seem to be inescapable components of existence but the third Noble Truth brings us some good news. The desire that creates in our psyche, that somehow all experience is unsatisfactory, can be eliminated, leading to the cessation of suffering. The way to the annihilation of desire is the fourth Noble Truth of the Eightfold Path. If we practice right view, right speech, right intention, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration, our desire and consequently our suffering will be extinguished. Isn't this a wonderfully simple plan of action? (I guess he's joking.)

But before we break out the champagne and begin to celebrate our liberation from suffering, it should be noted that there have been dozens of styles and schools of Buddhism over the past 2500 years and no two of them have agreed exactly what constitutes right view, right intention, right action, and so forth. So apparently it isn't as simple as it seems.

Even if that were true and we could be very clear about what all those things mean and how to go about them, it still wouldn't be so easy

actually, and it would take some doing.

Nevertheless there is a consensus among most Buddhists that meditation is an important and probably essential element of this path. After all, if the problem is dissatisfaction with our experience, then meditation, which tends to make our experience considerably more satisfactory (because it makes it easier to have equanimity), *would logically point to a solution. In meditation our experience is more vibrant, richer, more alive and our desire to have things be otherwise is therefore diminished.*

In ordinary life when something happens and you don't like it and you decide that it should be otherwise and you're running around doing things to make that so, you don't really experience how painful it is, this wish that something which actually is there not be there. You're sitting there on the meditation cushion and the pain of that is so apparent immediately. You realize especially when you're living in a monastery that in many periods of meditation there is no escape and you realize that the only thing there is to do is to be present with equanimity - that's the only salvation here, and little by little you learn.

Then he goes on to bring up a different subject:

The amelioration of suffering is not the central imperative of Judaism. The central imperative of Judaism, I believe, is to recognize and manifest the sacred in everything we do and encounter in the world. While this in no way conflicts within the idea of ameliorating suffering… in fact I think we could safely assume, that if we realize the sacred in the moment we would be rather less inclined to wish it were some other moment. Still it's not the same thing. Yet even if the problem of suffering is not the central concern of Jewish sacred literature it still occupies a prominent place in it. In fact the very first story we tell as a people is about a man and a woman who had everything they could possibly want but whose desire for the one thing they could not have thrust them into a world of suffering and death. Kabbalistic cosmology also expresses the idea that creation is fundamentally broken and that suffering is therefore inevitable. According to the Lurianic Kabbalah, God originally existed as the Ein-sof, literally, the endlessness, God's essential undiluted nature - a vast and limitless emptiness so powerful and so charged with supernal energy that nothing could coexist with it, so there couldn't be a world. So when God conceived of the brilliant idea of wishing to bring creation into existence it was first necessary for God to remove God's self, a tiny dot at the centre of the Ein–sof.

So God kind of scoogied God's self up a little bit, squeezing back just one little spot in this endlessness. This creation story is exactly one of the myths that we all have now of the Big Bang right? In exactly the same

way, one little spot of the Universe gave rise to the entire Cosmos. That's what this is saying - that one tiny dot became the creation as we know it. It burst out into creation as we know it.

This process of self removal is called Tzimtzum or contraction/constriction. This was accomplished by means of Keilim, vessels, that carried this divine light out of this tiny speck at the centre of the Ein-sof. But, as Tzimtzum unfolded a cosmic catastrophe occurred. At the time that this happened something went wrong. The divine light that had been withdrawn from this point was too much for the Keilim, for the vessels, and they broke - filling the universe with dangerous shards of devouring light. On the one hand it is Godly light yet on the other hand it is Godly light that cannot co-exist with things, so it devours everything. So this caused a big problem in the universe. The universe now became full of danger, failure, suffering and death and the task of humanity and all beings from the moment of that catastrophe forward became Tikkun ha-Olam, the repair of the universe, the mending of the broken vessels and the restoration of the divine light to its rightful place. That's the human mission and also the mission of all of creation; creation has that job.

Anyway I'm getting background to the point of suffering or rather he is. I get mixed up sometimes between him and me.

These three stories - the four Noble Truths, the Garden of Eden and the breaking of the vessels and the basic skeletal structure, which is the basis on which all three of them rest - always raise a number of troubling questions for me. Is the universe essentially deficient and in need of improvement? Is God flawed? Why was this desire which would prove to be our undoing implanted in our souls in the first place? How come God made defective vessels any way?

Was God some sort of a screw up that doesn't know how to do things, like some apprentice vessel maker that doesn't know how to get the right alloy or something? These are all troubling questions!

