

Brief Recollections on the Early History of the 'Newcastle/Tyneside Zen Group'

viewed by Gordon Bell

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The precursor to the Newcastle Serene Meditation Group, was the Tyneside Zen Buddhist Association and it formed in around 1973 inspired by the presence and teaching of Throssel Hole Priory. It was one of two Buddhist meditation groups in Newcastle at that time. The other followed the practice of Vipassana (Insight Meditation) taught by the Thai Forest Tradition monastery Aruna Ratanagiri at Harnham near Belsay in Northumberland. The two groups had close ties and for a period met at Richard and Jean Hopkins house in Devonshire Place, Jesmond, the home of a few of the lay supporters of Harnham. Newcastle University students also had a Buddhist society which featured talks by visiting speakers and were supporters of Harnham. Venerable Ajahn Sumedho and other monks from Chithurst and Harnham spoke and taught there frequently.

The early years the nascent Zen group met at various member's addresses, mainly on a rota and relied on a single paper newsletter (Zen Newsheet) of planned meetings. Eventually this developed into a broad-based booklet newsletter called Zen News carrying articles, poems, news and meeting contacts, edited, produced, printed and distributed by the group.

The early members included Robert Dunnett (Yellowhammer), David Brazier, Richard Apps, Dave Lavash, Marietta (Etty) Cook, Frances Bartley (now Rev. Houn Jigen), Dave Flemming, Dave Hurcombe, Duncan Sellers, Gordon Bell and sorry, my memory is missing other names.

Meetings were at a range of locations, mostly in homes such as Killingworth, Felling, Whitley Bay, Jesmond, Heaton, Prudhoe, South Shields, Washington and a few hired rooms, such as Jesmond Friends Meeting House, Churches, Eldon Square Fitness Centre.

Meetings were naturally quite relaxed and included recitation of Dogen's Fukanzazenji, two 30 minute periods of zazen (now called Serene Reflection Meditation) and one of kinhin (walking meditation). A period of sharing, communication and book reading/study with refreshments followed on. Occasional visits from a visiting monk from Throssel and day retreats. Since this was a period of the group's influence by Throssel Hole Priory, but before some groups became more formally affiliated, the proceedings at meetings did not resemble the religious ceremonial that is expressed in the present day. This helped introduce many people to Buddhism and Zen meditation and some of which went on to formally support the local Priory, attend retreats, sesshins, jukai and taking ordination as monks.

A core group were active in the first appeal for funds to build the present meditation/ceremony hall with dining/lecture room at Throssel. This was co-ordinated nationally with Throssel Hole Priory from the Newcastle Group, Gordon Bell was the Chair of the Appeal Committee. Pre-internet/fax etc., it ran by telephone and post and raised the funds for a self-build. The Prior, Rev. Daiji Strathern inspired activity of the Newcastle Group through teaching visits, day retreats. He was a motivator in the commencement of excavation of foundations, assisted by those who attended retreats, laity, and a small group of junior monks, including Rev. Daishin Morgan. The foundations became a monumental task as it exposed deep workings of a drift coal mine.

The day the concrete slab was laid saw most of the Newcastle group and several other Zen groups around the country help spread over 40 concrete mixers-worth, in a day. Zen very much in action, saw an amazing effort to complete the task at a speed and quantity that was in excess of professional builders! The reinforced slab under the current dining room and Meditation/Ceremony Hall is probably earthquake proof!

Shortly, after this time, Rev. Master Jiyu, became increasingly ill, so a plan developed for the Prior Rev. Daiji Strathern to go Shasta Abbey at this stressful time. A period of monastic instability and uncertainty developed. Rev. Jisho Perry arrived to take over the reigns in August '76 and with a two week overlap Rev. Daiji left for Shasta Abbey and sadly he left the order of monks shortly after. The small group of junior monks then travelled to Shasta to further their training. Rev. Kyosei Hughes stood in temporarily at Throssel followed on by a series of monks from Shasta Abbey.

