

Ehipassiko

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[Nun of the Heart](#)



"A monk, a nun, who cultivates a joyous disposition and is filled with confidence in the Way will find peace, stillness and bliss. Yet still a youth, a renunciate fully devoted to the Waylights up the world like the moon emerging from clouds."

(Dhammapada, v. 381-382)

Dear friends, it's been a while... This week marks my three-year anniversary of monastery life here in the blessed forests of British Columbia. Three years! Who knows how long I have been walking this path, or how many lifetimes I have been cultivating this practice. But let me just take a moment to pay homage to this latest chapter of my spiritual journey. The days and nights that I have spent here in this sacred place of refuge have witnessed inner adventures of the deepest kind. Golden drops of wisdom are percolating here and there. I have died and been reborn a million times. Throughout it all, there has been only one constant: a beautiful deepening of my peace, wisdom and happiness. My gratitude for all of the blessings of the last three

years is simply inexpressible. I am grateful to an endless list of beings, seen and unseen, who have guided and supported me from near and far. But mostly, I am grateful to myself. In this day and age, it is often considered uncouth to say such things. Under veils of egotistical modesty, we are reluctant to ever acknowledge our own goodness. But the Buddha encouraged us to regularly reflect on our own wholesome qualities and to take joy in our own happiness, just as we would do for others. So let me say this loud and clear, dear friends: I am deeply grateful to myself for making the decision to leave behind the world I knew in search of something higher... for disregarding the voices of the many well-intentioned people in my life who misunderstood and ridiculed my intentions...for having the courage to listen to my rather inconvenient and unconventional inner callings. The reward has been a blossoming of a calm wellbeing in my heart that continues to deepen with each passing breath - something I would not trade for any worldly pleasure or praise. Unsurprisingly, this last year has been marked with much change. Just a couple of days after writing my last blog entry, I received word that my mother had suffered from a debilitating stroke while visiting relatives in Sri Lanka. Overnight, her whole experience of life changed dramatically. When she told her right limbs to move, they no longer listened. Her carefully laid plans for the future were swept away in an ocean of uncertainty. Why did this happen? What had she done to deserve this? Who was responsible? Would she ever recover? These were the questions floating around her mind and the minds of those around her as she tried to come to terms with this painful reality. Her vacation, if not the rest of her life, appeared to have been hijacked. Mine too. All of a sudden, I found myself plucked from the serenity and quietude of winter retreat here at the monastery and on a plane to cacophonous Colombo to look after my mother's care for the next two months. I have mentioned previously how traumatic it can be for me to leave the monastery these days. This was on another level altogether. While I deeply cherished the beautiful experience of taking care of my mother at a time when she really needed me, and would not have traded it for anything, I will not pretend that it was easy to be back in the world again. For spiritual types such as I, being in the world is akin to the feeling of being an ugly duckling. It's highly uncomfortable... You can quack with the best of them, but you'll just never be a duck. In my case, I have been fortunate enough to find my fellow swans, but being apart from them is painful indeed. Alas, the inevitable winds of change were to swoop my dear mother and I into a whole new reality that was not of our own choosing. In response, we counted our many blessings and tried to face each new day with equanimity, love and light-heartedness. In the background, a silent mantra reverberated in my heart and mind: "Don't worry. Everything's out of control." This is of course the lesson that life is always trying to teach us. No matter how much good we've done in our lives or how many insurance policies we've secured, none of us are exempt from the harsh realities of sickness, aging, death and loss. They will visit each of us at some point or another, often when we least expect them. This has been the case since time immemorial. Yet for some

reason, we are shocked and outraged every time it happens. We make desperate pleas and angry recriminations to the Gods, demanding some explanation for the injustice. But these acts of desperation are all in vain and only contribute more pain and delusion to the world. The simple reality that the Buddha tried to tell us again and again was that this is the way things are. Every being, every thing, every relationship that is born is of the nature to die. The world and this endless round of existence are inherently unsatisfactory and full of suffering. We all (my mother, you, me and everyone that was ever born) will get old, get sick and die. Everything and everybody that we hold so dear to our hearts will be separated from us, no matter how much love and attachment once held us together. This might be the moment that some of you choose to stop reading this tale of woe. But woeful it need not be, my friends. The story does not end here. The Buddha didn't necessarily agree with this unsatisfactory nature of existence. He just called it for what it was. The first step, after all, is to acknowledge that there is a problem. Then, thankfully, He taught us the way out. The Buddha's Noble Eightfold Path, a systematic and comprehensive path of mental cultivation, is entirely concerned with getting out of this sad state of affairs. It is a path to the 'Deathless' state of Enlightenment. This is why the Buddha encouraged us to "come and see". At first, the act of really seeing life as it is can be unbearably harsh on the eyes. But soon, we realize that it's just the light of wisdom that is blinding us. If we can only dare to look, with open eyes and joyful heart, we will eventually see the whole picture as it really is. The big picture is neither alluring, nor repulsive, but simply and profoundly, the Truth. Once we adjust our eyes to the penetrating light of wisdom, there is nothing that could make us shed a tear, wince in pain, or turn away in horror. In this new perspective, everything belongs. We have 'Samma Ditthi' – Right View... Of course it's easy to read and write about these lofty Buddhist aspirations. The hard part is really feeling liberation in our hearts. The path for most of us is long and sometimes arduous. The Buddha didn't promise us instant liberation, but reassured us that the road to awakening is a gradual path of mental cultivation. Each time we incline our minds towards seeing the truth of the way things are, we are readjusting our focus just a little more, letting just a little more wisdom shine through. That's all we really need to do... as little or as much as is in our capacity in this moment, to turn our eyes towards the Truth. Life then becomes a true adventure of the most joyous kind. Each unexpected turn of events, no matter how jarring, is an opportunity to assimilate new information about the way things really are... to refine our view and to let go of our misperceptions about reality. It is these misperceptions, after all, that cause us to suffer. We think it's something out there that's causing us to suffer, but the cause is always our own delusion. We perceive permanence in that which is impermanent. We perceive an abiding self in that which has no abiding self. We perceive satisfactoriness in that which is unsatisfactory. And so, we suffer. We wish for, and rely on, permanence, substantiality and satisfactoriness where there is none. The logicians and investors amongst you may be the first to spot the flaw. We've bet against the way

things really are. A poor bet indeed.

As I write these words to you, I find myself in the warm hospitality of the kuti ('cabin') where I spent the first four months of my time here ('[The Rainbow Connection](#) Kuti'). It's somewhat awe-inspiring to observe that while the beautiful view outside my window appears largely the same as it did three years ago, the view of the person beholding it has changed completely. If you find me here a few months or even a few breaths from now, that process of change will not have abated for even a split second. We are in a constant process of profound change, but we rarely realize it.

A couple of years ago, after one of my cousins read my blog entry "[Butterfly Gliding](#)", she confessed to me that it had brought her to tears. She felt that she was losing me, as if I had somehow died. With a chuckle, she admitted how strange a feeling this had seemed to her, as we rarely saw each other when I was out there in the world anyways.

Even I have felt this loss on some level. I have grieved the loss of the person I thought I was. I have felt the pain of misplaced attachment and self-identification. Our heart trembles when it is forced to let go of something we have grasped onto so tightly. But grasping is not love, my friends. It is not love that propels us to entangle ourselves, and those close to us, in snares of worldly drama and sentimentality. Love is unconditional and all-inclusive, with no strings attached. It is a soft and quiet embrace that holds no ache. As my own process of self-discovery deepens, I feel this unconditional love expanding, both for myself and for others. My idealistic and insatiable quest for perfection is evolving into a patient and curious meeting of things as they really are, right here, right now. I must say, life is much more fun this way.

As the days have rolled on here, I have come to the somewhat haunting realization that I will never be able to go back to the world I once knew. I may physically return to the world one day, but I will never see it the way I used to. Those doors are slammed shut. This has led many to question why I haven't yet become a nun. With a heart so devoted, why not commit to the monastic way of life? I have no clear response, other than to tell you that the inner voice that led me here three years ago also tells me that the monastic path is not for me, at least not right now. I am somehow caught between these two worlds. Deep inside, I feel that I may still have some unfinished business with the world. I don't know exactly what this means, or how it will manifest, but I do know that my inner voice has never led me astray, even though I haven't always understood its mysterious ways.