Or is there something about the process of healing, something about our human need to work through suffering and death, to have this job of mending a broken world? Is there something about this task that is both necessary and good? Is there something about the process of going beyond our desire of having things other than what they are that might in fact leave us better off than if we had not had that desire at all in the first place? The fall from Eden cast us out of paradise and thrust us into history. Maybe we shouldn't be trying to get back to paradise because maybe we can't anyway. Maybe we should see the advantage of being in

history. Maybe there's something redemptive and necessary about the experience of living in an historical time bound world. As for the breaking of the vessels, the rabbis of the Talmud said it is far better to have sinned and repented than to never have sinned at all.

Isn't that astonishing? He doesn't mention that a lot of other rabbis took issue with that because the obvious conclusion is the more sin, the better… the more sin, the more repentance, so lets all sin more! Then other rabbis said, "Wait, I'm not so sure about that!" He left that part out. Anyway, the majority opinion seems to be that it's impossible not to sin actually, so that's why it's good to sin and repent. Because then we're stronger… they said it's just like a broken bone. A bone that gets broken and mends is stronger than a bone before it gets broken, which apparently is a medical fact. A lot of these rabbis were also doctors I guess. There are a lot of Jewish doctors you know.

All of this raises more questions. Suffering may very well be inevitable but can it also be useful? Is the history that we were thrust into after our fall from Eden not only inevitable but also something we needed to go through, something that benefited us more than remaining in a static paradise would have done? In a teaching that turns the Four Noble Truths on its collective head, Rabbi Nachman, the great rabbi master of the 18th century, seems to answer these questions in the affirmative. Here's a quotation from the Rabbi:

*"The strength of a person's desire is brought about by the impediments that happen to him or her. So when a person needs to do something, hindrance will always arise in the path and this hindrance is for the sake of the desire. By means of the hindrance, she will have greater desire to do this thing that she needs to do than she would have, had there been no such obstacle. For whenever a person is prevented from doing something, his or her desire to do it becomes that much stronger. Obstacles are placed in the way of a person who needs to do something so that his desire to do it will be increased. (*I think Rabbi Nachman here is speaking very much from his own experience because he had many, many inner and outer obstacles in his life.) *This is especially true in matters of holiness, because the more important the thing desired, the greater the obstacles that are presented. Consequently, when a person experiences many obstacles to the realization of some holy task he should realize that this shows the importance of the task. This is the general rule. Every obstacle is presented only for the increase of desire that once a person has a great desire to do something he will carry it out and the potential will become the actual."*

According to the Rabbi, then, there is an inevitable relationship between

our desire for the thing and the obstacle that stands in our way. If we didn't want a thing we wouldn't see what was stopping us from obtaining it as an obstacle. Although in Buddhism the existence of God is not acknowledged or denied, the God of Rabbi Nachman seems to have a pretty good idea of how the Four Noble Truths operate. Desire causes suffering but suffering also causes desire. If we desire that which we don't have, then suffering in the form of an impediment will only make us desire it more. So, suffering and desire are not inherent defects in the universe or God's mistakes; rather they are divine instruments. The Rabbi sees this use in awakening us on the spiritual path and quickening our resolve to remain on it as well. Indeed suffering can often be in awakening to the way things really and a pathway to a clearer vision in our lives.

I think it often happens that way; exactly that which we never wanted to see happen, which we feared and hoped we could escape, when it happens it opens us to a whole new life. So I think all these different thoughts and teachings make it clear to us that suffering is not a simple matter of something unpleasant to be avoided. Suffering is something pungent and pivotal in human life whatever your religious point of view or non-religious point of view. I think it's obvious to all of us that life can be powerfully meaningful to us, full of vibrancy and resonance and death or not; and we are built to search for that meaning, that depth and that power. When it's missing we become numb or bitter or brutal or sick in a thousand different ways. But when those things happen the suffering that comes from them can either reduce us to meaninglessness and despair or it can force us to seek a spiritual task and to pour our life's energy into that task exactly in proportion to the suffering.

So the question of suffering is a very deep human question. It certainly is one of the greatest of all human challenges and the greatest human opportunity. There is no way around it to stave it off for as long as possible. From my perspective that is not a great strategy. We really should think about this and see how we could turn toward that in our life that's most challenging and most rewarding.

