



# THROSSEL HOLE PRIORY

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Throssel Hole Priory is a Zen Buddhist training monastery following the Soto tradition located at Carr Shield, Nr. Hexham, Northumberland, England.

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## EDITORIAL

We have this month an article on the Precepts by Rev. Singer of the Eugene Priory in Oregon, America. This has been prompted by a number of questions we have had over the last few months concerning the Precepts and morality. Here is a typical one; "How can I keep the Precepts when I don't have the 'feeling' of them?" This comes from a twofold mistake. Firstly there is the mistake in thinking that the Precepts are something alien that one is taking on oneself, this is not true. The Precepts are in fact descriptive and prescriptive not merely proscriptive. That is to say that although they may be worded as injunctions they are in fact the rules on how to live from your own Heart. The fact that we don't immediately see this is simply that we have lost touch with our hearts. We do not have a 'feeling' for them simply because we have lost that natural neivete with which we were born and live in a sophisticated and cynical way. Only when we can throw this off and get back into touch with our heart will we find that the Precepts were there all along.

Secondly, there is the mistake that people make all too comonly with many facets of religion and other things as well. When you first start to learn anything it is frequently difficult and unnatural, this is true when learning to drive a car, write or use a sewing machine. But with practice it becomes second nature. One starts off following the instructions, they are or apparently seem to be difficult and unnatural. You feel that you are never going to be able to get to grips with them. Whilst you are driving you try to think what your foot should be doing on the accelerator, keep an eye on the mirror, change gear and see whats going on in front all at the same time. But soon your co-ordination begins to grow and you see that in fact it will be possible to learn how to drive. You gain trust in the instructions. Then as time goes on the process of driving becomes more and more natural untill it becomes second nature. In writing we no longer have to think how to form the letter 'q' befoe we write the word 'quick', it is something that we probably do not even know how we do. We just put pen to paper and write. So it is with the Precepts when they are transcended. We do not transcend the Precepts and then stop keeping them. We transcend the precepts when they have become our blood and bones.

This is easy with the Precepts on one level because our hearts will always prompt us in that direction. On another level it will be difficult because our selfish side, which is always looking out for its own petty and trivial gain, will prompt us in the other. This is where we need self discipline. After a time the Precepts will become the most natural way to live and in so doing they will free you. They will free you from your own selfishness and you will gain a freedom to live which cannot be described or expressed but can be found in practice. This is what the Precepts are about. They are about life. They are not a straight jacket to destroy life and bind it. They are the key to the straight

jacket that we already wear.

It is very important though not to mistake the finger pointing at the moon for the moon itself. That is to say that it is very important not to make the Precepts into what Thomas Merton calls a "religious ideology" but as I have said a prescription for life. All too often people hear the Precepts or some other piece of doctrine and turn it into an ideology, they then crush themselves and others with this ideology which is of course the very antithesis of life. In Zen we have a phrase that is sometimes used about the scriptures, that they can be like gold dust thrown in the eyes. When somebody has made an ideology of the Precepts this is what they have done, they have thrown the gold dust of the Precepts into their own eyes and blinded themselves with it. They will therefore never see their own heart, which is what the precepts are really all about. Please, it is most important that you take the Precepts and that you take them seriously. But also that you do not take them like a barren burden but learn to live with them freely, so that they become second nature and have a chance to work in you and lead you back to your own heart and so that the flower of life may spring upwards in the gentle warm rays of the sun.

#### THE WAY THE PRECEPTS TELESCOPE.

Almost everyone has moments when the usual ways of thinking and feeling give way to greater depth. These are the moments of clarity or beauty or deep feeling in which we feel genuine. D T Suzuki said, "A thousand times I have seen the little moments that make us dance " These moments give us a glimpse of the clarity and authenticity which is our natural state and which can be uncovered and developed by taking upon ourselves the discipline of training.

There is a core within us. It feels itself to be real, sees clearly and lives fully. This is the self that we know at the special times in life and which many people knew as children. This is the self which is in tune with the Precepts of Zen.

You begin to train yourself in Zen by taking the Precepts seriously. The decision to adopt the precepts has to take place in your own heart because you know from your own experience that to do harm, whether externally or internally, is not what you really want. To come to this discovery often takes first hand experience of the way in which evil coarsens the mind. For this reason, if you read the storey of the Patriarchs of our religion, you will find that many of them began their training as slobs, drunkards, emotional children, haughty intellectuals, and practitioners of witchcraft. They had to find out the hard way that we can get out of tune with ourselves and that another word for getting out of tune is doing evil. Thus evil is not something fundamental in Buddhism. It is erring from the fundamental, turning away from the heart.

