



RUGGED  
INTERDEPENDENCY

A Monk's Reflections  
on the  
American Buddhist Landscape

1990 – 2007

AMARO BHIKKHU

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# *Beginnings*

## BEGINNINGS

PERHAPS IT IS IMPOSSIBLE to say where anything *really* begins, nevertheless, it can be useful to map out a few landmarks here and there. Accordingly, here is a little of the background against and amongst which much of the thread of these travel-ogues unravels.

In the early 1980s Ajahn Sumedho began to make regular visits to northern California. He was the senior Western disciple of Ajahn Chah, one of the most highly respected Buddhist masters of the Thai forest tradition of Theravāda Buddhism, and he had been invited to come and teach in the US by Jack Kornfield, a former Peace Corps volunteer and psychologist, with whom he had spent some time in Thailand, in the late '60s, when they were both monks under Ajahn Chah's tutelage.

Jack had left the monk's robes after returning to the States in the early '70s and, with his friends Sharon Salzberg, Joseph Goldstein and Jacqueline Schwarz (now Mandell), had embarked upon establishing the Buddhist retreat center in Massachusetts called Insight Meditation Society (IMS). This had met with great success but had also revealed some differences in styles of teaching and practice amongst the founders. These differences, along with the massive interest in Buddhist meditation that was brewing in northern California, led Jack back to his city of origin, San Francisco, to found a parallel center to IMS on the West Coast. When it eventually came into being the new place became known as Spirit Rock Meditation Center.

These annual invitations to California were doubly attractive to Ajahn Sumedho in that, not only being an American and an alumnus of Berkeley University and thus being given a chance to visit his old stomping grounds, they also gave him the opportunity to visit his elderly parents and sister in San Diego. It therefore duly became part of his annual schedule to step out of the many duties he had in the foundation of his new monasteries in England (Cittaviveka in West Sussex and Amaravati in Hertfordshire) and to head to the West Coast for a few weeks to teach and to see family.

Over the next ten years he developed a devoted following of students in the San Francisco Bay Area. In 1988 they formed the Sanghapala Foundation, with the mission of creating a branch Monastery of Ajahn Chah's lineage somewhere in northern California. Dr. Marc Lieberman, Nancy Garfield, Debbie Stamp and Daniel Barnes, whom the reader will encounter in the coming pages, were key figures in the early days of Sanghapala, hosting and organizing many of the events.

In 1990 the present author, along with Ajahn Sundarā and Sister Jotakā (two of the senior nuns of our community at that time), accompanied Ajahn Sumedho on one of these teaching visits and, when the other three left to return to England, I remained behind to establish a temporary *vihāra* (monastic residence) as an experiment for the subsequent six weeks. There was plenty of interest in the idea of founding a Monastery amongst the small inner circle of lay friends but it

was unknown if there would be any wider enthusiasm for the project. Thus the experiment.

Things went well – along with the regular teachings that were given in San Francisco, I traveled widely to respond to other invitations and met numerous people; many were sympathetic with the idea of a forest Monastery and some energetically committed to making it happen. An account of that year’s visit was subsequently published as *The Golden State* in the *Forest Sangha Newsletter* (our Monastery journal) and later reprinted in *Silent Rain* – an anthology of talks, poems and travelogues, published in 1995 – as well as in this collection you are reading now.

Ajahn Sumedho’s parents had both passed away in 1989 so, as he also had ever-increasing commitments with the monasteries in England, thereafter I became the central teacher for the California students. At one point, at the start of 1992, it looked as though all the conditions were ripe for the new Monastery to begin; however, that apparent ripeness also coincided with the passing away of Ajahn Chah and with the disrobing and departure of a number of senior monks and nuns in the community – it was plainly *not* the time to be starting any new ventures.

The pattern of that first year thus repeated itself for quite some time: I came for a few months each year, Sanghapala set up another temporary vihāra, I would travel and teach and then head back to England again. At first I had been somewhat disappointed, to have the momentum of establishing the new foundation seemingly so dissipated, but it quickly became apparent that these things are largely a matter of perspective: Who’s to say that there will be a Monastery at all? Why should it be you who starts it?

This hiatus thus did a lot to help reveal shallow personal and ambitious tendencies within me and helped to keep bringing the mind back to what the whole endeavor was for in the first place – i.e. simply making Theravāda teachings, based on monastic practice, available to those who were interested. So, to my surprise, I eventually became grateful for the extra time it brought. Furthermore the annual visits cultivated a growing sense of community in those who kept showing up for our events and who plainly evinced a heartfelt connection to the Theravāda monastic tradition. We were becoming a Dhamma family. And this did not just involve the Bay Area community – my regular travels to Florida, Michigan and Chicago, to Portland, Seattle and Massachusetts all contributed to the formation of a web of like-minded folks across the nation, from sea to shining sea.

The efforts to establish the California Monastery thus moved slowly until the summer of 1995. At that time, as Ven. Master Hsüan Hua (abbot of the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas, in Ukiah, California) approached his death he offered Ajahn Sumedho 120 acres of forest in Redwood Valley, some 17 miles north of the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas, in order to help him start the Monastery that he knew we had been contemplating for some time.

I was in England, at Amaravati, on the day that he made this great gesture of friendship and generosity. On the previous day, May 31<sup>st</sup>, we had had a Sangha meeting there and had finally agreed that there were now enough senior monas-

tics around, and enough stability in the community, to allow us to begin looking for land in California. On the morning of June the 1<sup>st</sup> we got the call to let us know about the offer. It all fitted very well.

On several occasions, Master Hua had made a point of stating that it had been the dream of his life “to bring the Northern and Southern traditions of Buddhism back together again.” His offering was one of openhearted ecumenical friendship, and it enabled the two communities to be physically close and to relate in an atmosphere of mutual respect and harmony.

In choosing a name for the Monastery it seemed appropriate to reflect on the kindness of this offering and the spirit in which it was intended. It also seemed important to use a name in the Pāli language, to confirm the sense of allegiance to the Theravāda tradition. The name that was finally settled upon, “Abhayagiri,” means “Fearless Mountain.” The original Abhayagiri Monastery was in ancient Sri Lanka, at Anuradhapura. That Monastery was most notable for welcoming practitioners and teachers from many different Buddhist traditions. They lived there amicably alongside one another, distinct in their particular practices but not separate as communities. During the 4<sup>th</sup> Century CE Abhayagiri housed some 5,000 monks, according to the Chinese pilgrim Fa Hien, who visited there at that time.

Now that it has been developed for a few years, Abhayagiri Monastery in California is a center of teaching and practice for people in monastic or lay life. Its heart is a community of monks (*bhikkhus*), novices (*sāmaneras*), and postulants (*anagarikas*) pursuing a life of meditative reflection. Frequently monastics from other branches of this global community come and stay for periods of time. Those wishing to join the Sangha initially make a commitment as an anagarika for one year, during which time they can train in the monastic life and consider a longer commitment. After another year as a sāmanera, those who decide to continue with the training may be accepted into the Sangha of fully ordained monks. Shorter, temporary ordinations as an anagarika are also possible.

The Sangha lives according to the *Vinaya*, a code of monastic discipline established by the Buddha. In accordance with this discipline, the monastics are alms-mendicants, living lives of celibacy and frugality. Above all, this training is a means of living reflectively and a guide to keeping one’s needs to a minimum: a set of robes, an alms bowl, one meal a day, medicine when ill, and a sheltered place for meditation and rest.

The Vinaya creates a firm bond between the Sangha and the general public. One reason for this is that without the daily offering of alms food, and the long-term support of ordinary people, the Sangha cannot survive. Obviously, the necessary support will only be forthcoming if the Sangha provides an example that is worthy of support. This relationship creates a framework within which generosity, compassion and mutual encouragement can grow.

Dependence upon others encourages monastics to live in faith and to be content with a humble standard of living. For those who support the Sangha, this opportunity to give provides occasions for generosity and a joyful and direct participation in the spiritual life. In return the Sangha offers people spiritual guidance by verbal

teachings and by its living presence. Many of these themes are explored in the talk *Rugged Interdependency*, included in the latter part of this book.

Although Abhayagiri Monastery is not a retreat or meditation center, people are welcome to visit, or to arrange a stay as a guest and to share the lifestyle of the monastic community for a time. The community's meditation and work provides visitors with living examples of the Buddhist path. Guests can stay up to a week – longer stays are possible with the agreement of the community. Such visits can give lay practitioners the opportunity to deepen their understanding of Buddhism and of themselves in an environment that encourages peaceful reflection.

Abhayagiri Monastery was the first Monastery in the United States to be established by followers of Ajahn Chah. After the first six months Ajahn Pasanno came from Thailand and joined me to guide the Monastery as co-abbot. We had begun (on June the 1<sup>st</sup> 1996) with myself, one other monk (Ajahn Visuddhi) and a one-day-old anagarika (Tom DeMaria). Those earliest days were an understandable rush of new experiences – both good and bad, predictably – but all was held in a firm embrace of Dhamma practice.

During the many years I had lived as a monk in England, I had heard Ajahn Sumedho recount repeatedly the way in which he had worked with his mind when he had first arrived from Thailand, in 1977: "Every time that I thought, 'I have to bring the Dhamma to the West,' or 'All these people are looking to me as their teacher and I mustn't let them down,' or 'It's up to me to preserve the pure bhikkhu life in the West and to make sure it never gets corrupted,' then I would suffer tremendously. Instantaneously! But if I just thought, 'People have invited me here to live and practice the Dhamma, moment by moment,' then I would immediately feel ease and joy – 'How wonderful! That's what I love to do and I can do that anywhere.' It was not a problem."

So I took my lead from that and determined to do the same: simply to practice the Dhamma and if the Monastery and the Teaching flourished, so be it. And if it all collapsed and fizzled, so be it – the practice would be the same. Over the years this advice has served very well.

The three-month travelogue, entitled *Golden Highways Revisited*, comes from a period a couple of years after the foundation of the Monastery. It was at the end of the time when I accepted all the invitations from around the country that could practicably be squeezed into the calendar. As it happened, the travels of that spring and early summer encompassed virtually every group, center and Monastery that we had been connected with in the USA., as well as a side trip to an ordination in England, plus a visit to my alma mater there – thankfully the calendar has never been quite so packed before or since. It also occurred just a few weeks after Jack Kornfield had put forth the suggestion – to the teachers and Board of IMS, friends and supporters of ours in Massachusetts and to the monastic community at Abhayagiri – that a Monastery similar to Abhayagiri should be founded at or close to IMS.

One might well wonder why, with a schedule already so brim-full, one would have wished to load it further with the burden of keeping a journal along the way.

Good question... However, it was just this happenstance touching of all the familiar nodes of our Dhamma family web that was the reason.

In 1997 Dr. Martin Verhoeven (formerly a monk at the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas and now a teacher at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley) had introduced me to Professor Richard Hughes Seager, an academic historian at Hamilton College, New York, and author of *Buddhism in America* (Columbia University Press). The professor had read *The Golden State* and was enthusiastic in his praise for its unique perspective – not only in coming from a monastic but also from a non-American’s point of view. He fervently encouraged the penning of more such reviews of the American Buddhist landscape, and the result, dear reader, is now part of what you hold in your hands, or at least are looking at on a screen.

Like *The Golden State*, this extended travelogue is not intended as some kind of opinionated set of judgements on Buddhism in America, more it is intended to be a slice through the fragrant American pie of Buddhist life – to let us take a look, and smell and taste for ourselves what has been cooked up here in recent years.

Needless to say, if any persons or institutions mentioned in this book seem to have been represented in an unfavorable light, the author begs for your generosity in forgiveness; what is written here is solely in the light of personal impressions and perspectives. It has been my intent simply to open the pie up without adding too much of my own embellishment but sometimes that’s a tricky maneuver to accomplish.

Enjoy!

1990

*The Golden State*

# THE GOLDEN STATE

This is the first of two pieces which describe a visit made by members of the Sangha from Amaravati to the United States in the spring of 1990. This first part covers the broad spectrum of spiritual life which was encountered there.

## PART I

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### A FERTILE SEA

IT IS SAID THAT IN THE PAST – before the Europeans came – the San Francisco Bay Area was so thick with wildlife that the sky would be darkened by flocks of birds as they rose “with a sound like that of a hurricane.” Streams were filled with silver salmon; the hills were covered with forests of oak and berries, fields of flowers and bunch grass; seals, grizzly bears, foxes, bobcats and coyotes abounded. It was a land of inexpressible fertility. In the last 150 years of civilization, much has changed. But by some strange alchemy the fertility of the area persists: transmogrified from the rich life of local tribes and that of soil and beast, into the inner life, the hearts and minds of the people who now live there.

The USA, a land of opportunity, grew out of a revolution against European values. It was to be a country of freedom and equality. This ideal still pervades American society and probably nowhere more so than on the West Coast, where the majority of free spirits have gravitated. Here especially is a place of freedom of expression, where dreams of all kinds are pursued.



In May of 1990, Venerable Ajahn Sumedho, Sister Sundarā, Sister Jotakā and myself were invited to the USA to lead some retreats, participate in a conference on monasticism, and to give Dhamma talks to a number of groups on the West Coast. The invitation came from two groups: Insight Meditation West (IMW), founded to promote *vipassanā* meditation, mostly in the form of silent retreats and local sitting groups; and Sanghapala, whose aim is to help establish a Monastery in California under the guidance of Ajahn Sumedho. These two groups represent, to a large extent, the main sources of interest in our presence in the USA.

The two aspects of our life which they embody – serious meditation practice and traditional monastic form – are in fact closely linked, although the latter is less widely appreciated. It was to help people in the Bay Area have a fuller understanding of monastic practice, its methods and its results, that Jack Kornfield, the principal meditation teacher with IMW, convened the conference *The Joys of Monastic Life* which we attended.

The practice which Ajahn Chah and Ajahn Sumedho have advocated involves taking Vinaya – the monastic code of discipline – as the basic life style, and from that foundation learning to appreciate whatever you are with. Putting this teaching into practice, we actually found ourselves able to feel at ease in a bewildering

variety of environments: from the Esalen Institute to the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas; from the Zen Center AIDS hospice to a seminar with Huston Smith and a dozen academic philosophers; from a gathering in Chicago of all the Thai monks in the USA, to days of silence spent high in the hills of northern California at the Bell Springs Hermitage.

The people we seemed to meet the most had been practicing vipassanā meditation for a number of years – often through retreats at the Insight Meditation Society in Massachusetts or on the West Coast, with teachers such as Jack Kornfield, Joseph Goldstein, Sharon Salzberg and Christopher Titmus. In many of the West Coast urban areas – notably Santa Cruz, Palo Alto, Berkeley, Marin County, Portland, Seattle and Vancouver – fairly large groups of people meet regularly to meditate, listen to Dharma talks and discuss any problems in their spiritual life. These loosely knit groups of people hold their focus around their teachers and meditation groups, and around Insight Meditation West. In addition to running retreats, IMW is in the process of establishing a sizeable meditation center, Spirit Rock, in the countryside just north of San Francisco.

A prominent feature of this group's style of practice is the conscious movement away from traditionalist Theravāda Buddhist forms. Spiritual practice is shaped around formal sitting and walking meditation, and blended with a Western psychological vernacular to describe the inner world being investigated. This has worked well – very many people have found inspiration and benefit from this approach – but it seems that for some we met, there are areas of spiritual practice left unaddressed... or, at least, some potential in their hearts which has not had the opportunity to flower.

One area where this difficulty appears is in the basic premise which motivates the practice: i.e. what is assumed at the outset. By couching spiritual work in a psychological idiom – even though it is thereby more accessible – the practice can be construed in terms of “me and my problems, which I have got to get rid of.” This is fair enough – “me without problems” is much more attractive than “me with problems.” However, the longer this premise is followed blindly, the greater is the resulting anguish. According to classical Buddhist understanding, the person doesn't *have* problems, the person *is* the problem. It is because of conceiving everything in terms of me and mine, in an absolute sense, that we continue to suffer and fret.

So, as Ajahn Sumedho pointed out over the weeks, we have to make a paradigm shift: from “me and my problems,” to “the Buddha seeing the Dhamma.” Buddha wisdom is the ultimate subject – The One Who Knows. And Dhamma – The Way Things Are, Nature – is the ultimate object, which can have no owner. As this shift is made, the heart is liberated. The world still is the way it is, but it's no longer a problem, and it's certainly not mine.

A second area of hazy misunderstanding was devotional practice. As with all our retreats, at the ten days organized by IMW at Santa Rosa we had a period of chanting and bowing before the shrine at the start of each morning and evening meditation. We made it clear that joining in was not compulsory, and it took a good

few days for many people to get a feel for the role of *pūjā* in relationship to meditation and self-knowledge. However, by the fourth or fifth day we noticed more and more vigor coming into the *pūjās*. Ritual and devotion can be a way of reasserting, on the emotional plane, the aspiration to enlightenment – a way of engaging the faculties of the heart, along with those of the head, in empowering the practice of the Path. Likewise, the Sangha embodies an archetypal principle, which can help unite one with the lineage of all who have ever practiced as disciples of the Buddha.

The *pūjās* were done in English, to lend a little more to their relevance, and they became a keynote in the practice for many people. They made such an impact, in fact, that by the end of the retreat some of the sceptics professed themselves to have been thoroughly sold. Several Buddhist groups that we subsequently visited particularly requested that we do some chanting, or that I speak on the subject. There is a natural need in us to honor that which is good, higher, more noble, and it seems that people realized that making appropriate gestures of respect on the material level can be something beautiful. In our hearts we are bowing to wisdom, truth and virtue, to purity, radiance and peacefulness, not to a golden idol.

Balancing the intellectual and emotional elements in harmonious measure is also developed outside the shrine room through the work of serving others. In the Bay Area, service is found particularly in the area of hospice care. The growth of Buddhist involvement in care for the dying has been seeded from the long-standing efforts of such people as Steven Levine and Ram Das. In the last few years, however, it has taken shape as a full-blown hospice program in three locations under the auspices of the San Francisco Zen Center. The two doctors looking after the hospice ward in a local hospital (Laguna Honda) are Zen Center students and much of the daily care and counseling, assistance to the nurses, etc, is given by a team of some forty volunteers, most of whom are with the Zen Center or IMW.

The joint involvement of Zen and Vipassanā students is something that has actively been encouraged by the groups. Not only is the burden of work shared, but meditators are also able to engage their talents in helpful service. Formal meditation and silent retreats can lend a somewhat introverted tone to spiritual life. Generosity and service impel our attention outward and, to our surprise, we often find that simply by not thinking about ourselves so much many of our mental terrors vanish. Not only do others gain but we do also – the wondrous arising of the win/win situation.



The last week that Ajahn Sumedho and the nuns were in the USA was spent visiting Seattle. It is a cosmopolitan city and very reminiscent of San Francisco. Liberal and environmentally conscious in atmosphere, it too was a place to which people interested in Buddhist meditation had gravitated. The public talk which had been arranged attracted a large number, about half of whom had come down from Vancouver for the occasion.

Our hosts, aware of our full schedule in San Francisco, were keen not to exhaust us with too many events. Thus most of the days were spent quietly, talking informally with the local Buddhists or traveling around the area.

When not obscured by cloud, Mt. Rainier is a vast volcanic snowy bulk which dominates the city. On the day we went to visit it, the dense cover broke just long enough for us to glimpse the peak. All around, and across thousands of acres of Washington countryside, evergreens carpet the land. In sharp contrast to California, the Golden State (don't say "brown" when looking at its meadows in the dry season), Seattle is aptly named the Emerald City. Bearing the brunt of a huge rainfall off the northern Pacific Ocean, it is thus blessed with a dripping lushness all the year round.

The others bade farewell and took off for England. After a brief but very fine visit to Portland, I returned to San Francisco.



The people we visited in the Pacific Northwest, as well as those we met around the San Francisco Bay, live far from the shop-til-ya-drop mentality of materialistic America. If America does have any spiritual hope, one feels it will be through the likes of these folks. America is a young country, and just as youth can be obsessed with intense sensuality and materialism, it can also have an intense spirituality, openness of mind, eagerness to learn and readiness to change.

