

**The Voice of Amida Shu: Pureland Buddhism**

**Absolute Grace**

**Total Engagement**

Issue 38 Summer 2019

# **RUNNING TIDE**



**Quan Yin – Bodhisattva of Compassion**

## **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. Running Tide is distributed by:

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**Correspondence and Contributions** Submissions are welcome for consideration and can be sent to the Editor Johnathan Robertson at [jdrobertson87@live.com](mailto:jdrobertson87@live.com).

### **Amida Order & School**

The Amida Order and Amida School are a religious order and community, respectively, following the Pureland tradition, established under the auspices of the Amida Trust. In this periodical the letters OAB after a name indicate membership of the Order of Amida Buddha and the letters MAS indicate membership of the Amida School. The Amida School is also referred to as Amida Shu. All Order members are also School members.

### **Amida Trust**

A religious charity established in UK, registration number 1060589, for the furtherance of Buddhism. The Trust sponsors a wide range of Buddhist activities. The Amida Trust is a member of the Network of Buddhist Organisations in the UK, the European Buddhist Union, as well as the World Buddhist University, and has mutual affiliation with the Buddhist Peace Fellowship.

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## **EDITORIAL**

Dear Readers,

Hello everyone. For those you don't know me, I'm Johnathan Robertson, an aspirant in Amida Shu living in Maryland, USA. I'm happy to be given the opportunity to be the editor of Running Tide.

This issue will be focusing on diversity, and we have many wonderful voices sharing their experiences. Thank you to Dharmavidya, Kodo Nishimura, Nandarane Naina Parmar, Dayamay, Andrew Cheffings, Kaspalita, and Damian Smyth. Furthermore, I would like to thank Robert Waldron for his work in keeping Running Tide going.

I hope you enjoy this issue and I look forward to future submissions from the Sangha.

Namo Amida Bu

### **The editions and themes**

#### **Summer – Diversity in religious organisations**

Buddhism like many traditions in the West is increasingly being challenged by what could be called a rightful demand for inclusion.

#### **Winter – Meditation**

The winter can be a time to slow down and reflect and so we may look to meditation as a response to the seasons calling.

## **DIVERSITY IN BUDDHISM**

**By Dharmavidya**

Buddhism is not a cloning exercise. Buddha had many disciples and they were all distinct personalities and more so for following his teaching. Buddha had a talent for bringing out the special quality in each person. Honen was the same. Honen started a school of Buddhism that continues to this day, but he had disciples in many others schools as well. Buddhism, correctly understood, fosters diversity by liberating each person to be the best that they can be, each in a distinctive manner. We liberate others by not being focussed upon our own needs.

Such growth and flowering requires a fertile space. A fertile space is a community in which love, compassion, enthusiasm for one another and equanimity to surpass obstacles prevail. Such a community is a sangha - the sangha that we take refuge in. It is a bright pearl that can reflect the light of truth in all directions and be a precious treasure that we guard at all times. It is a safe home where old karma can be healed or composted. We might not always match up to such an ideal in our actual daily interactions, but we take this refuge in our hearts so that there is always a spiritual force within pulling us toward the centre. When people are accepted as they are there is no need to show off nor to go to extremes nor take up self-defensive poses; no reason not to welcome the stranger.

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The Buddha taught ekagata. This is a seemingly paradoxical principle according to which the most profound meeting occurs when the participants are each utterly alone, meaning totally authentic while expecting nothing in return, standing just upon their faith and not in any way trying to manipulate, ingratiate, seduce or change the other. Singular in being both completely authentic in who and what they are and deeply respectful of this being the case for the other. Natural. Deep respect is a foundation for real love, which is not possessive and does not attempt in any way to colonise the other. Respect the other as other, this is the basis of divine love, the divine eye that Buddha speaks of. This is liberation of self and other.