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MOUNTAIN SILENCE

Issue 11: Autumn

Article

Catherine Gammon's visit to Totnes Sangha
July to September 2010

Written by Michael Elsmere

0700, Wednesday 7th July, 2010. Heathrow terminal 1. The United Airlines flight from San Francisco has landed on time and Francis Checkley and I are waiting at arrivals as an interminable stream of world travellers emerges, still perhaps air borne, wide eyed into a hustling world of movement and harsh lights. Eventually she emerges; a small figure dressed in black. We bow and present our small bouquet of wild flowers. Her smile lights up the airless gloom of the place. Catherine is to be with Dancing Mountains Zen sangha for two and a half months! Those of us at the 'Envisioning Weekend' in Totnes in Nov 2009 had prioritised this as one of the aims for the sangha for 2010. Consequently Francis Checkley had corresponded with Reb over the intervening months and all this was now coming to fruition.

Catherine was ordained a Soto Zen priest in the lineage of Shunryu Suzuki Roshi by Tenshin Reb Anderson in 2005. She had been in residential training at San Francisco Zen Centre since 2000, and served as Shuso, or head monk, for the Spring 2010 practice period at Green Dragon Temple/Green Gulch Farm. She had previously received precepts as a layperson in 1998 from Rev. Shohaku Okumura. Before entering residential training, Catherine wrote fiction and taught creative writing in the Master of Fine Arts programme of the University of Pittsburgh. Her novel *Isabel Out of the Rain* was published in 1991 by Mercury House and her shorter fiction had appeared in many literary journals.

She was to spend some time in each Dancing Mountains sangha beginning with a longer period in the south-west in Totnes where Francis and Bernadette had offered her accommodation.

Almost immediately we were participating in early morning sittings on Mondays and Thursdays with Catherine instructing us with expert detail on the forms for morning service. Josh and Francis had organised a series of talks, sittings and discussions at a local natural health centre.

Those on Bodhicitta and Emptiness looked at teachings on bodhicitta both in terms of practices that cultivate and sustain it (including reasonings about suffering and ignorance, practices that cultivate compassion, and precepts, ritual and zazen), and in terms of the emptiness teachings of the *Diamond Sutra* and the importance of emptiness in our practice of the bodhisattva vow. Altogether there were eight evenings and these for the most part were well attended and we came into contact with many other Buddhists from Totnes that we had never met before as well as young people wishing to learn more about Buddhism. There was much very positive feedback on Catherine's clear, humorous and succinct approach to teaching and discussion.

On four Tuesday afternoons we met in the zendo where we immersed ourselves in the sophisticated, mind bending, philosophy of Master Dogen's Fascicle on Painted Rice Cakes. We all felt that we could have spent much longer on this difficult but absorbing text. We had a number of translations available which proved to us the difficulty of translating medieval Japanese and Chinese into our modern English idiom.

Catherine was also approached by The Barn at Sharpham and asked to give talks on Meditation and questions arising from practice. The Barn is a Buddhist meditation retreat centre set in a stunning hillside location overlooking the River Dart. It has been a friendly retreat centre for over 25 years where people are given the opportunity to reconnect with themselves and with nature in a tranquil, supportive environment. Through a mixture of mindfulness practice, teacher-led inquiry and working meditation in the organic garden, small groups of retreatants focus on and support the development of mindful practice in everyday life. Again retreatants were very appreciative of the insight and depth that Catherine brought to sessions with them.

Catherine as a writer in her 'previous life' had offered to lead a 'Writing as a Wisdom Project,' workshop during her stay. I knew this would be of interest to many of the writers I knew in the area but I admit I was a little concerned as to how they would react to the sitting in silence and stillness at the beginning of the morning and afternoon sessions. This is a pretty lively garrulous group! Again Catherine's experience as writer and tutor was apparent and we spent a lively, fruitful day writing questioning and discussing books and literary matters. Again the feedback was very encouraging and appreciative and asked for more of the same!

A formal one-day retreat ended Catherine's stay with us. To sit in silence and stillness in a beautiful rural setting, the leaves on the trees fading was perhaps a fitting conclusion to a visit that had brought to all of us in

Totnes so many riches and eloquent teachings.

Leaving Catherine at Heathrow both Francis and I felt that her visit had emphasised what we both already knew; that a good teacher is an inexpressible blessing.

Michael

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MOUNTAIN SILENCE

Issue 11: Autumn

Article

Suffering

Written by Francis Checkley

The existentialist writer Jean-Paul Sartre once observed that "L'Enfer, c'est les autres". Hell is others. This otherness is suffering. Early childhood experience, marked by an oceanic and blissful feeling of oneness soon gives way to a growing sense of separation and the accompanying suffering that Sartre alludes to.

We are then progressively conditioned into a construct of reality whereby we identify more and more with our senses and consciousness until we become convinced of a fixed, separate and unchanging self. And so arises the black hole of worldly mind, forever dissatisfied, perpetually judging and speaking ill of others, always seeking and clinging onto whatever might allay our fears of loneliness, and desperation that we may never find our sense of belonging, our true home.