This maturing of values resonated through all the established groups we visited, and also amongst those who came along to the regular talks and retreats that I was invited to give around the Bay Area in July: twice-weekly evening talks, and three evenly spaced weekend retreats. During this time I was based in San Francisco, in a small apartment just around the corner from 10 Arbor Street where the meetings were held. The aim was to have something of a temporary Monastery, where those who were interested could come and talk with the monk, meditate, or just step out of the momentum-driven world for a spell. Being in residence, I was also able to receive people who wished to offer alms, accept invitations to visit people's houses and conduct blessing ceremonies for babies, houses and the newly opened Bell Springs Hermitage.

A small amount of publicity had quietly filtered through local Theravāda Buddhist circles. At first the numbers of folk coming were low, but it was encouraging to see how, in just a short span of time, the level of interest reached three or four events a day and, by the time I left for England in early August, the shrine room at Arbor Street was getting to be too small to contain everyone.



The Bay Area is truly a hothouse of spiritual seekers, yet the people we met did not seem to be those searching for the quick, hassle-free solution to all life's problems. (Local advert: Free credit – pay nothing 'til April!) Many had been steeped in one

kind of spiritual medium or another – from psychedelia to therapy and meditation – since the late sixties. These approaches had all promised freedom; many had helped but not quite succeeded in bringing the carefree fulfillment longed for.

While it is true that people will always come and check out a new product on the market, the interest directed towards us seemed to be more than just skin-deep. Buddha-Dhamma is not a cosmetic teaching. It was apparent that the example of the renunciant life, the surrender that comes from participation in a traditional form and the power and directness of the teachings, provided people with something that made a difference.

In this respect, the time I spent at the Esalen Institute is of interest. I was invited to spend a few days there, about 150 miles south of San Francisco, on the Big Sur coast – one of the most beautiful spots on earth. Esalen has been the birthplace of much Californian spirituality – in particular, most of the novel approaches to psychotherapy were hatched there.

The spiritual and terrestrial influences mingle at the institute very much like their statue of the Buddha, almost hidden amidst a swarm of flowers, sitting serenely at the heart of the garden. Quite by chance my visit coincided with a concerted move by the staff to establish more of a daily meditation practice for themselves. They were keen to invite monks and other meditation teachers to come and give them more consistent guidance. Like so many other spiritual communities, they had been through struggles and conflicts, and now felt the need to establish more clarity and cohesion. The Director and other staff expressed their hope to me that, should a Monastery be established in the area, we would come and teach there periodically. Therapy is not enough any more!



American culture, for the most part, dispenses with the old, and renews/reforms/progresses. This theme carries on as strong as ever, but it is significant that the current problems of ill-health, pollution and waste-disposal are reaching impossible proportions and people are waking up to the need to readjust their values. The adjustments have an American flavor, of course, which was evident in the large billboard advertising a *bio-degradable* throw-away camera, or the poster for a new low-fat yoghurt-based ice-cream substitute proudly promising: “All of the pleasure, none of the guilt.”

The few weeks we spent in the USA brought home the realization that the rising sensitivity to nature, and respect for the origin, substance and fate of the things we use, was reflected in a true change of attitude in the American Buddhist world. For, rather than just trashing the traditional ways of doing things – leaving classical monasticism and devotional practices entirely behind for the sake of a new, rational and hierarchy-free Buddhism – some people are finding it worthwhile to recycle the old. After all, like other things we try and dump, the old doesn't just go away – it has an annoying habit of hanging around for a long time before it decom-

poses. What if it turns out that there is a lot there that's still of use? It would be such a waste just to sling it out.

People seem to be looking at traditional monastic practice with a fresh eye; its relegation as a culturally antiquated, worn-out form is being revised. At the end of the *Joys of Monastic Life* conference, when Jack Kornfield asked "How many of you would consider entering a Monastery, say for a period of at least a year?" 70-80% of the assembly raised their hands.

Certainly, some aspects of Buddhist custom are redundant and inapplicable to Western society. But, as our experience in Europe has shown, these elements are not related intrinsically to the Dhamma-Vinaya as described by the Buddha. And, as many eminent teachers in Asia point out, it might be good if such aspects of Buddhist custom were discarded in Asia as well.

This visit to the West Coast was arranged in order to provide access to the Sangha and to see if the traditional unit of Monastery and lay supporters had a useful place in American society. The impression that has lingered is not one of friction with people, or of materialistic and violent horrors – even though these perceptions were plentiful enough. These impressions fade, and what fills the heart is a quiet delight, echoing with endless highways of space and light, thick with oleanders... or islands rising in the early morning, out of miles of opal fog.

This is a rich land, there is goodness here – goodness in the land and in the hearts of the people – and it has been a joy to help the sincere find that which is truly golden.

## PART II

---

### A STILL LIFE

This is the second of two pieces which describe the visit made by members of the Sangha from Amaravati to the United States in the spring of 1990. This latter part of the account dwells more specifically on seclusion and monastic practice in the USA.



IT IS AN OFT-RECOGNIZED FACT that, once a religion is established in a society, over the centuries its original values tend to be obscured. Cultural overlay, empty intellectualism, assumed importance and conceit all contribute to a process of corruption.

When a religion enters a new country, however, there is an opportunity for a reclarification of values – particularly if it has not arrived through missionary zeal but through the interest of the local population. Against the background of new culture, whatever does not relate to the basic spiritual paradigm becomes illuminated – and can be questioned.

Most religious traditions employ similar tools – self discipline, kindness, devotion, contentment with little, contemplation, meditation – which historically have often been formulated into monastic institutions. As Buddhism enters Western

(and particularly American) culture, however, these basic spiritual qualities are being cultivated via variety of approaches. Some are conservative, traditional and origin-based; others are novel, unorthodox and based more in the effort to fit with present cultural values.



During our teaching tour on the West Coast of America, Ajahn Sumedho, Sister Sundarā, Sister Jotakā and myself moved amongst groups of both sorts. On the traditionalist side, we spent time at the Sagely City of Ten Thousand Buddhas, near Ukiah, northern California, and at the Buddha-Dharma Meditation Center in Hinsdale, Chicago. We also visited the New Camaldoli Hermitage, a Catholic Monastery on California's Big Sur coast, and Taung Pulu Kaba Aye, a forest meditation Monastery in the hills south of San Francisco, established by a Burmese Buddhist master of the *dhutanga* or austere tradition.

On the modernist side – if that is the right word – we visited Spirit Rock, the center being established by Insight Meditation West (IMW) and the Vipassanā meditation students of the West Coast; Green Gulch Farm, a community associated with the San Francisco Zen Center, and Cloud Mountain Retreat Center in northern Oregon, also mainly used by Vipassanā students. We also conducted an inaugural blessing ceremony for the Bell Springs Hermitage, a retreat center particularly for those with life-threatening illnesses.

Perhaps these two attitudes are extensions of the psychological tendencies of primacy and recency: either trusting what was first experienced as most important, or trusting what has been experienced most recently. Both approaches are, naturally, blessed with benefits and problems.

Traditionalism (primacy) derives from a respect for one's origins. On the spiritual level, for Buddhists this manifests as respect for the fundamental, unconditioned Truth (*Saccadhamma*) as the source. On the conditioned plane, it means a respect for Gotama the Buddha, the whole dispensation which arose from his accomplishments, and the lineage of all who have lived according to the teachings over the centuries – keeping them alive and vibrant to the present day.

Such devotion to the roots of one's faith has a tremendous supportive quality: one is participating in a form which has existed for millennia, with the power to buoy one up and carry one along, like the flow of a great river. One has the right to enjoy the inheritance of one's ancestors, living in the way extolled by them.

Traditional monastic institutions automatically inherit the faith and devotion of the people of their country of origin, and can rely on a stable Sangha to back up any efforts in a new land – which often receive financial support from the laity. Adherence to the trusted standards of the old country draws in those who already have confidence in that form.

The principal difficulty is that, inevitably, these well-established forms of Buddhism carry a cultural overlay. This can make their transplantation to another social milieu a very delicate operation. If those bringing it over have little con-

versancy with the new environment, the precious seeds of wisdom can remain trapped within a capsule of Asian custom and language. Or – like a rare and fragile orchid – it might take root as something exquisite and exotic but basically infertile, unable to withstand for long the rigors of its new location.



The Sagely City of Ten Thousand Buddhas is, as its name suggests, more than just a Monastery. Alongside the facilities for the hundred or more resident nuns, monks and novices, there are also elementary and secondary schools and the Dharma Realm Buddhist University. It is the main center for a group of orthodox monasteries spread along the West Coast of America and Canada. The spiritual guide and founder of these monasteries is the Venerable Tripitaka Master Hsüan Hua, a *bhikshu* (monk) of Chinese origin who began teaching in San Francisco in the early sixties.

Although the main interest and support has so far come from the Chinese community, there is a strong emphasis on making the teachings available to English-speaking Americans. Indeed, many American men and women have gone forth as *bhikshus* and *bhikshunis* under the Venerable Master's guidance, and are now in the forefront of administrative and teaching duties at the monasteries. Their approach has been – right from the start – not to dilute the monastic form to make it more palatable to Americans, but instead to make clear what the teaching and discipline offers, and to give people the opportunity to rise up to it.

The monasteries still have a strong Chinese flavor – all the religious objects, rituals etc. retain the form developed in China over the centuries – but Master Hua has consistently pointed out the original forms established by the Lord Buddha. Thus his monasteries adhere more closely to the Vinaya and observe a number of Sangha procedures more strictly than is done in present-day Taiwan, Hong Kong and mainland China. Along with translating all scriptures and rituals into English, this approach makes it possible for those attending retreats, ceremonies and Dharma talks to tie in the practice directly to the Lord Buddha's own Way, rather than just to the obvious Chinese tradition.

Despite attempts to make the teaching more accessible, Sangha members commented that the average interested American still finds, perhaps understandably, their form of practice somewhat impenetrable. However, things are constantly in a state of adaptation. In being faithful to a tradition, one starts out by sticking with the known and well-established – and makes changes later, to fit the time and place. It is a dodgy business to design ideal reforms from scratch; one does better to see what changes will be suitable – often by seeming to blunder at first.

Americans, however, are used the opposite approach: the ideal is laid out on paper and approved beforehand – rather like the US Constitution. This may be fine in principle but, to be ruthlessly practical, one has to start from where one actually is. So, getting back to the problem of importing a monastic form, although there might be all kinds of great adaptations that could be made, it is only by using what

is there already that one finds out what really needs to be changed. In making changes in this usually painstaking manner, the trust and confidence of Buddhists in the country of origin is happily retained. Pioneer monasteries are much in the public eye back home, so if too much is altered too quickly, disaffection can set in on a dramatic scale. Once a community is well-established, however, important adaptations can often be made without such negative repercussions.

It was very encouraging, therefore, to see that these monasteries have recently instituted some Pāli chanting with English translations in their morning and evening recitations, and have made it optional for the monks and nuns to wear Theravāda robes if they choose. This is in order to further the recognition of unity between the different branches of the Sangha and to stress connectedness with the Buddha rather than with China.

At the Buddha-Dharma Meditation Center on the outskirts of Chicago, the experience is similar. Established much more recently (1988) by Phra Ajahn Sunthorn Plamintr, the Center has aimed to be a resource as much for local Americans as for the immigrant Thai population. In June of 1990 I was invited there to attend the demarcation of an ordination precinct (*sīma*), and the ordination of several men as novices and bhikkhus. Despite being quite a junior monk I was accorded a place of honor amongst the many *mahā-theras*, and was asked to give one of the Dhamma talks to the whole assembly.

The efforts and sincerity of the resident Sangha, and also the lay supporters, were immediately striking; so also was their concern to be more of use to English-speaking Americans. So much was this on their minds that, from the drive from the airport right up until my departure time, I was repeatedly asked for advice on this. The barriers of language and culture, I was told, meant that more than 99% of the people coming were Asians.

They had been trying very hard. On this weekend, for example, they had ensured that most of the Dhamma talks would be in English. At the Center, they held regular meditation classes; they had formed links with other local Buddhist groups in the Mid-West Dharma Association and had invited well-known teachers of other Buddhist traditions to speak on their festival days. However, many felt that there was an inexorable inclination of the center towards becoming little more than a Thai cultural center, with all the trappings of a Thai City Monastery.

The future is, of course uncertain but my feeling was that this outcome was quite unlikely. These are the early days when, as mentioned above, one tends to stay close to the mold from which one has recently emerged. Gentle transmutations will come with time. Since the determination of the abbot and his closest lay supporters is to establish a Monastery for all people, and a place where meditation is taught and practiced, that must be the direction it will take.



Our contact with Brother David Steindl-Rast at the *Joys of Monastic Life* conference led to a visit to the Monastery at which he now stays. Although professed in a dif-

ferent order, he has been at the hermitage of New Camaldoli for the past eight years. When the Camaldolese order was set up in the 11<sup>th</sup> Century by St. Romuald they were even then something of a reform movement. Eschewing leadership by abbots (who already had an aura of power and worldliness), they established a unique pattern in Christian monasticism. Their life is divided into three basic styles: that of the hermit; that of communal life in the Monastery, or cenobium; and that of living in a house in the city. Each monastic spends varying periods of time in each situation according to their disposition.

It was this unique blend that moved Father Thomas Merton to urge the Camaldolese to establish a Monastery in the USA. In his eyes, his own Trappist order was too isolationist and rigid to fully serve the American people as he felt a monastic community could. Unfortunately, by the time the New Camaldoli Monastery was founded, he was too valuable to be allowed to leave his own community. Thus he never got the chance to live with them in the stunningly beautiful place they found, nestled on the hillsides overlooking the Pacific. However, that the Monastery exists today and is one of great vitality and ecumenicism, would probably please Father Thomas more than his own getting to live there.

On their 800 acres they have a number of hermit monks living in the woods, and a main community of about 25 monks, novices and lay people, most of whom are a lot younger than the average resident of today's Christian monasteries. They have a small house in Berkeley as well, where a couple of monks reside whilst engaging in studies at the University of California.

They still retain their traditional monastic habits and follow the Liturgy of the Hours, but they have also made a number of adaptive changes – particularly in providing ample facilities for women and men to come on solitary retreat, and in the ecumenicism of their services and literature. Their emphasis is strongly towards contemplative and mystical aspects of religion, and towards religious unification. The Prior, Father Richard, was instrumental in bringing about the recent meetings between the Pope and the Archbishop of Canterbury. And Tibetan Buddhist prayer flags could be seen flying in the little garden behind his cell.



As contrasted with traditionalism, the modernist way takes its cue more from the current attitudes and understanding of those interested in the teachings, than from the way the teaching has been presented and lived out in the past. The present environment is of primary importance. This derives from the quality of Ultimate Truth as “apparent here and now, timeless”, just as traditionalism derives from its quality of being the source and foundation of all things.

Here one finds, in the main, middle-class raised, educated, white Americans. The teachings are presented in their own language, by teachers from their own kind of background, and in a familiar cultural context. The advantage of this way is that it is easily adopted and used by people who have grown up in the West. It slips into their value system and is absorbed comparatively painlessly. It is natu-

rally more understandable to many people, being of Western appearance and less alien than forms with an Asian veneer and decidedly conventional flavor. Also, the vocabulary used to describe the world of the mind accords much more with contemporary psychological ideas than classical Buddhist expressions do.

A big disadvantage is the disconnectedness from the historical Buddha that naturally arises. Through claiming Buddha-nature as one's reference more than Gotama Buddha and his whole dispensation, social links with the rest of the Buddhist world are weakened. Moreover, skillful means, teachings and traditions that the Buddha established – which serve the whole spectrum of human life – tend not to get used to the full. On the practical level, the separation from Asian forms also means that devoted Asian people, who might be delighted to support the efforts of others in their cultivation of the Path, often do not recognize these groups as real Buddhists. The spirit of generosity, so much to the fore in Buddhist countries, is thus disabled from helping to nourish these efforts.

Another, and perhaps the most important, disadvantage is that in adapting to the surrounding culture, some moral aspects of the teaching which are crucial to wholesomeness and liberation get passed over. Without the reflection of the larger Buddhist community, and without the standards established by the Buddha being given prominence, these groups are vulnerable to incidents which can have grave consequences.



For a long time the Zen Center has been the most prominent Buddhist institution in the San Francisco Bay Area. Originally established by Shunryu Suzuki Roshi – whose collection of transcribed talks in *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind* graces many a Buddhist bookshelf – the center was guided, after his death in the early Seventies, by Richard Baker Roshi, his Dharma heir. The center went from strength to strength, establishing both Tassajara – a retreat center for more rigorous training – and Green Gulch Farm – a more informal community of Zen students, based around a market garden as a means of livelihood. In a sixties-seventies spiritual environment characterized by distrust of most traditions in favor of a direct-experience spirituality, this Soto Zen group had managed to strike a remarkable balance that allowed for tradition-based and disciplined practice to be integrated with the idealistic lifestyles of the time. For many, it seemed the perfect blend, which gave birth to much confidence in Buddhism as a spiritual path.

In 1984, however, the Zen Center community, and all Buddhists in the US, were stunned by the news that Baker Roshi had been relieved of his post as abbot, because of a number of serious transgressions against community standards of proper behavior.

When I visited Green Gulch, the main interest expressed to me was in Vinaya and community discipline. Zen's customary approach to the Precepts has been – in contrast to the rest of the Buddhist world – more as themes for contemplation, which you bear in mind whilst going about doing what you do, rather than

clear guidelines to be followed wherever possible. This overly liberal approach was clearly one of the causes of Baker Roshi's downfall, and for the distress and confusion of their community resulting from it.

Norman Fischer, the head of Green Gulch, spent as much time as he could with me, discussing the establishment of a more solid basis of moral conduct for his community. He pointed out that they now better appreciated that they were not monks at all, but should look upon themselves as lay-priests. It was quite a relief, he said, to recognize their proper role, and to establish their values accordingly as a lay community. It was his hope – even though some other leaders of the Zen Center group were at variance – that they would at least establish the Eight Precepts as the standard for practice at Tassajara. This came not from a disaffection with his own tradition but from the obvious need, within the spiritual life, for a basis of restraint and trustworthiness.



IMW and Spirit Rock have had no such catastrophic incidents. The plans for their Marin County site focus around a retreat center, but also include a teaching area where people can come to learn meditation and to hear Dharma talks, and an area set aside to be a Monastery or hermitage. This group's style is based around lay practice, and is guided by teachers such as Jack Kornfield, Sylvia Borstein and James Baraz. It is a group that has served thousands of people, organizing silent retreats and leading local Vipassanā meditation groups on the West Coast. Because of its simple approach and absence of religious trappings, it has been an inroad into the training of the heart for many whose interest was, initially, in a more effective kind of therapy.

Its form of meditation practice is, however, akin to the methods of mind-training contained within classical Theravāda monasticism. Because of this, and of Jack Kornfield's time spent as a bhikkhu with Venerable Ajahn Chah, it was no surprise that IMW should convene the *Joys of Monastic Life* conference, and that Jack was the moderator of the event. His affinities with both approaches described here, together with the growing interest in morality and traditionalism aroused by the debacles of Baker Roshi and Ösel Tenzin (Chogyam Trungpa's successor, who had fallen into similar transgressions and who had died of AIDS in 1990), made the conference both pertinent and timely. The event was not so much for monastics to meet and discuss with each other, but more for Bay Area students of Buddhism to have an opportunity to contemplate such questions as: What is monasticism for? How does it work? What are its results? Is it still a valid approach? What should be changed? – and to hear from the mouths of monks and nuns themselves the accounts of their vocation.



Those invited to speak and lead discussions were quite carefully chosen – not for their eloquence or attainment, but rather for their years of commitment to a communal, contemplative, orthodox monastic life. There were Buddhists and Christians; all of us were Westerners.

Approximately 150 people attended, most having had little if any contact with traditional monasticism. Although largely of Vipassanā and Zen Center background, there were also a fair number of Christians. Of the main talks, even though all were fine expositions, probably those of Sister Sundarā and Sister Columba were most memorable.

