

Running Tide

The Voice of Amida Shu:

Pureland Buddhism

Absolute Grace

Total Engagement

Issue 39 Winter 2020



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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Contents

- Innocent Devotion by Dharmavidya
- Simple Meditation Instruction by Sensie Alex Kakuyo
- Finding The Buddha Outside by Kaspalita
- Finding Centre by Dayamay
- Calm Abiding Meditation by Ananda
- Just Sitting With the Buddha by Johnathan Robertson
- Online Offerings



Editorial

Dear Readers,

I hope you all are keeping warm. In this edition, we will be turning our attention to meditation in its many forms.

Thank you to Dharmavidya, Sensei Alex Kakuyo, Kaspalita, Dayamay, and Ananda for for your contributions. This issue has quite a few interesting perspectives on meditation, whether one is sitting or moving, in nature or in the city.

As always, I hope you enjoy this issue and I look forward to future submissions.

Namo Amida Bu,
Johnathan Robertson



Editions and Themes

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.

Spring – Earth

This Spring, as the Earth opens to another season of growth, may we celebrate her and also respond to the challenges of climate crisis.

Submissions are welcome.

Innocent Devotion

Dharmavidya

Meditation begins with thinking. To meditate means to think. In the texts the Buddha repeatedly says that the first dhyana is a state characterised by applied and sustained thought. The notion "applied and sustained" is said to be analogous to polishing a metal vessel. One has to both hold the cup in place and also rub it vigorously. Thus applied and sustained thought means to hold a subject in mind and enquire into it with energy and enthusiasm. One can, therefore, loosely define meditation as holding a wholesome subject in mind, and one is only able to do so if that subject holds you. Meditation is, therefore, an activity of a devotee. Unless one is devoted to something it will not hold you. One should remember that the word Dharma fundamentally meant "that which holds". So meditation begins with thinking, but it does not end there.

We are held by the Dharma, but also by our nature - our being-in-this-world. Thus there are two ways. Totally entrusting to the first, one can proceed directly to the field of bliss by thinking about sacred things. Suitable subjects are the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha. Here Buddha can mean any Buddha and in the Pureland tradition we concentrate on Amida Buddha, as manifestation of the sambhogakaya, or Shakyamuni Buddha, the nirmanakaya. Sangha refers to the spiritual ancestors. One might meditate upon one of the great exemplars from the past. Sangha can also mean the celestial, sambhogakaya bodhisattvas, such as Quan Yin or Tai Shih Chih. Dharma, in this case, refers to the Dharmakaya, the ultimate source of grace or transference of merit.

Ascending to the mountain top by such a direct route is not easy for ordinary beings and it is only the most dedicated devotee who can fall into a bhakti trance at the slightest provocation. These latter are the true "sons and daughters of a good family", the family of Buddha. They are Buddha children, myokonin, innocently devoted. Such people have stopped. (samatha). Ego has given way. Body and mind have fallen. They pass their time like Milarepa, singing the praises of the Buddha and the holy way. One does not encounter many in this modern cynical age of sophistication. Beyond thought they naturally fall into the second, third or fourth dhyanas, entering states of great equanimity where faith is complete. This is by way of entrustment. How we envy those who have such faith and ease!

So, not having been so seized, starting where one is, at the foot of the mountain, one reflects upon one's dependent nature and thus enters the field of insight. This is very practical. What have I received? What have I done in return? What trouble has my existence caused for others? In this precious human rebirth one has received an incalculable amount, so it is good to confine one's enquiry in time, at least. What have I received in the past twenty-four hours? Air to breathe, sunshine, food, shelter, clothing, company, a body, a mind, a cover to warm me at night, a country where I have enjoyed

many freedoms, holy teachings, and so on, and in each of these there are many sub-details. Most of these things I did not make myself, did not earn, do not own, did not contribute to. Mostly this is not inter-dependence, but simply me being a recipient of rich bounty of which I am unworthy. What have I done in return? A few things that make a small contribution to the welfare of sentient beings, but they are puny by comparison. We can also reflect that none of these benefits that we receive are here eternally or by necessity. All are contingent upon a myriad of other impermanent factors. How fortunate one is to be able to live another day!

In this inward investigation (nei quan) we are struck by our dependent nature. Such work may give rise to many thoughts, images and memories and we experience many feelings. This is not a technique for arriving at a preordained state of mind, it is a deeply human activity of reflection upon the reality of our life and existential situation where our little flame could so easily be extinguished in a gust over which we might have no control. Aware of this frailty, we long for a refuge. Thus insight becomes the antechamber to the field of bliss. Thus prepared we may be in a more salutary state and so able to pass through the portal and turn our mind to the sources of grace that may hold us in our frailty.

