

HIGHLAND

SPRING/SUMMER 2010 NEWSLETTER

TRIRATNA BUDDHIST COMMUNITY

SANGHA

Editorial

Welcome to the spring/summer newsletter – this time we have some wonderful articles on the theme of ‘Deepening Our Practise’. As I sit tucked up indoors on a very cold, rainy and windy day I am reflecting that the concept of ‘Spring’ has many levels and that growth and new life can take many forms!

The purpose of our newsletter is to support and encourage each other through sharing our experiences and ideas and we welcome contributions, short or long, in a variety of forms, from all of our Sangha. If you would like to contribute perhaps, about something you have studied or read, a retreat you’ve been on or something you are just ‘exploring’ in the context of the Dharma please get in touch. It can be written but what about using the form of a poem, painting, drawing or a photograph? We aim to produce a newsletter three times a year but are happy to receive items at any time.

Please contact Jo at: jo@highlandeco.org.uk

Read on and enjoy!

Spending Time With Our Sangha.....

Our residential weekend retreat this year was held at Mhoniak Mhor writer's centre.

Just half an hour from Inverness but it felt like the middle of nowhere, with a vast sky and plenty of weather dancing over it during our stay.

The theme for the gathering was Sangha.

We looked at an excerpt from Sangharakshita's 'What is the Sangha' and also had a wee conversation café on how we collectively and then more personally engage with our practice.

For me, getting away for a w/e is usually hard work as my family are involved in a variety of activities and juggling everyone around is a bit of an organisational feat!

But there is also the difficulty in leaving behind ones activities and identity and engaging in something which is out with the 'normal world'. So part of retreat resistance for me can be about that simple tension between 'the world' and 'the spiritual'!

And here is the rub-how to draw these two together and to use the tension creatively?

Using the time to reflect on the Sangha is a very lovely and effective way to work with this experience.

Why? We have to be able to emotionally engage with what we

are doing, we have to be able to draw on our passions and pains in order to integrate ourselves, to understand ourselves, to be able to leave behind or disengage from what ultimately hurts us and move towards what is ultimately beautiful and helps us. And we need all the help we can get in our endeavours!

And friends in the good life are invaluable for this - to encourage when we are struggling, to rejoice in our qualities and insights, to confess with in order to attempt to leave unskilfulness behind, to share excitement and beauty with or just to have fun with.

But also concern and involvement for friends can take us beyond our own concerns and involvements and enables us act with kindness even when we feel challenged in so doing - it is easier to discount or disregard e.g. a practice of mindfulness whilst washing the dishes, than engage with a friend's demands or observations!

So spending time with our Sangha, our friends, is time well spent.

One small insight I've uncovered in the last wee while is the depth to which we are all connected with each other. But there is also the understanding that we need to be and to feel connected in order to be truly human. And this does present me with a challenge.- other people are messy, take

time, require communication, are upset by my actions sometimes.... but also other people present me with endless opportunities - to understand my nature, to give and receive, to connect with, to inspire, to be understood.

So friendship is very much a fundamental part of the spiritual life and very much an effective tool for growth.

We concluded the w/e by looking at how we could help each other practice more together.

The possibility of more than one residential w/e next year, of having a group outing to the Glasgow Buddhist Centre for a festival day and to set up Facebook site for the Highland Sangha were all ways we thought were worth investigating as a means of practicing together.

So a weekend spent together, practising and attempting to understand the Dharma together was a lovely and rewarding thing to do. And in the midst of such beautiful scenery and comfort I look forward to this opportunity again.

Sridakini

Becoming a Mitra in the Highland Sangha

In many ways I felt like a Mitra long before the ceremonial 'coming out'. I had been practicing enthusiastically for three years and studying with a group of Mitras for a year before deciding to make my commitment public. When I told the group that I was going to become a Mitra some of them were surprised because they thought I already was! Sangharakshita highlights the importance of public ritual in our spiritual development and his views about this resonated and made sense to me

At first I thought that it would be good if the ceremony took place at my home with my Mitra group and family around me; I could build a shrine and spend some time preparing the space and myself. I was thinking of my family who wanted to be there with me; I thought it would be 'easier' for them if it was at our home.