If I lived solely from my ideals, I would have jumped into monasticism long ago. It is an institution that I deeply, deeply revere. My closest spiritual guides have all been monastics and their level of wisdom is undoubtedly a fruit of their monastic training. But ideals are just ideas that we would love to be true. Truth is the way we really feel. If we live our lives solely based on ideals, we can miss the subtle intuitive cues that our

deeper minds are giving us; we can miss the Truth even as it's staring us in the face. My own truth is that I have never had a calling to don the robes of a Buddhist nun. But in my heart, I ordained long ago. As my teacher once told me, ordination is a state of mind. When our primary aspiration in life is to cultivate the Buddha's path of awakening, we are already a monastic at heart. When we have renounced worldly aims and values to focus our energies on realizing the Truth, we are walking the very same path as the Blessed One. It is not a piece of cloth or a shaved head that makes one a monastic – it is an aspiration and commitment of the heart. In fact, my very name means "Nun of the Heart". Well, that's my own recent spin on it, at least. I have always known that 'Dil' means 'heart' in the Hindi language; this year I discovered that 'Ani' means 'nun' in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. Draw your own conclusions, friends.

So on this, my three-year anniversary of monastery life here in B.C., I give thanks and bow deeply to the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha, the three jewels that have proven to be my truest refuge. I pay homage to my teacher, Ajahn, who continues to guide me with utmost skill and compassion. And I offer myself a gentle pat on the back for braving the journey thus far. If anything, my experience here has proven that the feelings that I express to you today could easily vanish tomorrow. The person who writes these words will have already died by the time you read them. But let's not get too lost in ultimate realities. Right here and now, as I look out my window, a most glorious full moon is peeking through the darkness of the evening, illuminating the landscape before me. And as I look deep in my heart, my inner light of wisdom is doing the same. May it be so for you too. May it be so for all beings.

caterpillar

*There is no butterfly
Said the moon to the cocoon*

There was no

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[September 9, 2014](#)

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[January 17, 2014](#)

[**Jazzmatazz**](#)



"Let go of the past. Let go of the future. Let go of the present. With a heart that is free

cross over to that shore which is beyond suffering."

(Dhammapada, v. 348)

Another new year meets us, dear friends. At its dawn, I send you blessings and wishes for deep liberation and awakening in this very moment. The days and nights are relentlessly passing, but the time for awakening is always here, always now. As I settle into my third year here at the monastery, the inner adventures continue to unfold in

new and awe-inspiring ways. It has taken me longer than usual to get this particular blog entry started. Penning the recent experiences of my heart into words has proven a bit difficult. Perhaps it is because the experiences themselves have been somewhat difficult to make sense of. This has been a very different kind of year for me and I have faced at least a few large and messy mud puddles on my path. Life in a monastery can feel like a prison or a paradise, depending on your state of mind. I've had a little of both this year. When my teacher began his year-long solitary retreat last April, I was dwelling in such an exalted state of joy for him that I thought very little about how I would fare without his presence here. Since I first arrived here, and long before, he has been my Lighthouse of wisdom as I navigate the dark waters of my deeper mind. In his absence, I can appreciate even more profoundly how privileged I have been to have someone in my life who truly lives the Dhamma from the inside out. In the holy life, many can talk the talk, but few can walk the walk. Many can play the notes, but few can play the music. Once you have met someone who has mastered their own mind to a greater extent than the vast majority, it's quite easy to get attached to their presence. It's also easy to mistakenly assume that they are the holders of your own truth and liberation. There is no doubt that I have thrived in the presence of this great Lighthouse and I will continue to benefit from his wisdom as long as the universe allows it. But one of the most rewarding aspects of this year "on my own" has been the opportunity it has given me to see where my true refuge lies. Since returning from my month-long island retreat in September, I have been experiencing an unprecedented feeling of letting go that has been, quite frankly, a little terrifying. In the past, renunciation came in small doses, and not without my prior consent. "Yes, I'll let go, as long as I'm in control of the process", I'd fool myself. "Mustn't go to extremes, right?" But at some point along the way, some sort of illusionary cord was cut and I now find myself in this kind of free-fall state where I am sure of very little other than the fact that everything inside me is changing and everything is perfectly, sublimely, out of control.

The terrifying part is not so much the fall itself, but rather the realization that so much of what I once held to be true and solid seems not so true, not so solid anymore – even my understanding of the Buddha's teachings. It's not that I am beginning to doubt the teachings, but rather that I'm beginning to doubt the doubt itself. My ordinary critical mind has been running the show for so long – questioning everything, including my own wisdom. But in this falling, a subtle confidence seems to be emerging. There are things that I do know to be true. My inner voice of wisdom is gaining ground. The call of *ehipassiko* is gaining deeper meaning.

Of course, my critical mind is not without protest over this unexpected coup. There are times when it tries to convince me I'm moving backwards on the path, perhaps losing the plot altogether. The little me is quite understandably screaming with fright: "You're losing the Way! You're caught in [Mara's](#) snare! You're falling headfirst into delusion"! But these words seem to have no effect. I'm simply falling. And it feels just fine, thank

you very much. Here, in the midst of this free-fall, my truest, most trustworthy friend appears by my side. No, it's not my teacher, the Lighthouse. It's a light all my own – my inner light of *sati* (mindfulness). Sati comes to my rescue and reassures me, "You have nothing to fear. Just remember that you have wings." And then, as if waking from a dream, I suddenly realize I am not falling at all – I'm flying! How could I have forgotten? I'm a [*butterfly gliding*](#)!

I confess to Sati that things are changing in ways I did not expect, cannot control, do not approve of! I ask her, "Am I losing the Way?" "Well, how do you feel inside?", she replies. Then, a memory long buried in my consciousness bubbles up. I am about 18 years of age, sitting on a piano bench, with my piano teacher at my side. I have just performed a technically sound performance of a classical piece of music that would make you yawn without shame. For years, I had been preparing for one piano exam after another...going through the motions...mastering the structural foundations of the art, all the while slowly losing the gumption to play from my heart. She looked at me with the eyes of a caring teacher and said, "My dear, if you continue on this track, you are going to lose your love of music completely. How about we learn some jazz?"

Thus it came to be that in my last year of formal piano lessons, I learned the sacred art of jazzmatazz: the art of syncopated rhythms, offbeat arpeggios, playful sharps and flats in the most unexpected places... freedom. Of course I couldn't have just started there. It was only because I had gone through all that dry technical and theoretical training over and over again that I was able to give myself over to jazz in the eleventh hour. But that's when I began to really *feel* the music from the inside. This changed everything.

Sometimes, when we're just starting out in the butterfly life, it can feel all wrong. Everything we thought we knew about the law of gravity doesn't hold in this new world. It takes some getting used to. But here in this new place of being, my trusted friend Sati looks me deep in the heart and, with a conviction and clarity that only true mindfulness could have, she assures me that I haven't lost the Way... I'm just getting used to my new wings. So how do I feel inside these days? I feel like jazz on the inside. I feel like knots that I didn't even know were there are coming undone. My inner chords are surrendering into arpeggios. To the average caterpillar, it could seem like I'm losing ground. But on the inside, I feel a new kind of groove. I am channelling my inner Thelonious Monk (Nun?) and it feels good and true, cool and easy... Yes, it's a bit offbeat...a little melancholy at times...a bit dissonant on occasion...but these aren't just random notes. There's an oh-so-sweet melody in the madness. A butterfly's inner rhapsody, I dare say. Sending you love, light and a little jazzmatazz...

When the great dam burst I could only ride the wave

Faithful of the Way

[1 note](#)

[January 17, 2014](#)



Click above to listen to "*I Surrender, Dear*" by Thelonious Monk

[1 note](#)

[November 4, 2013](#)

[Desert Island](#)



"With enthusiasm, establish yourself in solitary practice - sit alone, sleep alone, walk alone and delight as if secluded in the forest."

(Dhammapada, v. 305)

The idea was born on a rather ordinary day, circa December 2011. It was our busy season here at the monastery, with lots of guests coming and going and a long list of work projects slated for completion before winter retreat. A fellow resident must have observed that I was feeling particularly stressed that day and suggested that I needed a vacation. I had only arrived at the monastery a few months before so the idea seemed rather funny to me. There was really nowhere else I wanted to be. She probed further: "If you could have an all expense paid vacation anywhere in the world, where would you go?" As a former travel junkie, I was quite surprised to find that no exotic destination came to mind. Instead, a picture emerged in my mind's eye of a quaint little cabin, overlooking the ocean, with waves crashing on cliffs in the distance and not a soul in sight. There I was, alone, in silence, delighting in blissful solitude. Just this image was enough to send a wave of calm bliss throughout my whole body. In that moment, I vowed to somehow try to make that vision come to life.