At the beginning of the second day, Jack Kornfield invited everyone to suggest areas that they would like to see covered. The list began: celibacy, equality for women in Theravāda Buddhism, adaptability of rules, vegetarianism, differences between Buddhism and Christianity... and on and on it went. It seemed that everyone had a pet issue. After about half an hour, Ajahn Sumedho and I looked at each other – it would take months to deal with that lot!

Just then one of the audience announced that she had just had an insight. Silence fell and we waited... “We want it all! We don’t want to give up *anything*. This is real *American Buddhism!*” Everybody laughed and, for that moment, could see the tendency to search for a perfect Buddhism that matched one’s own particular biases. Ajahn Sumedho turned toward her and applauded.

Nevertheless, the suggestions kept on coming, and with the question of equality for women well to the fore. It was Sister Sundarā’s turn to speak next and Ajahn Sumedho leaned over to me with a concerned look, “I would not like to be in her position right now.” After a short break, she gave her talk. She spoke movingly and magnificently. In many respects, she had taken the most tricky of issues and clearly pointed out the way to work with such things: there are no simple answers, only ways to practice wisely.

Sister Columba was deeply impressive, and probably less for the wonderful words she spoke than for the purity and light that imbued all she did and said. She described her entry into her convent, and the life that she and her sisters led. She fielded questions with directness, humor and honesty. Here was the result of a lifetime given up to pure conduct, simplicity and Truth: a being radiant, clear and sublimely happy. For many people at the conference this said more than all the words for, despite belonging to the most orthodox and austere of traditions, she had arrived at a state of being that freewheeling Californians have combed the hills and beaches endlessly to find.



At the close of the conference, Jack Kornfield asked the assembly how many would now consider entering a Monastery, say, for at least a year. It was a testimony to the insight in convening such a conference, and to the capacity of the speakers to put their lives into words, that 70-80% of the people raised their hands.

A Monastery's purpose is to provide opportunities for such interest to bear fruit. Even though, as some suggest, the future of Buddhism in the US might lie with lay groups, the Monastery remains a unique and invaluable environment for the development of the spiritual life – not only for those within the enclosure, as it were, but also for those for whom it is a reminding and encouraging presence in the world.

So how will things develop? Who knows? What can be seen for definite, however, is that there is already a tremendous fellowship among Buddhist people in the West. During this visit I experienced only warmth, hospitality and respect from those I met. What we are experiencing here is a cooperative effort towards a common goal, rather than a contest to see who is right and best. Traditional forms and the spirit of the present can work together like an old, well-used tool in a skillful hand. The tool and the hand on their own cannot achieve very much, but in concord we can bring great beauty into the world.

1998

*Golden Highways Revisited*

*A journey through American and English  
Buddhist landscapes*

## PART I

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SAN FRANCISCO – TAMPA BAY – SUSSEX NJ – MASSACHUSETTS – NEW YORK

**MARCH 25<sup>TH</sup> & 26<sup>TH</sup>**

BRIGHT AND HUMID – they say the good weather came with us and that the winter had been strangely damp and cold – Florida is in its customary apparel of T-shirts and shorts, cumulus clouds and emerald lawns.

After leaving my mother, sister and brother-in-law (who had come from England to visit my new home in California for the first time) to the tender mercies of Highway 280 and air-traffic control at midday, a quiet afternoon passed at Marc Lieberman's: reading and letter writing, suffering and not suffering. Suzanne appeared after 4:00 and Marc swung in breathless at 6:35. With a quick about-face we loaded up his car and took off for the airport ourselves.

Our lives are both so heavily scheduled these days that our friendship bears its fruits in brief telephone conversations and these sporadic passing contacts. We catch up: he's quitting his eye practice and setting up alone; *The Jew in the Lotus* film was a roaring, front-page success in Boston; Michael, his son, got in to Michigan State University; Suzanne dropped the manufacturing project she had and will help Marc set up instead; the Monastery goes well; the Sangha is healthy; the Change of Use application is proceeding... *samsāra* as usual, albeit with beneficent faces at present.

Brief, quiet flights and we touch down at dawn in Tampa Bay. Steve Ganci is there to meet – red hot rod of his partner's son to drive as the kid is in trouble with the law and mother has had to adopt the vehicle. As we pull out from the terminal's concrete labyrinths the luminescent sapphire of a tropical dawn embraces us; a fingernail moon, low in the sky with Venus more than close enough to start breathless rumors, hangs framed by dark palms along the highway. Water on all sides – the sky and all that meets the eye impossibly blue – we are the breath of a vast jewel, cyan aquamarine, wavelet oscillations of azure.

We talk and replenish our friendship as the other colors soak into the day: the state of Theravāda/Vipassanā in the USA, the attitudes towards monasticism, the currents of change in Jack Kornfield and the growing interest in Pāli scriptures – after owning the vehicle for 25 years you finally take a look at the engine and study the manual, even give a nod to the provenance of the beast.

Up until now individualistic, authority-snubbing and antiheirarchical American perspectives have (understandably) permeated the Buddhist world here. This was no surprise to us since Ajahn Sumedho had often described how, when he made his first visit back to the US in 1976, he encountered zero interest in having him around to teach: "Yes, nice to see you, thank you very much, now please just move on – we're going to do it all differently here." Us monastics are, after all, a pretty conservative lot. England and its old-world institutional forms turned out to be a much more natural seedbed for this classical, orthodox style of practice, so it's

no wonder that, since we arrived there in 1977, this monastic community was welcomed with (modestly) open arms – after all the English do *not* hug.

So, during these last few years in America, it has been an unexpected but heart-warming experience to see a recognition of the worth of scriptural texts, monastic training and commitment to renunciation rising up. It's not that all of a sudden monastic practice is the latest thing but perhaps it just needed 20 years of trying "new, improved – faster, bigger, better," to reveal the limitations of that ethic. Certainly the New World spirit can be massively refreshing and contributory to spiritual growth but it's also good to be seeing that some of the values of the Old Country of the Dhamma are more loved and respected than before.

A quiet morning at Bodhi Tree Dhamma Center, tucked as it is in amongst the steadily spreading sprawl around Tampa Bay, close to St. Petersburg and Clearwater (home of the Scientologists and the Madonna of the mirror-glass bank). It is in Pinellas County, on Florida's central gulf coast. The acre of grounds that forms the little center features a meditation hall and bookstore, areas for outdoor walking meditation and a vigorous Bodhi tree, *Ficus Religiosa*.

The Center opened in 1985 as a meeting place for the Florida West Coast Buddhist Society, a nondenominational Buddhist study group. It was founded in its present form with the help of the well-known monks and meditation teachers Venerable U Sīlānanda (from Burma) and Venerable Gunaratana, more commonly known as Bhante G (from Sri Lanka). Although not formally affiliated with other institutions, Bodhi Tree maintains contact with many different meditation centers. In 1993, a fund was established for the eventual purchase of land for a rural retreat center in west-central Florida.

The main focus of the place is "the alleviation of suffering through the spread of the Dhamma, the teachings of the Buddha as preserved in the Pāli Canon and the Theravāda traditions of southern Asia." Intensive retreats and classes are offered periodically, and regular meetings are held that include periods of vipassanā meditation and a talk on some aspect of Buddhism. Although primarily Theravāda in orientation, Bodhi Tree also hosts visits by teachers from other Buddhist traditions.

Jim Cameron is the main force behind the place these days. The Center actually sits in the grounds surrounding his modest home and he seems to be the organizer, secretary, yoga teacher and janitor for most of their activities.

He had first taken an interest in Buddhism in 1971, when he was a young conscript stationed in Fort Hood, Texas. When he arrived in Phu Bai, Vietnam, in July of that year, he did duty riding shotgun on convoys between DaNang and QuangTri. They would pass through villages with monasteries and temples, and he was always filled with wonder by the Buddha images that he saw there.

One day he was called down to DaNang for some records issue. While waiting on the return Chinook helicopter at Freedom Hill there, he met a young bhikkhu with a string of mala beads who was also waiting for the ride. Jim had been simply awed and intrigued by him and they flew up to the firebase together. He was very

curious about the monk: he was so tranquil that it made him wonder, “What is this?” That was the moment the Dhamma had really entered his heart.

He later confessed that he had had a rather naïve wish to bring a monk home with him, thinking that he could set the monk up with a little place and be the monk’s supporter. In a way, with the visits to Bodhi Tree of the likes of Bhante Gunaratana, Ven. U Silānanda and myself, his dream of hosting and supporting monastics has come true – at least in sporadic bursts.

Today, nearly 30 years later, he is fresh back from the Old Sod and we spend the morning reconnecting and exchanging tales – it is sweet to be with these folks again.

Their year has been quiet, only one or two retreats with Matthew Flickstein; I wonder how/if they were deflated by my nonacceptance of the Spiritual Directorship that they had offered? There was an edge to Jim’s comments that spoke of a sadness that they had not been doing much more than the regular sittings. He also had been having major health problems – his injured leg (damaged many years before) was finally giving out on him – but we shall see... there was also talk of some students of Bhante Gunaratana buying land between Tampa and Orlando to start a residential center and that bodes well for the community here.

Warm afternoon: thick scent of orange blossom in the air.

### **MARCH 27<sup>TH</sup>**

First morning sitting, before the retreat begins – a crowd of birdsong fills the air, the chickens begin to scratch, a road roars in the distance. No words.



Swallowtails and dragonflies, thin as pine needles, dart and hover among the bushes. Clouds begin to clear. Bamboo creaks – leaves and their shadow-partners flimmering in the brassy heat of afternoon. Blossom holds the horizontal with barely a stir all day – Jim gives her an affectionate scratch in passing, she grunts her love for him in short snorts and squeals. If you’re going to be reborn as a pot-bellied pig, aim for the Bodhi Tree address.

### **MARCH 28<sup>TH</sup>**

A small clutch of twelve souls forms the core of the retreat – other folks come and go each day. Bringing into consciousness the heart of kindness and the cycles of rebirth – so easy to explain, done so many times before, but the deep-tissue mysteries of clinging and identity ever amaze with their tenacity, guile, elasticity and sweetness. The knife keeps hitting those horny tendons and gets deflected again and again. What to do? Sharpen, persist, be patient – be ready to fail, intend to succeed...



Through the day we shuttle back and forth between formality and informality, activity and rest, the retreat and the cartographical machinations of Mason & Dixon. From the ringing of crickets in the gathering dark to the shores of Susquehanna; discoursing on the body in the mind and the heart of loving-kindness whilst shuffling along 39° 43' 17.4" in the company of Lord and Lady Lepton and an automated yet unnamed female duck of Parisian origin. Ruth is stranger than Richard...

### **MARCH 29<sup>TH</sup>**

All stay through until the retreat's end (there were only four at the finish – including yours truly – last year) and leave for their homes glowing gently.

Jim and I drive down to the Barrier Islands and go for a long stroll on the beach – catching the liquid iron sunset at the apogee of our trip. Moves are afoot in Bodhi Tree to go to a more lay-based model although who knows how things will evolve. On our return to the vehicle we see a vast bungee-vessel, strung between two lit-up towers; a capsule, obviously containing some screamers, plunged earthwards twixt two giant rubber bands. The array sprang them up and down a good few times before the oscillation drew to a close, bearing them safely to the ground. The next big thrill in Tampa Bay.

On returning, the friends of Jim who had dropped in before – Ken the car dealer and his young, bikini-topped bride – were still at his home and had now been joined by John, a buddy and neighbor working at the VA hospital. He had developed a ritual of bringing Jim (and other friends on the block) a weekly pie. Innocent and sweet folks, whose conversation revolved around holidays, menus and vehicles. Just at the point where I began to feel a bit of a lemon they all upped and departed – Jim went to take the pie to Judy next door, now all we are left with is the sweet warm night and the soft clattering of bodhi leaves.

### **MARCH 30<sup>TH</sup>**

Departures and arrivals: a morning with Jim – down to the Seahorse for breakfast (his ex-wife's favorite haunt) and thence on to the Myakka nature reserve. Cool sea breezes pour steadily through the restaurant window, the day is bright again and the morning pavements are thick with the middle aged – snowbirds savoring the last of the mellow season before Florida turns up the heat.

Bright and cloud-strewn, we make our way on broad highways through the endless succession of passages, causeways, bridges and island hops that form the lacework of this area. Glittering waters stretch smoothly in all directions (only a few feet deep for the most part) condos rise, fast-food and hotels fill the eye at every close-up. The horizon is ever a hazy strip of dark green – here a hill is the inches the highway rises above the swamp. White motor launches, bearing their

proud charges, thrust themselves through the layers of benevolent sea. We head south.

Strangely reminiscent of the *Esan*, North-east Thailand in the monsoon, water-filled fields, lush trees, deep ditches abound on all sides. The clouds gather and the humidity gets thicker but the glare is as bright as ever.

Myakka has just opened again following major winter floods – the water laps the roadway all through the park. Herons and snowy egrets, plus other birds galore, are thick on the ground as they step their gently merciless way through the waters. Palmetta covers the ground that's visible, along with marsh grass and speckles of wild iris. The river has spread wider than Jim has ever seen, submerging hundreds of acres in the generosity of its blanket. No 'gators are around to be seen but we meet some feral pigs – remnants of the 400 bought by some adventurers of old who aimed to walk from Tampa Bay to the Mississippi... the humans didn't make it but the hogs are still doing fine.

Rich, thick greens, great oaks resplendent with moss and lichens, snakes, frogs and turtles a-plenty, and an old lady, bristling with keen determination, gathering wildflower seeds from among the grasses.

Heading back to Bodhi Tree we took the streets through the poorest Black neighborhood – last year riots broke out when the cops shot a Black youth in a car – smoky windows, thought he had a gun, opened fire, oops. For three nights they rampaged and fired on police, their cars and helicopters. The place looked very careworn and reminded me of the face of a boxer who had just gone 15 rounds with Joe Frazier. It will take a while to get it to look human again. Ironically the chief Episcopalian cemetery lies right in the epicenter of the 'hood. As the Africans moved in the Anglos moved out, and even dismantled the church and took it with them. "Those poor folk they left there in their graves," was heard in all seriousness – as if the dead were the ones who had to suffer there.

Pulling out of St. Petersburg on the way to Tampa – Emily Dickinson on billboards and brown bunnies by the roadside, selling raunch and ice cream, what a job... Farewells at the airport – Middle America heading north, then "Welcome to Paradise: Newark, New Jersey."

Georgette and Maxwell are there to greet in a heat more representative of June than March – 85° at 5.30 in the afternoon – blossom is out all round and the shock is obvious. In a rosy brazen glow of sunset we pull into a condo complex in Morristown, to meet the local Vipassanā group for tea. An expectant circle – some new, some familiar – and a good talk on matters monastic and attendant themes. The IMS Monastery idea gets an airing, a formal suggestion of a forest Monastery being founded near to IMS having recently been made by Jack Kornfield to their Board – ears prick, which is no surprise. Dr. Robert Elswit is mine host.

We pulled into Go-onji West – Georgette and Maxwell's farmhouse in the Sussex countryside – at around 8:45. It is now late; G. & M. have long retired and the night is utterly silent – all but for the rolling of the ballpoint on paper and the roaring of *nada* in my ears. Long day – many miles – enough already.



At the Morristown group, as in the car with Georgette and Maxwell, the conversation centered repeatedly around the purpose of monasteries, what they provide, how they work, and the paucity of certain qualities in the Vipassanā circles – it was the same theme as Jim and I fell into at the beach, in our discussion around the direction of Bodhi Tree: when things are run by lay-teachers, and thus phrased and structured according to their own nonrenunciate value systems, surely something is being lost from the Teaching and Practice.

People ask: “What can we do without a teacher, a center or a Monastery? How do we further the practice?” and they ask with great sincerity. How does a lay-teacher, aspiring to a comfy, middle-class lifestyle, then direct them? Inevitably it is toward practice within the mold that they themselves espouse, but is it enough to liberate? Certainly the sameness of lifestyles of the teacher and students serves well to foster a closeness – there are no problems because of alienation or remoteness caused by robes or a plethora of Precepts – but does that similitude of way of life have its drawbacks too? Never before has Buddha-Dharma been introduced into a society by such a proportion of non-monastics – will it really be introduced?

Amongst the many others facets of this issue, the question of charging money for the Dhamma comes up again and again. So many of the lay centers and teachers have sincere and genuine reasons for feeling the need to set prices for retreats and teachings – and the prices seem to keep climbing even faster than national rates of inflation – does this mean that there’s a generic lack of faith? Is this the only reasonable way to do it in these times? Is doing everything on freewill donations simply an atavistic reflex, symptomatic of a bygone patriarchal age, as Ken Wilber would have us believe (in his essay ironically entitled *Right Bucks*)? How come monasteries can run solely on *dāna* and other places not? These are riddles wrapped in mystery that circle around these gatherings; only time and wise reflection will coax the truth forth from them.

I spoke to Georgette and Maxwell of Jack Kornfield’s reservations about dilution and also his movement to the Way of the Elders as the generic term of reference, rather than Vipassanā; the same issue manifested in Morristown – heads nodded in agreement but can one really expect the forty-somethings to up sticks, shave heads and move into a mendicant life? Maybe not, but the more the issue gets raised the more we are drawn towards a balanced picture. The heart knows the sound and smell of self-justification.

At the very least those centers and styles of practice are a very accessible entry point. Georgette and Maxwell recounted how, 30 years ago, no one had a clue about Buddhism or meditation – and *that* was among the students of their roshi, Isshu Miura. Now huge numbers, increasing exponentially, are at least aware of some of the essential elements of Dharma practice and there is a general groundswell of faith and interest in the Buddha’s teaching.

MARCH 31<sup>ST</sup>

August weather: after breakfast Georgette takes me round the garden and for a visit to the *zendo*. The outside bell is the (deliberately) fractured wheel of a railroad car – it rings like an ancient gong. Inside the small shelter are other calligraphies of Miura Roshi and Niwa Roshi (his Dharma-heir) plus agèd bowl-bells and the most solidly grounded Buddha image I have ever seen; red wood and Kamakura style but low to the ground and broad-kneed, it holds the space with ease and a presence of power. She was one of the very few students that Miura Roshi accepted during the years that he taught in New York City, at the First Zen Institute. He had been abbot of Go-onji Temple in Kyoto, one of the pioneers of Buddhism in the US – editor of the journal *Cat's Yawn* and author, together with Ruth Fuller Sasaki, of the acclaimed *Zen Dust* – and had passed away quite some years before. She invites me to sit in the Roshi's seat – more than one bird sings.

Round the pond with Maxwell (met the golf-mad neighbor) and got hissed away from the Canada goose's nest. Clear water, glad fish, grass like a country club lawn. After the meal we head off for some of the sights of Sussex – the town, the highest point of New Jersey and the Hawk's Nest above the Delaware. From the summit soft blue hills, tree-clad and farm-speckled, flow off into the distance. They range into New York to the east and north, Pennsylvania to the west; the three states meet at Port Jervis, a bend in the great river.

Earlier in the afternoon we had climbed to Indian Rock above their house, along the savage cut of a new road to the site of a neighbor's hopes for a dream home – gazing out over the broad valley like an agèd brave or warrior chief surveying the breadth of his domain. Now smashed stone and splintered trees mark the way to the spot.

Local features are pointed out – taking in the character of the land – ol' time rural, East Coast USA for sure – even had a “field of dreams” baseball diamond at Ideal Farms. Water everywhere; small towns; traffic headed for the mountains behind us in Pennsylvania. The rock faces at Hawk's Nest were inscribed with the John Hancocks of the Pepperwood Trolls, sparrow, Joby and Doby and a multitude of other loves and unreadables. Piles of junk had been dumped over the edge, down on the banks of the Delaware.

We spent the evening watching the Ajahn Chah videos: *The Buddha Comes to Sussex*, (yet again) *The Mindful Way* and *Alms bowls to Newcastle* – we were so young – 20 years shows its face undeniably. All but Ven. Asabho [later Akiñcano] in the latter film have disrobed now: Ajahn Pabhākaro, Ñānaviro, Thānasīlo, Sobhano and Brian – 20% survival, par for the course. It's a shock suddenly to see old friends that have since moved on, back in their monastic apparel again.