This means, among other things, that when something “goes wrong” one should always first look to one’s own practise, training and faith to see what is going on there, and ensure that one has a firm spiritual footing before launching forth to try to fix things in the world. We always have something to learn - much to learn.

Much of ordinary society is a matter of conforming to civilised conventions that preserve a superficial appearance of social harmony. This is good as far as it goes, but it does not go far. In a sangha we go further. Every member of the sangha is a special treasure. The aim of a true teacher is that each member of the sangha flourish in his or her own particular way. It is a great delight to see them doing so. This is an aspect of “grandmotherly mind” as taught by Dogen.

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Buddhism is a middle way, not in the sense of compromise, not in being half-hearted nor full of ifs and buts, but in the sense that the central current is the most powerful. On one side there is the extreme of defensive isolation, resentment and self-pity. On the other side there is the extreme of identification, merger, co-option and co-dependency. The person who practises ekagata is natural and does not go to these extremes and so is not needy. The water flowing close to the bank of a river gets caught in eddies while that in midstream surges ahead. Just so, the noble disciple of Buddha takes life on, rises to its challenge, and does what needs to be done without pretention.

There are many schools of Buddhism. All good, even if inhabited by fallible human beings who sometimes become narrow or overly self concerned. The diversity of schools in Buddhism mostly stems simply from the diversity of people. Different folk need different strokes. This was true even in the time of Buddha himself. Different seekers had different needs and Buddha's leading disciples were a very diverse group. By the time Buddha was old, there were far too many disciples for him to teach them directly and so he would send them to this or that person among his group of close followers. Go to Shariputra and learn the principles and how to think properly; or, go to Maudgalyayana and learn mystic practices; or to Kashyapa and practise asceticism for a while; or to Subhuti and learn about emptiness; or go to Purna and learn how to give a good sermon; or to Anuruddha and learn mindfulness; or Upali and learn vinaya discipline; and so on.

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Thus, from the very beginning there were groups of practitioners learning in different ways, all within the Dharma-Vinaya of Buddha, but with different emphases and different syllabuses. Thus to this day, in Buddhist countries you tend to find different groups or schools focussed upon the philosophy, the meditations, the discipline, the faith, and so on. These are all just different facets of the same thing - different doorways into the same Great Dharma Hall.

Just as there are many doorways into the Great Dharma Hall, so there are also many exits. Some issue forth to become social activists, some to become hermits in the mountains, some to write poetry, some to work in industry, some to be doctors or social workers, some to become celibate, some to raise families, some to travel the world, some to settle in one place. All carry the same Three Jewels - Buddha, Dharma and Sangha - in their hearts. All preserve faith in the Dharma that surpasses ordinary attachments, that opens onto the deathless, that shows us nirvana, and that fills our lives with the grace of all the Buddhas. All the Buddhas smile upon them, these bodhisattvas rising from the earth.

In the Larger Pureland Sutra we are told that the denizens of the Pure Land spend their time travelling to the Pure Lands of other Buddhas and making offerings to them in whatever way is suitable in the particular case. This is a manifesto for inter-religious respect. Similarly, in Roshi Kennett's Litany to Quan Shi Yin, we read:

Give us the wisdom to know that what the Christian churches teach has been taught by the Buddhas for thousands of years;



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Give us the wisdom to take the Sufis by the hand and, in their dancing, to know the joy of meditation;

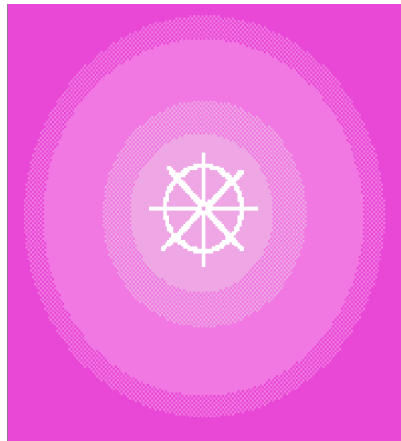
Give us the understanding that the Jewish festivals are celebrated by Buddhas;

Teach people to know that peace in the world can only be gained if we make peace with one another deep in our hearts;

Teach us to know that we are responsible, every one of us, for the conflicts that tear the world, because of the greed and conflict in our own hearts;

Teach us to face ourselves as we really are by holding up your mirror, in all your manifestations before us;

Teach us that all beings, of whatever colour, religion, or species they may be, are equally loved by all the Buddhas.