Long has it been that the ocean has called my name. When my heart is still, I can feel her softly urging me to come near. And so it was that I decided to do a one-month retreat in silence and solitude on an island somewhere off the British Columbia coast. For many months, I held this vision in my mind, not really knowing where, when or if it would ever happen. Then, in April of this year, on the very same day that my teacher here at the monastery began his year-long solitary retreat, a couple of supporters who were visiting asked me if I planned to be away at all during the coming year. Apparently there are many people who feel I need a vacation! I told them of my plans for solitary retreat and they serendipitously proclaimed that they knew just the right place. Indeed, they did.

It wasn't exactly the same as the picture that came to my mind's eye that day, and it took me a year and a half to bring it to realization...but in September of this year, this little dream of mine became a very beautiful reality. With the help of many blessed friends, I spent the whole month of September delighting in silent and solitary retreat on a most heavenly little gulf island off the coast of Nanaimo. It might seem kind of odd for those who don't live in a monastery (or even for those who do!) that I would leave this quiet forest abode only to go on a retreat somewhere else! Alas, I am a hermit deep in my heart and there is simply nothing that brings me more delight than the idea of dwelling silently and alone in the natural world, near to one of my dearest friends and teachers, "Ajahn (Teacher) Ocean". In Buddhist cosmology, we are told that the realms of heaven are infinitely more blissful and beautiful than any pleasure we can experience here in this human realm. But being on that little island of paradise had me pondering how anything could have been more sublime. The island was small and

private, with only one other resident human and one resident cat – both of whom graciously respected and supported my silence and seclusion and to whom I am deeply grateful. The interior of the island was filled with lush, dewy forest, moss carpeted pathways and no predators or traffic lights to be found. Its shores were adorned with the most arresting cliffs and crags, exquisite stones and seashells, and grand old arbutus trees arching gently towards the sea. Up a little pathway from the shore, overlooking the magnificent waters, was a cute little cabin that Goldilocks would have found most pleasing – a truly ideal dwelling place for my retreat. And down by the waters' edge was a screened sleeping hut, which I turned into a meditation hut by day. On warmer days, I would swim in the cool, still waters with starfish twinkling at my feet and go for long hikes in the forest's unspoiled wilderness. Even more beautiful than the island itself were the feelings it inspired in my heart – feelings of joyful release, of timelessness, of everything being utterly perfect, of being satisfied and complete. I sat alone, slept alone, walked alone and delighted in seclusion. It was purely and simply rapturous...for a while...Alas (she said with a deep sigh), even these most sublime feelings, even the unparalleled bliss of the heavenly realms, simply cannot last forever. How many times have I heard this truth? How many times have I believed the lie? Like all conditioned phenomena, all feelings are subject to the law of impermanence. One morning, about ten days into my retreat, as I awoke in the midst of this paradisiacal splendour and gazed out onto the waters, something seemed amiss. I searched my heart for my missing bliss and found Ajahn Ocean saying in her most sweet and gentle way: "My child, I am made of mere elements, devoid of self – do not ask of me more than I can give. If you try to grasp or cling to me with attachment, my beauty will slip through your fingers and vanish in the tides. Where can you find lasting beauty if not within your own heart and mind? Stay here by my side, but turn your gaze inward. Reflect on my nature and you will find that my beauty actually resides within you." It has been a month since I returned from this retreat and I still find it difficult to express the experience succinctly in words. There is so much and nothing to say all at the same time. To try to speak about silence and solitude through words is like trying to draw a pink flower with a blue crayon. It just can't be done. This was the longest retreat I've ever done and the first in complete solitude. There were moments of rapture and insight and moments of confusion and despair – all of which were welcomed in the light of awareness. I went to this desert island to face my mind alone, and that is what I did. Being alone in the natural world offers us the opportunity to set aside the social constructs that trap us all too often and to recondition ourselves according to the laws of Dhamma – the truth of the way things are. Because in the natural world, the Dhamma can be seen unveiled. If we observe nature in its untouched, un-manipulated splendour, we can feel the truth of the way things are more clearly. We see birth and death, sickness and decay, impermanence and suffering in their raw forms. We see that it's all as it should be and all out of our control. The Dhamma can be seen everywhere, but through the ages we have become very adept

at masking these realities in our conditioned world. In nature, we need not look too far to see the truth – it comes to us uninvited. We need only be in its presence for a while, in silence and solitude, to feel a different way of being. This seems to have a very soothing and transformative effect on the psyche. It is like reconditioning ourselves to not just go with the flow, but rather to be the flow. We begin to really feel that the earth, air, water and fire that fuel the universe are the very same elements that fuel this body and mind. To really know this is to know that we are not separate from anything in the universe, a truth that is profoundly liberating for the heart. To know that there is no separate “I” is to put an end to all fear, greed, anger, loneliness, conflict, separation and all forms of suffering in this world. Sounds simple, doesn’t it? But time and time again, this simple truth eludes our complex minds. Time and time again, we shackle our peace to the storyline of me.

Truthfully, we can only grasp the Buddha’s deepest teachings on *anatta* (“not-self”) through direct experience and this is no easy task. To fully know this truth is to be a fully enlightened being. In the meantime, we have only blue crayons to rely on. In my experience, however, understanding most often comes gradually, little by little, and this was the value of my period of solitary retreat. It’s like when someone spills the beans that there is no real Santa Claus. For a while, we don’t really want to believe it. It would shake our world too deeply. But then, little by little, the evidence becomes too great. Why is Santa’s handwriting the same as my Mom’s? How is it possible that his elves at the North Pole could have the same exact wrapping paper as my brother? Slowly but surely, we unravel the great conspiracy. But unlike the case of debunking St. Nick, when we unravel the great delusion of the self, we will know unparalleled peace and liberation and the highest happiness of all the worlds. Thus have I heard. Therefore, I practice.

Dear friends, my month of silence has not cured me of my verbosity. So let me end here. I leave you now with continued wishes for your well-being and some words from my great friend and teacher, Ajahn Ocean:

“Impermeable Peace”-By Ajahn Ocean
Come to me, my child, I have much to teach you. But please come alone. Come alone so that you may hear, in silence, the truths I have to share. Dwell on my shores in sweet serenity and let my salty air cure you of all dis-ease. Bathe in my cool waters and feel the ever-present ebb and flow that govern all things. Look upon me in the light and you will clearly see your own reflection. Gaze beneath my surface and you will find a stillness that lies hidden at my depths. But come alone and listen with a quiet heart.

I have much to tell you but in a language all my own.

I will speak to you in ripples and gurgles, splashes and crashes, Singing you songs of all that has ever been.

Stay close to me and you will come to know that we have never been apart. Be

*near, my child, and I will bless you with the wisdom of my being, That you may feel
endless ripples of release,
and bathe in impermeable peace.*

[1 note](#)

[November 4, 2013](#)

[0 notes](#)

[November 4, 2013](#)

[3 notes](#)

[August 3, 2013](#)

[**The Mystery of Equanimity**](#)



*"There are those who discover
they can leave behind confused reactions
and become as patient as the earth,
unmoved by anger, unshaken as a pillar,
unperturbed as a clear and quiet pool."
(Dhammapada, v.95)*

A little over a month ago, I briefly departed from my little oasis of solitude here at the monastery to travel to the comparatively bustling city of Vancouver. It was a pleasant trip, filled with many happy reunions with my family and loved ones whom I hold dear. Nevertheless, leaving the monastery can be a somewhat traumatic experience for me these days. The longer I stay here, the more I forget just how fast the world moves and just how crude it can be. But there was one reunion in Vancouver that was especially meaningful to me. Amidst all the hustle and bustle, this meeting of friends was quiet, soft and full of truth.

When we first met, I can't quite recall. Though we were family friends since my childhood – she much older than I – our friendship really began about seven years ago when life took the both of us to South Asia. From our brief visits on the subcontinent, I began to regard her with great esteem for the remarkable sense of grace she brought

to her life. She was a woman of great dignity. But her dignity was not founded on nobility of birth, profession or social status. From my perspective, her grace emanated from a profound sense of what the Buddha called 'equanimity'. Rarely have I met true examples of this quality in people of the world, but she was most certainly one of them.