It's by no means uncommon, and certainly no disgrace, to have lived as a monastic for a while and then to have decided to return to lay life. In Thailand, particularly for men, it is considered a necessary part of growing up and developing maturity to take robes for a while, even if only for a few weeks. In the West a far greater proportion stay on for longer in the monastic form, the motivation to have been ordained in the first place being much more personal than that of social

convention, however there is still a sadness in the air – like a death in the family – when someone decides to go back to jeans and T-shirt. As with most things in life, people go into the training with an open mind and a good heart, but if after some years the shoe no longer fits: vat to do? After careful consideration, to move on to a different set of footwear seems the only sensible option.

There were good, inspired chats through the evening – on child murderers, racism, mingling of genes and the nuns' progeniture – we range over the blue landscapes of mutual experience; trading views and histories, hearing each other's little griefs and insights.

A full day – and still with the summer heat by late night – it hit 88° at 1:30 this afternoon – a little less than its maximum for midsummer – I should have held back on the long johns and brought more sunscreen.

### **APRIL 1<sup>ST</sup> & 2<sup>ND</sup>**

Glad I brought the long johns. By the time we came through the villages south of Barre, Massachusetts this afternoon, the signs were reading 4°C – icy rain and a chill bite on the neck.

The day leading up to this was spent in many words and movements: a long chatty breakfast and – after a photo at Muira Roshi's grave – a morning with Vonnegut and Dresden; Nabokov had been the night before.

The cherry outside the house had just begun to bloom, and the star magnolia had doubled its decking of creamy white flowers but, as we pulled out at midday, the glow had definitely gone: we meet endless highways of grey and rain – punctuated by cuts through rock formations, swirled like Viennese chocolate mousses, and a pit stop at McDonald's south of Hartford, Connecticut. Along the undulating ribbon of Highway 84 we flow like easy light – when we meet some traffic and are brought to a halt we wonder what is up – soon enough the blue flashes and huddle of bodies on the bank, the cars facing the wrong direction and the mashed front of a big grey sedan give us their message: "Joe's plans for the day have changed." So it goes. Hi ho.

We finish the journey to the sounds of Ābhassārā's *Requiem*; Georgette's ear finds Gregorian, Indian and Celtic strains in there with the haunting Latin. By the end of *Dawning of Union* we are closing on Barre. A warm welcome from Chris takes us into the Study Center and gets me settled.

Georgette and Maxwell stop for tea and a breather, then head for a restaurant in town: it's their 36<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary today. The two of them are a rare breed – been together so long and still full of love and respect for each other – it has been a delight to dwell in the warm aura of their company. At this time they are thinking to bequeath us their property; if it ever falls out that way it will be an honor to preserve and use the haven they have created – to live beneath the trees they have planted and for their flowers to rise between our toes.



Grey skies and the extra day give plenty of time to check in with Mu Soeng, Taraniya, Don Sperry and to prune the vast pile of notes for the study workshop. The hours fly and the work proceeds easily – these *kutīs* are very conveniently set up: warm, clean, all mod-cons – what else could one wish for? They are the most recent (and welcome) addition to the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies' facilities.

The Center was begun a few years ago to serve the increasing demand for instruction in Buddhist scriptural teachings. It was not that people wanted a college where they could go to get a degree in Buddhism; the intention behind the foundation of the place was much more to answer the interest that there was in Canonical texts to help support meditation practice and thereby the liberation of the heart.

It's a vibrant little enclave and quite different in character to its grand progenitor, IMS, just down the road. BCBS is centered around an old stone farmhouse. Its gentle swath of lawn reaches down to and around the newly constructed meditation hall and accommodation block, and the three *kutīs* are arranged behind that. The whole array settles far back from the road, up against the margins of thick woodland and rocky meadows. IMS, in contrast, is a redbrick baronial mansion, complete with pillared portico and antebellum aura. It has a formality that is hard to shrug off.

After a chat I find out that Don's mind has changed about coming to Abhayagiri in May – he still has the intention to be with us but he'd like to spend the summer helping Tan Punnadhammo out at Arrow River Community Center, his hermitage outside of Thunder Bay, Ontario.

Mellow day, much solitude. Tan Punna has missed his flight (rapping too long over coffee at the airport) and hopes to appear tomorrow. Hi ho.

#### **APRIL 3<sup>RD</sup> & 4<sup>TH</sup>**

The needle stays in the same groove – grey, somber, cool and notes to pore over. All goes by with ease – Deb in the kitchen is greatly solicitous (giant breakfasts and anxiety over “the night foods”) and is wonderfully kind, Sumi is the other staff member with Chris – she is an IDEA (Inter Departmental Executive Assistant).

Folks for the workshop start to gather: Tan Punna has arrived by 8:30, but after breakfast, and has conked out following a night of sitter's practice at the airport – he missed his bus as well last night, waiting in the wrong place.

The workshop is almost fully booked (44 plus Tan Punna and I) which is an encouraging sign, although they say that many/most of their programs are full these days. They have a good selection of Mahāyāna and Theravāda classes ongoing, with Mu Soeng heading up the former, and Andy Olendzki the latter. They are branching out into a week of Vajrayāna this year too. All seems to be flourishing here and they are constantly refining their courses in other ways: they now have a *Bhāvana Program* which is mostly meditation but with a three hour study

session in the day as well. It's all very impressive, and palpably on the right track. There are also moves to do more events on *dāna* – Ajaan Thānissaro (Tan Geoff) ran a workshop this spring like this and the overheads etc. were covered fine. In the future we should push for more of this.

Tan Punna surfaces late afternoon and we chat over tea. He is well and Arrow River is, as usual, just getting by as one steward hands the baton on to the next. He is in good spirits and at ease with the life.

The workshop kicks off at 7:30 and, surprise surprise, there is *still* more material in the notes than can be got through in one evening – we finish at 10:00 anyway – oh well.

Very low key morning sitting – it's nice to have so little in the way of ceremonials for a change – and then into the splurge of talks and teachings from the Shining Ones. The theme is *The Teachings of the Thai Forest Masters*, including Ajahn Mun, Ajahn Buddhadasa, Ajahn Lee, Ajahn Chah, Ajahn Maha-Boowa and Upasika Kee Nanayon – by the end of the session (at 10:30 p.m.) we are all buzzing fit to light the town of Barre. Add the charge of Joseph Kappel (the former Ajahn Pabhākarō and my first teacher in Thailand) and John Massey (also an ex-monk and composer of blues *Sutta* arrangements) to the mixture and you wind up with a lot of wattage in the air. Come the evening session, after a bit of history of Ajahn Chah, and *The Mindful Way*, it's handed over to Joseph and he fully takes the stage – it's good to see him in his glory like this, he has a lot to give and is at last (seven years after disrobing, following 20 years of monastic life) finding his voice in the lay universe. A sweet, poignant and unique session, filled with laughter and power. Golden tales of our Venerable Father and his children.

## APRIL 5<sup>TH</sup>

Snow! Falling endlessly in gentle white stellations of the grey air; it falls and falls and falls and never settles – like the ceaseless barrage of perception and thought, *sañña* and *sankhārā*, landing in the mind of the *Arahant*, or rather not landing but dissolving into completion upon contact. Upasika Kee's mind and diamond-sworded manner fill the morning hours: let go and let go and let go and realize the infinite emptiness of within. There is no other task in life worth doing.

It has been announced that the afternoon session will conclude at 4:00 – after Ajahn Mahā Boowa and some midrashic sharings. To my amazement – despite the full, bright and zealous energy of the session so far, less than half the folks reappear at 1:30... are they all busy writing?... Another two or three trickle in as the final hours go by but they eventually have no words to offer. After Luang Dah Boowa has said his piece, (complete with the world-stopping, all-dissolving: “If there is a point or center of the knower anywhere, that is the essence of a level of being”) – we take a breather and then cluster (the last 15 or so) for our final sharing. A few sweet jewels come forth – especially Katherine's *Sixty Holy Women*, Sandra's *Letter to the Ajahns* and Dorothea's tea party for all six great ones.

Joseph has more to say and offers useful encouragement to the notion of monasticism in general. Over and over again the theme comes up of introduction

of this tradition and method of training to the USA. People are more and more aware that it has been lacking and yet it can't be introduced into the American psyche overnight. Joseph bemoans the lack of interest and support there has been for monasticism in the US Buddhist scene, but for 95% of the people this is because they have scarcely cognized the existence of it. So I applauded Joseph's comments but added that, "It takes a long time for such principles to really percolate through society – the 30 years that Buddhism has been in the US public eye is a very short time historically."

The gathering ends with an enthusiastic taking of the Refuges and Precepts – only the monastic junkies remain – and we're down to about 12 by now. So it was a radiant and heartfelt time, luxuriating in the divine presence of the Ajahns, but it was also telling how – even in the face of *repeated* exhortations on the uncertainty of life and the priority of Dhamma practice, from the voices of those who boom the sound of the Dhamma across the valleys – that so many ignored the exhortations to stay and even left earlier than planned. "People are busy, Ajahn..."

"I know, but is the Dhamma something that you tack on to your life or something that your life is surrendered to? It seems so reasonable: family, work, schedules, driving long distances... but when is King Yāma going to call?"

We had long talk with Joseph, his lady Katherine and the good John Massey. A brief tea break and then the Monastery Development Circle met at 7:00 p.m. Taraniya, Perrin, Dorothea, Dona, Sandra, Jaya, Katherine 1, John, Mark Hart, Buzz, Joseph and Katherine 2. A rich meeting, which I was very glad to be at, and out of which came a few clear notes:— Firstly, there is considerable energy within this circle for helping a Monastery to be founded here; secondly – Jack having catalyzed the process, there was *no* inclination toward, even an explicit avoidance of, an even remotely on-campus Monastery at IMS (the hermit in the folly is not a desired option); notably there were no IMS folks there (excluding Taraniya) and little interest had been generally shown by the IMS community in the monastic teachers; thirdly – people were happy with the idea of annual visits of a few weeks/months and saw that the main aspect of the venture was unifying themselves in vision and energy first, *then* perhaps creating an invitation, should it seem appropriate. Joseph offered to go to England and invite Luang Por to come, teach a retreat and leave someone in 2000; fourthly – Abhayagiri offered to help support the effort with occasional monks here and there but it was made clear that we are not going to assume responsibility for the project.

It was also made clear that 1) it should all be worked in small increments (e.g. "you don't have to decide on a location now"); 2) the money will appear when it's needed, if the energy is right; 3) the purpose of the venture is to end suffering, not to create it.

We were all done by 8:45 – finally the words ran out.

These are great, good-hearted people, wise and skillful, and it felt an honor to be sitting amongst them. Jack had catalyzed this discussion, with his suggestion that we found a Monastery near IMS, but no one was going to let blind enthusiasm and wishful thinking rule the day. It was impressive to hear and feel how everyone

had sensitivity to the depth of the different issues at play: e.g. monastic resources, finances, friendships and rivalries – so, in the end, there was not a lot for me to add. The wisdom of the group spoke for itself.

## APRIL 6<sup>TH</sup>

A long exhalation – breakfast with Tan Punna then a discussion with Libby on the retreat schedule – long digressions on early departures, chemical sensitivity, note writing and the BULLETIN BOARD!! 70 are signed up for the retreat and it's a 10-day only. We will shoot for incense, candles, everyone at the sittings and no early departures – we will see how the training goes down.

Don Sperry came by after Libby's departure and – moist-eyed – declared his interest to come to Abhayagiri to go forth. We had had a long rap a few days before on the infinite number of reasons to delay the task and, now having sat on it for a while, the decision arose. It was a brief exchange but potent and gladdening at heart – *Sādhu!* All hail to the aspiration to go forth! Both he and Libby enquired about the previous night's meeting (he had typed Jack's letter) – the energy is keen and bright on this issue, for sure.

Tan Punna went to visit the Khmer temple in Leverett with Mark Hart – to call on the blind nun and her companions who visited us last year – so I ate alone and then sauntered over for the session with the volunteer staff midafternoon.

The questions they had were a mixture of points on mythology and eclecticism in *Silent Rain* – Kali and Parsifal in particular – and some confrontational points on the dualism of monastic/lay dynamics. The dependency question – living on alms, not cooking, driving, etc. – and, after that, it was a pleasant relief to go onto the position of women in Theravāda, even though all the discussion went reasonably civilly. The protagonists didn't seem to be too convinced of my reasoning (surprise surprise) but what can you say? There is a strong feeling that: "the Sangha gives food for the heart and the laity food for the body" model is inaccurate or at least incomplete for the current situation in the West. Lay people are living in more meditative ways as yogis at places like IMS so why glorify the robe and relegate the layperson to feeder/driver? Good question.

Eventually we led the conversation around to, "Do you think people might enjoy driving and cooking for those whom they admire and whose conduct is worthy of honor?"

"Yes."

"OK. So, if the monastics are living in an inspiring way, then their dependency becomes a 'field of merit' for the world. If the conduct is unworthy it's a barren field – don't bother with it."

It was also pointed out that diversity of forms can indeed be a good thing: a sign of health in the system. Furthermore: "Just because I like this form and find it's right for me, doesn't mean I feel that other forms are wrong." It's an oft-assumed view that, if I chose to do or be something, that I feel that everyone should be and do just like *me*. People are regularly startled to hear that either you have no opinion about what they chose to believe in and do, or (wonder of wonders!) that you are

genuinely glad that others in this world think differently. How could it be that one sole mode of being or set of attitudes served for all humans on the planet? And, even if by some weird happenstance that was the case, the odds against my particular brand of opinions being the number one option would be roughly six billion to one.

In short: if it works it's the right thing.

Weary of talk by the late hours of the day, the evening meets the end of *Mason & Dixon* and some pages of *Kalila and Dimna* – that and the hum of the fridge, the occasional whining blast of the heater and the snowflakes of nada falling on nada: “Nada nada nada nada and even in Barre – nada.”

## APRIL 7<sup>TH</sup>

We pack up our belongings and bid our farewells as a bright and fragrant morning covers BCBS. This is a fine center and we gave Mu Soeng our clear, wholehearted Sādhu! for their efforts.

Andy Miller drove us to Boston (at least to Dorothea Bowen's house in West Newton), engaging in his mild and sweet manner on the adharmic nature of retirement plans – which I agreed with, with another wholehearted Sādhu! It turns the whole effort of practicing and teaching the Dhamma into a very white, middle-class institution: visions of the octagenarian vicar sitting in the conservatory, doing the *Times* crossword for eternity, entered consciousness.

Once, at a Spirit Rock Board meeting, I raised the suggestion of living on faith and trusting that, if you have done right by the Dharma, your students would gather round and look after you – it was a scenario that drew a few blank looks as it was expressed. How could I suggest such a thing?

That it seemed so unimaginable, or likely to provoke reactions of “Good grief, what a totally airheaded, monkish perspective – this guy should get a life...”, is a sign that the favored mode of life of the Vipassanā teachers is solidly white, educated, middle-class conservative. What about the opportunity to go forth when your duties are done – *kāma*, *artha*, *dharma*, *moksha* – who looks forward to being a mountain man in his cabin, listening to his beard grow and being with his bones as they stiffen through the glory of the seasons?

It is true that such faith requires a lot: a readiness to risk enduring the painful, to trust that karma has its result but without written guarantees as to who will provide what where when and how. But that faith also inspires a lot: when people know that you are prepared to go without, or they hear that you have had to bear with hunger or loneliness, the heart leaps to reach out and provide all that can be offered, gladly and without reservation. That trust in human goodness actually calls it into being.

Dorothea welcomes us with her flawless grace and hospitality – Jaya Karlson is there also and, after the meal, when Andy has departed, the Peloponesian factor comes well to the fore. “Here is the Greek female contingent!” and that was it for the next hour and a half – maps and crumpled histories of Sparta and the Peloponesian Wars included, as both of them were born into families from that area

(Manyati). I was reminded of the response that the Spartans once made to Philip of Macedon – quoth he: “Lacedaemeons beware, if I enter your city I will destroy you all and forever establish my sovereignty over you. Your names will be lost to history forever.” Quoth the city fathers in reply: “...if...”. Apparently the Greek government did the same when told by the Axis powers that they were coming and would they accept occupation – “No” was the one-word reply.

A rich and joyful time rolled by as we headed off to Boston Common, the Park and a walk through town. We dropped off Jaya along the way. The city was in full bloom, with students and secretaries draped all over the lawns, guitarists strumming and branches burdened with the brightness of cherry, almond, magnolia and apple blossom. The human realm in the gladness of spring – strolling, rolling, smooching, playing – the air was warm and bright, inviting stillness of heart, and the nostrils full of the fragrance of *muditā*. April, love and fertile greens – the arising side of the cycle.

We stroll up Commonwealth Avenue, past memorials for local worthies: by General George on his noble steed, then sailors, politicians and nine firemen, lost together in a tragic blaze, back in 1972. After a spell in Trident Books we amble down Newbury Street – getting more chi-chi, fou-fou with every block. I can’t help noticing how many opticians there seemed to be and how every face we meet seems to be dressed with different styles of spectacle – it must be a *meaningful* item of dress these days for so much juice and \$\$\$ to go into it. Cafés line the street and the outdoor tables are thick with Bostonians, students and city warriors alike. Numerous are the white collars and ties and tight, shoulder padded twinsets, along with the slash-armed skate boarders and gaggles of roller-blading haves.

As we walk along – the late afternoon sun directly behind us – the dream folk who flow towards us squint and blink or peer from behind shades, not quite sure that they are seeing Buddhist monks drifting towards them. The light gives them our silhouette but steals our definition until we are within a few feet. It is strange to see that curiosity – etched with suspicion or excitement, shyness – crystalizing on the faces as we glide through each other’s consciousnesses.

Past Cartier, Armani and Versace, Brooks Bros. and Burberry’s and back into the greening park again. Dorothea takes us home to West Newton and, come the evening, a small informal gathering of folk clusters around. Kathy Holmes and partner, Deborah, Janey, Ruthy, Sandra and Perrin, Charlie Bowen, Chris Melton, and who else but the spirit of concord.

Conversation rolls around the concept of the new Monastery, Sangha news and the plans for Abhayagiri. A few hours flow by. As Deborah has a two-and-a-half-year-old we touch on the child-unfriendly atmosphere of IMS and how monasteries function i.e. “all humans welcome – size irrelevant.” Again, people are keen to hear the results of our Monastery circle meeting and the subject of location and time lines appears again, also the structure of the nuns’ order. Many of these good folk happily pay up their fees and go along to teachings and retreats at different centers; a few, however, are dyed-in-the-wool Monastery types and have no heart for the “Dharma for dollars” world. For them the chemistry of the classical

mode, where everything is done on faith, is the ingredient that inspires – all the rest, for them, is void of meaning.

By the time 9:00 arrives all head for the door and the great, glad silence reigns again. How sweet to end each day alone and quiet.

## APRIL 8<sup>TH</sup>

A vast and varied breakfast was shared with Charlie and Dorothea – most of it permeated, if not completely obscured, by the unraveling of US and Canadian history, the War of Independence, the Ottoman slaves and the drive to the West of the Virginian landowners; facts and figures still circulate furiously as we wend our way through a bright morning to the house of Buzz and Flora Bussewitz.

She had just survived a trip to India in February, which had included an operation in the Vellore Missionary Clinic on Arunachala Mountain, on the opposite side to the Sri Ramana Ashram. As had happened in November of the previous year, her guts had seized solid and she had needed to get them “de-coked.” She had been a Christian missionary herself, in the Marathi-speaking area of the Indian countryside, when she was in her 20s; she had left there and had last seen India in the time of Mahatma Gandhi, 62 years previously. Despite the rigors of the journey and the sickness, she never once wanted to be anywhere else. What a great soul.

Completing the circle had been very important for her and Buzz and, although she looked a lot older than last year, she was as in fine a fettle as anyone of 90 could hope to be. She intends to do the 10-day retreat at IMS even though it was only one month ago that they returned from their epic adventure.