However, there was also the option of having the ceremony conducted within the context of a Highland Sangha Practice day at someone else's home. I lived with both options for a while and decided that it was important to go somewhere more public and less parochial. I felt good about this decision.

On the day I was very excited and quite anxious too. What would it be like? Would I feel any different? Would my family be OK with it all? My husband had asked me what it might mean for me to be a Mitra. I said I didn't know. Maybe I would meditate more for a week or two afterwards but otherwise maybe not very much. After all, I already felt very committed to going for refuge and was practicing as best I could most of the time!

I was so pleased that I had decided to have the ceremony in the context of a practice day; it somehow made sense and felt right. I was glad not to be orchestrating it the way I might have at home. It meant I was free to be more open to what I was doing and how that felt. The plan was to study in the morning and have the ceremony after lunch. My husband and one of my sons would join us then.

The morning was inspiring and I felt energised by Sridakini's talk. After lunch I went into the shrine room to have a bit of time on my own and think about what I was about to do. I was immediately struck by the changes that had taken place; there were two extra 'spaces' with cushions and copies of the Puja book and my cushion had been positioned in the centre of the circle. I felt touched by the care that was clearly being taken to make space for my family to join us and I felt some anxiety that I had been moved to the middle. As my husband and son arrived they were greeted warmly and shown to their places. Everyone else came into the shrine room and after some time hanging about at the edge, I took my place centre stage.

The actual Mitra ceremony was conducted by Satyapada who was the first person I met when I initially made contact with the FWBO, so this seemed fitting and I liked the sense of continuity. I also really appreciated her sensitivity and thoughtfulness; she suggested that in honour of the new Triratna community that I actively and publically make my commitment to the three jewels. This was inspired I think and was a very important part of the ritual. I was aware that my energy and emotion was particularly stirred up in the declaration of my commitment to the Sangha and in their rejoicing in my merit. It's difficult for me to articulate my feeling of open and full-heartedness as I sat in that room in the heart of the Sangha and in the presence of my family. I felt open and tender with a heart full of Metta. It was awesome. Thank you. Thank you to those who were there and to those who would like to have been there.

Gerry

Deepening Practice in the Everyday: Listening

Recently, on a car journey to Ullapool, I was listening to an old cassette of a talk by Sangharakshita on Right Speech. In passing he mentioned that, “of course”, the speech precepts also apply to listening. This caught my interest immediately. I confess that I don’t spend a lot of time sitting in meditation (list of excuses available on application) and the bedrock of my engagement with the Three Jewels is mindfulness practice in daily life. Sangharakshita’s remark suddenly made me realise that although I work on my speech as part of my practice, beyond trying to be a “good listener” I hadn’t given the process of listening much thought.

Speech is of great importance in Buddhism and gives us four of the ten precepts undertaken on ordination into Triratna Buddhist Order. They are to refrain from false speech, harsh speech, meaningless and superficial speech and slanderous speech. The positive expressions of these are to practice truthful communication, kindly and gracious communication, helpful communication and harmonious communication. So applying these to listening, to receiving the speech of other people, we can form a clearer, deeper idea of what it means to be a good listener in a Buddhist sense.

To take some examples, I know that often as I listen to someone recount an incident I am forming judgements in my mind, perhaps thinking that s/he should have acted differently, had made a mistake, acted unskillfully etc – and in fact, sometimes being quite harsh in my listening! Or my attention wanders off and I simply go through the motions of listening: “Oh yes, mmm, really...” in a way that is not helpful at all. It’s also too easy, although avoiding slanderous speech myself, to collude in gossipy or complain-y conversations by simply listening and not trying to move the conversation to be more positive and creative.

Another example of unskillful listening is not giving others our full attention when they are speaking because we are keen to contribute to the conversation ourselves. I have a tendency to interrupt, to cut people off before they have really finished their sentence. Sometimes this is because I think I know what they’re going to say, or because there are other people also in the conversation all wanting to join in, and I want to speak before someone else does ... and I’m so keen to speak that I don’t listen. This cuts me off from deeper communication and a deeper understanding of others. It is also taking the not given, being ungenerous with my attention.

