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the regular COLUMN

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This week I returned from France, two weeks at the Amida retreat centre, an intensive period receiving teachings on the Larger Pure Land sutra, training in Buddhist ministry, and participating in the day to day life of a lively community.

After this contribution, I hand over the Regular Column to the next writer. I realise I've been its author now for nearly two years. Checking back my first piece was about the challenges of leadership and the creative edge between structure and chaos. That seems relevant to my stay in France. Developing knowledge and skills in Buddhist ministry significantly requires development of leadership qualities, particularly in the ceremonial aspects. I've been learning about the ritualised forms conducted by the *celebrant*. I've enjoyed holding this role, working in close co-ordination with the *bell-master*, the two roles together, depending on the way they are held, substantially affecting the spiritual experience of participants. Of course one 'lets the robes' do the work, but that requires 'getting the self' out of the way, which means *really* drawing on one's practice to deal with performance anxiety – at least for me, in the past having tended to think of myself as a rather shy person who avoids being the focus of attention. It's exciting too to have the opportunity to explore and experiment with variations of the ritual forms, creating new forms that might suit a particular group, for example beginners. The experimental process requires acting at that edge between structure and chaos.

In the occasional periods of free time I enjoyed opportunities to explore the French countryside, beautiful and unchanging over many decades in this overlooked region of central France, a place that tourists rarely visit. It seems that this year sunflowers have become the agricultural crop of choice. There are field after field of them, must be hundreds of thousands, even more than came to hear the Buddha lecture in his heyday! During an evening stroll it's quite a sight to see a field of many thousand, all looking as one to the East, waiting for tomorrow's sunrise. When we arrived in France they were all standing tall, upright, giving a sense of optimism, of hope for the coming day – having total trust, like faithful disciples. It's hard to describe what a deeply uplifting emotional experience this was, one could only watch and admire for a considerable time. How much the contrast then on the evening before leaving France. Their heads were beginning to droop, a community whose time is passing, giving an overwhelming sense of sadness, of disappointment even (plenty of scope for projection here), of days gone, of a life lived. A bittersweet quality, life's like that.