Jaya and Geoff Karlson were there for the morning, as well as a friend of Buzz and Flora from a block or two away. When we spoke after the meal she waxed lyrically on the delight and inspiration *Silent Rain* had given her and, yet again, felt compelled to get clear in her mind the situation for women in Theravāda monasticism.

This question fills the air in these parts like the pollen from the cherries and the forsythia – it’s everywhere you turn. It speaks from a place of brightness and blossoming hope but it also causes a few sneezes here and there. It always makes a difference when people are informed of some of the heavier rules and their restrictiveness – e.g. never sleeping more than an arm’s distance from another nun. “Who would want to live that way?”

I also voiced publicly, for the first time, my pet theory that perhaps the Buddha knew that the discipline necessary for the women of his age would not be appropriate later on, so he built in the obsolescence clauses of 1) the nuns needing always to live near town in an enclosure – the *upasaya* – and not be forest-dwelling wanderers; and especially 2) that an *acarinī*, an elder nun who was a teacher, could only ordain two *sāmanerīs* (novices) per year as fully fledged *bhikkhunīs*. Given the general fallout rate of juniors, you don’t have to be a statistician to work out that the gross number would drop off sooner or later. This would cause the original *bhikkhunī* order to fade out and then make it necessary for women and monks of later periods to sculpt an appropriate discipline themselves. Hence the *śīladharā*

(the nuns' order that has been crafted at Amaravati Monastery in England, by Ajahn Sumedho and the Sangha there) could be exactly according to the vision of the Buddha – who knows?

Of course this is complete speculation, arguably heretical to boot – and second-guessing the Buddha is probably fated to be always wide of the mark – however, it is worth taking a moment to consider what his reasoning might have been when he laid down these kind of strictures on the women's order.

He was well-aware of the need to keep his system of training adaptable to other times and cultures, and he established the *mahā-padesa* rules (the Four Great Standards) to facilitate this. Furthermore, it's conceivable that he realized that the place of women in society was going to be so variable from place to place, and over the ages, and also such a tender and heated issue, that he placed such tight limits on the Order so that it would naturally need to be regenerated virtually from scratch in every locale it migrated to. Perhaps he trusted the wisdom of coming eras to craft the training of women according to their own time and culture; certainly, since the Theravāda lineage of nuns died out 1,000 years ago in Sri Lanka, that is exactly what is happening within our culture now. Elder nuns from the Northern tradition, Theravādan women, ordained and lay, plus some monks sympathetic to the plight of women aspirants (e.g. HH the Dalai Lama) have all been joining forces to find ways to enable a valid and viable, full monastic training for women to be established in the Theravādan and Tibetan worlds.

It's certainly a painful and demanding process but it's one that bears great hope with it as well – by many people wisely and patiently working with the confusing array of contingent elements, something great and noble is enabled to spring forth.

The afternoon turns cool and we go for a walk in the Arnold Arboretum, where Buzz Senior spent much of his latter years as a docent and photographer of plants. Along with Buzz's relationship with his mother having been brought to greater balance and ease in recent years – particularly in his devotedly taking her "home" to India – his somewhat fraught connection with his father was now transforming itself via Buzz being entrusted with the 15,000 beautiful transparencies of the entire flora, in all seasons, of the Arboretum – his father's greatest legacy.

How sweet an irony that this is how the bond gets to be worked out and brought to some completion too. To make sure that, somehow, the fruits of so many hours, months and years of loving labor do not just turn into forgotten piles of mottled plastic. Lineages get passed on in strange ways, and sometimes it's only by operating at a distance that we can cope with what is handed to us – or maybe more that it's only when we chose to accept the bequest rather than have it thrust down our throats, that its value can be revealed to us. Buzz confessed that, once his father had died, he realized he was actually quite interested in plants – even glad to know their Latin names that his Dad had belabored him with when he was young.

We move on to Cambridge Insight Meditation Center for a get-together with Larry Rosenberg and Michael & Narayan Liebenson-Grady before the evening talk

at 7:00. I said, "You look well," but in truth, at first, I hardly recognized him – he looked older, heavier and strangely subdued. It was only late in the evening that we learned that a month ago his stepdaughter had, without any warning, committed suicide. Despite the cordiality and warmth of welcome – the first thing he said was, "You realize that the future of Theravāda Buddhism in this country lies with you – or at least with your lineage..." – our chat was somewhat fragmented. They kept disappearing one by one to go in for interviews with their Board members and Larry's heart was obviously somewhat distracted – we would start a theme and then, in mid-subject, he would leap to a different topic. It all made sense when he told us later on what had happened; he seemed as though he had been kicked in the guts and was in shock, depressed and grieving. He had obviously been deeply humbled by the whole affair – such an abrupt appearance by the Messenger tears us out of our comfortable programs and shakes our priorities into a different order. So much turns to chaff in our mouths and the heart is filled with all that might have been.

The talk was entitled *Action in a World of Contemplation* (an indirect rip-off from Thomas Merton) and seemed to go down well. It was a play on the theme: the body is in the mind, not vice versa, and the implications that focusing on the still versus the flowing element of experience brings. I also pulled *maranānussati* (the contemplation of death) well into the fore as the presence of it was already in the room: "Where are you going, Sam? What are you doing?"

Sandra and Perrin take Tan Punna and I off into a rainy night – leaving the last remaining questioner stranded with his: "Well I'm teaching more and more these days but I'm uncomfortable talking about 'ending becoming' and 'not wanting to be reborn' – I want to be! I don't want to get out of life." Being given an answer based on the questions of Upasiva and Anurādha, and Vaccagotta and fire – teachings that the Buddha gave to dispel accusations of nihilism and to define the limits of the expressible – he drew in his horns and became quiet, uncertain but reflective: this is a major attack on the compulsive, life-affirming reflex of the USA.

Things have really changed so little since the Buddha himself had to assert: "I do not teach the annihilation of an existing being and those who say I do, basely and falsely misrepresent the Tathāgata; what I teach is suffering and the end of suffering – it is with ignorance as condition that formations come to be..." and so on through the whole pattern of Dependent Origination. The Middle Way is a fine fine whisker of a line.

The Buddha was used to being misunderstood and taken for an annihilationist, but he was not going to avoid that just by appearing to be a life-affirmer. The truly radical approach that he took was instead to be an experientialist: the experience of life is like *this*; all things arise and cease; all things are not self.

Rainy night, pitch black along the light-strewn highway. Wipers flash and thump, wheels roll, the road goes nowhere, finally bringing us to Concord.

## APRIL 9<sup>TH</sup>

A calm spring day with Sandra, Perrin, their sweet pooch Puñña and Joseph Kappel joining us for breakfast. A major exposition on microwave aerials for cell-phones grabs our minds.

Other side of Concord, Joseph takes us for a walk around a local pond, through the woods and then around to his home to view *Fractal Geometry: the colors of infinity*, complete with classic Pink Floyd background music and Arthur C. Clarke as narrator. Deep, deeper, deeper the patterns of the universe unfold from  $z = z^2 + C$  and refuse to bottom out – in these guys there is the zeal of the kids who found the treasure. Unfolding, spiraling, rippling, multiplying in an infinity of natural forms – we are closing in on the geometry of consciousness. Mind, matter, self and nature all intermingle in the inexhaustible quadrilles of the Mandelbrot Set. Tales of Gödel, Feigenbaum and Hofstadter dazzle Joseph as we return, Russell and Whitehead, systems theory and the self-reflective essence of Nature's heart – Dhamma aware of itself is the consummation of our being.

As if the journeys to infinity were not enough, the afternoon finds us at the Omni-dome going up Everest with the Imax crew of Krakauer/Hall/Fisher/Breashears infamy. The film is on in Boston and in, or under, we go. Having seen the book and the *National Geographic* piece had no effect on the enormity of the impact. Revisiting those brave, tragic, poignant episodes – seeing the people in action there – brought the same mixed feelings again. How grand and compassionate the human heart can be, and how blind, drunk and obsessed it can be too. This team made it – its leader (David Ventours) without oxygen – perhaps they closed the circle for the others. Perhaps, and I suspect it's so, the wounds of family and friends and those whose bodies froze to the mountain, will ache and suppurate for long years to come. Without Dhamma as a healing agent, by whatever name we know it, ragged gashes will get ripped open in the same places again and again.

Farewells to Sandra, Perrin and Puñña and off to IMS with Taraniya. Rain again in the dark. Silence and settling in.

## APRIL 10<sup>TH</sup> – 12<sup>TH</sup>

Early morning finds Taraniya driving Tan Punna and I to St. Joseph's Abbey in Spencer, about half an hour from IMS. Father Kevin Hunt, also involved in the Christian/Buddhist event in the Bay Area next year, appears to greet us and show us around. Quite by chance we bump into the vivacious Carol, who had been on the BCBS weekend and who has been a devotee of this Monastery for 30 years.

The Monastery buildings were erected virtually all at the same time, 1951–53, and are built completely out of round, flat fieldstone. "Oh how poor, how wonderful, how poor," said their abbot-general in Rome, hearing that the place was built from rocks they had gathered; apparently he nearly had a fit when he actually saw the finished article – it's a very smart outfit.

Corridor after corridor, chamber after chamber, cloister after cloister we are taken around – here a Madonna, there a St. Anne done by the Master of Sienna, a

16<sup>th</sup> Century Spanish crucifix and a 2<sup>nd</sup> Century Roman wellhead – antiquities and priceless treasures litter the place. Holy knick-knacks that had accrued over the years so copiously that Fr. Kevin scarcely noticed them any more.

Many of the brothers seemed agèd but the abbot was a man of perhaps 50 and had only been in office a couple of years – Fr. Thomas Keating, now in Snowmass, Colorado, was his predecessor. Fr. Basil Pennington is also one of the 80 or so official residents although he is on the road a lot these days. The resident community numbers about 65 – 70 (without guests) with a sprinkling of 20- and 30-somethings amongst them.

We were all very impressed by the similarities of our lifestyles – apparently, when Sazaki Roshi came there to visit he said, “If you just changed the color of the robes it would be the same as our monasteries.” Their ordination procedures, novitiate, etc. all bore a striking resemblance to ours – their livelihood programs, however, were a very different scene. Their *Trappist Preserves* operation fills a warehouse the size of IMS’s meditation hall with jams and jellies. We were stunned. Their farming had almost ceased, we heard, apart from Fr. Raymond’s few sheep, it no longer being economical to run. They also had a department doing vestment production – not a big market you might imagine – but they seemed to make quite a tidy profit from it and 16 monks and some lay women helpers are kept at the job full-time.

The place was constructed very closely to the classical Cistercian model and had the feel – despite its newness – of having been dropped there from medieval Europe onto the New England landscape. It felt like a vibrant community and the simplicity and integrity of their lifestyle was impressive. It being Holy Week everyone we encountered was on their way someplace – usually to the next rehearsal – so we did not have a lot of sit-and-chat time. Also, as is well known, the Trappists are not noted as conversationalists, unless there is some pressing cause to speak.

Bright weather has settled in and the afternoon was spent curled up with *The Story of the Stone* – revisiting Vol.I before passing it on to Ajahn Sumedho. Hours drift by – last details to sort out with Taraniya and Libby, including giving Taraniya the Eight Precepts and putting her in white again.

Come 8:30 and the ship is launched – maybe 70–80 people on board. I made an appeal not to have any weekenders so we will be able to keep a more consistent routine, and have less shifting.

It feels good to be back in the saddle again: some familiar faces from last year, some quite new. Rachel Ropp is front and center, and Sandra, Perrin, Dorothea and Jaya are close by. There is a bold and beaming energy in the air and the Eight Precepts are taken with considerable vim – both surprising and gladdening to see.

Saturday slides by, marked only by a chance encounter with Joseph Goldstein on the path and a bout of hay fever in the afternoon. We hit it with a vigorous blast of Vitamin C and antihistamines and by the evening pūjā it had gone into retreat. Tan Punna kindly took up the reins and gave a fine talk – including a piece on diligent effortlessness, a close cousin of the undistracted non-meditation of Tsoknyi

Rinpoche. Apparently it was a phrase that Khema Ānanda (Tan Punna's teacher) used frequently – we'll get some mileage out of these two before we're done.

Resurrection day comes and goes – Vitamin P for early cocktail, does the trick. Each day at breakfast, tea and the meal different folks appear for a chat. We see a lot of Jan Angevine and Libby, but most others pop in here and there. Edwin and Myoshin have both put their backs out moving into their new accommodations by Gaston Pond – Goose Landing.

Still morning and clear skies, the forest path is cool under foot. Squirrels scurry and squeak their mysterious chattering to each other. Bird calls rebound from the silent pines.

Night arrives – time for Dependent Origination and the three great questions: a) where did I come from? b) where am I going? c) what am I supposed to do now? Shamelessly ripped off from Brother David but adapted to the new context of the Four Noble Truths and *paticca samuppāda*. We'll see how everyone took it.

### **APRIL 13<sup>TH</sup>**

Another bright day. Joseph Kappel joins us at the mealtime and takes part in the Q & A session in the late afternoon. It has a good energy and the whole body of the retreat seems in good shape – keen, energetic and good-humored. At teatime we take a walk along one of the nearby roads, the sun is dropping and the light turns to a softer shade of gold. We talk of mutual friends and the state of his life, his relationship to the Sangha and the need to boost the monastic presence in the USA.

Come the evening he gives the Dhamma talk and, weaving it into his own saga, speaks to the same issue: how monasteries function, the power of the Five Precepts as a guide for life and his own finding of his feet outside institutional life. He speaks with power and conviction – it's good to see him so confident in himself again. The crowd obviously appreciates what he has to say, and also the process of his journey. Post facto he comes to my room and gives a foot massage – we get onto the subject of MIA/POWs and *Kiss the Boys Goodbye*. He had never heard of the book so I went into some detail recounting some of the particularly startling facts the author presented on how and why the US Government wants us to believe all the Boys who are alive are already home...

It's late by the time we finish – it has been a good day – the heart glows at having had the chance to repay some of Big Joe's kindnesses by giving him the floor and publicly acknowledging him as my first Buddhist teacher.

### **APRIL 14<sup>TH</sup>**

Tuesday comes and goes – blue blue skies and warm earth underfoot – we start the interviews and folks seem quite shy. Sharon came by at tea (Joseph Goldstein cried off, being too busy with his *samādhi*) and we spent an hour together on the mysteries of the book tour and some conversation on her experiences of teaching in Russia. I told her I expect to be there for Christmas and offered to give a talk or somesuch for the group in Moscow. How it will all take shape remains to be seen. She seemed in very good spirits and, along with most other people, asked how the

Monastery circle meeting went. She too is supportive of the project but it's by no means a primary concern.

Bodywise the mucus element is in full glory again; the trick seems to be balancing the flow of snot and sneezes on the one hand and stupefaction from antihistamine pills on the other. My head is blank through the evening sitting and so I give a talk on *Thinking and Not Thinking* – hard to keep the thread going and to avoid repetition. Oh well – at least all the basic, necessary information got put out there on *papañca* (conceptual proliferation) *yoniso-manasikāra* (wise reflection) and enquiry.

## APRIL 15<sup>TH</sup>

The morning chanting on Wednesday was a snot-clogged affair but we soldiered through. It's deeply impressive that I have to use the mike to make my voice heard as the leader. The group really gives it full voice – 18-syllable Pāli phrases and all – it's a gladdening sign for the general acceptance of these forms into Buddhist practice in this country. I have certainly never experienced such vigor outside the Monastery before. A few of the folks have issues about bowing – but, in the land of the free individual that's pretty normal.

A cooler, overcast day at first but the interview groups are brighter – most of the people seem to be working with the different practices with some skill. One or two have split: (1) had AIDS and was coming down with pneumonia; (2) dog had had an emergency operation (3) noncompatible with Dhamma – par for the course, no blame.

Taraniya gave the evening talk with a host of neat vignettes on ill will. She is a very personable and gifted teacher. We're still needing to encourage all the folks to show for the morning pūjā – we'll also see how many we can persuade to stay to the close. A few already have their rides booked for early morning Sunday – perhaps we should bill the closing blessing as an *Empowerment and Dharma Transmission Ritual*, which it is, but in need of some more fancy PR to get the zeal element to engage with it.

## APRIL 16<sup>TH</sup>

Hay fever, snot-trickles and tickling throat proceed purposefully along – inconvenient but not unbearable. It just means that there's no inclination to give instructions during the sittings for fear of explosive coughs into the microphone. It's no great loss as there's usually little to say by this time – so much guidance having been given already. All seems even-paced and the interviews are lively and full of useful questions. By the end of the afternoon stint we had dealt with fundamentalism, globalization and the future of humanity – not bad for a day's work.

Edwin Kelley, the IMS director, came by for the tea and we spent a good couple of hours together. Mostly we spoke of IMS and how things are developing here: the plans for the new long-term practice center in the woods between IMS and the Study Center and the structure of life at IMS itself. It was interesting how clearly Edwin saw the place as trying to provide an efficient service to people and that the

employment of more paid staff, contracting out such things as lawn-mowing, and the reduction of volunteer staff to less than 10 people, was all part of the improvements. A little murmur was felt in my heart, however, as so many times, in our efforts to do things better/more efficiently/effectively, we spoil the very quality of what we're doing.

The ethos of *what* is provided exists within *how* it's provided and if spiritual community is to be dropped in favor of efficient management/professional institutionalism, something very special is going to be lost in the process. Witness the caustic remarks made about the polish and style of such places as Esalen these days. It's not just a question of worshipping the funky, down-at-heel good ol' days but looking at our core priorities – what do we want to offer to the world as the heart of the Buddha's dispensation? Would the Master be pleased with what he saw here? Is it to be Insight Meditation *Society* or I.M. *Systems Inc.*? What should we look out for in the development of Abhayagiri? Will we be facing the same dilemmas 20 years down the track?

Right now there is no vestige of thought to run Abhayagiri with employees and charges. Like most monasteries it's a public space: everyone is welcome as long as they respect the place and keep the Precepts. There is no need to register or pay. As a member of the public you can show up for teachings or not, as you chose. Come and go when you like. If you want to stay overnight you need to find out from the guest monk if there is space. But even if you have stayed for three months, and eaten the Monastery's food every day, no one would even think of glancing in the donations box to see if you gave anything. It's not like that... now... Let's plan to keep it this way.

We spent a little time talking about Abhayagiri, Edwin was very impressed with our plans. He took them off to make a copy or two for ideas re the new long-term retreat center. We also broached the Massachusetts Monastery question somewhat but, having put so much time into the other issues, we only skated the surface. Not that, at this stage, there's much to say; I was also glad to have it played down as IMS is not a particularly desired location for most of the Circle.

The evening talk, apropos of a couple of issues that came up in the interviews, was the familiar exposition on *Spiritual Friendship/Relationships*. It seemed to go down well, even though the *Piyajatika Sutta* was a main feature, also Visākhā and the granddaughter ... not much sleep ... revs too high and howling coyote packs – oh well.

## APRIL 17<sup>TH</sup>

Grey and rain, April's grasses drink it up and flowers blush with the touch. Interviews are over in the morning so I spend the whole afternoon sitting in the hall. Powerful peace together with occasional nasal explosions, and when the mind moves to desire objects or future scams – oscillating between the questions:

Is this a person?

and

Where is the mind?

Wordless floating joy!

We have a questions session to close the afternoon and I am still semi-wordless until we're halfway through – so it goes. The rest was rich and a hoot.

Highly charged at teatime – discussing with Buzz and Taraniya the IMS improvement issues – glad that Tan Punna is doing the evening talk. He puts out a good line on why the emphasis on *dukkha* (which a few voices had complained about) and many handy hints on practice outside the retreat situation, stressing the Five Precepts as the mainstay of sustained happiness. Flat batteries by the end of the day – for once I recline before 10:00 and go out like a light.