We can express metta towards someone by giving them our full, loving attention. In Sharon Salzberg’s book “Loving-Kindness: The Revolutionary Art of Happiness” she tells of a friend who made a long and arduous journey to Sikkim to visit His Holiness the Sixteenth Karmapa. This friend, to his great delight, was granted an audience with the Karmapa and was amazed to find that the Karmapa treated him as though his visit was incredibly special and important, “not through any grandiose gestures or ceremony, but rather through the simplicity and completeness of the Karmapa’s presence, which offered my friend an experience of being completely loved.” I imagine that the Karmapa didn’t express this love by doing all the talking!

Listening well in daily life is an ideal training ground for deepening practice. It helps us to strengthen our loving-kindness, sympathetic joy (mudita) and compassion (karuna) and our general awareness. It is also a practice of generosity. And it’s very, very accessible...

That passing comment by Sangharakshita has given me a new way of deepening my practice which is constantly challenging and engaging. So now I’m off to meet my three children from the school bus, and to listen to the stories of their day. My immediate intention is to listen well, fully, kindly, as a way of expressing my love for them.

Lizbeth

Buddhism via Blackberry

As anyone who was on the recent Sangha retreat, or who has been to the recent beginners courses will know, I have a new Blackberry - not a piece of fruit, but a mobile phone from which you can get online, manage your emails, organise your calendar... I have been singing it's praises ever since, to the extent that folk are wondering if I'm on commission. But what has this got to do with Buddhism?

In the last few years, more and more Buddhist resources have become available online, both within the Triratna Buddhist Community and from elsewhere, and I now have all these materials available to me, at a click of a button, 24 hours a day. I wanted to know if this could help to deepen my practice, or whether it would just be another distraction.

I have signed up to FWBO news (<http://fwbo-news.blogspot.com/>), and everyday or two I get some news from within the Order. It is wonderfully inspiring, and there has been a huge variety of stories; I have particularly enjoyed hearing about new centres becoming established in Brixton, where I used to practice, as well as Worcester and Exeter, and thinking of ways in which we might apply what has been learned there to our own efforts to establish a centre in Inverness.

I regularly listen to talks from Free Buddhist Audio (<http://www.freebuddhistaudio.com/>), which I can do in my lunchbreak or walking to and from work. I look at our own website for the Triratna Buddhist Community Highlands (<http://www.bigmind.org.uk/>) as well as the sites of the Glasgow Buddhist Centre (<http://www.glasgowbuddhistcentre.com/>) and Dhanakosa (<http://www.dhanakosa.com/>) to find out what's happening, and to decide which events to go to. I browse through the resources at the main FWBO site (<http://www.fwbo.org/>), and when friends express an interest in the concept of a retreat, I email them the details for [GoingOnRetreat.com](http://goingonretreat.com/) (<http://goingonretreat.com/>).

I keep up with Buddhist friends on facebook, including the Glasgow Buddhist Centre which has its own page. (We are looking in to setting up a Triratna Buddhist Community Highlands facebook page - email me if you're interested.) I also keep up with what's happening in the world of Engaged Buddhism in the UK through the website of the Network of Engaged Buddhists (<http://www.engagedbuddhists.org.uk/>).

All of these things have helped me to learn more about the Dharma, and to connect with the wider Sangha. But of course practice is not about reading information, helpful though that might be; I can read about meditation, listen to talks about it, discuss it online... but for it to work, I need to just sit down and get on with it. And nothing compares to face to face contact with other practising Buddhists. The recent weekend Sangha retreat showed me that the development of spiritual friendship through entering in to relationship with other practising individuals is at the heart of the Sangha, and no amount of online information can replace this.