Then to keep the Priory functional David Brazier (from the Newcastle Zen Group), became the Prior, talking ordination. (he later became a teacher, author in engaged Shin Buddhism and psychotherapy)..I remember being at the Priory in the old farmhouse when Roshi Jiyu ordained Frances Bartley by phone with a full complement of monks attending at Shasta Abbey and naming her Houn Jigen, assisted at Throssel by David Brazier (Rev Homyo Brazier). These were critical times of change and uncertainty as Rev. Jiyu's health faltered and gradually improved. The Zen groups around the country pulled together to support the Priory, the travelling monks, and the purchase of the property of Throssel from the monk that left the order.

Just like the monks coming and going, the members of the Newcastle Zen group were doing the same. Moving jobs, saw early members move elsewhere, Robert Dunnett-Yellowhammer to Solihul, Dave Lavash and Richard Apps out of the area. Dave Flemming passed away after contracting HIV/AIDS. Gordon had a head-on motorcycle crash one February evening 1980/81 on the way to the Zen Group, seriously injured but recovering over several months.

Dave Hurcombe may be able to recollect the Zen group around this time as my memory is not so clear. I know I was getting my life together again after the crash, and met Dorothy, who became my wife. She attended some of the Zen meetings and also took Jukai with Rev. Daishin Morgan in 1983. I remember attending Dave Flemming's Catholic Funeral Mass (officiated by his brother-priest) and then his Sōtō Zen Buddhist funeral at Newcastle Crematorium, followed by an informal secular memorial celebration at Throssel. The Newcastle Zen Group had good connections with the LGBT community and I remember attending Body-Positive (HIV/AIDS) meetings with my late wife Dorothy before Dave Flemming's passing.

I think from 1984/5 my life took on more focus on work and less on attending meditation groups. Study of oriental therapies, running a pair of natural food stores and vegetarian restaurant, teaching, further study in UK and abroad (Australia, USA, Japan). Whilst I maintained contact with Throssel and Shasta over the years I also studied widely in other Buddhist traditions including Tibetan/Bhutanese (Drukpa Kargu), Shingon, Theravada and Buddhist/Taoist traditions related to the oriental therapies that I practised and taught.

More of the background can also be gleaned from the Newcastle Zen Group's **Zen Newsheets** and **Zen News** that have survived, scanned and archived at <https://tinyurl.com/zennut> as well as early Throssel Hole Priory newsletters also on the

same web page. Other issues of Zen News etc., may have survive in the library/archives of Throssel Hole Buddhist Abbey.

There is a very good record of Throssel Hole in the early days by Ian P. Oliver in his book; *Buddhism in Britain* (Rider 1979) p.178-192. It echoes my experience too.

Here are a few of my photos of Throssel in the early years:



Main Building (Farmhouse) in 1974



View of Barn (Zendo) and main building (1974)



The Zendo – Access door behind altar for external stairway (1977)



Meal & Lecture room below Zendo with Kanzeon Shrine (1977)

Buddhist Group Activity in the North East Area

A personal View

From around 1968 I became interested in Buddhism, initially reading as many books as I could find from libraries (Hartlepool, Durham and Sunderland and National too). Discovering in 1970 from a local newspaper about the celebration of Wesak in May at Durham University and that there were two Thai monks studying at Durham University and teaching Buddhist meditation at the student's Buddhist Society. They were from the Buddhapadipa Temple, in London and the more senior monk, Vorosak led the teachings. I tracked them down before the term closed and this started a long association with the student's society which was open to non-university people. I became one of the non-student members that helped the transition from year to year as members completed their academic studies. There was an Oriental and Asian Studies department, where leading professor Dr Karel Werner spoke regularly at meetings and he taught yoga and Indian philosophy (with my future wife Dorothy, whom I did not know at that time).

In furthering my study of Vipassana meditation, I attended a 3-week silent intensive retreat in Hindhead, Surrey with Dhiravamsa, a former senior incumbent of the Buddhapadipa temple.