## APRIL 18<sup>TH</sup>

Morning reflections on having no future and spreading kindness and forgiveness through the world. After breakfast it's backed up with a "cancel your plans to leave early" speech. The troops are shocked but one or two will see the virtue of placing Dhamma before diaries. I told the story of Andrew on the Santa Rosa '96 retreat: a young man who had vowed to me he would not go crazy or run away, made the mistake of falling madly in love (for the first time) before the retreat began. On the Thursday morning he was seen rushing from the hall; a little while later he was sheepishly asking the retreat manager for jumper cables. He had got as far as his car to make the getaway but only to find a dead battery – No escape.

Robert Armagno came from upstate New York to take the Five Precepts and Brent from Alabama came to ask for monastic training (someday). He's a bright, bright light but, at 22, has the confusion of a dozen different elements in his Plans. With a bit of luck he'll make it out to Abhayagiri one day but I expect the journey will have a few surprise side trips in it for him. Burning with a mission to enlighten and save the planet (after 10 – 20 years of monastic training) I assured him was a long, long shot but I admired his purity of heart and zeal.

We instituted Noble Speech after the *Sharing of Blessings* and then had tea with Tara and Dan Goleman, who had come to visit us. Tara wanted to pick my brains on the transformation of negative emotions for her coming book on the subject. We ranged long and wide; from Buddhism in China to *yoniso manasikāra*, Dependent Origination, fear of letting go, Anglo-friendly Dharma language (emptiness/*dukkha*/desire, etc.) and a host of other aspects. Fortunately she had a tape running. We only had a couple of hours and yet we covered an ocean of material; finished up with the *puggala paññāti* (the catalogue of human types) and the Buddha families; what to do with greed/hate/delusion types, and their negative and positive aspects. We decided that *mohacarita* (deluded types) were the hardest to teach and that perhaps the positive side of that tendency was the ability to be pleased/agree with anything.

We gave the evening over to Dharma sharings and had a regal session – lasting at full energy until 10:15. The grandiloquent and the poignant, the simple and the wise, the grateful and the farcical, the opening of the eyes.

## APRIL 19<sup>TH</sup>

A morning full of reintegrations and reminders. We played Heng Yin's *Songs for Awakening* during the morning sit and filled the crew with more encouragement to stay until the end. It seems that many had heeded the advice and most that did leave, did so with sincere apologies. One or two incorrigibles slipped through and a few that life necessitated.

By the end of the morning ceremonies and the postprandial goodbyes (there must have been 30–40 people squashed in the yoga room) my jaw was aching with all the smiling and goodwill expressions. For a moment it seemed that another infinity of questions had started and I wondered if we were ever going to escape. None were leaving and more were arriving – finally we moved the gears and the farewells began. It may have just been the size of the retreat but there seemed to be a huge number of very heartfelt eulogies. We finally hit the road at 3:00ish, with Jaya, Libby, Sandra, Perrin, Buzz and Tan Punna in attendance.

The journey to New York was with Gina Sharpe, her husband John Fowle and their friend Jill Satterfield (all of whom had been on the retreat) and largely retraced the Highway 85 route from Sussex, NJ. Along the way John plied me with a stream of enquiries about the Amarahistory and my life as a monk. I was blinking and worn with facial fatigue by the time we arrived in Westchester County.

It was hard to get much of a sense of the locale as it seemed very like the forest/lake/freeway pattern all the way through this region. However, as we pulled off the highway around Bedford and Mount Kisco It was clear that this was a very well-heeled area. John *insisted* that, at 4,000 sq. ft., their house was a very small one for the area (the record stands at 37,000 sq. ft., for a family of five, being built at present).

Nevertheless their house was a delight to the eyes as we rolled in, and an ever unfolding set of treats as I was shown around. Famous for being the former home of Sir Stephen Spender and Gian Carlo Menotti, and Samuel Barber, it had also housed JFK and Jackie overnight on some remote occasions.

Star magnolia and flowering cherries, bright forsythias and purple azalea punctuate the walks. Tall, well-groomed pines stretch up from the lawns, and a rock garden with a Buddha-image and a waterfall tumble down from the hillside behind. Everywhere in the house the eye falls upon thanγκas, scroll paintings and *Buddha-rūpas* – like some latter day Pure Land, countless Tathāgathas spread in all directions – the rooms are also framed by huge banks of windows and skylights, merging the inner and outer geographies together. A land of devas devoted to the Blessed One – what a delight to roam their halls.

## PART II

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NEW YORK – PORTLAND – CLOUD MOUNTAIN – SAN FRANCISCO – ABHAYAGIRI

### APRIL 20<sup>TH</sup>

TO MY SURPRISE THE RETREAT was slated to begin this morning (I had thought we had half a day's grace) but, given that it is all due to happen here on site, it was no problem.

Gina had organized the whole affair down to the last detail – food prepared by others in the group, the florists arrived at 8:30 laden with choice bouquets and sprays. The house is already spotless and the gardens mani- and pedicured to a T – all flows along like a well-oiled machine. Despite the size of New York City there has, amazingly, never been a Vipassanā center here and it was only last September that Gina, Tamara Engel and Sandra Weinberg drew such a project together. They have been meeting three times a week in the City and hope to have regular daylong sittings and retreats. This was their first such event.

By the end of the day everyone is glowing gently and folks seem highly pleased with the Dhamma offerings. It's all just the same old stuff but, being so starved of seasoned teachers to the area, they all lap it up with vigor. Apparently, although there have been a large number of small, isolated meditation groups in the area, there had never been the pull for the big-name teachers to visit: not worth going to a group of only six people, apparently.

This issue has been a constant refrain in recent times, both from members of small local groups as well as at the meetings of Spirit Rock teachers that I have been attending of late. The heart is pulled in two directions: there is a genuine natural gladness to speak to whomsoever asks for Dhamma teachings, however, there is also the specter of economic need. People hate to say it, and things have got ugly on occasion when trying to encourage "sufficient" dāna, but the fact is that if there is a choice between going a long distance to a small group or to a large one, the likelihood that the latter will bring in more dollars usually wins the day.

The same is true around teaching unpopular subjects: if a teacher knows that *Sex and the Dharma* is going to attract five times the number of people that *Mindfulness of Breathing* is likely to, which subject are they going to talk on? No contest.

To some extent it is a question of the lack of seasoned teachers – and newer folks are often happy to take on these small and remote groups – but the majority of the issue seems to hinge around the commitment to a comfortable middle-class lifestyle and the consequent need to sustain an income from teaching that feeds that cash-hungry maw. Mortgages, car payments, college fees for children – all these and more pile up into a substantial mountain of obligation. Gotta keep those \$\$\$ coming in...

Jill, Tracy and Diedre stay on for the evening, the latter overnight as she is from two hours away. We sit and watch *The Mindful Way* and *The Buddha Comes to Sussex* to great acclaim. Weary, weary, weary by the end of the day.

## APRIL 21<sup>ST</sup>

The pattern repeats itself, again avid conversations over lunch: day one emphasized *mettā* and *pabhassara citta* (the radiant mind, naturally free of defilement) and had good questions on reflective thought and emotion – to wit how to practice with the latter through noninvolvement in its stories and by attending to, and letting go of, the accompanying physical feeling instead.

Day two went into vipassanā, rebirth, the Five Precepts and accepting Nature the way it is. Gushing with gratitude they all line up at the end to bid farewells and offer gifts in a spontaneous and moving ceremony. The cat, Pañña, is still unsure quite *what* all these strangers are doing in *her* house.

It seems strange that just a couple of days of teaching the essential themes – the ol’ story – has such an earthmoving effect but I guess, if this is the first time it has been heard, all the bells in heaven are likely to go off. How wonderful is the Dhamma – like sweet sweet dew on parched desert seeds, bringing them into glorious blossom after an age of quiescence. It’s a delight and a privilege to be a part of this alchemy, and also a test to receive the unabashed love of the folks without palming it off, or taking it personally. Diedre talked with me of this same issue, regarding praises for her singing: You just have to receive it into the feeling body and meet the eyes from the empty heart.

Laden with offerings once again, I will have to organize another package to go off to Abhayagiri.

## APRIL 22<sup>ND</sup>

Early morning, wandering in the cool dew of John and Gina’s garden – retired now from their lives as Wall Street lawyers, they fully enjoy (as do all us visitors) the mossy lawns and tall pines, rockeries, the pool and tennis court, the cherry and the azaleas – hidden fragrances fill the liquid air. Bright morning sun rises through the trees.

Our day for da Cidy.

John washes the side windows to make sure of perfect view – we surge off and make our way to the house where Jill lives. The cluster of canine goodwill around their place rushes to meet us: Scarlet, Reason and a spaniel whose name I missed – soft dogs roaring their gentle hellos. We visit briefly the world of her chandelier and sculpture studio – strange hornet’s nests of wire and light, chairs of brass and ivy, a home to birds and beasts. She holds up a translucent Buddha – unfinished – and introduces us to a standing one in process – only wire and empty suggestions of shape so far.

Down the lanes past hedges and rolling meadows, copses and ponds of home counties England. We hit the freeway and join the roll south to New York City. Signs to New Rochelle and Scarsdale bring resonances of a hundred songs and

movies: Dick van Dyke or was it *Bewitched*? Trees are everywhere and the aura of vernal power dominates the view – large suburban homes poke through the lines and blocks of lime-green leaf.

New York Botanical Gardens open up to us and Jill's sister Kris shows us around. Like Jill, a slender blonde presence but somewhat more filled with the tightly sprung gotta-get-goin genre of the area. Blossom clusters burden the trees all around. Pink cherries, dazzling white plums and almonds. We pass through the walks and head directly for the seven-acre hothouse, a stupendous Victorian edifice of whitened glass and connected domed pavilions, like the Middle Eastern splendors of the Royal Pavilion in Brighton. Here, however, the glories are in the dripping richness of the greenery within, not in the trceries and decor of the architecture.

Steamy tropics, like Fern Valley in Jamaica, tender Mediterraneans, arid cacti of the southwestern desert and the bowers of impossible metallic turquoise, scarlet and gold pitcher vines, jasmine towers load the sticky air with aromas of love.

Soon crowds of multihued tots, trailing behind their teacher, names emblazoned on cards upon their chests, flow around us in harlequin waves as we make our way around the buildings. Hanging epiphytes drip with the morning's spray and a strange sterility hovers about us in the absence of insect noise, frogs and butterflies. Awesomely realistic faux tree trunks, laden with moss and climbing plants, arch above our heads and fill the chambers of our vision – black pools of rush and water plants are dotted here and there, peppered themselves by the glint of coins, little hopes shining from the dark underworld.

We glide on to the rock garden – “Nation of Islam?” one local enquires of us, perched with his buddy on a bench by the gate – the world is in bloom; dogwoods, fritillaria, shocking scarlets and purples everywhere, gentle alpine blues and whites abound.

What vision the garden-makers had! How well they intuited the rising tides of the city around them. Not only Central Park but this botanical garden in the Bronx, now surrounded by clutches of mean and uncertain streets. What wisdom to define these sanctuaries, to keep the presence of Nature's bounty visible, breathable in the midst of our human creations and their outflows. It sits here like a green and pulsing source of reviving energy in the midst of heart-sapping confusion and compulsion.

We had cancelled our luncheon at the members dining room at the Metropolitan Museum (probably due to a divine hand intervening) and had rearranged to eat at Khun Wan's restaurant Siam Inn II in Hell's Kitchen – being somewhat more gentrified these days it would probably be more appropriate now to refer to the area as Bistro de l'Infer or some such. Suwit, Wan and Gaew were there (the latter two having been at Abhayagiri the previous year for the May alms-giving ceremony) plus many others who worked in the restaurant. We met Wan's husband Daeng for the first time and a sweet elder lady known as Pat.

It was a delight to see them all again and they were plainly very happy to have the chance to offer a meal to one of their monks. Gina, John and Jill were seriously

impressed by the welcome they got as companions of the ajahn, even though Suwit had been a regular member of Gina's meditation group.

They were seated at a separate table and thoroughly feasted by Wan, Daeng and the others. Suwit came and sat with me as soon as the eating was done and chatted at great length about his own progress in the Dhamma since meeting Ajahn Toon over here; also expounding his reflections, as a hairdresser, on *kesa* (hair of the head) as an object of meditation. He said that nowadays he takes the opportunity to have Dhamma conversations with his customers and that many seem to come more for the chat than for the haircut. He also noticed that his tips were getting bigger accordingly, sometimes a \$20 tip for an \$18 haircut – must be good Dhamma. He is happily single and neither homesick for Khon Kaen nor stuck on New York – “Wherever I am is my home” – a wise man in a wild town.

We meet up with Nick and another friend at the Met, and are whisked away on a whirlwind tour of India, South-east Asia and China by Brigitta, a German-born but genetically reprogrammed New Yorker – *not* a docile docent. We smiled appreciatively by were all left somewhat dazed by the unrelenting current of her delivery. She left us at the Japanese exhibit and I found myself placidly staring for long minutes at a huge folding screen depicting gibbons in a forest – the space and silence reverberating in my ears, the only thought capable of being formed was “gibbons...”

Emerging eventually onto the broad cascade of steps that forms the Museum's connection with the street, we were greeted with a sight of the epitome of multi-tasking urban living: a young man on roller-blades, dog charging along on extended leash, cell-phone clamped to the ear whilst weaving through crowds of pedestrians and puddles from the recent cloudburst, utterly at ease and chattering avidly into his mouthpiece. And the remarkable thing was that it was utterly unremarkable – no one turned a hair.

After taking a rest at Sandra Weinberg's apartment, we made our way to Shambhala, down on 31<sup>st</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> somewhere around the florists area and the beginnings of theater-land. We had a fine taste of New York cab drivers and their ways (including a pincer movement that brought four cars abreast in three lanes – very impressive) and the sweet and sour juxtapositions of have and have-not that New York City has raised to an art form.

Mike of the Shambhala Center was very welcoming and, although things were a little late in starting, (another stalwart feature of NYC) there was a turnout well beyond people's expectations – more than 100 showed up and folks were spilling out of the doorway, standing in the hall outside to hear. The title for the talk had been billed as *Inner Silence – the Precious Jewel*, and, as if to order, a full repertoire of car alarms, shouts, sirens and automotive noise, wafted up from the street eight floors below.

There was great energy to the evening and good questions following the talk. The most obvious of which being, “How do you practice effectively in New York?” Jack Kornfield had (apparently) once said that he couldn't imagine why anyone interested in Dharma would live in New York in the first place; this (if he actually

said it) was not a very helpful comment considering there's: a) people b) suffering c) intelligence d) leisure time in great abundance and these are generally the elements required to make Dhamma practice a useful tool.

It was 10:00 before we said our final goodbyes and nearly 12:00 by the time we got back to Bedford. Being revved for the evening it was 2:00ish by the time the engine cooled.

## APRIL 23<sup>RD</sup>

I woke after a long dream about Richard Gere being on a retreat with me. We celebrated this phantasmic visitation by John taking me for a tour of the area (small old houses, village greens, rocky outcrops, big gorges, *huge* new houses, trees everywhere) and passing by Mr. Gere's residence on Pound Ridge – apparently, at one point, they had been considering moving next door to him. Along the way John and I had an interesting chat about Dharma teachers and *dāna* and their constant complaints – he quoted one of them as saying: “You just don't get it, it's not a tip!\*” My reply to this, addressed in abstract to these good people, was: “Instead of complaining about the supposed shortfall, why not try to: a) be more worthy and b) cut your overheads – what you need will come. But if you choose to own and drive a Lexus, how can you expect people to take a *dāna* rap seriously?” (Maybe ask Rajneesh...)

It might well sound as if one is blowing one's own trumpet to assert that things are done much more easefully and graciously in the Monastery but, being as objective as possible, it still seems to be true: no one is ever charged for anything, either overtly or covertly; if money comes in it gets used for the welfare of the community, wherever it is needed; no one has personal stashes; we have no dependents; we don't go into debt; and if there's not enough money to build or pay the bills, we just sit and meditate until things come around again – it's a very spacious way to live.

Furthermore, when the friends and supporters of the place receive zero coercion to show that support financially, it is a pure joy for them to offer whatever they wish; there is no pressure of obligation anywhere in the mix.

Prior to this Gina and I had had an in-depth discussion on her role in the New York Insight group. When the question of a location for my talk had come up she had been shocked that some folks preferred the Union Theological Seminary, a venue with an aura of a Victorian gentleman's club, à la Buddhist Society of London, to Shambhala, as the latter was “too Buddhist.” She found it amazing that a Christian institution should be preferable simply because of the fear of putting people off.

As we talked we re-ran comments that some other leading Vipassanā teachers had made, such as: “Many people have been hurt by religion; we want to avoid recreating that pain for them and therefore we shy away from using overtly religious forms within Buddhism when presenting Buddhist teachings.” Both Gina and I felt that maybe some of the Pentecostals who came to listen to the talk might have been put off but most people are aware that, if it's a Buddhist monk speaking, it's

suitable to be up front and just call it Buddhist. Besides 90% of people interested in Buddhism or meditation have been *disappointed* by religion rather than hurt by it. It simply failed to make sense or be very important, that's all.

The upshot of this overarching fear of upsetting some people is that the presence of the Triple Gem gets diluted beyond all potency. It's accessible, but perhaps too weak to help change people in the radical way that the Buddha's teaching can do. By trying to be all things to all people, and to not offend any sensibilities into the bargain, we are expecting far too much of ourselves.

When Ajahn Chah came to IMS in 1979 he had much sage advice for those who had founded the place and who were now consistently in the roles of teaching and mentoring. Amongst the many things he said, perhaps the most notable was:

"If you wish to succeed in your endeavor here you must be prepared to challenge the fixed opinions and desires of your students (literally 'to stab their hearts'). If you merely present teachings that accord with your students' defilements, telling them only what they like to hear, for a while many people will come but ultimately they will vanish away and you will have failed, because your words will not have enabled them to break free of samsāra.

"Sometimes it is necessary to act and speak completely counter to a student's wishes – at first they may hate you for this but later, when they see that you only have their welfare in mind, and they also see that your advice has indeed enabled them to let go of their burdens, they will be very thankful to you. This is the only way you will succeed here."

All around Westchester County and on the run to Newark the lime trees are shedding their pollen – pale green dust speckles the edges of the roads and drifts in clouds onto our windscreen. The same soft, lush aura embraces the hills along our way until we meet the marshes and factory complexes of Noo Joisy. Goodbyes at the airport; fond farewells and promises of future contact: "I will let you know when I can next come to New York."

If you're invited into the heart of the Beast to help catalyze a transformation why refuse? It was immediately after the enlightenment that the Buddha brought on board: a) his family in Kapilavastu; b) the Kassapa brothers, the most significant religious leaders of the region; c) King Bimbisāra of Maghada; and d) King Pasenadi of Kosala. Get the power-holders on the right track and the lives of all whom they touch will be bettered.

Buddhism has seemingly always entered societies from the top and, once certain significant and influential people have developed faith in the teachings, then it naturally filters through and trickles down to all those whom they influence. Once the Buddha had caused such faith in his teachings to arise in the Sakyas, the most respected religious leaders and then the two greatest political figures of his time – King Bimbisāra and King Pasenadi – he had, in effect, brought the whole region under the scope of his liberating insights. Or at least those insights and spir-

itual qualities were then being talked about, reverberating in the air of Magadha and Kosala, and for whomsoever felt an interest in them, they were close at hand.

In the same way, New York City is a major power center in the American organism. By bringing even just a little influence to bear there, the ripple effect through all those in its web of energy are touched by that – even if only to a minuscule degree. A little change there brings a great effect.

But by this time the system is drained to the bottom. Plane delay... who cares... delay ... take off ... Denver sun and T-shirts... drained... “Oh Lord, please don’t seat me next to the young blond Mormon in the dark suit and tie,” *Elder Dawkins* on his lapel. “There is a God...” – the Elder (aged about 20) is in row 18 but on seat A and I’m in C. “We thank you Lord...”

Mike Echols awaiting in Portland to greet.

“I hope nothing is arranged for this evening.”

“No, not a thing...” he gulps quietly, “but there are folks who’ll be coming for the morning sit tomorrow.” He saw my face fall, “but I can tell them not to come if you’d like...” I give him the best lost spaniel look I can and recount my schedule of the last fortnight.