Claire Martin

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A Personal Mandala

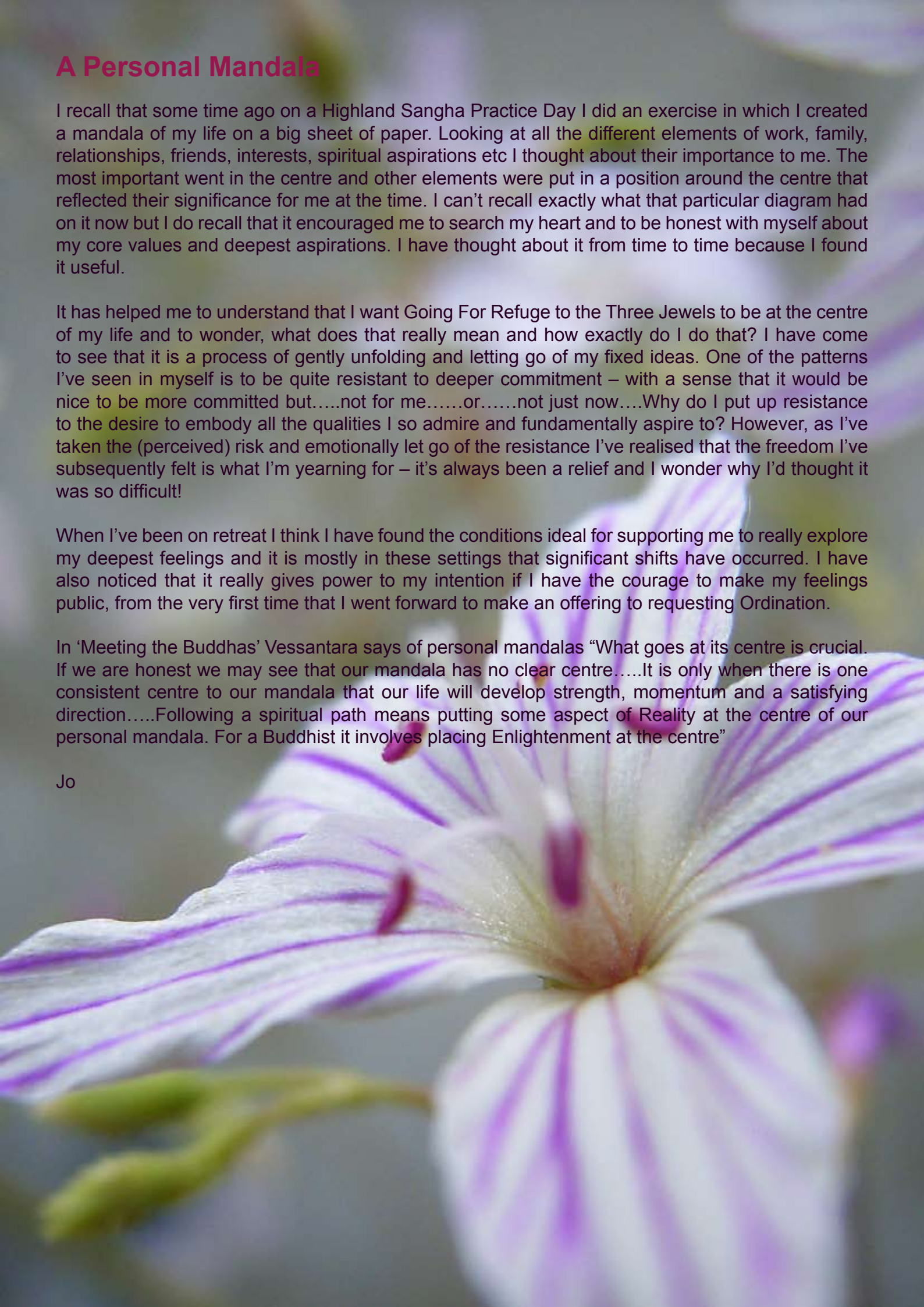
I recall that some time ago on a Highland Sangha Practice Day I did an exercise in which I created a mandala of my life on a big sheet of paper. Looking at all the different elements of work, family, relationships, friends, interests, spiritual aspirations etc I thought about their importance to me. The most important went in the centre and other elements were put in a position around the centre that reflected their significance for me at the time. I can't recall exactly what that particular diagram had on it now but I do recall that it encouraged me to search my heart and to be honest with myself about my core values and deepest aspirations. I have thought about it from time to time because I found it useful.