Without a commitment to the Precepts, there is no training. It is tremendously helpful for a person to formally take the Precepts either in the laymans Jukai ceremonies or in the Priesthood ordination. The Precepts are at first morality; a rule of self discipline which we willingly take on ourselves because we trust that it will help us find our core. There is no external God in Buddhism who decrees the Precepts. Rather they are passed on to us by the Buddhas and Patriarchs-ordinary people who developed themselves into the fullest possible human beings and thereby became Buddhas. These people studied what they had learned within

themselves and then handed on the Precepts as guide lines on how to discover what they found and how to live as they lived. Thus you take the Precepts upon yourself. When you are given the Precepts in a formal ceremony, the priest asks you, "Will you keep these Precepts or not?" It is up to you. If you want to uncover your most genuine self through meditation and training, you have to first become a thoroughly moral person. There are no exceptions to this rule. Later, when you have absorbed the Precepts into your bones, you transcend them.

Take, for example the problem of cynicism. It is easy to see that when you are cynical about something, you are closed to it. You are far away from the sense of depth and wonder which exists in those special moments. Instead there is judgment and bitterness. To clear away the cynicism you adopt one of the Precepts as a way to practically approach the problem. Depending upon which angle you are seeing it from, cynicism can be worked on from any one of the Precepts. If you are bitter because you are not getting what you want, it would be "Do not covet." If it comes from feeling superior to others, it would be "Do not be proud of yourself and devalue others." Or it might be a form of anger and thus the Precept which says, "Do not be angry" would be the rule you would take upon yourself in order to change. There are many practical ways to do this. All take the energetic use of your will. Sooner or later you will reach the point when cynicism arises in the mind and it does not feel right; it seems abnormal and uncomfortable. You find out that you really don't want to be that way. You actually want to stop it because you see that it is not in tune with yourself. At this point the Precepts have begun to deepen. This is when you turn the stream of compassion inward. You say to yourself, "I don't want to be like this. I am going to change." The Precept "Do not be angry" now transforms itself into the more fundamental Precept, "Cease from evil."

Notice that the very thing that has been leading you to uncover your heart and find your original innocence is your cynicism. Thus, as the Sandokai says, "In darkness there is light."

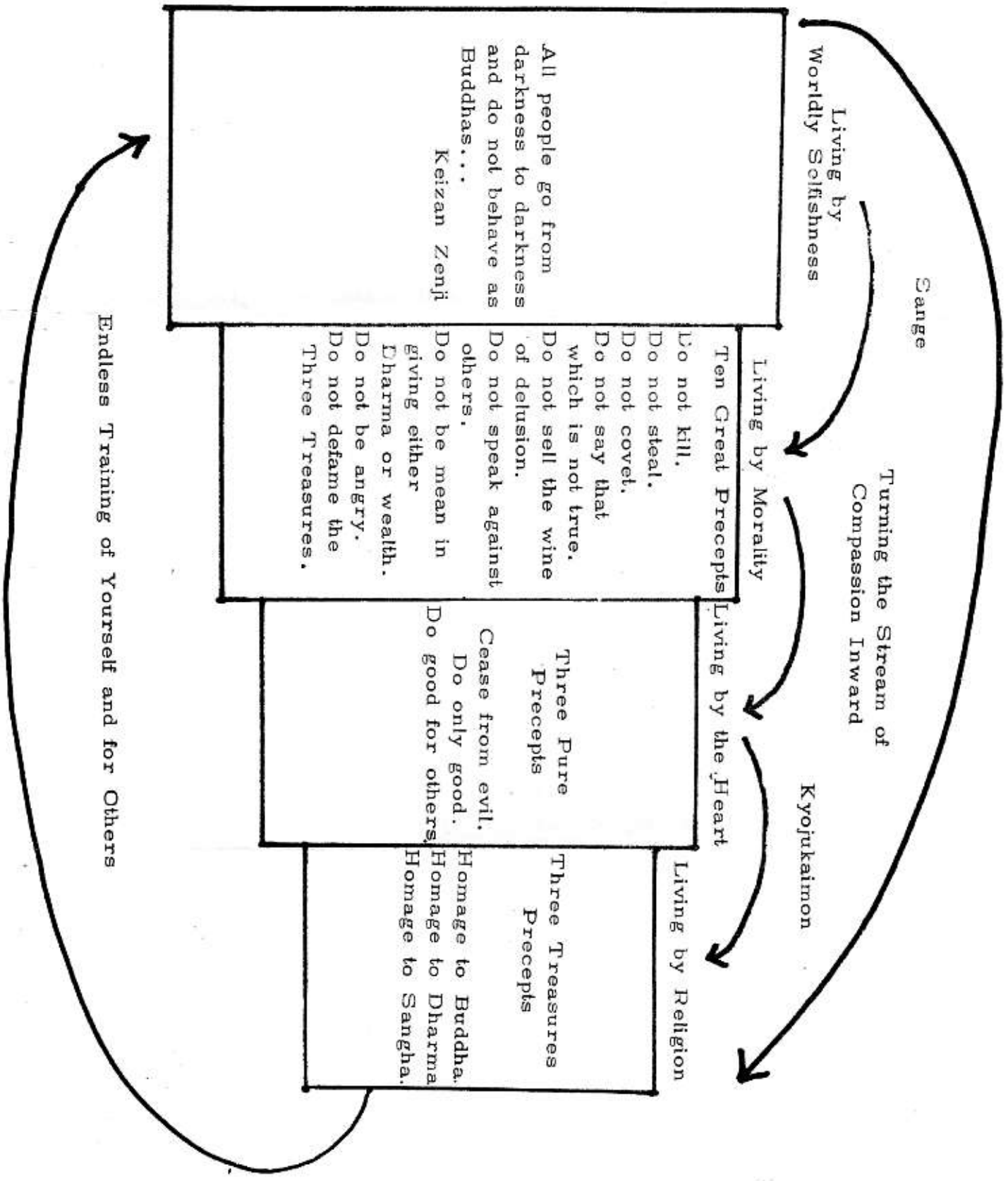
Also in light there is dark. You have to get beyond morality in the normal sense of being a good person. It is possible to get stuck with innocence and naivete, and to create a mask of innocence to replace the cynicism. Where as before you made the world seem ridiculous to yourself, now you are trying to make it seem fresh and innocent. This effort is necessary but you must not get stuck with it. Otherwise you substitute one mask for another. You have to learn to let things be as they are; simply to see clearly and openly without imposing your own opinion.