Like a trooper he calls everyone up and then stands guard at the door at 6:20 a.m. the next day – I never heard a thing, even though (being on East Coast time) I had been awake since 4:15. Blissfully alone and unengaged in anything more than looking at pictures of India and the emptiness of the mind. What a sweet and quiet joy.

## APRIL 24<sup>TH</sup>

Janné and Charles came by and I walked with him later on to pick up their daughter Tara from her play-school. Portland is in the thick of its blossoming; we pass white lilacs on the street and shockingly bright, fecund clusters of azalea, peonies and pink star magnolia. We meet some of Tara’s friends, including a boy called Dallas and “Jumping Bunny” Emma, then return for a meal offering at their house.

It had been impossible to schedule a talk in Portland on this trip so there was some miffedness in the air; in addition it looked as though there would not be enough time for this in June either, when it was planned for me to return. They are good-humored people, however, and the damage is surely repairable. Ever since my first visit to the US in 1990 I had been coming to visit Portland and had given numerous talks and held daylong meditations here. By now there was a substantial group of folks who felt close to the monastic Theravāda style of doing things but since only a very few came down to do the longer retreats in California, or to stay at the Monastery, these trips to their city of rain and roses were the only times we met. We have become good friends but we rarely see each other.

In a less crowded year I would have been able to stay for longer and have the time with these fine people, however, with the beginning of the Rains Retreat in early July this year all the engagements are somewhat crunched – there always being the effort to minimize travel outside of the Monastery during that formal retreat period.

Mike was also bemoaning a dropping off of attendance at the Columbia Sangha sittings (often down to just two) but said that Janné's beginners' class on Sundays was going well, as was Robert Beatty's Vipassanā group. My energy levels were still a bit too low to really engage with the issue and give much concrete advice – we'll get back to this one for sure...



Richard Eaton comes by to provide transport to Cloud Mountain retreat center and we wing our way northward through showers and over rivers to Castle Rock. Greenness surrounds us and, as we pull into Cloud Mountain's drive, fills every corner of the vision. Thick undergrowth and glistening luminescent tree frog emerald moss is everywhere. Welcomes by David Branscome and his partner Laura, who now run the place together. A small group and no monastic assistance – it should be a pleasantly low-key session: 17 retreatants only for the nine days.

Alone in the kufi by Diamond Hall again – outside my windows walls of green and fiddleheaded fern fronds rise into the dimming sky – blackbirds begin to make their roosting calls as the light draws in. The silence rings – alone and together again.

Night comes. We have our first meeting – this tiny clutch of beings – and the chorus of frog-song fills our ears.

## 25<sup>TH</sup> APRIL – MAY 3<sup>RD</sup>

Low chi, slow to rouse. Like the fishes of Cloud Mountain ponds, we swim in a vast tank of verdure – a massive tangle of green.

Fountains of new fern growth spring from the heart of the old – a thin pine sprouting from the broken and decaying stump by the path. Layer upon layer upon layer of moss – the Buddha is almost buried in the cave of his green mountain, it was bare rock when I first came here seven years ago.

Tiny birds hop amongst the reed beds around the pond – the palest of drifts of blue mist rise from the glassy surface – morning sun-gold pours through the dense grove filling the eastern border. A robin hunts, listening for worms and grubs; the cats stalk the birds and invisible rodent life; the worms munch their way through the earth; all is eaten with the hungry eye. Day begins on Cloud Mountain, morning light through fern-forms and leaflets – iridescent, multiplying life.

Paticca samuppāda Saturday night.

The Five Hindrances Sunday.

The question period brightens us up, brings us together more.

Bamboo clusters, green and stately; grand, dark brown fishes in the pond. Scroll paintings from the Met re-echo in the mind: what pools of carp and swaying, creaking fronds did those masters stare into? Where are the fishes now? Are the clumps they so delicately sketched still shouldering snow and reflecting the brassy suns of Chinese summers, bending in the autumn winds of Hokkaido?

A family of martens wheels and chuckles in the air; yellow irises open in the sun, their golden father; stands of adolescent ferns perch like green pelicans, roosting quietly in the morning light.

Endless, still, bright days – that lonesome whistle swells and rolls through cloudless, sunny air. The inner sound rings on – nada nada nada nada nada.

The eternal dance of mothlets and spiderwebs, all illumined in the rays of the evening sun, strung and dodging between the lime-green luminescent spring growth. Unnamable smells strike at the moment of leaving buildings: one time is it hyacinth and narcissus, sweet woodruff? then acrid rot? or some waft of the essence of forest life itself – fragrances from the glands of Pan...

Monday night: the Four Noble Truths and dismantlement of the nihilist critique of them as narrow and shallow, life-negating.

Tuesday night: contemplation, *templum* and mythology, King Lear and Medea; reasonable resentments and going through the grief curtain – *morbo inferiore*.

Interviews have begun: all is well enough, the room is still, a few tears – turning back from the wall of darkness and facing No.1.

Wednesday: the frogs serenade on a sultry eve, banana-moon in the western sky. I wonder how it would be for Drukpa Kunley, Herman Hesse and Opal Whitely to sit down together over tea – divine and mad as hatters, one and all...

Evening talk on self and selflessness and the bad rap the ego gets – it's a useful tool, like the human foot, but not something to build a life around. Let the walls fall out and enjoy the sun and flowers – be not afraid. There is no "right thing for me" only the potential to learn and bless in all situations.

Thursday: instructionless morning – not a lot more to say – another bright and blessed day of stillness and light – getting steamy in Diamond Hall by late afternoon.

A few tears in the interviews and inspirations to talk on.

That night: relationships of wholeness and of separateness; also got the folks (some) off their chairs and into attentive, versus *mode dégagé*, for the talk.

Friday: the weather is on the change – hot, sultry days have brought thunder, the cracking of trees and the first splatterings of rain. The ominous splitting of trunks and crashing branches made me think to speak of maranānussati – contemplations of death. It was also the "advice on life after retreat" spiel and it was useful to have such an object lesson to work with.

The frogs are very happy with the night rain and, come the next morning, it's still overcast but the air is fresh and liquid once again. Strong encouragements to watch the going home urge – we'll see how they do...

All in all the folks have been very peaceful: most are new to this style but have taken to the practice quite easily – even subtle elements like facing the curtain of fear and going through it, or dropping problems, people and questions into the space. It is a still room – a diamond hall indeed.

All along the forest paths the banana slugs are out enjoying the freedom of wet surfaces everywhere and an absence of the moisture-sapping sun. Also, what with the winds of last night, there is much juicy leaf-litter underfoot. The moist

and tangy fragrances of the woods are richer than ever and the lime-green mosses covering the rocks and rotting logs seem to spread and glow even as you look at them. They are in their element. That phrase from the funeral chanting: "*chuddo apeta viññāno, niratthamva kalingaram*" – "hollow, void of consciousness and useless as a rotten log," comes to mind again and again by way of it being belied by the life of the forest floor. Just on the "dead" trunk lying on the bank outside my window there must be 20 species of moss, grass, lichen, flower and even a couple of shrubs growing, and that's without counting all the animal life and plants not readily discerned by the eye. It's a metropolis, a nation of its own. It's Nature's sweet irony that it's the falling of the great that provides the nursery and food source, foundation for the next generation and for the world of the very small.

Stone lanterns and brown standing rocks punctuate the paths and garden pools. Delicate bamboo clusters rub them with the soft, dry edges of their leaves, mosses climb their sides and form coronets of living lace around their heads. Water boatmen and pond skaters scurry here and there, bending the skin of the waters like the mind landing on the moment.

Fleshy fish of dark brown and silver dodge and flow just below the surface, occasionally bursting forth with an audible gulp as they broach the air barrier from below and seize the some unwary six-legged passer-by. An incongruous yellow plastic duckling floats gormlessly on the murky waters; nearby, next to the reed beds on the far side of the pond, a couple of slightly more convincing adult decoys sit. So far they have all failed to attract little more than the imaginative attention of a few meditators, triggering childhood memories of our favorite bath-toys and bemused speculation on the possibilities of flocks of plastic wildfowl homing in during their flight northwards to the rich feeding grounds of the bathtubs of Seattle and Bellingham: "Oh what joy, what a triumph it would be to bob on the three acre pool of Mr. Gates!"

The retreat winds down through the reintegration program of 1) writing task at noon; 2) institution of Noble Speech at teatime; 3) the evening sharing (as precious and sweet as ever); and 4) the *bhajans* of Secret Flame at dawn. We topped it off with the requiem for our sojourn together and had our final and heartfelt blessing lingering on a rash of last minute philosophic conundra (e.g. "As Buddhists, what is the relationship of heart, soul and spirit?"). Energy levels were diminishing by now and, as the last goodbyes were made after the meal offering, we piled thankfully into the car of Adrienne and Greg Satir by half past two.

More philosophical puzzles plied the air as we passed the giant silos of Kalama: "Do you feel hopeful for humanity in the light of these turbulent times, or do you feel we are headed for social and ecological disaster?" "How do you feel the emancipation of women is affecting life on earth?" Dear people and sincere enquiries but, by the time the plane is on the runway, I am glad indeed for the numb familiarity of the safety instructions and the empty seats around me. Noncontact with sense objects and the relative bliss of a *suññatā-vihāra*, aaaahhhhhh...

Of course, at every step of the way, each being who is helping you along is glad to have the opportunity to spend time together; this is part of the Blessed One's

genius in tying the hearts of the homeless ones to the lives of the faithful, by establishing alms-mendicancy, moneylessness and a general powerlessness to shape to world according to your wishes. Thus, as Greg and Chris and Adrienne were glad of the chance to talk, so is Don Sperry who meets me at San Francisco airport; especially since he has wound up his life at IMS and is coming out to Abhayagiri with a view to an indefinite stay.

He had just had a very fine visit with his family in Indiana who, it seems, had come to the agreement to back him and support his going forth – to Don's immense surprise and relief. We talk some on the way to Edward Lewis's place in Tiburon and I hear about the families' interactions and his time with a long lost cousin, a Muslim who now lives in Modesto.

A quiet evening at Edward's – gentle conversation and catching up on mutual friends and family. His daughter has been making her first progress through the Antipodes and SE Asia and was doing very well on her own on the Road. Her customary fearfulness of life's dangers seemed to have radically fallen away; a fact demonstrated more than anything by a 270' bungy-jump she made in New Zealand – not a pastime enjoyed by shrinking violets.

## MAY 4<sup>TH</sup>

A day full of the Spirit Rock teachers' circle: Jack Kornfield, Wes Nisker, Debra Chamberlain-Taylor, Robert Hall, Julie Wester, Anna Douglas, Guy Armstrong, John Travis; the usual players, although absent this day were Howie Cohn, James Baraz, Sylvia Borstein, Mary Orr and Eugene Cash. These few folks who were away were mostly leading retreats.

The walk to the hall is filled with the rich scent of wild bay trees along the creek. Irises dot the driveway and the garden areas, their feathery tongues of gold and purple lapping the spring air full of life and moisture.

The buildings for the residential retreats are nearing completion, nestled under the shelter of the green curves of the Marin County hills. The Big Opening is scheduled for July 4<sup>th</sup> and it seems that all is on-line for completion by that time.

There were difficult issues in the air and we gave most of the day to hearing through the voices of one particular dilemma. After all the talking and contact of the last few weeks I was little disposed to keen engagement but found I was able to listen fully and intently – also to reflect that this was not some unfortunate aberration within the otherwise smooth flow of Spirit Rock life but the very stuff of life itself: two dear honorable, honest people with severe criticisms of each other and two radically different versions of the "same" events. The Kurosawa film *Rashomon* was quoted repeatedly as an example of how different people involved in the same events are, in fact, often subjectively in totally *different* events – especially when viewed in hindsight with the filters of new views in place: *because of such conflicts, hence Vinaya.*

The Dhamma of the real world keeps intruding upon our programs of what we believe and what we have planned – this was also borne out by Jack's recent emergency hernia operation and James Baraz's torn retina. He couldn't make it

to the meeting as he had had to spend the last week lying on his front, to keep the pressure on his eye down. It's also his only good eye – the other is almost blind already – so the stakes are high on this one. It's a raw truth, but, indeed, this is the inevitable path that we're all on: "*Byādhi-dhammomhi byādhim anatīto...*" "I am of the nature to sicken, I have not gone beyond sickness..." It's a question of wholeheartedly embracing the fact that "my plan" is not the same as Nature's and surrendering to endings without complaint.

As if there had not been enough talking already, at the end of the afternoon we sat down with the family program folks – Seth Castleman, Julie Wester, Lisa McCool and Gary Buck, and met to discuss the first family retreat. Julie then followed us back to Edward's so we could do the fine detail planning for this.

By the time all that was complete, and the last phone calls had been made, the day was definitely over – good words spoken, goodwill generated and good-heartedness sustained but enough engagement with the world of things. Time to let it go and disappear.

## MAY 5<sup>TH</sup>– 6<sup>TH</sup>

A quiet morning at Edward's with he and Don fielding phone calls whilst I finished off *Slaughterhouse Five* in blissful solitude.

After the meal we set off into a rainy afternoon to visit Glenn McKay at his houseboat and studio in Sausalito. Famous for his pioneering Headlights optical displays with Jefferson Airplane in the '60s, he has recently been working with a few computer people and now has many of his lightshow slides on disc. The programs they have created for him allow him to manipulate the flow of images, freeze them, print out their mixtures or whatever. Don and I sat transfixed as the astounding succession of flowing colored forms took shape and dissolved in front of us. He still had many of the slides he had created in the days of his classic Headlights shows, along with the patterns he had been conjuring in recent weeks.

He also showed us the outline for a retrospective show he was invited to do at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art next January, consisting of four separate pieces for each of the '60s, '70s, '80s and '90s. Along with all this we got to see a video that he had been making for many months, *No Strings Attached* – a combination of his light art and various musical pieces, all forms of stringed instruments but varying from cello to sarod to Celtic harp.

We took a cup of mint tea aboard his houseboat and chatted for a while longer before setting off for the City. We arrived at Theresa Owen's house in Noe Valley and settled in for some more tea and conversation – the plan had been to have a couple of quiet days, however, the space got somewhat embellished by a succession of video tragedies: *Rashomon*, *Trainspotting* and, the next afternoon, Branagh's *Hamlet*. Perhaps not the lightest mix of influences for an already weary brain but hey, the human condition does not always wait for a convenient time to impart its lessons to us.

By the end of Wednesday afternoon my circuits were well and truly satiated: as Don drove me to the monthly gathering out at 46<sup>th</sup> Avenue, my mind flashed

with images of rape in medieval Japan, a screaming Ophelia and the haunting voice of Lou Reed singing *Perfect Day* while an overdosed Renton was hauled into the emergency room, gazing at the scene from the bottom of his well. "It's such a perfect day..."

The turnout was small for the evening but it was good to see the mix of new and old faces. A talk on inner silence filled the evening and the group energy was strong – it is so good to be in the presence of the Dhamma.

The travel arrangements for Ajahn Vajiro were severely scrambled so he didn't return to Theresa's with Don until about 1:15 a.m. Energized by the evening I was innocent of sleepiness and so had waited up for him – his journey from Chicago had taken 22 hours, the flight normally lasts three-and-a-half, so he was somewhat grey-green about the gills when he pulled in.

## MAY 7<sup>TH</sup>

David de Young came by, as planned, at 8:00 the next morning, and we packed our mountain of gear and acquisitions into the Monastery van. Along the way we picked up Margot Sangster who, having stayed at Wat Pah Nanachat (the home Monastery for the Western disciples of Ajahn Chah in Thailand) for some time and now being resident in the States, was eager to see us all and come to visit Abhayagiri.

After initial earnest conversations we all lapsed into deep silence and the road rolled away beneath our wheels. California is immensely green, the oaks are in lush leaf already and the spring grasses are thick upon the hills and verges. Golden-orange poppies peek out between the tall green stems and there is a dense Mediterranean richness in the air. Grey skies encircle the heavens but all around is green, green, green.

After reaching Abhayagiri, exchanging warm greetings and taking the meal in silence together, most of the afternoon passed by in chatting with the others and opening the mail that had arrived in the last six weeks.

It is a great joy to be back in the embrace of this deep valley once again. Our buildings are humble: just a small bungalow and the garage that we have converted into a meditation hall, plus a scattering of small huts and trailers here and there through the woods, but to get back here again feels like arriving at a grand and glorious place. This comes not just from the feeling of entering the heart of a place embodying the Triple Jewel, but more it is from simply being back with the family – my closest companions in the holy life.

The Monastery has been open for nearly a couple of years now. It's hard to believe that we have already grown used to the immense views spreading to the south, down the valley of the Russian River, to the shy families of deer and quail that tiptoe and scuttle through the undergrowth, to the ground-squirrel city in the bank beside the dirt road that climbs the hill from our main buildings to wind its way up into the forest, and to the gunning of pickup engines at all hours of the day and night that signal the movements of the numerous local growers tending their crops and arranging deliveries.

The passing of these two years has also brought about the completion of the novitiate period of our first monastic trainee – formerly Tom DeMaria, now Sāmanera Karunadhammo. He had taken his anagarika Precepts on Visākḥā Pūjā, the full moon day of May, 1996, the night before we loaded wagons in San Francisco and rolled up here, to open the Monastery on June 1<sup>st</sup>. After his initial year as a postulant (anagarika) he had then taken on the more refined training of the novice, or sāmanera, and as that drew to a close he had requested full ordination as a bhikkhu, a Buddhist monk.

Whilst I had been away on this long teaching tour, all of the preparations necessary for the ceremony had been continuing apace. Tan Karunadhammo had sewn his new robes, learned all the appropriate chanting and thoroughly acquainted himself with all the rules he would now be required to observe. Ajahn Pasanno, with whom I share the abbot's duties at Abhayagiri, had received permission from the Thai Sangha to perform ordinations and had also mastered his (even more copious) chanting for the ceremony. The Buddha once said that his dispensation could only be said to have truly arrived in a new land when a son of that country encountered the teaching and received full ordination as a monk from a Sangha of bhikkhus on his native soil. And even though before this date there certainly had been other ordinations in the USA, this was to be the very first of ours – so these were momentous days for our new Monastery.

Late in the afternoon we take some time to have our first full-scale run-through of the ordination ceremony up in the forest. The community has put up a beautifully made platform in amongst the spinney of thin oaks in the central clearing. We decided to hold the ceremony there in order to begin to get people's minds around that site as the future center of the Monastery's spiritual life. Eventually, on the far side of the clearing, overlooking the valley to the south, we hope to build our main meditation hall. Also we chose it just because it's a suitably divine spot for such a unique occasion: bounded by mossy trunks and roofed in oak leaf and sky – given enough prayers for fair weather, who could ask for better?

The evening passes with an informal sitting while news gets exchanged and the mail heap reduces. By the end of the day weariness is well and truly here, and the sight of the log walls of my kutī, and the bedding neatly prepared for my arrival, is a welcome one. Time to lay the rūpa down and let it rest.

## PART III

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### ABHAYAGIRI – SONOMA MOUNTAIN – GREEN GULCH – SPIRIT ROCK

#### MAY 8<sup>TH</sup>

THE MORNING IS TAKEN UP with the “mixed blessing” at the house of our next-door-neighbors Peter La Rivière and Mary Curran. Both of them having once been Catholic monastics (he for a few months, she for 20 years with 12 of them as novice mistress) and now close to Buddhist practice as well, they had asked us to do a house blessing for them in combination with the monks of Mount Tabor – the Ukrainian Uniate order of forest monks between whose property and ours Mary and Peter’s place is wedged, like the lettuce and tomatoes sliding out of a well-filled sandwich.

Ajahns Pasanno, Vajiro, Visuddhi, Ven. Jutindharo and I walked over and met Father Damian, Brother Elias, and Mary and Peter at their house. Peter was still somewhat pale and tender after his operation for lung cancer which had taken place only a week before. They were both in good spirits, however, and glad that the long-awaited blessing was finally going to take place. We began the proceedings down at Dhammadhara, their little shrine-room and meditation space, which had suffered somewhat from the winter storms.