A year ago, on a brief trip to Vancouver where she then resided, I was saddened to learn that she had been diagnosed with a terminal illness and had been given but six months to live. Though we did not speak in depth about the looming prospect of her own death, the suffering was palpable. Her home was filled with a museum of exquisite treasures from her travels all around the world, each holding a story of some meaningful experience or adventurous encounter. What little value they had now, she bemoaned, she could not take these beloved treasures with her on this next journey. And yet, through the melancholy, her sense of grace remained as beautiful as ever.

A subtle and profound beauty lies in accepting the way things are – not by pretending that everything is just fine when it's not, but by really facing and welcoming suffering just as it is. She was not joyous about her condition, but neither did she seem to be protesting it. The expression on her face spoke of the wisdom she had accrued in this life and the remarkable ability she had to face any situation with grace and acceptance. She had cultivated the sublime abiding of equanimity throughout her life and here it was coming to her aid when it counted the most.

In the days leading up to my most recent visit, her condition took a turn for the worse. The doctors had told her this was it - she was steadily declining and would not get better. Her family was kind enough to let my mother and I see her for a brief while. She was confined to her bed, unable to speak much. But there she was, still full of grace and acceptance. I placed my hand gently on her arm and felt a calm sense of ease. She knew the end was near. She was ready. She spoke only to tell us that she felt no pain in the body and gave an enthusiastic nod to my mother's offer to make her favourite cashew curry. When the time came to depart, it was clear that this would be our last meeting. I chanted a blessing for her to help guide her on her way and reassured her that she had nothing to fear. A seasoned traveller, she was simply going on a new journey, to a new land, without the heavy burden of baggage and with a brand new body to boot. With her great virtue, I had no doubt she would be going to a very special place. She softly nodded with a knowing gaze. A few days after that meeting, she passed away.

One can never know what another experiences at the moment of death, but in her presence that day I could hardly feel any fear in her at all. In the final moments of her life, her heart seemed to be resting in the sublime abiding of equanimity. My heart felt a subtle ache not from losing her, but rather at the sight of such indescribable beauty.

Equanimity is a state of mind highly revered in Buddhism. The Buddha spoke of it in many different contexts, including as one of the four 'sublime abidings' or 'heavenly abodes' of the heart and mind, along with loving-kindness, compassion for the suffering of others, and joy for the happiness of others. While the topic of loving-kindness merits its own blog post altogether, it refers, in short, to an exalted state of *agape* or indiscriminate, unconditional love for all sentient beings. It is the greatest love one can experience for oneself and others - the love a mother has for her child, the love known by the saints, the fullest expression of an open and fearless heart. It encompasses compassion and sympathetic joy, and can be matched only by its perfect partner: equanimity.

This year, I have found myself reflecting a great deal on equanimity. My teacher was the first person I ever met who truly embodied this virtue and it is undoubtedly the quality I most admire about him. It wasn't until I started living the spiritual life that I realized just how limited my worldly understanding of love was. We are taught in the world to love only those closest to us, to have compassion for the underdogs, to share the joys of our friends alone. We are taught and encouraged to love with discrimination. We cheer on the angry activist and take comfort in a sense of us versus them, good versus evil, right versus wrong. But the Buddha tells us there is no 'versus' in true love. True love is unconditional and all-embracing. It needs no justification and knows no boundaries. When we abide in true loving-kindness, we love the Hitlers of the world just as much as the Mother Teresas, the abusers just as much as the abused, the foreign just as much as the familiar. We see them all through the eye of wisdom.

Such a depth of love is often hard to fathom with regard to all beings. But it's even harder to grasp when applied to life itself. In my view, equanimity is like true love for our experience of life itself. It is an indiscriminate and unconditional open heart to whatever life presents us, both that which is pleasant and that which is unpleasant, internally in our own minds and out there in the world. Those rare beings who abide in equanimity are cool, balanced and unshaken amidst the worldly winds of praise and blame, success and failure, pleasure and pain, fame and obscurity. It is as if they are perched on a high mountaintop, far above the clouds, looking down on the world. From their vantage point of wisdom, they can see clearly the ever-changing weather in the world and thus neither cling to sunny skies, nor to stormy weather. They know all these conditions simply come and go; they see the big picture. But contrary to popular perception, they are not coldly apathetic or disinterested. They have simply looked deeply into the nature of human existence and seen it for what it is. They have no need to shade their eyes from reality, they can only love and welcome all experience into their embrace. They are not unfeeling, but rather have opened their hearts widely enough to feel life without any buffers, to open to the unsatisfactory nature of existence and respond with unshakeable love.

I cannot claim to have mastered this beautiful state of mind as of yet but I am in reverent awe at this vast potential of our hearts and minds. The more I practice here, and open to the truth of the way things are, the more I feel this love flowing in like a cool, calm stream. With this cultivation, I hope that I too will one day be able to face my own death with the beautiful equanimity that my friend displayed. That is the one sacred treasure she was able to take with her on her journey and the only one that really mattered.

Back here at the monastery, I continue to delight in the joys of the spiritual life. September will mark my two-year anniversary here, which feels both completely natural and utterly unbelievable at the same time. The worldly winds of change flow as freely here as they do out there and I try my best to row my boat more and more steadily as each day goes by. Though I do miss the great light of my teacher who is on retreat this year, I am using this time to cultivate and strengthen my own inner light of wisdom. What's more, I am happily surrounded by many other kind spiritual friends here, including a particularly special marmot who teaches me important lessons about my heart each and every day (see photos below).

Until the next time, I wish you balanced warmth of heart and coolness of mind. May you dwell in the sublime abiding of equanimity. May all beings be at ease.

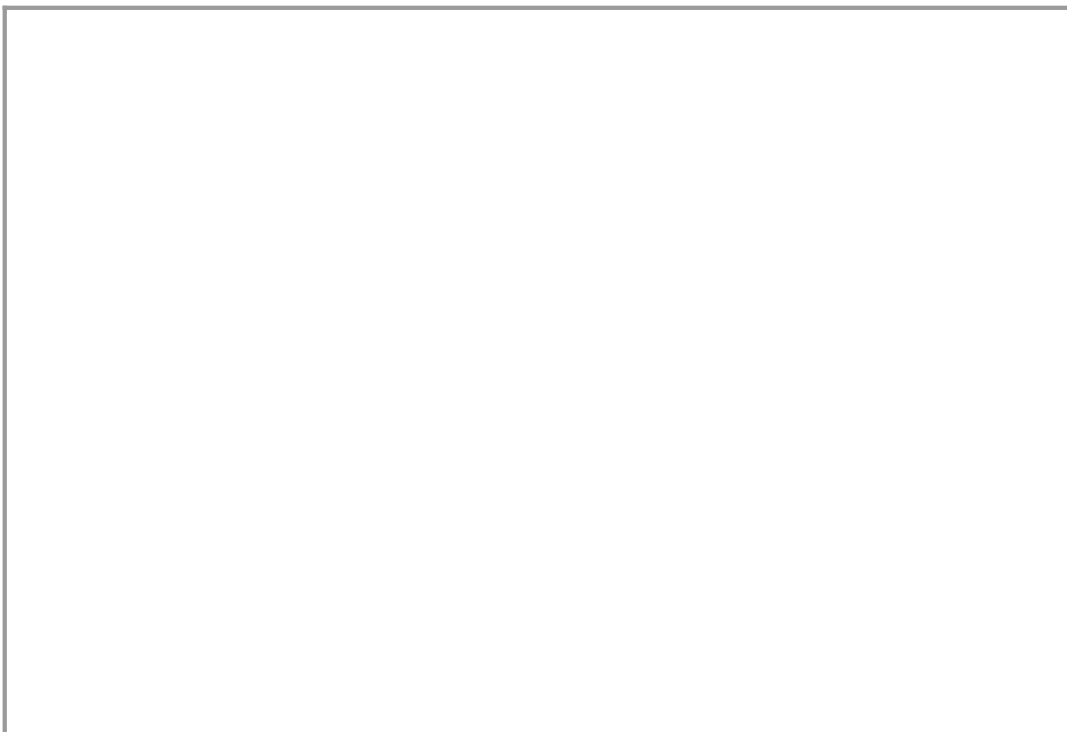
Foxtails sway gently

Dancing in the shifting winds

Fanning heart and mind

[0 notes](#)

[August 3, 2013](#)



May 12, 2013

To Honour the Worthy Ones



(Photo Credit: H. Schramm)

*"Devotion and respect should be offered
to those who have shown us the Way."
(Dhammapada, v.392)*

It's a beautiful day here at the monastery. Spring has finally sprung and the weather is dreamy. Rebirth abounds, not only for my animal and flower friends, but also for me. I feel that another new chapter of practice has begun here and I look forward to the lessons and insights that it will surely bring. To commemorate the beginning of this new chapter, I have just moved to a new kuti (cabin). Back in the world, whenever I felt the winds of change beckoning me, I would head off to new continents and distant lands. Here at the monastery, I simply move to a new kuti. Call it restlessness or a healthy love of change, I am enjoying my new resting place and the sense of renewal it has inspired.