## Kodo Nishimura

I am delighted to know that there is a beautiful group where they practice Nembutsu and learn about Amida Buddhism in Malvern England. I believe that this teaching is liberal and forgiving and helps your life to be more balanced.

Buddhism is something that told me that it is ok to be who I am to be happy, regardless of my sexuality or gender.

My name is Kodo Nishimura, and I was born in a temple in Tokyo. I am certified as a Pureland Buddhist Monk, and also I am a Makeup Artist and an LGBTQ activist.

I used to struggle with my sexuality since when I was young. As a child, I told my mother that I am a girl. I

wore her mini skirt, so it became a gown for me, and danced to a song called "Bon Jour" from the Beauty and the Beast. As I grew older, I started to be confined and felt limited to express my joy due to the expectation of what a male should be from the society.

I was divided into red and blue, when I loved yellow and pink. I was assigned to wear trousers at schools and turned in to a male student when I felt in between. I felt that I was not welcomed and did not belong to the school system. Even though I had some female friends up till the middle school, at high school, boys hung out with the boys, the girls were always with the girls, and I did not have any friends. I

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felt hopelessly isolated there. I was unable to share my honest interests, such as Sailor Moon or Disney princess because I was scared of discrimination. I was once made fun of my sexuality, and I became quiet and completely shut my heart to protect myself. My heart was aching and screaming, "WHY!?" I felt that I am nice and funny enough to have at least some friends.



**Kodo the Pureland  
Buddhist monk**

Then I watched a movie called "Princess Diaries" where a sad student ignored, like me, gains confidence, and felt some hope to be heard, so I studied English as my life depended on it, and succeeded to attend an art school in NY; Parsons The New School for Design. I learned that it is ok to nourish my passion with new friends and people there. Since I was interested in beauty, I started to assist a makeup artist during my junior year. I wanted to learn and do makeup for my friends who also felt like they did not belong in the society, to encourage them to find beauty in themselves. That is the reason why I became a makeup artist and teach makeup today. In terms of my appearance, with encouragement from my friends and mentors, I

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started to dress up in heels and wore lashes to feel more like myself. I felt these looks represented who I am. It was easier at places as NY, where people expressed themselves fearlessly.

At my art school, students from all around the world were competing to create better art projects. Memorable projects were often about their own unique cultures and backgrounds. So I thought that it is essential for me to know who I am. Since I grew up in a Buddhist temple in Tokyo, and my parents are both monks, (yes in Pureland Buddhism, monks can get married and have children) I decided to study Buddhism to fortify myself. I wanted to dig down deeper on my roots and explore the teachings. I joined the monk training

right after my graduation. I wanted to know "Why we have to be good to others" when I was mistreated by the others, and "What happens to life after death."

However; as I kept studying about Buddhism, I had a questions such as, "Am I welcomed to become a monk?", because some rituals during the ceremonies are divided into men and women. I am a person who is attracted to men and felt like a woman inside, and I wear make-up and heels at times. I thought monks were only allowed to be a minimalist and live a humble life. I questioned my master. He said that Pureland Buddhism accepts and forgives everybody, even prostitutes or criminals can equally be saved by Amida Buddha. Equality is the

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most important message and not the ritual choreographies. In Japan, monks wear casual clothing when they are not doing ceremonies, so what would be the difference to wear something shiny. The most important thing is that you can comfortably spread the message of equality that all can be saved as a monk.