We make an offering of our life. All that one has experienced in the foregoing reflection, one offers up to the Buddhas. They, being wise, receive it happily. We know that they have vowed to help those who turn toward them, be we ever so base. We can trust that they will know what to do with this jetsam of our life as if it were scattered pieces of a jigsaw of which only they know the ultimate design. Even though what we offer may seem unwholesome to us - disappointment, guilt, rage, confusion - they will know what to do with it and will receive it with the same happy grace as our gratitude, humility, compassion and love. Thus, in making offering, there is great relief. A peace descends upon us. We have found our refuge. The peace sinks into our very physical being. This is real "tranquil abiding". We have found our place, our true home.

Thus one enjoys what is known as a "peaceful abiding in the discipline of the Noble Ones" and by this means faith is reinforced by experience. One cannot help but carry this faith in one's heart. Faith grounded in apodicticity is adamant. It endlessly sends one forth into the world where one is surrounded by Dharmas, and thus by Buddhas, for all teach endlessly. Thus it is that by studying the self one forgets the self and this forgetting is evidenced by the coming forth of all the Dharmas to meet one and illuminate. Joy spreads in the world, holy beings rejoice, and one goes forth with the Buddha's name ever on one's lips.

Namo Amida Bu.



Simple Meditation Instruction

Sensei Alex Kakuyo

My first official meditation lesson was surprisingly simple and incredibly profound. I arrived at the Indianapolis Zen Center about 30 minutes before class was scheduled to start, and I asked one of the senior students to walk me through the service for that evening. She obliged, and everything seemed standard; we'd bow, we'd chant, we'd meditate, and then there'd be a short Dharma talk at the end.

However, I was a bit worried about the meditation side of things. I'd been sitting on my own for about a year, and I was confident in my ability to sit without moving. But I wanted to make sure I wasn't missing anything, so I asked her to show me how meditation was taught at the center.

Again, she obliged, and we walked into the meditation hall. Once we were settled on our cushions, she looked me in the eye with great intensity and gave me the following instructions.

1. Sit on the cushion
2. Stare at the wall
3. Breathe in
4. Breathe out
5. Don't move until you hear the bell

Then she got up and started prepping the hall for class; leaving me to contemplate what I'd heard. Nearly a decade later I'm still contemplating it. Because the practice of seated meditation is easy to

do, but it's difficult to master. When we bring our focus to the breath; concentrating on the feeling of air moving in and out of our lungs, noticing the expansion and contraction of our chest, our minds rebel.

Our thoughts wander to other, more-exciting things like the guy who cut us off in traffic or the girl who smiled at us on the subway. Then we bring our focus back to the breath, and our mind wanders again. Thus, the practice of meditation is an endless cycle of gaining and losing single-pointed concentration on our breathing.



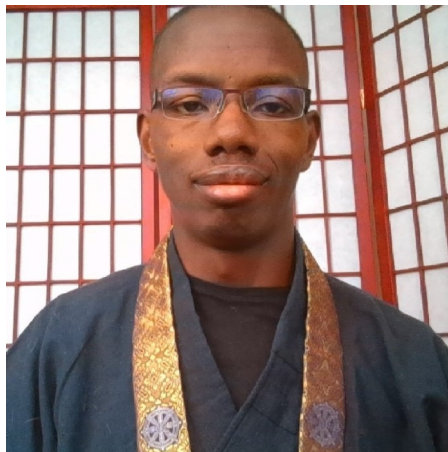
The reason for this is our brains are incapable of focusing on more than one thing at a time. Yes, we breathe all day as our minds wander from one task to the next. But there is a big difference between the shallow chest breathing that we do normally and the deep, restorative breathing that takes place on the cushion.

In order to take a meditative breath, as I call it, where we extend our stomach with each inhale and pay attention to our lungs filling like balloons before relaxing our chest and letting the air escape slowly through our nostrils, we have to focus. We have to temporarily let go of our thoughts and live as fully embodied beings. Of course, it's impossible to maintain this state of mind forever, but every second that we do is magical.

In my own life, I've found that this is especially true during times when my thoughts are a source of suffering. When I sit down on the cushion with a mind filled with anger or despair, the practice of meditation leaves me with a choice. I can breathe or I can suffer. But I can't do both.

And each time I choose to let go of my painful thoughts; choosing instead to focus on the life-giving air in my lungs, I come alive. My spirit softens. And I'm better prepared to deal with whatever is waiting for me outside the meditation hall.

