

## Homing Pigeon

By Rev. Master Phoebe

Just about every year we find a homing pigeon in our patio, lost and exhausted. Homing pigeons are tame, like to be around people, and are used to sleeping in manmade shelters, rather than tree tops. They are also very beautiful and smart. People keep them, train them and then transport them over great distances to the starting point of a race. Here the pigeons are let out, and have to make their way home on their own – an amazing feat if you think about it. Of course during these trips sometimes they get lost or too tired to keep going, and then if they are lucky they will find a place to rest and feed. Our patio is one such place, being in the middle of a large wilderness area, where a tame pigeon has trouble finding a safe haven. I can imagine the pigeon's relief and delight, when after flying over the mountains for hours on end, there suddenly appear some rectangular, human made structures. Usually when we find them they are sitting on the porch roof, cocking their head and calling for food; they appear to be happy to see a human being and trust that they will know what to do and help.

I put out some birdseed in a container, and at first he looks at the container with suspicion: that is not what he is used to. He walks around a bit, and tries a little, and eventually will eat. His exhaustion actually helps, for he is in no shape to go look for something elsewhere or fuss too much. The next thing is shelter. The pigeon tries to make his way into an attic vent, which has a cover over it. But it does look like a pigeon hole, and the nights here are cold – too cold for a tired bird. As I watch the pigeon sitting uncomfortably on the slats over the fishpond, instead of in a tree, it occurs to me to make him a bedroom out of a banana box, stood on end, with a dowel stuck through it to make a perch. I leave it on the pond cover, and notice the next morning that it had been used.

Recovering from exhaustion over the next few days, he gets more and more lively, talks and eats and walks around on the roof. On the fourth day he follows me around, flying from tree to tree as I walk between the buildings. The next morning he is gone. I am both happy and a little sad, and leave the food out for another couple of days, just in case he returns, and offer merit for a safe journey home.

For people on a spiritual journey, the temple or a meditation group can be a similar place of temporary shelter. Even though the food for thought is somewhat different from what they expected or are used to, and the sitting practice is new and not immediately comfortable, there is a recognition on a deeper level that here is something that is comforting and strengthening. A few days in retreat or a visit to a group meeting can make a very great difference in someone's life, and we may never know the full extent of it. Every now and then we do get a glimpse, as in the case of one of our meter readers.

Sometime last year I found a slip of paper in our mailbox, which read: "thank you for being here, your Edison meter reader." Intrigued, the next month I kept my eye out for him and went to say hi when he appeared. He was a new guy, young and pretty angry looking. He said: "well, better get used to me for I am not going to get promoted anytime soon." We chatted a bit and he said he really liked the articles in our newsletter, which we distribute for free by our gate. The next month he left another thank you note, this time with a five dollar bill attached. Two months later I caught up with him again, and he told me that Rev. Master Seikai's article, *Feeling Good*, had completely turned around his way of thinking about himself, and that he was in the process of training for a technical job with the electricity company. A few months later he came to say good bye, and introduced the next man to me. When I met this one, he said that Eddy told him servicing the temple had made all the difference in his life. Like the homing pigeon, we will probably never see him again, but still I send him merit every day.

All of us, at some time or another, feel in need of some comfort or encouragement, and we never know from where it will come. In fact, in the story above, Eddy and the monks mutually encouraged and comforted each other by just doing our respective jobs to the best of our ability. And so it is with meditation groups and temple activities: at times we clearly see the purpose and feel the need, and at other times it seems nobody notices. Those are the times I have learned to appreciate, because they strengthen my practice and keep open the channels of compassion, within me and without.

This offering of shelter I call temporary only because it is, in itself, not the true Home which, on a purely spiritual level, we need to find in our own hearts. Nevertheless, people need places of practice and for many "temporary" is for as long as they live and breathe. These are the people who find benefit in places of practice and keep coming to those places regularly. At times their sense of need turns into gratitude or a desire to serve others who have the same need to find a place of refuge.. In this way "temporary" may last for a long time and benefit many.

Sometimes I wonder how birds pass along vital travel information, and if our recent visitor Hendry (which is the name I give all homing pigeons) has told his friends about us yet.

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