It has helped me to understand that I want Going For Refuge to the Three Jewels to be at the centre of my life and to wonder, what does that really mean and how exactly do I do that? I have come to see that it is a process of gently unfolding and letting go of my fixed ideas. One of the patterns I've seen in myself is to be quite resistant to deeper commitment – with a sense that it would be nice to be more committed but.....not for me.....or.....not just now....Why do I put up resistance to the desire to embody all the qualities I so admire and fundamentally aspire to? However, as I've taken the (perceived) risk and emotionally let go of the resistance I've realised that the freedom I've subsequently felt is what I'm yearning for – it's always been a relief and I wonder why I'd thought it was so difficult!

When I've been on retreat I think I have found the conditions ideal for supporting me to really explore my deepest feelings and it is mostly in these settings that significant shifts have occurred. I have also noticed that it really gives power to my intention if I have the courage to make my feelings public, from the very first time that I went forward to make an offering to requesting Ordination.

In 'Meeting the Buddhas' Vessantara says of personal mandalas "What goes at its centre is crucial. If we are honest we may see that our mandala has no clear centre.....It is only when there is one consistent centre to our mandala that our life will develop strength, momentum and a satisfying direction.....Following a spiritual path means putting some aspect of Reality at the centre of our personal mandala. For a Buddhist it involves placing Enlightenment at the centre"

Jo



Tara Practice Day

The next practise day, to be held at Anam Cara on the 29th August will be led by Gunapala on the theme of Green Tara.

Time: from 10am till 4.30pm.

Gunapala is planning for a day of Ritual and devotion, with Puja and readings to invoke the Bodhisattva Tara: Tara is an archytypal embodiment of compassion- who steps down into the world to alleviate suffering

The day will be suitable for beginners and for those without prior experience of Puja (devotional practise/ worship).

Puja (devotional practise / worship) is one way of opening up the heart, to higher, more spiritual qualities like Compassion.

What to bring:

Vegetarian lunch to share.

Those who have already connected with Tara could bring along their favourite devotional verse or image to include in the ritual.

Suggested donations:

The suggested donation is £20 for the day. Please feel free to give less according to what you can afford.

All donations will go towards supporting further Triratna Buddhist Community Events and classes.

Tel: 01343 850011
for more information.



We are very pleased indeed to welcome back Ex-Helen, from her ordination retreat in Spain. She returns to us radiantly - as **Abhayadevi!**

Her name means Fearless/ undaunted Goddess and her private Preceptor, Gunasiddhi wrote this about her, when introducing her to the Order:

“Ex-Helen first came into contact with the Dharma when she was living in the Shetland Isles. Her contact with the FWBO, as it was then, was through attending weekend retreats that Vimalavajra led. It was on one of these that she asked to become a mitra.

She then moved to Inverness where she works full time in the health service. She has two grown up children and elderly parents who live next door to her.”

“I think it is remarkable,” Gunasiddhi says, “given her conditions, that she is now ready to join the Order. Since she came in contact with the Dharma she has made it a priority to go on retreats even though this involves a lot of travel. She is self-disciplined especially with regard to her meditation practise and I have never heard her complain about her conditions; she just takes the initiative to meet her spiritual needs.”

“Paraphrasing Bhante Sangarakshita (the founder of the Triratna Buddhist Order),

‘the would be Bodhisattva has no worries, she just gives herself to the spiritual life. So long as you are still wondering what to do with your life you remain unclear, unsure and therefore un-confident. But in a sense once you have made up your mind and committed yourself, in a sense everything is looked after and there is nothing to worry about’.

He also says that of all the great Buddhists he has met with there were certain qualities which despite their differences they all seemed to possess.

‘To begin with they were all very single minded, once they had discovered their purpose they never wavered. Then they were all characterised by fearlessness’.

Abhayadevi has this quality of having made up her mind; she is undaunted, fearless. It is a heroic quality. Of course someone who is completely fearless is Enlightened so that is there in her name too.

Abhayadevi is also sensitive to beauty, art, music and literature. She has a response to the archetypal and to Green Tara as the luminous embodiment of compassion. So her name has both the heroic quality of fearlessness and the softer quality of the devi. I am sure she will contribute greatly to the Highland Sangha. She is a fourth sight, giving others who live in similar conditions the confidence that they too can go forth.”

Sadhu Abhayadevi!

