

Stilling and Seeing Through

by Joe Richardson

So you have been practicing for a few years now. You are familiar with the Mindfulness of Breathing and the Metta Bhavana. You take part in a puja now and again when on retreat or when visiting your local group or Buddhist centre. You enjoy the relationships with friends that you have come to know through shared practice. You are getting to know yourself and your habits better but as a result you sometimes wonder if you are actually making any progress on the path!

Tucked away in the corner of the Dhanakosa programme is a jewel of a retreat called 'Stilling and Seeing Through'. The title relates to the twin aspects of the meditation path of Samatha and Vipassana or Tranquility and Insight. The retreat is led by Smritiratna who many will know from his introductory meditation teaching. On the Stilling and Seeing Through retreat the real depth and integrity of Smritiratna's long experience of practice and reflection shines through. Over the course of the week he leads us through the many familiar aspects of the practice renewing our interest and showing how each part supports the others in an integrated whole. Mindfulness, kindness, spacious awareness, faith and devotion, interconnectedness - all are introduced with Smritiratna's characteristic warmth and enthusiasm as he enables us to develop faith, confidence and a courageous attitude in preparation for a contemplation of impermanence wherein lies so much of our doubt and fear.

Above the shrine in the place of perhaps more familiar thankas of Tara and Padmasambhava is a strange day-glo painting of a yellow Buddha figure. Blazing forth as if from within his belly is a glittering jewel. He sits with his right hand in the gesture of boundless giving. Throughout the week, I find my gaze returning again and again to this image and particularly to the jewel in Ratnasambhava's left hand, held at the level of his belly. For me it is as though the jewel of the Dharma which once entered at a head or intellectual level and which then matured and moved downwards into an aspiration of the heart can, over the course of this retreat deepen and become more integrated. The belly, the place where digestion and assimilation of nourishment takes place is also the place where our fear can be truly acknowledged.

With 'Stilling and Seeing Through' Smritiratna has developed a retreat of great depth and richness. His systematic approach to practices strengthening and supporting one another allows us to consolidate our own efforts and experience and to develop a confidence that progress on the path is genuinely within our capability.