This new kuti overlooks a beautiful marsh and I have taken to spending my afternoons sitting silently in awe of its beauty. Occasionally I am joined by a pair of geese, a young bunny, some curious squirrels and, without fail, a friendly bumblebee. I often reflect on how peaceful it is to be with wildlife in the forest. Sometimes when we don't share the same language as other beings - human or otherwise - we're able to communicate in much deeper ways. I enjoy my afternoons with these friends and learn many important lessons from their silent company.

On one such afternoon, I observed with great interest a mother crow teaching her baby

crow how to fly. It was a windy day and the mother glided effortlessly in the breeze as her baby made valiant efforts to follow her glide. When the baby seemed to be struggling, the mother would gently nudge and encourage her little one to keep trying, to keep following her glide. I remarked to myself that this is how most of us learn the really important things in life. We are constantly observing the behaviour and motivations of others and, consciously or not, emulating them in our own ways. The mother crow didn't just give her baby a book on "Flying for Dummies" and I doubt she shared any words on the subject with her youngling. That's not how we learn the great lessons of life, is it? We learn and teach others by example and by example alone.

From my own parents, I learned some of the most important spiritual lessons of my early life. Though they were not meditators or very religious in their own right, they taught me very fundamental Buddhist principles simply by way of their conduct in everyday life. Like the baby bird, I instinctively followed their glide. By their example, and not by their command, I learned truthfulness, patience, generosity and unconditional love. Throughout my life, they have been unfailing examples of these and other virtues. And as any good Buddhist will profess, these virtues constitute the very foundation of the Buddha's teaching. Later, when I was in my early twenties, I recall someone asking me how she could convince her young children to become interested in the Dhamma. She seemed keen to uncover what sneaky tactic my parents had employed to manipulate me into going to the temple. I remember suggesting that her best bet would be to, quite simply, be a true example of the Buddha's teachings herself - to give her children the foundations of virtue and love and then let them find their own wings. I vaguely remember she was not too satisfied with my response. It's not so easy, after all, to really practice what we preach.

Occasionally...rarely, we have the good fortune of meeting spiritually wise beings who really do practice what they preach and teach by example. This has been much on my mind as of late. This new chapter of my time here at the monastery began in early April when my beloved teacher, "Ajahn" (meaning 'teacher' in Thai), began a year-long solitary retreat in silence and seclusion here at the monastery. We have been planning for this year for quite some time now. I recall him floating the idea soon after I arrived here in late 2011 and my heart leapt with excitement. An odd reaction when someone tells you they're thinking of going into seclusion for a year...but what I heard was much more than that. I heard an opportunity calling for me to support someone who has selflessly and tirelessly given me, and countless others, the highest gifts of truth for so many years now. By simply staying here and continuing to serve the monastery during this year-long period, I saw an opportunity to express just an ounce of the immense gratitude that I feel to this wise monk and to, as the Buddha encouraged, "honour the worthy ones". This was a blessing indeed.

I remember very vividly the first time I met Ajahn. It was back in the summer of 1999

and I had signed up for my first ten-day meditation retreat with this mysterious monk from British Columbia whom I hadn't met before. I had just turned twenty and had just finished my first year of university. Life was looking bleak. I had come to the haunting realization that I had no interest whatsoever in what I was studying, nor did I have any desire to engage in the frivolities of life as a twenty-year old. I had been quite the social creature in my younger years, but suddenly found myself exhibiting hermit-like behaviour, losing interest in all the things I thought I should be interested in and not really understanding what was happening to me. The world that I had once found so friendly and promising suddenly felt like some sort of bad movie, where virtue was a rare commodity and superficiality ubiquitous. Some might have diagnosed it as depression; indeed, the thought did cross my own mind. But I now look back on that phase of my life as one of the most critical junctures in my spiritual journey and recognize that most seekers of the truth have gone through the same. Whether I was conscious of it at the time or not, my mind was growing disenchanted with the world and inclining towards the deeper truths of life and, whether I liked it or not, most of the people around me could not relate.

It was then that I met the very greatest of friends, a teacher who not only embodied virtue and wisdom, but who also assured me that I was not alone in this quest for truth. To my great relief, Ajahn showed me that there were many others who had walked this path before me and could provide a guiding light in what seemed like infinite darkness. I remember being overcome by an uncontrollable flood of tears before we had even exchanged a word. They were not tears of grief, but rather tears of great relief. Somewhere inside me, I knew that I had finally found someone who could answer my deepest questions about life, even if I hadn't yet clearly formulated those questions in my own mind. To this day, the recollection of all the gifts he has given me over the past fifteen years and his living example can still move me to tears. To this wise monk, I owe a debt that is quite simply immeasurable.

The Buddha placed great emphasis on having "kalyanamittas" (wise spiritual friends) along the path. Apart from the necessary and important work we must all do individually, I can now appreciate just how important it is to spend time in the company of wise teachers. If we want to learn how to be a skilled musician, we instinctively know that we need to spend time learning from those who are highly skilled in music. In the same way, if we want to know the truth, we must spend time in the company of the wise. I used to tell myself that I could be in the thick of the world but still stay true to my own spiritual values, even though the rest of my flock was clearly flying in a different direction. But looking back, I can see that I greatly underestimated the power of association. I am still a baby bird, spiritually speaking, and I wish to follow the glide of the wise, not of the worldly. Perhaps once I fully develop the strength of my own wings, I will be able to fly solo anywhere without veering off course. But I'm grateful to have this opportunity to be near to those who really embody what I am seeking.

Somehow, just by being nearby, I am able to marinate in their peace and wisdom until it flavours my whole being.

This was perhaps the primary reason I felt a great call to come here and spend more time with Ajahn. I learn so much just by being in his presence. This is where you really see the depth of a person's view – through their example in everyday, ordinary life. While I will have little to no contact with him throughout his year-long retreat, I feel his example even more strongly now as he undertakes the real work of the spiritual life and I continue, happily, to follow his glide. Like my afternoons with my friends by the marsh, I feel his good company even more palpably in silence.

This coming year of Ajahn's retreat is expected to be a quiet one here at the monastery with very limited visitors and a more informal structure. The other residents and I have been blissfully basking in this heightened quietude. As I walk from my kuti to the main building every morning, I delight in the sacred hush that pervades the grounds these days. It's a very special time here... Before going into his retreat, Ajahn encouraged all of us to use this year to deepen our own personal practice as well. With this in mind, I'm hoping to undertake a solitary retreat of my own this fall. If all goes well, I'll be spending the month of September in silence and seclusion on a private little gulf island off Canada's west coast. Monastery life bears great fruit but it is very strongly focussed on community life and I wish to get a taste of life as a true hermit for just a little while. The thought excites me greatly, but perhaps I'll tell you more about that in my next blog entry! For now, I send you bright spring wishes of renewal and blossoms of happiness across the miles. And, to all those of you who have been shining examples of goodness and truth to me over the years, I express to you my sincere gratitude and deep veneration. Even for us solitary types, it is one of life's greatest blessings to have such wonderful friends.