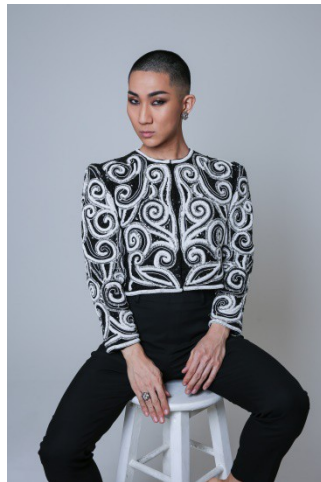
Since then, I felt completely liberated to be who I am, and I am determined to tell people not to feel guilty to be who they are. I can be a living example of staying true to who I am, and be smiling from my heart. Realizing that my existence is right, made me possible to make real friends, connect with others deeply. It is one of the blissful feelings I did not experience before. I want to emphasize that you can

remain who you are and be happy, because Buddhism proves you right.

2019年3月21日(木)

10:21 Kodo Nishimura

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



**Kodo the Makeup Artist  
and LGBTQ activist**

## **Women in Religious Organisations**

### **Nandarane Naina Parmar**

In ISKCON (The International Society for Krishna Consciousness), we practice the Vedic teachings of Lord Krishna using the holy scriptures of the Bhagavad Gita and Srimad Bhagavatam. This includes the Ithiasas, namely, the Mahabharata known as the instructional histories of how one should conduct themselves in order to find the truth of who they are, the soul's journey, and lessons we are here to learn. Whilst the soul transcends race, class, gender, and other material designations, it is confirmed that the body we have acquired whether as a man or woman can be effectively engaged in loving devotional service

to Lord Krishna through mutual love and co-operation for spiritual advancement which brings along with it, unconditional love, all acceptance and no judgement. Simply co-operation and collaboration.

As a woman in ISKCON, the teachings and role of women in an organisation have been somewhat liberating. They've dispelled my own challenges of navigating the cultural, geographical, economic, psychological constraints I've put upon myself and those I have experienced as stereotypical prejudices which to some extent have been true for myself as I've also played into them through the fog of understanding my identity: confident, submissive, doormat, and successful. The labels go on as much

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as the paradox of what it means to be a gentle lady and dynamic leader.

As I near the autumn of my life, the scriptures have somehow helped me to overcome my own duality of who I think I am in a woman's body and how I fit in within my own faith. That is until I realised: As spiritual souls, the solution of our challenges can never be resolved through material solutions but instead spiritual solutions. It now means being uniquely who I am, comfortable in my skin knowing, remembering, and being present in every moment how I am using my unique gifts and talents to serve others whilst accepting myself.

So, what do the scriptures say?

Women are revered and known as the Goddess of Fortune within a home,

organisation and society. Where they experience peace, contentment and joy, the place attracts all good fortune.

Women deserve to be respected and protected. Failure to protect and respect women is seen as a societal failure.

Protection must not be confused with repression or using women as a commodity for gratification. The scriptures warn that when a woman is disrespected, humiliated and exploited, it results in grave consequences and breakdown of families, communities and societies in general.

Women have a significant role in ensuring the feminine qualities are protected and whilst we are all equal as spirit souls, the temporary designation as a woman brings about opportunities to bring to

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the forefront human qualities such as compassion and kindness – to be loving, nurturing, kind and caring within relationships, families, groups and organisations. An example of this is when Theresa May in her resignation speech expressed her sad emotion. Instead of seeing it as a weakness, it was indeed an expression of deeper human feelings that leave to the imagination what it tells us about others and the role we all play in life.

Our roles in life and within our organisations may vary depending on how we use our gifts and talents to serve others and ourselves in finding the truth of who we are in relation to reconnecting to our ultimate loving Lord Krishna. In that context we all have an equal right and

duty to find the truth of who we are. Not alone in our bodily designation but in the knowledge of the truth of who we are as spirit souls in sangha.