And so we take refuge in the Three Treasures. In Buddha as the Perfect Teacher, in Dharma as the Perfect Teaching and in Sangha as the Perfect Life. But how, we might ask, is Sangha the Perfect Life? Partly I think because in the growing intimacy of Sangha, our deeply cherished sense of self more readily manifests. All of our personal dogma, tightly held convictions, stereotypes, judgemental attitudes, prejudices, become available for study.

To be with Sangha friends in meetings is to come face to face with a whole array of world views, of methodically and precise social constructs that even the gentlest of probing, gives rise to anxiety. Anxiety because we begin to realise how precarious and ultimately indefensible our "take" on reality is. And without practice and at least a minimum of insight, it is a "take" we will defend with all our reserves of ingenuity and cunning, even to the point of attacking those who, by their mere presence, question our "truth".

The question for us is to what extent we can remain relaxed with our personal and collective suffering and how forms of non-violent communication might facilitate a non-threatening spaciousness in our

lives. For many of us, even after years of sitting practice, it can be quite humbling to witness the fear and anxiety underpinning our veneer of tranquility. And it is with great sadness that we see the part we play in the creation of our own and each others suffering.

Maybe because of our continuous turning away, sometimes in the most subtle and devious means of avoidance, we fail to recognise the Noble Truth of Suffering, the truth which is ultimately liberating.

With deep bows, Francis.

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Extract

A Handful of Leaves

Source: Venerable Ajahn Sumedho's book 'The Four Noble Truths'
Amaravati Publications, 1992

The Blessed One was once living at Kosambi in a wood of simsapa trees. He picked up a few leaves in his hand, and he asked the bhikkhus, “How do you conceive this, bhikkhus. Which is more, the few leaves that I have picked up in my hand or those on the trees in the wood?”

“The leaves that the Blessed One has picked up in his hand are few, Lord; those in the wood are far more.”

“So too, bhikkhus, the things that I have known by direct knowledge are more; the things that I have told you are few. Why have I not told them? Because they bring no benefit, no advancement in the Holy Life, and because they do not lead to dispassion, to fading, to ceasing, to stilling, to direct knowledge, to enlightenment, to Nibbana. That is why I have not told them. And what have I told you? This is suffering; this is the origin of suffering; this is the cessation of suffering; this is the way leading to the cessation of suffering. That is what I have told you. Why have I told it? Because it brings benefit, and advancement in the Holy Life, and because it leads to dispassion, to fading, to ceasing, to stilling, to direct knowledge, to enlightenment, to Nibbana. So bhikkhus, let your task be this: This is suffering, this is the origin of suffering, this is the cessation of suffering, this is the way leading to the cessation of suffering.”

(Samyutta Nikaya LVI, 31)

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MOUNTAIN SILENCE

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Book reviews

Two novels of exile and loss:
'The Other Hand,' by Chris Cleave
'The Road Home,' by Rose Tremain

Written by Michael Elsmere.

"How can we live without our lives?"
John Steinbeck: 'The Grapes of Wrath.'

We often hear from politicians of all colours the phrase, "the British are a tolerant people." Often cited are the various waves of immigration that have taken place into the country most recently from Eastern Europe but before that from Africa, the Caribbean, Jews from Europe and further back in history the Hugeonots escaping persecution in France. There is often a tone of self congratulation about the phrase which is then often followed by "but," with a long string of reasons why immigration should be reduced or even cease. The recent 'cap' on immigration by the coalition government is an example of this mixed response to immigrants whether political refugees or economic migrants. What is a just, compassionate solution? There is little doubt that we are all implicated in the treatment that is afforded to immigrants. How, I often wonder, can we meet the challenges with wisdom and skill in order to mitigate suffering and loss?

The two books in this review plunge into the debate and depict in graphic detail the acute suffering of ordinary people who are forced to leave their loved ones and their homeland in search of what we all yearn for; a safe warm place to live, an opportunity to work and a healthy environment to bring up children. Perhaps beneath all those airy political soundbites there are the dark shadows of avoidance and denial?

The Other Hand takes the reader from the bush of West Africa via a shocking encounter on a Nigerian beach to the glitzy media offices of London and domesticity in leafy suburbia. The book begins in a Kafkaesque immigration detention centre set somewhere in south-east Britain. Little Bee, a 16-year-old Ibo girl from Nigeria, has been 'detained', an Orwellian Ministry of Truth word, here for the last two years, teaching herself skills that point back to horrific past events and

forward to a hoped-for future. Making herself look unattractive to 'the men' is the first of several allusions to Little Bee's past. Learning the Queen's English from quality broadsheets obsessively, although having obvious relevance, also points to a fearful desperation for anonymity.