Namu Amida Butsu



Sensei Alex Kakuyo is a Buddhist teacher and former Marine. He served in both Iraq and Afghanistan before finding Buddhism through a series of happy accidents. The focus of his ministry is helping students use gratitude, meditation, and mindfulness to integrate spirituality with their daily lives. Alex holds a bachelor's degree in philosophy from Wabash College and his book *Perfectly Ordinary: Buddhist Teachings for Everyday Life* will hit bookshelves in the Spring of 2020.

Learn more at <https://sameoldzen.blogspot.com>.

Finding the Buddha Outside

Kaspalita

This morning I stepped outside and my soul relaxed. As I opened the door a cloud of long tailed tits flew away from the bird-feeder. Everything was damp; there were a thousand jewels of dew in the slant morning sun. On the short walk from the door to the rabbit enclosure there were a thousand shades of green around me, and the air was cool against my skin. "Is this the soft touch of Amida?" I wondered.

That small act of stepping into the garden produced a noticeable change in my body-mind system. My walking pace slowed, I took in a deeper breath and instead of paying attention to my whirring thoughts I found myself noticing what was around me.

"This feels like home", I thought, followed closely by "Why don't I manage to get out here more often?"

High up in an ivy tangled elder tree a blackbird sang.

"Is this the voice of Amida?"

It isn't always like this morning of course. The sublime is not always so easily available.

In the early autumn I spent a day out on the hills on my own. As I moved higher up the slopes and into the woods the noise of the traffic from the town below faded away. I spotted a gap in the trees, inviting me away from the main path and found a spot to sit and pay attention to the world and say nembutsu. Time passed and I followed the impulse to head towards the summit.

I followed something that might have been a path or an animal track through the trees. The path disappeared and reappeared further up the slope. This side of the hill was steep and I found myself leaning forward grabbing at the arms of trees to steady myself, or on all fours, hands in the cold earth.

The trees thinned and the ground was covered with autumn-dried-out-bracken and brambles. The path was the suggestion of a track: a hint of separation between the bracken. I placed one foot in front of the other, trusting the ground to meet it. Sometimes the earth was where I expected it to be, and sometimes my foot went further, into a hidden hollow in the ground, or into the beginning of a burrow. Nevertheless, the earth was always there somewhere, ready to meet me.



The path hugged the hillside, following a ridge. It was a long way down a steep slope to the bottom. I experienced a moment of vertigo. My heart was suddenly racing, and I felt a jolt of adrenaline enter my system. "Where is Amida now?" I wondered. I took a moment to recover my balance. Here — this close to the edge and the ground hidden by the undergrowth — taking steps felt like an act of courage. Could I trust whoever had walked this path before me? Could I trust the earth? I looked behind me, downhill, and then up to the summit again. Going up seemed a little easier. The choice to trust the path was made for me.

Minutes later I was sitting at the top of the hill. The sun had broken through the clouds and there were patches of gold in the valley. A couple of dog walkers walked by and said hello. They had taken the more straightforward path up the hill.

Each time I go outside to practice I am aware of the choice I am making, and of my privilege. I am leaving the many blessings and comforts of modern life behind, knowing that I will return to them. I am wearing the right gear and have the right kit with me. Many people around the world are fleeing their home because of the climate crisis, or conflict, or economic collapse. For them the experience of going out into the world is very different.

It is the act of choosing that is important. I could choose to take up the mendicant life, with just a robe and bowl and that would bring a certain amount of edge to my practice, but that is still different to being forced onto the road with nothing. Of course some people forced onto the road do have powerful experiences, but many are simply scared and desperate to find home.

The choice I make happens in a context of being supported to find refuge through my spiritual practice, and through the teachings I have received, and I carry this with me when I go into the natural world.

What is the choice that I make when I step outside? It is to come into relationship with the complex, fractal, lively world in a way that respects its otherness. That allows flowers, birds, trees and even rocks and mountains to have lives of their own.

Sometimes these lives seem to speak to me, or to meet some question or deep process that I am carrying. Sometimes they do not speak to me directly, but are simply going about their own business and the act of being with them is profound in and of itself.

Dogen said that when the self falls away the ten thousand things appear. The reverse is true as well, when we bring ourselves into relationship with the ten thousand things the self falls away.

Finding Centre

Dayamay

Being in the city always seems to produce a meditative effect in me, and always has done. Even before I started to use formal meditation techniques I was transfixed by the mysterious buzz of the busy streets in Birmingham or the vast sprawl and endless flow of London Town. It has always made me think. Nowadays I practice slow walking with some quiet chanting amongst the heaving crowds or a short sit on a bench as I try to take in and make sense of the unique feelings that I sense in these vibrant spaces.