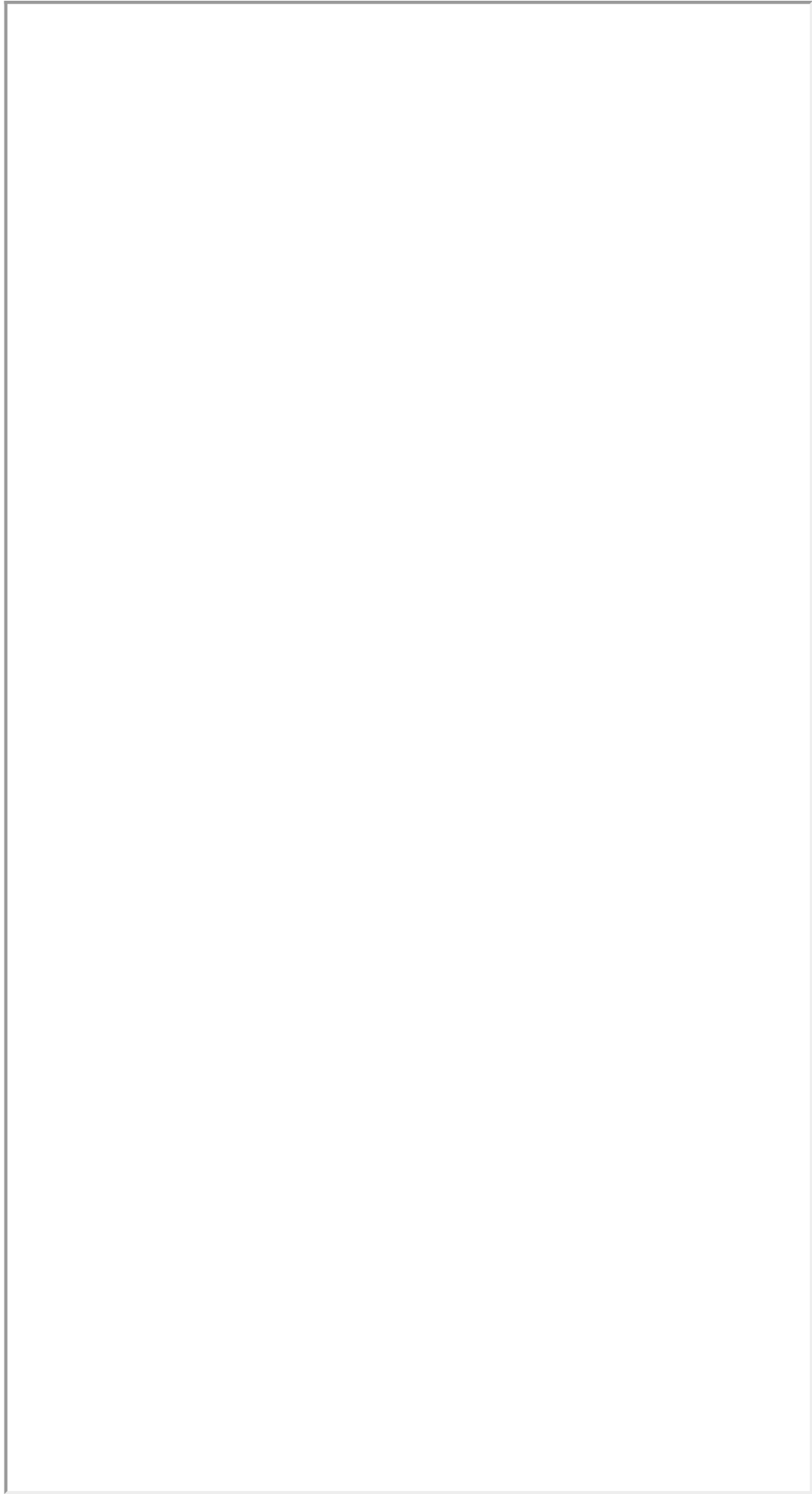
Fly high baby bird

Follow mother's trusted glide

To find your own truth

[1 note](#)

[May 12, 2013](#)



January 19, 2013

Row, Row, Row Your Boat



"There are beings who travel the difficult path, across the dangerous swamp of defiling passions, traverse the ocean of delusion, through the darkness of ignorance, and go beyond. They are sustained by wise contemplation, secure in freedom from doubt, liberated; such beings are great indeed." (Dhammapada v.414)

I began writing this entry on the fourteenth of January of the year 2013. When I was a little girl, back in the twentieth century, I used to enjoy daydreaming about what the future would be like. My visions, informed largely by 'The Jetsons', foresaw a future of technological delight. Surely by 2013 we would all be riding to foreign galaxies on hovercrafts and having our dinners prepared by domesticated robots. Never did I imagine that on the fourteenth of January, of the year 2013, I would be sitting in my tiny little cabin with no electricity, no running water, chopping my own firewood for warmth and squinting slightly to write these words for lack of proper light. No domesticated

robots here to prepare dinner and, actually, no dinner at all! Never...did I imagine a future so great.

Here at the monastery, we are now in the midst of our formal winter retreat, a time when we wind down our regular schedule and deepen our practice. The winter is a lovely time for this as Mother Nature also takes her turn to rest in stillness. She sends the birds off to warmer climes and nudges the animals into their burrows. The trees stand bare and the wildflowers rest in peace, awaiting rebirth in the spring. As the sun rises, the winter skies are infused with glorious shades of pink and orange and, at nightfall, an endless landscape of twinkling stars. Snowflakes dance like whirling dervishes in the calm, still air. It is as if Mother Nature is singing a soft lullaby to one and all, coaxing us into stillness. Now that I have spent all four seasons here, I have come to love each of them for the unique feelings they inspire. But I must say I am starting to favour winter for its cool and quiet austerity.

It is hard to believe that I have now called this monastery home for almost a year and a half. If you had told me a year and a half ago that I'd still be here today, as happy as I find myself, I'd have called you crazy. But if I've learned anything from my time here, it is that we can never really know what the future has in store for us. Life, the Buddha tells us, is inherently uncertain. No matter who we are or how much power we wield among men, life does not consult us before delivering its onslaught of twists and turns, highs and lows, fortunes and losses.

My teacher often refers to life as a river of events – ever-changing, flowing, insubstantial and impermanent. We cannot command the river to flow in accordance with our own desires, at a tempo of our own choosing. Neither can we choose not to be in the river. All we can really do is learn how to skillfully cross over the river no matter the tide, no matter the weather, no matter what life presents us. This is the training that Buddhists undertake. We endeavour to learn the skills required to row our boats ever so gently and ever so merrily, to maintain joy and equanimity amidst both calm and stormy seas. Our destination is not a far shore, but rather a state of mind that is unperturbed by the turbulent journey.

When reflecting on the six months that have passed since my last entry, the dominant feelings that come to mind are of that of intense awe and deep gratitude. Day by day, I witness the transformation of my own mind and the workings of the universe with great wonder and awe. Much of this I cannot explain in words. A beautiful sunrise can stop us in our tracks, but even the most poetic language can only hint at why it moves us so. Suffice it to say, life is not what I thought it to be. It is much more beautiful. The more I investigate the inner workings of my mind, the more this beauty is revealed to me and the more it calls me to investigate further. There is a wondrous, ineffable flow to life that unfolds when you relinquish control and get out of your own way. It inspires great faith and trust in certain universal laws – that goodness begets goodness, that

generosity attracts abundance, that truthfulness gives rise to wisdom. Increasingly, I wish to uncover the most guarded secrets of the great hermits and contemplatives – the depths of beauty that they discovered within. No longer am I satisfied with mere glimpses; even the most eloquent poems, the most soul-stirring music, the most passionate romance can really only offer that much – mere glimpses. Their nature is transient and thus inherently unsatisfactory. I wish to discover for myself the deepest well from where they emanate, the all-encompassing and everlasting beauty of truth. This, the Buddha tells me, is the only desire that is truly worthwhile: the desire for enlightenment.

Many people have a hard time conceiving of enlightenment. It is often thought of as some sort of suspended state of being, a place of intense light, the ultimate savasana, where tones of Enya float through the air and Rumi whispers sweet nothings in your ear. I will not comment on such interpretations since, truthfully, I can speak with no real authority on the subject. Nonetheless, I believe the Buddha was fairly clear on this point. Enlightenment, from a Buddhist perspective, is quite simply the end of suffering. The Buddha shows us that beings suffer because they have failed to understand certain truths. After their enlightenment, fully enlightened beings do not go to some magical vortex, to abide there in bliss for all eternity. Enlightenment is not a place. I find myself increasingly conceiving of enlightenment more like a perfect view or perspective. Fully enlightened beings clearly understand suffering, its cause, its cessation and the path leading to the cessation of suffering. They know the inherently unsatisfactory, impermanent and insubstantial nature of all conditioned phenomena. They do not wince at the sight because it is not contrary to their vision of reality. This isn't some sort of passive resignation either – they are intensely joyful and alive. They have removed the fetters of greed, hatred and delusion that filter the mind movements of the ordinary person. They do not suffer because they do not expect reality to be any other way than as it is. Importantly, they don't just know these truths intellectually. They know these truths through direct experience, through wisdom. Truth encompasses every fibre of their being.