"Excuse me for learning your language properly. I am here to tell you a real story. I did not come here to talk to you about the bright African colours."

These colours, when they come - on a beach in Nigeria - are dark Goyaesque, and the route back to them begins with Little Bee's so called 'release' from the centre with three other traumatised women, variously cheerful, bewildered and suicidal, and a phone call to a columnist and journalist, Andrew O'Rourke. Little Bee had encountered Andrew and his wife Sarah on that beach in Nigeria. Now he is stunned and dismayed to hear from her.

From this, the rest of Little Bee's story begins to unfold. Something horrific has happened that has not only left its mark on the teenage Ibo girl but has shaken the O'Rourke family to its foundations. In Kingston-upon-Thames, Andrew suffers from acute depression. Sarah, who edits a women's magazine called Nixie, pursues an unhappy affair. Their young son Charlie dresses and lives as Batman. Their story is narrated by Sarah - necessarily so, because in the time between Little Bee's telephone call and her arrival in Kingston, Andrew commits suicide.

"It started on the day we first met Little Bee, on a lonely beach in Nigeria. The only souvenir I have of that first meeting is an absence where the middle finger of my left hand used to be. The amputation is quite clean. In place of my finger is a stump, a phantom digit that used to be responsible for the E, D and C keys on my laptop," relates Sarah.

Cleave's unobtrusive skill in sentences like that allows the world of the machete to be glimpsed through the world of the laptop. Most of the action has already happened when Little Bee and Sarah reunite. Then, in a violent, compressed, intense and chilling setpiece flashback, he has Little Bee tell how she first met the O'Rourkes in Nigeria, and what happened on the beach. This kernel of violence throws up a stark choice and drives a wedge between Sarah and Andrew O'Rourke. Life in England may appear superficial compared to a life-and-death struggle for existence in the tropical forests east of the Niger. Little Bee, however, has voted with her feet. One can have too much authenticity. Too much world.

We know the pressures that the steady flow of immigrants has caused in our society, though we hear less about the benefits of having them here;

nor do we have much idea what they think about us or their lives.

Lev, the Polish migrant in Rose Tremain's book, expects to find men who looked like Alec Guinness in 'The Bridge on the River Kwai,' but found they were slovenly fat geezers with shaven heads and garish tattoos, and not so different from those he worked alongside in the sawmills back home before losing his job. The tragic death of his adored wife, his responsibility for his small daughter and his ageing mother, and the need for money in a decaying village that has lost its heart, persuade Lev to leave for London. Lev's London is awash with money, celebrity and complacency – an ugly picture of the way we live now. Fortunately, he's a dreamer with a will of iron and the luck of the devil, as well as being strikingly handsome – as Lydia, the woman sitting beside him on the bus, is quick to spot. She is a translator and teaches him a little English on the bus, and gives him her address in London.

Lev sleeps rough and is afforded kindnesses by strangers, all foreigners like him. He distributes leaflets for a restaurant and finally has to ring Lydia. She scans the 'Wanted' columns for him. He finds a job washing up in a restaurant under a famous egotistical chef, G. K. Ashe, who wants his pans "clean enough to drink cocktails from". Lev finds a room with the dissolute Irish Christy, a kindly drunk who hates celebrities: "If you can't get your ball at the back of the net you're no one." Lev is hardworking and adept and is rapidly promoted. Money flows back to Poland. Nothing but success lies ahead. Only the longing for his daughter keeps him awake at nights. However, apparent ruin faces him when he is arrested after a drunken assault on his vacuous English girl friend and Ashe sacks him.

Tremain has reached a turning point. This dilemma is resolved when Lev hears that his village is to be destroyed in order to build a new dam. He has no choice but to return. He's now an accomplished chef, so he can, and does, make money fast. He could, of course, send more money home and stay put but he chooses to pretend that he's burnt his boats here. Besides, he's hatched a new plan to make money back home that, he being Lev, sounds mad but is not. We know he will make it work.

Rose Tremain writes apparently effortlessly, tackling the serious misery of a hidden homesickness with a light and humane touch but with a firm grasp of the terrible day-to-day realities. She has a rare ability to enter into the complex emotional world of the stranger, the foreigner, the outsider. She's on Lev's side. England has made him a chef, but when is gratitude ever enough to overcome the longing to go back to one's own, to live one's own life?

Michael

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