In accepting life as it is without judgment you begin to transcend morality. Morality is choosing to take a rule upon yourself in order to change yourself. Living from your heart is when you are moral because you are in contact with your basic nature which is compassionate and positive. But you have to go beyond even the heart, beyond all sets of opposites such as cynicism and naivete. Then you enter the flow of life which is to live in the realm of religion. The bridge to the religious life is described in the Kyojukaimon which is a commentary on each of the Precepts. The commentary takes each of the Precepts from morality and living by the heart to transcendent religion. For example the commentary on the Precept, "Do not be angry" says, "There is no retiring, no going, no Truth, no lie; there is a brilliant sea of clouds, there is a dignified sea of clouds."

In working on cynicism you discover naivete. In meditating with a naive mind you begin to see things as they are. In seeing things as they are you see that nothing exists. All things are the flow of existence-time.



THE WAY THE PRECEPTS TELESCOPE



At this point the Precepts again fold into themselves and become the Three Treasures Precepts. Now the choice you must make at each moment is whether or not you will clear away the selfish self and bow to the Buddha. The Precept has become 'Homage to the Buddha' and takes the form of constant internal movement from the self to the Self

Although the Precepts fold into themselves, they also unfold. There is always the falling back into selfishness, the need to take to heart a Precept, and the movement from morality to religion. Our animal nature does not go away. We are never done with training. Always there is the flow from worldly desire to peace and back again.

### PRIORY NEWS AND EVENTS.

Retreats. Retreats during the Autumn training period will be held on:

12th and 13th of October,  
2nd and 3rd of November,  
30th of November and 1st of December,  
14th to 22nd of December.

Please note the date of the October retreat is as above and not as stated in the July newsletter.

A Wedding. On August 27th Hilaire McCarthy married Lesley Ford here at the Priory in a ceremony conducted by Rev Daiji Strathern, we offer them our congratulations and wish them a long and happy life together.

Ordination. All new Priest Trainees will be required to undergo a three to six month trial period during which time they will have shaved heads and wear robes and an adapted rakksu. Anne Cripps began her trial period at the beginning of August, we wish her every success.

Coal Mining We have been working on the old coal mine mentioned in last months newsletter to get it into some sort of order. It is a drift mine, that is it goes horizontally into the hillside, there is a 9" to 1' thick coal seam. So far we have been digging lots of mud out to enable the water to drain away **and make the mine** reasonably accessible. We are now seeking expert advice before going any further. If anyone has any information on small scale coal mining please let us know.

Retreats. Daiji and Fr Stephan Gowers, O.C.R. conducted a very successful inter-religious retreat at Spode House in July which was attended by 17 people a good number of whom were religious. Daiji also conducted a one day retreat organised by the local Buddhist Society at Durham University.

Zazen Booklets We now have copies of the Zazen booklets, published at Shasta, price 30p, they contain instructions on Zazen, how to make your own zafu and extracts from Selling Water by The River.

New Building The new zendo has not been started we are still being held up by planning problems but after a re-think of the design there now seems a reasonable chance of getting full permission in the next couple of months.

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All virtues are nothing without humility. Take, for example the Pharisees. The sum of all virtues, minus humility, equals "shipwreck in port." The characteristics of humility: not to believe in one's own qualities, not to be so much as aware of them (humble mindedness), not to judge, to rejoice at being humiliated. And for the humble - beatitude from the very first step

Father Yelchaninov.