## **The Origins of Buddhist Diversity**

**By Dayamay**

If Buddhism wasn't open minded and tolerant, I would probably not have found the spiritual home that I hold so dear today. If the exclusive religious cultures of the past had maintained a spiritual paradigm that kept the elite in the know and the ignorant in darkness, there might have been no hope for someone like myself, whose growth and development as a sensible human being depends largely upon the fertile conditions that spiritual community offers. To a large extent, I owe my life, dignity and relative happiness to having been accepted, defective behaviour patterns and all, into a family that is capable of looking beyond the surface wounds and

the defensive strategies and into the infinite potential that any human being has when they devote their lives to a higher cause.

The history of Buddhism tells us that this has not always been the case. At one time or another in the last 2-3,000 years the privilege of the holy life has been reserved for those of high status and wealth and has even excluded people on the basis of gender. When I think of our spiritual community and try to imagine the social landscape, minus the women and those of us who were not equipped with a high level of education or come from a prestigious background, the vision is a bleak one indeed. In our Sangha everyone has a place and everybody has an opportunity to offer

something of value to the overall cause, which includes the elimination of racism, sexism, bigotry and oppressive social stigma.

The origins of this healthy diversity can be traced back to the very beginning of Buddhism. As even Shakyamuni struggled with the social conditions which denied females the right to practice or live a monastic life. He was so heavily influenced by the dominant patriarchal climate of his time that he had to be persuaded by his closest disciples to allow women into the Sangha. I think this can be seen as an example of the power of the democratic attitudes and principles which prevailed in a nascent organization as a result of the profound power of Shakyamuni's enlightenment, which continues to reverberate through the ages to this

day. There are also examples of the Buddha making a point of elevating social rejects to the highest spiritual status and allowing them to flourish in the Sangha, which helped to level the intellectual playing field, eliminate prejudices originating in the caste system and exemplify the limitless potential of all humans, despite their outward appearance or disadvantageous social position. These accounts of the past serve to relay to us the importance of diversity on many levels and provide the seeds of harmony and equality that enable us to continue to spread the love of the Dharma in a desperately troubled world.

In my time in The Amida Sangha I have been surrounded by an attitude of acceptance, tolerance and love. And as a result

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have witnessed the  
blossoming of individuals  
(including myself) who in  
less favourable conditions  
might well have not made  
it through the door for one  
reason or another. Our  
collective and individual  
attitudes arise from the  
understanding, on a deep  
spiritual level, that we  
need each other to survive.  
That the world needs us to  
be united in a stance that  
encourages diversity and  
holds it as an essential  
element of a healthy,  
spiritual way of life.



## **Inclusivity and Buddhism**

### **Andrew Cheffings**

A little time ago I was sitting at the piano, practising a piece, and I started to fall asleep as I practised, not because I was especially tired, but because this is my tendency when I do repetitive practices.

Another tendency I have when doing repetitive practices is to become more and more anxious. Maybe one day repetition will not feed my OCD, but at the moment it tends to.

A third difficulty I have is with vocal repetition. Since I had growths on my larynx I find that I have to limit the amount of time I sing or chant.

Add to this an old back injury which complains bitterly if held in one

position and hypermobility which causes pain to emerge when I least expect it and with no warning and I have a recipe for difficulties in religious practice.

Listening to my medical teachers, I know not to 'sit through' these pains as they are not the kind of pains to sit through but the kinds of pains which indicate potential injury.

So, I can be a person who does not feel included in many Buddhist practices or in Buddhist events and services which use such practices.

These are practical matters of inclusiveness, there are also, of course, textual matters of inclusiveness. For me these are less important unless a text which excludes me is held up as a paragon by the community in which I practice. However, ideally I

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don't want to use texts which might exclude others from participating in my practice.

It is also the case that any text or practice has the potential to exclude. For example, I might feel excluded by long periods of community Nembutsu chanting for the reasons listed above but the Nembutsu could also be an inclusive text and practice for me when understood in particular ways and practised in other ways.