In 1972 I saw a local TV report of the opening of a Zen monastery in Northumberland near Allendale. At the first opportunity, I headed off in my 3-wheeler van without knowing where the location was. I asked the locals all the way from Allendale to Throssel near Carr Shields. When I eventually arrived, there was only one monk, Dogo a Chief Junior present, whilst the main body of monks were with Rev. Master Jiyu Kennett in London on a teaching trip. I was allowed to have a wander around. The property was at that time very basic to say the least, as they had just taken over from an artistic hippy commune. I joined a week retreat (sesshin) a few months later and took the Buddhist Precepts with Rev Master Jiyu Kennett.

After the Thai monks completed their studies in 1972, an American Sōtō Zen monk, Rev. Mokurai Cherlin, from Throssel Hole Priory came to study Chinese language at Durham University for a year. Rev Mokurai continued the tradition of meditation instruction and was an intensive, serious person and a strong disciplinarian. Consequently, the membership lost its more laid-back student group and continued with a more committed core group of followers, mostly non-students. Some of the Tyneside meditators travelled down to Durham and thus began a period of close cooperation and focus on Sōtō Zen. The following year Rev Daiji Strathern started to lead some day retreats at St John's College and members of the Newcastle Zen Group took part too. The weekly meeting for meditation and monthly lectures from local and visiting speakers ran reasonably smoothly and also met outside the university for meditation at homes of post graduates Robin Price in Sacriston, and Jonathan Sutton in Littleton.

The Durham Student's Buddhist Society facilitated at various periods, meditation instruction in Vipassana, Samatha and Shikan Taza (Sōtō Zen).

Rev. Master (Roshi) Jiyu Kennett, was a visiting speaker at the Durham University Buddhist Society. I think it may have been 1972/3. I had asked a student member to book a lecture room for the talk on a weekend in the Elvet Building. When the day came the building was LOCKED! Rev. Jiyu and a group of 6-8 monks stood outside with a growing

number of students and attendees. In wondering what could be done to find a spontaneous meeting room, Rev. Jiyu suggested in a very down to earth manner, "let's cross the road to the Three Tuns Inn and meet there!" {Comment: The Three Tuns or Three Barrels/Drums; in my mind became an expression of the Ship and 3 Drums – the logo of the Order of Buddhist Contemplatives :-)}. We were just about to enter the pub when one of the students returned from the Students Union saying that there was a large space available in part of the Students Union Bar! Venue solved! It was a great talk. There is a transcript of the talk at <https://tinyurl.com/zennut>.



A Buddhist Group emerged in Stockton-on-Tees in around 1970, started by a school teacher from Ceylon. Inter-connective support between the groups helped develop the practice of meditation styles of Vipassana and Zen here too.

I understand there was small group of followers of Samye-Ling (Tibetan Monastery near Lockerbie, Scotland) meeting in Newcastle from around 1970.

Peter Harvey, a lecturer in Buddhist Studies at the then Sunderland Polytechnic (now University) and member of the Samatha Trust, taught samatha meditation in Sunderland and Durham including the student's Buddhist Society.

A Chronological Memory How the 'Newcastle Zen Group' dovetailed with happenings at Throssel

- 1972 – Throssel Hole Priory opened.
- 1973 – Tyneside Zen Buddhist Association (TZBA) formed and commenced meetings.
- 1974 -76 Regular meetings with talks and day retreats with TZBA.
- 1976 - TZBA involved with Appeal Fund for building new meditation/ceremony hall.
- 1976 - August - Rev. Jisho Perry arrives as Rev. Daiji Strathern goes to Shasta.
- 1976 – The property bought by the Order/Trustees from outgoing owner.
- 1976 – Small group of junior monks move to Shasta Abbey to progress training.
- 1977 - June – Rev. Kyosei Hughes replaces Rev. Jisho as he returns to Shasta Abbey.
- 1978 – David Brazier (member of TZBA) ordained and replaces Rev. Kyosei as Prior.
- 1978 – Jigen Bartley (member of TZBA) ordained. (Currently at North Norfolk Sangha).