As someone who has lived most of her life in the realm of ideas, this latter point has been a source of great insight for me. You cannot understand the truth through the intellect alone. You cannot read about Buddhism in a book and know the truths that the Buddha spoke of. To fully know the truth, you must live and breathe it, be ever close to it, safeguard and care for it. This is the reason I feel so profoundly grateful to spend my days here at this monastery, in the company of great spiritual teachers and friends. Here, in this place, I feel intimately close to wisdom. I cannot see it with my eyes or grab it with my hands, however much I try. But when I am least expecting it, it enters my pores and transforms me from the inside out.

The more time goes by, the more I begin to see that the "monastery" is not so much

the physical location where I reside or the spiritual community it shelters; it is more like a sanctuary within my own mind, a nesting place for peace. I do not spend the bulk of my days studying Buddhist texts, debating points of philosophical doctrine or clocking endless hours on my meditation cushion. I just try to live every moment with the basic teachings of the Buddha in mind such that they filter and inform every thought, every interaction, everything that I do. It's not always so easy. My boat gets rocked around in the river too often and I sometimes feel like jumping ship! But when I can just remember to employ the two great oars of mindfulness and serenity with careful balance, it becomes easier and easier to row my boat ever more gently and ever more merrily. I no longer think of my practice as the amount of time I spend in formal meditation or study. Rowing my boat through the ever-changing river of life is my practice.

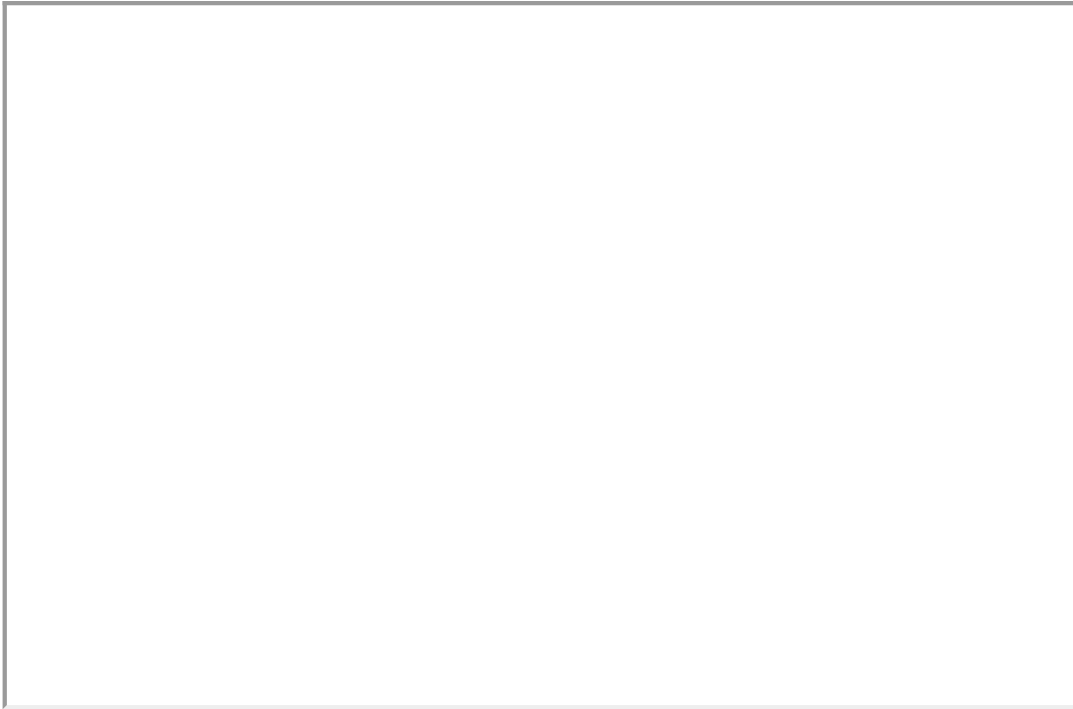
I have been away from you for quite a long time now, but continue to feel each of you very closely in my heart. I know that many of you have faced great suffering over the last year. Amidst all the euphoric beauty here at the monastery, I too have faced my own periods of frustration, grief and loss. But rather than wish your troubles away from you, I wish you the equanimity and wisdom to know that the river's nature is to be tumultuous, unpredictable and full of storms. It cannot be any other way. This is the first noble truth that the Buddha expounded – that there is suffering, that life is inherently unsatisfactory. If we really know this truth, if we really feel it in the depths of our being, we will put more effort into learning how to row skillfully so that we don't find our boats capsized so often in the hurricanes of life. To the extent that we remind ourselves of this truth, our discontent will decrease and our sense of peace will expand. This is what I wish for you. As I end off for now, I send you my profound wishes of 'metta' - loving-kindness - wherever you find yourself in the river of life. May these most sincere wishes for your well being travel across the miles and reach each of you as a warm, gentle breeze that softly caresses you as you row...row...row.

Row, row, row your boat Gently, merrily, wisely

To the shoreless shore

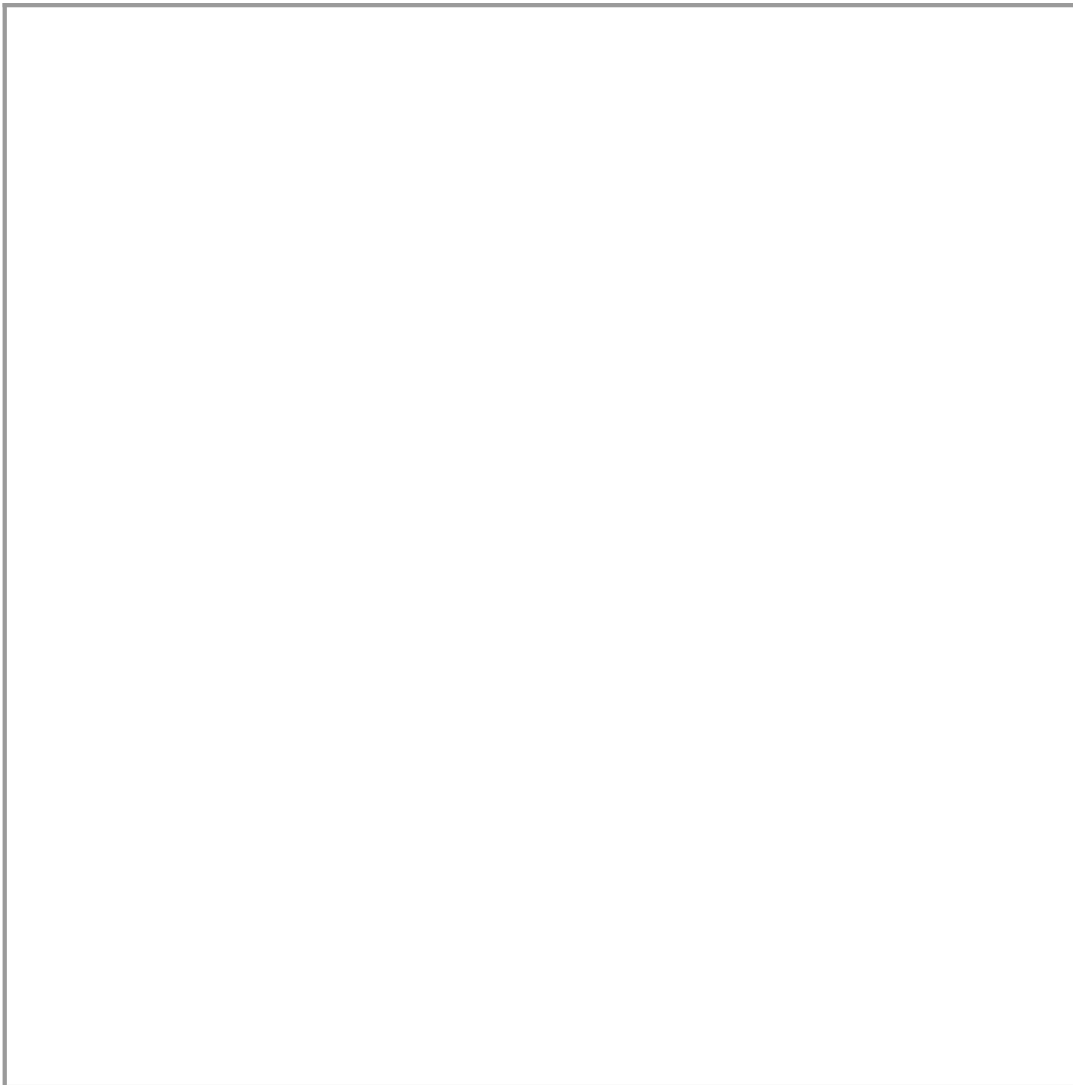
[1 note](#)