To me, the Nembutsu represents unconditional Love, which permeates all reality. Unconditionality is fully inclusive.

Thinking in practical terms, how might I envision a fully inclusive religious practice. My answer could be: in complete simplicity. A fully inclusive religious practice might be as

simple as being together as a fully inclusive community. So, people who are not vocal, who have no language, either spoken or thought, who can neither hear nor see, can be included through touch. Touch can let such beings know of the supportive presence of other beings.

To me, aspiring to unconditional inclusion in religious practice is the aspiration to be in accord with Namo Amida Bu; with the unconditional Love that permeates reality.

Having that simple, fully inclusive layer in place is important in my understanding of inclusivity in religious practice. Layering other modalities of practice over this fundamental, simple layer is also a positive idea to me because doing so can add richness for a

variety of different beings present, and anyhow, I think our temporal states are changing all the time, so expecting one kind of practice to always include me is not a completely reasonable idea. Finding what layers of practice are most meaningful to all the individuals present and using them could be a valuable practice in itself.

The two Metta Suttas, the Karaniya Metta Sutta and the Mettanisamsa Sutta, are very short and simply and clearly written and can be seen to concern fully inclusive religious practice. One practice discussed is the practice of including absolutely all beings in thoughts of loving kindness. Another practice discussed is the practice of acting in such a way in the world – treating absolutely all beings with loving kindness.

Mindful of my bombu nature, I'm not expecting full nirvana-realising results from myself any time soon, but this can be a direction of practice for me.

Also, thinking of the idea of bombu nature, I might ask myself, "As a bombu being, how will I be able to be sincerely kind to others?" In Pureland terms, I might give the answer, "With Amida's support."

In the Longer Pureland Sutra, Amitayus tells me that all beings who hear His name inevitably end up in His Pureland. The inevitability of hearing His name is expressed in the 17th vow in terms of sound and in the 32nd vow in terms of Light, and in the nature of His name which is Limitless, Unbounded Life and Light. Even Light does not exclude the visually

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impaired as it can also be perceived as warmth (Amitayus has covered all His inclusion bases, at least in terms of disability; it might be more inclusive of me to write 'all Their inclusion bases').

So, I can conceive Amida's Light carrying me into a practice of kindness and the Path as a letting go into this journey.

Ratnaprabha's translation of the Karaniya Metta Sutta ends with these lovely sentences : "In this way, you will come to let go of views, be spontaneously ethical, and have perfect insight. And leaving behind craving for sense pleasures, from the rounds of rebirth you will finally be completely free!"

I think it is a lovely thought that by practicing being kind to all beings and including all beings in unconditional loving

kindness, taking an active part in the Great Love already fully present in the Universe, the effects can be as powerful as those of any other religious practice.

There remains the conundrum about how beings unable to comprehend this sutra through having no language might be able to practice in such a powerful way. My own feelings about this are that Great Love can communicate in many ways, not only through language, and that some of that communication can be through other beings, practicing the simple practices of being together and letting all beings feel supported through something as simple as touch, layered with other modalities. Through feeling supported and included, whether, directly

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through Great Love in the  
Universe or through other  
beings practising the way  
of Great Love in the  
community, all beings can  
take up this practice  
through feeling its benefit  
and wanting to transfer  
this benefit to all the  
beings around us, and if  
this cannot be perceived in  
terms of self-power, it can  
surely be perceived in  
terms of Other-power and  
Amida's unlimited power  
to save through Their  
unlimited Life and Light.

And one of the modalities  
which can express this  
practice is the fairly simple  
practice of chanting,  
singing or speaking the  
Nembutsu, but for me it is  
important not to neglect  
the simpler practices onto  
which this modality can be  
layered to add to its  
richness for a variety of  
beings.