The same questions arise in me now as they did back in the old days. Almost as if my mind is, and has always been attuned to some higher frequency of the dense energy fields that comprise the concrete jungle in all of its complexity. What is it that I love about being in the city? At face value it can be somewhat cold and foreboding, seemingly reducing even the most extravagant of souls to an anonymous speck in the ocean of figures and their synchronized shuffle towards...whatever. But I think that this is part of the attraction for me. Something about the latent volatility and contrasting apathy of the masses bouncing off each other speaks to me about our place amongst it all.

Nature seems to offer a complementing backdrop to all of this, somehow holding the space and suggesting a profound relationship between itself and the radiant dullness of concrete and tarmac, flesh and stuff! A perfect juxtaposition expressing itself in our midst as we distract ourselves with more mundane matters, thereby missing the whole point of the sacred show.

This was never more apparent to me than in the last few days, as I ambled around Central London, lending myself to the raw excitement and nascent flux of the Extinction Rebellion movement.

I felt like I had done 25 years ago as I leaned into the unknown aspects of the city experience in Birmingham. Carried along in the river of commerce in all of its hypnotic power, its pervasive hold on the Human psyche. The buzz is impossible to resist.

This time I had more purpose though, I felt some deep affinity with the cause and a compelling connection to the crowds of people, most of who I had never seen before, let alone met, and will probably never see the vast majority of them ever again. We shared a common passion though, which deepened for me with every minute spent amongst the high resolve and determination of those who refuse to sit back and let the world go up in smoke...at least without a fucking good fight!!

Meditation was about the furthest thing from my adrenalized brain as I mentally wrestled with the prospect of being arrested for deliberately being in the wrong place at the wrong time, and subsequently, with the shame of being too scared to commit myself in such a heroic manner. The very idea of being confronted with angry policemen and women was enough to stimulate my deep guilt and shame complex, reducing me to a nervous mess as the scene deteriorated into a chaotic stand-off.



I chose to bail out before the threat became reality. After all, I have been there and done all of that, albeit for a much lesser cause, and in a haze of chemicals and unnaturally induced endorphins! It seemed unnecessary to interrupt my recent unblemished arrest record, which can mean the difference between working and not working at times.

When I returned later there were familiar faces and Spiritual vibrations. The Love was flowing and the people were never more united. Before I knew it I was sitting in the thick of it all, a row of police with florescent yellow coats and somber faces behind me and a joyous crowd of defiant revelers in front of me. I knew which side I preferred to be on!

Soon we were being guided in meditation by a gentle, kindly man with a microphone. I must admit to having been too agitated at this point for any formal practice to have happened, but was very grateful to have Satya sitting next to me, I suspect she was similarly afflicted, although we didn't really speak about it. I was struck by the calm in the crowd as we sat in silence, some seeming to find their centres and slip into their

energetic flows relatively easily, given the highly distracting nature of the circumstances: Sitting on the cold, damp tarmac in the entrance to one of the busiest bridges in London, traffic lights still flashing dutifully despite the absence of any mechanical traffic. Flanked by rows of blank faced police, less than enthused by the day's events so far and itching to put an end to the festivities by hauling us all to jail!

We prayed for the world, for ourselves, our families, the police, politicians and all sentient beings and this centered me more than I had felt for some time.

The next day we sat again, in the middle of a usually very busy, but now car-less street and I felt the true power of what we were doing, why we were there. I settled into my position and soon found myself enjoying the familiar circulation of sensations and recurring thought patterns that characterize my normal practice at home, in the comfort and peace of our beautiful shrine room. No longer hopelessly disturbed by the steady stream of observers and spectators, some of who had cameras on tripods and arranged themselves in rows in front of us to get the perfect picture as a souvenir of all of the weirdness. I sensed the depth of the statement that we were making and the importance of the message that we were conveying as a movement, united and motivated towards essential and fundamental change. And I felt the power of Amida Buddha, uplifting me and encouraging me as struggled against all the doubt and fear that my mind presented me with. It can be easy to be carried away with all the rapture and high spirits in a situation like this, and my ego surfaced regularly, as if to remind me that it still exists and needs to be seen and loved as much as the rest of me.

Somehow, sitting on the floor in the middle of that road, I felt complete, and knew that I was exactly where I needed to be!

Namo Amida Bu.



Calm Abiding Meditation

Ananda

What I am sharing with you is not the insight of some spiritual superstar, but rather the reflections of a dense and obtuse practitioner who has been practicing “in the world” for the last 24 or so years. My practice has at times been very focused and at other times rather casual. I have done a lot of different Buddhist practices, but I have always had Calm Abiding Meditation as part of my daily routine

Calm Abiding (*Samatha*) Meditation is one of the foundational contemplation practices of most schools of Buddhism. It can be taught in many ways but usually involves awareness of the breath.