[January 19, 2013](#)



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[January 19, 2013](#)



[0 notes](#)

[June 19, 2012](#)

Butterfly Gliding



"The path that leads to worldly gain and the path that leads to Liberation are different paths. Seeing thus, the renunciate disciple avoids the distraction of worldly gain and success to dwell in solitude." (Dhammapada v.75)

Just over nine months have passed since I arrived at this peaceful forest refuge. How fitting... These nine months of gestation have given birth to a new sense of wellness, clarity and ease – a rebirth of the most blessed kind. The Buddha encouraged his disciples to reflect often on the nature of birth and death – this endless and unsatisfactory cycle of existence called 'samsara'. He showed us that if we are mindful of the ever-changing nature of the world, we will begin to see that all that has the nature to be born also has the nature to die. When I reflect on the last few years of my own life, this reality cannot be clearer. The last chapter of my life has very distinctly come to an end and a new one has begun. I can remember the person I was just a few years ago – her values and opinions, her hopes and fears – but I cannot relate to her anymore. I remember her somewhat like a butterfly gliding in the wind remembers her days as a caterpillar roaming the earth. Once that cocoon has been shed, she can no longer go back to her old self or her old ways of being. She can only fly freely toward greater heights.

There is much to say about the six months that have passed since my last blog post. Much. And yet my time here has trained me to try to speak little. So I will endeavour to focus on the most important things: My heart is very happy here; I feel at home in my current state of homelessness; I feel deeply, deeply grateful for the incredible beauty that I am surrounded by every day: the wise teachers and spiritual friends that I

continue to meet here; the pristine wonders of the forest and its cuddly creatures; the peacefulness that has started to take root in my heart; and the opportunity to practice amidst these very ideal conditions. I also feel deeply grateful for the not so beautiful parts of life here - for the opportunity to face the defilements of my mind with truthful, open eyes and without the familiar distractions of the world. As I sit here writing this to you, there is a soft, gentle rustle in the wind outside. The birds are singing songs of joy and delight. Baby marmots are romping around the monastery grounds. The afternoon rain has given way to a fresh mist in the evening air. The clouds glide slowly to the west as the sun descends over the horizon. Most importantly, I am here to notice these things. I am not completely lost in preoccupations about the future or dwelling on events of the past. I am here, enjoying this present moment of joy and lightness.

When I first arrived here in September, I had an unrelenting sense of anxiety over what the next step in my life would be. Should I return to my diplomatic career, should I try for a new life in academia or some other form of international work? Should I give up international life and try my hand at teaching yoga or working for some sort of lay Buddhist organization? How could I make a livelihood for myself without being swallowed up by the crazy world out there and without losing sight of what was really important to me? What did the world expect of me and could I deliver? Endless questions... futile proliferations of the mind.

I told my teacher that I didn't want to spend my whole precious year here worrying about what I was going to do afterward. He very wisely suggested that I make a plan not to make any plans for six months. After six months, I could then allocate half an hour every day to planning. During those planning sessions, I could formulate a wish list of criteria for my new life and livelihood. If I found my mind roaming into the future at other times of the day, I was to gently remind myself that I was only allowed to plan during those half-hour periods. It was a great idea... though I only really honoured the first part. After some settling in, my planning mind settled down and I allowed myself to just be here and enjoy the wonder of this special time of my life. When the six months were over, I realized that I didn't need to do any planning at all. I was extremely clear on how I wanted to live, where and with whom. It was all right here. As I tried to formulate my wish list, I found myself simply describing my life here at this monastery. There was simply no need to look elsewhere. In April, soon after the end of our wondrous winter retreat, after years of uncertainty and doubt and endless extensions of my leave of absence from the Foreign Service, I finally submitted my resignation without batting an eyelid. I asked my teacher, the Abbot of this monastery, if I could continue to live, practice and serve the community here for a while longer. He graciously agreed. So I have decided to stay here...in this serene little oasis in the forest...indefinitely.

To those who knew me in my former life as a caterpillar, this may come as very shocking news. If I really think about it, even I myself find it rather shocking. Thirteen years ago, when I first felt a very deep connection to meditation and the Buddha's teachings, I felt wholly ready to commit my life to this path. At that time, my karma had other plans. I was pulled into the thick of the world, very literally, into a life of constant travel and an all-consuming career in diplomacy. In terms of worldly life, I could not have asked for a more interesting set of experiences. I will always treasure the international escapades of my twenties and appreciate their value in preparing me for my new life as a butterfly. But that life was never my destiny and I always knew it. There was a much deeper longing in my heart that spoke to me in rare moments of silence and solitude. I could have chosen to ignore that voice for the rest of my life and humbly accept my life as a caterpillar. But now that I have had a taste of what it feels like to fly, I am so grateful that I didn't just settle for mediocre familiarity. If we really appreciate the reality that we will all die one day, that life is passing us by with remarkable speed, we will recognize the responsibility we have to live in accord with our deepest values and aspirations. Thirteen years ago, I tried with gusto to embark on this path and quickly got pulled in a different direction. About a decade later, I started to stumble around in a rather haphazard fashion and now, to my great surprise, find myself on that very path, in the blessed company of the wise and compassionate teacher who first inspired me to follow this path towards truth so many years ago. Isn't karma grand?

I still don't have any idea what the future holds but the question is frankly not so important to me anymore. We can fool ourselves into thinking that we have control over the ebbs and flows of our lives, but the Buddha assures us that we are simply heirs to our karma. We plant seeds and we reap their fruit when the conditions are ripe. Instead of devising convoluted plans to genetically modify our own fruit, all we really need to do is keep planting the right seeds. So in case you are lying awake at night, worrying that I've lost my marbles and am throwing away everything good in my life, please just trust that I am planting seeds for something much better. I have taken refuge in the Buddha, in the truth he expounded, and in the community of noble ones who have committed to follow his path of awakening. I couldn't be in better hands.

The Buddha assured us that there will always be great suffering in the world. But our highest duty is not to right the wrongs of the world, nor to drown in the suffering of the many. Our highest duty is to train our hearts and minds to be unshaken and utterly peaceful in the midst of this great suffering. Our highest potential is to train ourselves to see the truth of the way things are, to uproot the deep fetters of greed, hatred and delusion from our hearts. It may take lifetimes and it certainly requires great effort and sacrifice, but what else could we more beneficially aspire to? To be happy and light independent of the darkness around us... to dwell in beautiful states of mind even when surrounded by the unbeautiful... to be blissfully content in the most ordinary of

moments. These are the prizes I have now set my sights on. You may think I'm a dreamer, but I'm not the only one. Here, in this little nook of the world, I am surrounded by beautiful beings who, like me, aspire to one day attain the bliss of awakening, to be free from all suffering, to realize the very same truth that the Buddha realized. It isn't a path for the faint-hearted. Like salmon swimming upstream, we are going against the overpowering current of the world and of our own deeply ingrained delusions. But we draw great faith and energy from the example of the Buddha, from the skillful teachings he so compassionately left us and from the many fruits of the practice that we can observe in this very life. Ehipassiko, my friends... ehipassiko.

Didn't I say I was training myself to speak little? Well, in an effort to renounce my ingrained verbose ways, I have started to write a series of haikus as a sort of zen journal. So I leave you now with the first haiku I wrote back in April and a few photos that speak for themselves. May you be happy wherever life finds you and may you feel as free and light as a butterfly gliding.

Butterfly gliding A dream cast forth in the wind

Aspiring heart