## **Flourishing in Our Own Way**

### **Kaspalita**

It's not quite mid-summer.  
I'm in the garden  
collecting flowers for the  
shrine room. Grey clouds  
streak the sky, but for now  
it isn't raining. We have  
had days of heavy rain, the  
garden is green and lush  
and the ground squelches  
with each footstep.

I'm walking slowly around  
the lower part of the  
garden, clipping a few  
bright dog daisies. I find  
some grass with catkin like  
seed-heads and collect a  
couple of stems. I lay them  
all down on the stone  
steps, next to the three  
deep-blue, almost purple,  
irises I have already  
secateured.

As I walk back through the  
garden, a blackbird pecks  
at the dark damp soil in  
the veg patch, looking for  
worms.

I only do this job very  
occasionally. Izzy usually  
drops by once a week to  
clean the shrine room, and  
to offer fresh flowers, but  
she's away this week.

I feel a few spots of rain on  
my face, as I carry the  
flowers up to the temple.  
As the rain starts to fall I  
remember the parable of  
the herbs from the Lotus  
Sutra.

In it the Buddha describes  
how rain falls on many  
different sorts of flowers  
and herbs, and each grows  
and flourishes in their own  
way. He then likens the  
rain to the dharma,  
spiritually feeding each of  
us with whatever is that we  
need, allowing each of us  
to flourish in our own way.

What I love about this  
image is that there are so  
many different plants that  
the rain falls upon, and  
there is a place for each of  
them in this garden of the

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Buddha. Sunflower seeds become sunflowers, acorns become oak trees, and nettles send up new shoots from the ground and flower in their own way providing food for brightly coloured butterflies.

This describes the ideal Buddhist community. Dharmavidya has said that we are not in the business of producing clones. Each member has their own beautiful way of being, and their own beautiful offering to make the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas.

We aim to appreciate beauty that is different from our own, and to make space for the many different kinds of spiritual flowering that are possible.

As ordinary human beings we are not only fed by the rain of the dharma. We also feed ourselves from karma's trough. We can all

be beautiful and we can all be greedy, hateful and deluded. Real spiritual communities are also real human communities, full of joy and full of struggle.

There are some flowers that I love, that other people would never have in their gardens, and there are flowers that —no matter my best intentions—I struggle to love. The same is true in real human communities.

What can we do then? We can trust that whatever the state of our own gardens, in the Buddha's garden all flowers are welcome; we can trust that in the Buddha's Pure Land all kinds of people are welcome, even the people that we struggle to welcome into our own lives; and we can trust that all the different parts of ourselves are also welcome in the Pure Land.

## The Doubter's Prayer

### Damian Smyth

I joined my first Bodhi Retreat in December 2010, at The Buddhist House in Narborough, UK. I had been in a relationship with Susthama for nearly a year. We lived some ninety miles apart back then. I made it for the last hour of a twenty four hour continual Nembutsu. It was 11:00am on a Saturday morning with the chanting due to climax at midday.

As I was removing my boots to enter the enthusiastic commotion, I struggled. My occasional obsessive compulsive disorder kicked in. I had to re-put on my boots and remove them again, but this time 'correctly'. And again.

I am aware enough of my own behaviour to know I

am delaying. I could have arrived at 09:00 am, or earlier, but I had chosen to take it easy that morning, and arrive when I did with just enough of an appearance to show willingness. As I got nearer to the door of the shrine room, the more extreme became my avoidance. I was afraid of evangelical indoctrination. I was afraid I would be faking the chant and I didn't want to be a fake. I told myself to show solidarity with my Buddhist brothers and sisters.



To digress, I did enter, and the chain of people in linked hands, chanting in

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ascendance was broken as a glowing and joyful Suthama, smile as wide as an airport runway, crossed the room to take my hand. I had landed. All fear transcended to relief.

Following this was lunch, and following that was a stone passing. The purpose of the stone passing was to freely discuss what occurred to participants during the twenty four hours of Nembutsu, or anything else one wanted to be open about.