While the practice of Calm Abiding is often taught as a stand alone practice, I would suggest that it works better within a religious world view and in particular within the Buddhist Dharma. The Buddhist Dharma places our lives within the context of a very large, spacious, and complex universe where change happens over vast periods of time and the goal is nothing less than the cessation of suffering for all beings. (Buddhists are definitely not under achievers!)

What is Calm Abiding Meditation?

First: Calm Abiding Meditation is rejoicing in the fullness of the present moment. It is both blissful and peaceful while also being very alert / aware. Calm abiding is not the stupor state of escapism.

Second: Calm Abiding is possible even for people with full lives.

Third: I don’t know about anybody else, but personally, I was so busy trying to meditate that it took me forever to recognize that Calm Abiding is about **Abiding** in the present moment. Sounds, sensations, sights, thoughts, etc are all occurring in the present moment. There is a lot going on in the present moment and we really need to pull back and just appreciate and wonder beauty of each moment.

Fourth: Thinking is stressful. (That’s *dukkha* to you Buddhists.) Take a break from thinking and analyzing and judging everything. (Trust me, your thoughts will wait around for you.) Give yourself some time each day to sense fully the present moment. Listen to the ocean, or the wind, or the birds, or the traffic, or whatever, with your full being. Don’t think about it, just perceive.

Fifth: You are not your thoughts. In fact, your thoughts are just a small part of your experience. Unfortunately, we tend to obsessively focus on our thoughts. We confuse our thoughts about who we are, with what we truly are.

Sixth: Calm Abiding is joyful. Really!

Seventh: Calm Abiding Meditation takes commitment. You need to make time in your daily life to just be. You really do need that 30 minutes, or more, each day with nothing to do but sit, breath, and be aware. (It is only boring because we have become accustomed to having our minds stimulated non-stop.)

Eighth: As you grow your practice will grow and change. Calm Abiding is only one part of the Buddhist Path. Buddhism is a way of life which involves: faith, study, ethics, ritual, community, meditation, self reflection and transformation.

If you want to change your life, you need to be willing to change. The Dharma can help you make that change.

Peace, Paul



Just Sitting With the Buddha

Johnathan Robertson

There was a time when I was very enthusiastic about sitting meditation, particularly in the style demonstrated by Soto Zen followers. I would sit as still as possible. My hands would be in the proper mudra and while I counted to ten. And I would try to do it all perfectly.

There was a real rigidity to my practice. I was worried that I wasn't doing it properly and that, for every moment I wasn't doing it properly, I was wasting my life away. I also became addicted to the occasional euphoria that would arise during practice, thinking "This is it! This is where I need to be!"

After a while, meditation became a chore and a hell.



It was about this time that I had also learned about the nembutsu. In an attempt to calm my mind, as counting no longer worked, I began to repeat the nembutsu in my mind

while I sat. To my surprise, it worked far better than any amount of counting or attention to the breath. Even when my mind was at its most turbulent, I could find a rock in the nembutsu and sit on that rock until the storm passed.

Eventually, I grew to revere the nembutsu as I realized that the space provided in seated meditation was the same space provided when I was just going about my business, uttering an occasional "Namo Amida Bu." It didn't matter whether I was still or engaged, the refuge was the same.

With reverence came faith and a realization that every bow, every candle lighting, every ceremonial gesture, and every nembutsu was a moment of refuge. There was no need for rigidity when I could simply trust the Buddhas.

This is not to say that meditation has no use. It was through both meditation and nembutsu that I found a common thread. Both practices have taught me much about the spiritual life.

Nowadays, I don't quite sit as I used to. I no longer sit "properly" with my hands in a mudra, trying to attempt a state of perfection. I just sit with the Buddha and with faith that there is nothing else that needs to be done.

Namo Amida Bu



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Audio talks

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<http://www.amidamandala.com/audio-teachings/>

<https://www.youtube.com/amidamandala>

Online study

Join Dayamay's monthly Skype study group. Email Dayamay for joining instructions through following link.

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Virtual Temple

Join the conversation with Amida Shu Buddhists from around the world on our virtual temple.

<https://www.friendsofamida.com/>

General Information

Upon groups, activity and on line resources

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

Prefer to read

Buy Kasper & Satya's introduction to Amida Shu Buddhism 'Just As You Are', Buddhism for Foolish Beings or buy one of the many books from our teacher Dharmavidya David Brazier.

Namo Amida Bu