I wanted to hear stories about visions, of sensing a beyondness, of feeling gratitude. However, in a room of faith I was sceptical. I decided that for me to function in this group I needed to be honest from the outset, and bring my doubt into the light.

The words 'Namo Amida Bu', were meaningless to me. Had no reference. With a little fear over the response I might get I asked, "What would happen if you walked in a circle for 24 hours chanting, 'Cock-a-Doodle-Doo'?"

I was anxious I was insulting the group, but it was Dharmavidya who took the question in honest and characteristic good humour, answering that, "I don't know what would happen..." There may even have been a joke that maybe we should try it someday.



## **Somma Sutta**

### **Soma Sutta translated by Andrew Olendzki with notes**

Andrew Olendzki first encountered Buddhist thought as an undergraduate studying philosophy and religious studies in Boulder, Colorado.

After a year in India and Sri Lanka, and several years studying Sanskrit and Pali at Harvard, he earned a Ph.D. from Lancaster University in the UK. His primary mentors were Ninian Smart at Lancaster, Mas Nagatomi at Harvard, and Lilly deSilva in Sri Lanka. His doctoral dissertation developed a new psychological perspective on the core Buddhist doctrine of interdependent origination, showing how it can be used to

understand the origination and cessation of one's own moment-to-moment experience. Viewed in this way, it becomes a powerful tool for psychological transformation.

After several years as an assistant professor at Montserrat College of Art and teaching at other colleges, he was asked by Joseph Goldstein to become the first executive director at the Insight Meditation Society in Barre, Massachusetts (where he had been teaching Pali to the IMS meditation teachers). He thus left the academic world to play a leadership role in the meditation community, largely because of his passion for grounding the teachings and putting them into practice.

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"Soma Sutta: Mara Meets  
His Match" (SN 5.2),

translated from the Pali by  
Andrew Olendzki. Access  
to Insight (BCBS Edition), 2  
November 2013

The nun Soma has entered  
Andhavana (Blind Man's  
Grove) near Savatthi to  
practice meditation. Mara,  
the embodiment of  
delusion, sees her there  
and desires to make her  
waver and abandon her  
concentration. He  
addresses her with a verse:

"That which can be  
attained by seers

— The place so hard to  
arrive at —

Women are not able to  
reach,

Since they lack sufficient  
wisdom."

Soma replies:

What difference does  
being a woman make?

When the mind is well-  
composed,

When knowledge is  
proceeding on,

When one rightly sees into  
Dhamma?

Indeed for whom the  
question arises:

"Am I a man or a woman?"

Or, "Am I even something  
at all?"

To them alone is Mara fit  
to talk!

### **Andrew's note**

This, in my view, is the  
definitive statement in the  
Buddhist tradition  
regarding the equality of  
the sexes. Whatever other  
words have crept into the  
literature — from ancient  
times to the present —  
whatever attitudes may  
have been expressed by

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Theras, Lamas, Roshis or Teachers over the ages, this position of thoroughgoing equality in light of the Dhamma is plainly stated by Soma, one of the Buddha's contemporary nuns.

Soma was the daughter of the chief priest of King Bimbisara of Magadha, and was an early convert to the Buddha's teaching. She spent many years as a lay supporter before eventually becoming a nun, and achieved awakening — like so many of her sisters — not long after joining the order.

In this exchange Mara is clearly trying to provoke and discourage Soma, but

only reveals his delusion. The expression he uses literally means "two fingers' [worth]" of wisdom. It may originally have been a reference to the domestic task of checking if rice is cooked by examining it between the fingers, but here it is obviously used pejoratively to impugn that women are less capable of liberation. Soma not only refrains from getting offended (perhaps remembering Buddha's teaching to always "forebear the fool"), but calmly points out how ludicrous the statement is when viewed in light of the Buddha's higher teaching about the nature of personhood.



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