Despite the slightly disheveled look of the place we all entered the spirit of the occasion immediately. Father Damian went first and spoke of the Jordan water that they use for such occasions – their Monastery has a small supply of water from the Jordan River itself and a few drops of this are placed in any water that is employed for blessings. It is thus seen as having the presence of the Christ infused in it and the sprinkling of it accordingly serves to bless the place with that same immanence. It was remarkable how similar the ceremony was to our own – the only difference seeming to be the size of the sprinkler and the quantity of water in the bowl, even the spiritual/mythical symbols were virtually identical.

After the initial short blessing at Dhammadhara we went to the main house and conducted a full-bells-and-whistles ceremony – particularly empowered by the presence of Peter’s cancer and our goodwill and hopes for his speedy recovery. We gave it our full force and, apart from the Russian incense failing on Father Damian (he blamed it on a suspected Ukrainian nationalist plot) the whole affair went perfectly. Peter and Mary rounded off the morning for us with tea and pastries, not leaving much room for the meal-offering back at the Monastery – a small price to pay for the chance to wish well and to pour our friendship into a form that will linger in all our memories with a sweet glow.

The afternoon passed with my hacking through the thickets of e-mail and another rehearsal for the ordination up at the clearing. All went very well.

Richard Smith from Detroit, Faye Dirksen from Oklahoma, Rachel Ropp and her father from New York and LA respectively, and others have already started to arrive, along with numerous cards, parcels, e-mail and cyber-gladioli for

Tan Karunadhammo – he is nervous but shouldering it all well. His mother had set her heart on coming but had been turned back by recalcitrant airplanes and unruly weather. His brother and sister have made it, however, and will be an important element in the blessing of his Going Forth.

It is deeply heartening, amidst the still slightly weary afterglow of all these travels, to be abiding in such an atmosphere of wholesomeness and goodwill. All around, everywhere you turn, are more signs of human goodness and the capacity to bless. Human life can be so tragic and fraught but it can also be a treasure of immeasurable worth.

## MAY 9<sup>TH</sup>

The day is bright, with soft cumulus drifting through the clear blue heavens. All around the dripping greens of spring glow cheerfully: the gods are smiling.

Today is the day for final preparations and last details for the Visākḥā Pūja celebration to be held this evening and for the ordination the next day. Ajahn Pasanno and the others have thought all this through very well and little remains unattended. We have the breakfast meeting in the Dhamma Hall, as there are about 12 guests plus nine monastics, and pass out the final tidying and decorating tasks. I beg leave to spend the morning in my kuṭī preparing the materials for the study session with the Upasikas this afternoon.

The Upasika Training is a program that was begun in England a few years ago. The principal idea behind it is two-fold: firstly, to provide more direct instruction for the lay community on the Sutta teachings and, secondly, to help cultivate a greater support for people's commitment to the Theravāda tradition and practice. We gather once every couple of months and, along with renewing the commitment to the Five Precepts, we explore a small section of the Teachings in a through way.

At present we are doing a series on Right Speech, Right Action and Right Livelihood and got as far as part one of Right Speech during the last Upasika session – it's a big subject! Quite a few more folks arrive by the mealtime: Cindy Hoffman and Sunshine Taylor from the coast, Kondañña, Walt Kassoway and several others from the Bay Area. By the time the session began at 1:00 p.m. the hall was filled with maybe 30 people, and Sunshine officially undertook the Upasika Precepts.

It took us the full afternoon to cover harsh speech, slander, and gossip and idle chatter, the latter in the eyes of Bhikkhu Bodhi being also inclusive of the flood of input from the mass media and the information technology world. This is a wise and skillful perspective since information has become an assumed and absolute good, along the lines of fun, sex and material progress, in the view of Western society.

As has become customary the monastics departed from the session at 4:00 p.m. to leave the Upasikas to their own discussions. It has been very heartening to see the unfolding and growth of this group, and the lay community generally around us, particularly in the way that they have come to learn from and to support each

other. This is just the kind of networking and active application of the Teachings that we had hoped to engender as we started this program up.

The tide of greetings and smiles swells as we reach the evening and the time for the Visākhā Pūjā observance – it's the day before the full moon but, since so many are already gathered here we decided to hold it on this night. Ajahn Pasanno gave a talk outlining the principles of the festival: the birth of the Bodhisattva, the enlightenment and the *Parinibbāna* – the final passing away – of the Buddha. There were 48 of us in the line of light circumambulating the Dhamma Hall and, for the first time, we had to stretch the procession out across the car park.

After a breezy day the night air had grown still; candles glowed peacefully in our hands, illuminating the flowers and fragrant incense that we held in honor of our great guide and teacher – the Buddha. Each lap of the shrine is dedicated to the recollection of one of the Three Jewels, with the offerings being finally placed in censers at the foot of the stairway up to the Buddha on the hill. Cool and clear, our freshly shaven heads painted silver with the light, the beauty and fragrance of devotion to the Path and to the Beyond to which it leads.

The night was completed by the taped recital of the first two books of *Touching the Earth*, an epic length poem by Grevel Lindop, recounting the life of the Buddha, in that now oh-so-rare form iambic pentameter, complete with rhyming couplets. It is a stately and wondrous piece of writing, all the more precious insofar as it was composed by a meditator and so has a reflective, contemplative edge that other similar pieces, despite manifold other virtues, have lacked (e.g. *The Light of Asia* by Sir Edwin Arnold).

Always there have been some who explored  
The octaves of the universe, and poured  
The mind's energies into contemplation,  
Refinement of the heart, bright penetration  
Of the one to the One; hunting in the mazes  
Of world and mind for the well-hidden places  
Where peace is found, to touch or pass through the circle  
Of living light that binds in the conceivable.  
One such was Asita. How he had come  
To the bare rocky cleft that was his home  
Nobody knows; but as a hermit there,  
A bright-eyed wrinkled sage with matted hair,  
He lived, poor as a bushman, owning a thin  
Cotton robe, a foodbowl, antelope-skin  
Rug for a seat, a wooden staff, no more.  
Fed by the villagers downhill, who were in awe  
Of his piercing gaze and gift of prophecy  
(And begged at times the herbal lore which he  
Dispensed only at moments of real need),  
He lived a life from which both fear and greed

Seemed long since fallen away. In the rock's shade  
Or under a liquid blaze of stars he made  
An art of stilling the breath, distilling the thin  
Mountain air to a radiant essence within  
The gaunt, scarred body, mind poised like a hawk  
Riding clear airs of thought, hearing gods talk  
Sometimes, or merging with silence.

(I ii)



The deep-eyed sages say  
That fear of death is what drives men away  
In solitude to seek the deathless. Well—  
Why mention death? Let it be death to tell  
The Prince of death, or sickness, or old age,  
Things that infect the gifted mind with rage  
To escape what's natural. Let him live in bliss;  
Let him have palaces that outshine this  
As a pearl does a pebble! Wrap him round  
With music, beauty, gardens! Let no sound  
Come there but laughter, nightingales, the flute—  
Let young and lovely voices drown the brute  
Mutter of suffering from the world beyond.  
Later he'll listen. First, let him grow fond  
Of living in the heaven of great kings  
While still a boy. Will he renounce such things?  
Never.  
Suddodana breathes more easily. Plans  
For halls, lakes, gardens, multiply. He scans  
The pastel fields of vision: world within world,  
Small realms of lovely detail are unfurled,  
Jewels inside jewels. Plunged in their radiant deeps,  
Dreaming of beautiful prisons, the King sleeps.

(II iii)

The poet envisions that, when complete, the work will be made up of eight sets of four books; he is now on Book Three (only 29 and a bit to go...). As things fell out, the last line "dreaming of beautiful prisons, the King sleeps," was sounded on the stroke of midnight, so we closed the proceedings there and decided to reassemble for morning chores at 6:30 a.m. on Sunday.

## MAY 10<sup>TH</sup> – VISĀKHĀ PŪJĀ

Once again the gods were kind and the day dawned to clear blue skies and lively birdsong.

The morning hours were filled with the bustle of the tidying up of the Visākhā Pūjā things, arranging more flowers and offerings that arrived with the incoming visitors, making notices, and the spirited bonhomie of a widespread religious community gathering for a blessed and unique occasion. It was a great joy to see so many old friends and acquaintances, plus a few new faces, meeting and greeting and delighting in each other's company, all drawn together to celebrate one man's efforts to let go of everything.

As Joseph Campbell pointed out, in *Oriental Mythology*, it's the greatest of ironies that it is when the Buddha finally breaks back into the void, that the world bursts into bloom and *mandarava* blossoms rain down from the sky. When he gives the first discourse and Kondañña sees the Path, all the heavens ring with applause, and at the final passing away – “going beyond the sphere of knowledge of gods and humans” – the earth quakes in respect and the *sāla* trees burst forth in blossom out of season, heavenly music fills the air. Why do the devas, who delight in beautiful things, celebrate when the heart aspires to transcendence of the world? Because the good heart knows that the consummation of life lies in the complete abandonment of attachment to, and identification with it. The most beautiful thing in all the Universe is the heart utterly freed of the sense of time, identity and location – and the devas love the beautiful.

Glen McKay arrived to take pictures (one of n + 1 cameras here today) and, by 12:45, most of the folks were processing up the hill for the ceremony. I waited at the house for Rev. Heng Sure, one of Master Hua's senior monastic disciples; he was fashionably late but eventually arrived at 1:20, providing just enough time for everyone to sit a while and quieten down.

The ordination platform had been set up by Ven. Kataññuto with exquisite taste, including the large batik, of Sujātā offering milk rice to the Bodhisattva, behind the shrine. With walls of moss-clad oaks and a roof of sky we carried out our *Sangha-kamma* with great precision, it got a little chilly as the sky clouded over for a while, but the assembly was more than warmed by the power of the event taking place before their eyes: One man making his commitment to go forth and realize Nibbāna and his acceptance into the community of those who have similarly committed themselves. “*Ehi bhikkhu!* – lead the holy life for the complete cessation of dukkha.” Ajahn Pasanno justly got a round of applause for his *anusāsana*, the long list of instructions recited solo by the Preceptor at the close of the ceremony.

The day was far from done at the last “Sādhu!” – numerous were the well-wishings and the gifts to the new bhikkhu and we all filtered down the hill, glowing gently from the goodness of the day and warmed by the sun-drenched banks of the hillside. Long hours of tea and talk, then a Sanghapala Board meeting (quite brief) and, to finish the day, the recitation of the *Pātimokkha* (the monastic Rule). It is an immovable fixture of the calendar, to be done every New and Full Moon, but thankfully Ajahn Vajiro was fully prepared (as it is a 45 minute long recital of about

13,000 Pāli words) and, although we had been gladdened by the glories of the day, both knees and brain cells were starting to tire profoundly by this time. A Great Day – good in the beginning, good in the middle, and good in the end.

*Evam.*

## **MAY 11<sup>TH</sup>**

Day One of Tan Karunadhammo's bhikkhu life and what happens? We get an anxious call from the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas and are informed that Ven. Dhammavāra – a 109-year-old Cambodian monk, whom we had known as a good friend for years and who was now resident there – has fallen ill and is being whisked off to hospital. So Ajahn Pasanno, Tan Karunadhammo, Don and I hop in the car and spend the day in the waiting room at the Adventist Hospital in Ukiah – a fitting recollection on old age, sickness and death – we also got a full blast of Jenny Jones and Oprah Winfrey from the inescapable TV in the waiting room, so there were plentiful reflections on greed, hatred and delusion as well.

Bhante had suffered another minor stroke – there had been several over recent months – and additionally, in an effort to alleviate his itching skin problems, his attendant had covered him with tumeric – a well known anti-irritant in SE Asia. On seeing the vibrant, sickly yellow, the abbot of the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas had called an ambulance and had had him whisked off to the emergency room. Fortunately the tumeric was cured with a face cloth but the stroke was going to take more extensive treatment. All forces were mobilized – including Dr. Peter la Rivière, who had been treating Bhante already, and the contingent from Bhante's temple in Stockton – about 12 Cambodian monks and lay people, who were keen to take him back there at once.

Emotions and opinions of all sorts abounded; we tried to be a calming force in the proceedings. All seemed to be stabilized, Bhante's condition as well as the array of intense feelings, by the end of the afternoon and so, at around 6:00 p.m. we headed back to Abhayagiri.

As Ajahn Pasanno was due to go to Canada the next morning, he, Ajahn Vajiro and I sat down together to talk over a few Sangha matters that could not be put off. This took us to 10:00 p.m. or so, then Ajahn Visuddhi had a final item he wanted to bring up... another looooo o o ng day but, as there's nothing else to do, why complain? A bhikkhu's life is full and full of surprises.

## **MAY 12<sup>TH</sup>**

We took leave and asked forgiveness of Ajahn Pasanno at 5:30 and I passed the morning with the heap of phone calls to be made and e-mails to be answered. Slowly the list reduces.

Early afternoon we went off, Ajahn Vajiro, Sāmanera Ñānamuni, Don and I, to visit Bhante in the hospital. As we walked in the door he woke up; Peter was just saying to him, "The monks will soon be here to do some chanting for you, Bhante." Right on cue we placed palms together and recited a number of the *parittas*. He

was attentive, had his eyes open most of the way through and, after a pause for half an hour or so, we carried on with some more. At the sound of “*Namo me sabbe buddhānam...*” – *The Twenty-eight Buddhas*, the ultimate protective chant – his eyes flashed open like a pair of headlights and a smile came over his visage.

Plainly trying to keep in touch with the sense world, such familiar recitations draw the heart to the surface and fill it with a joyful purpose. His condition seemed to be stable and so we left after an hour or so – the doctors will keep him in for a few more days and the great hope is to persuade the Stockton crowd to let him return to the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas, where he wants to be. We shall see what happens.

Back at Abhayagiri the crowds have started to disperse – we could all fit in the house for 5:30 tea again – we chanted more parittas for Bhante at the evening pūjā and dedicated our good wishes for his welfare. All day it has been raining, as it did on Monday – the dragons certainly looked after us well and protected our ceremony from being washed out – *anumodanā!*

### **MAY 13<sup>TH</sup>**

Simple days – coming to the morning chanting, taking care of correspondence, eating the meal together in the house, off to visit Bhante Dhammavāra in the afternoon.

He is greatly improved. Arriving, we chant parittas, sit and talk for a while. (He is only able to speak a word or two, but no matter). Ven. Sarin, his attendant, provides us with cold drinks, we chant some more and depart; already it's a peaceful and pleasant routine. Peter La Rivière, with his daughter Marguerite and her husband John, come by for tea, plus Peter and Laurel Mayland and Moria Lawlor. Much of the conversation gets taken up with discussing Bhante's condition, but we also manage to roam through Alaska and the subject of lost and wounded bird life.

### **MAY 14<sup>TH</sup>**

The rhythm repeats itself the next day, although Paul and Lili Breiter come by to offer the meal. She had been troubled recently by violent dreams and, as they had recently moved into a new apartment, they asked us to come around and do some blessing/exorcising chants for them. Although she's Chinese and he's a New Yorker they follow a largely Tibetan practice. Paul had studied with many lamas, mostly out of the Nyingma lineage, since the time he spent with Ajahn Chah as a monk (the famous Varapañño) in the mid-'70s. Since we had arrived in California, however, he and Lili had been drawing closer to this tradition again and had now moved to Ukiah to be near the Monastery.

The group of us five monks, and Anagarika Michael and Anita, piled into the van and emerged to enter the almost completely unfurnished living room of their place. We had neglected to bring any of our accoutrements – blessing string, beeswax candle, asperger for the lustral waters, etc., etc. but it didn't seem to matter – it was a somewhat minimalist affair all-round. Paul didn't even have a

match to light the incense or any cotton thread all – “Cotton buds any use?” – still we managed fine, using a Tibetan blessing cord and a small bowl of water for the sprinkling of the rooms. What with all the parittas we have done for Bhante Dhammavāra recently, and with all the extra voices, we managed to raise a good tower of sound – including *The Twenty-eight Buddhas* again, the ultimate protection against demonic attack.

Phase Two of the afternoon was a visit to the great trees of Montgomery Woods – a small grove of ancient redwoods, a few miles west of Ukiah along Orr Springs Road. Take a left at the north end of town – just at the “Get US out of the UN – *no* new world order” billboard, and the local gun shop – then wind your way up into the vast crumple of green hills filling the area between Ukiah and the Pacific Ocean.

The day was bright and the spring sun flashed from the heads of poppies, lupins and clusters of other wild flowers – brave purples and glowing yellows that the naming mind has no handle on – everywhere there is the dense flush of green richness: in the gullies, up the banks, over the meadows, wrapping the hills. The landscape sings as it falls away from our road on either side – views to Snow Mountain in the northeast and south into the twisting valleys of the Coastal Range. Craggy outcrops and oak meadows, fir-bristled hills huddle and sprawl around each other in apparent disarray, like a heap of malachite drunks piled up after a serious night – rain-besotted, shamelessly resplendent with the lavish inheritances of Nature – they grin in their sleep as their emerald beards pour forth with gleeful abandon.

Patches of cloud speck the sky and form racing shadows on the land below us. We wind through fields and trees until we finally descend to the river. Once at the woods we meet up with David Dawson, Chris Bradley (a young Canadian staying at Abhayagiri) and Tan Ñānamuni who had all gone ahead in the car. We slowly wend our way through the groves of vast and silent beings, seasoned by centuries of change and the restfulness of each other’s company. Ajahn Vajiro, Tan Jutindharo and Tan Kataññuto have never been in such a place before – like all first-time visitors they are awestruck by the deep surreal quietude of the place. A rich silence that is quite unlike anything else in the world – as if the trees were talking, in an inaudible register, at one word per hour, discussing matters other than the nature of these little bipedal bugs scurrying around beneath them.

Huge logs are left to lie where they have fallen, to transmute and rot and support the next generations of forest life – it’s another of those strange ironies that a fallen redwood tree actually supports more life than a live one – we also hear it told that the fabric of the trees, all that carbon-based matter, is woven from the carbon dioxide of the air. So these trees are in some way sky incarnate, the gods of the empyrean descended into form only, on their destruction by fire and decay, to return to that element again. Even if the science is not 100% accurate, it’s certainly somewhat true, and gives a very different perspective of what we are all gazing up to here.

It's late by the time we get to the hospital but we follow our routine as usual. Bhante is decidedly perky and is engaged with us the whole time – true that, inspired by Ven. Katanñuto's darker features (he is El Salvadorean), Bhante talks in Thai for a while – but he soon comes around and we converse in English eventually. His recovery is astonishing and Dr. Peter said that, quite honestly, both he and Dr. Rogers were flummoxed as to what the ailment actually had been. It did not follow any known pathology.

Now that he's recovering, the question of where he should go becomes more acute. Thankfully most of the auspices are directing him back to the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas, at least for a while, rather than the long ride back to Stockton. When I put the question to him straight: "Bhante, do you wish to return to Stockton, as many of the Khmer community would like you to do? Or would you like to go back to the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas, at least for a while?"

"I would like to follow the Middle Way..."

The perfect answer.



By the time we return to the Monastery it's 7:00 p.m. so there is a late pūjā – practicing the funeral chants for Ayya Khema's ceremony next Sunday.

She was a well-known, much loved and respected Buddhist nun, who had died recently from cancer. Originally German by birth, she had become a devoted student of the (then) monk Phra Khantipālo, and had been instrumental in helping him to found the forest Monastery Wat Buddha Dhamma, in a remote area a few hours drive from Sydney, Australia.

Once the Monastery had been established she took the Eight Precept ordination herself and then swiftly moved into the role of teaching and writing Dhamma books. She was a pioneer in the movement to reinstitute the full ordination for women in the Theravāda tradition (it had died out a thousand years ago in Sri Lanka) and she received the full bhikkhunī Precepts herself through the Chinese lineage. In fact it is not completely accurate to refer to that line as Chinese since the group of nuns that brought the full ordination to China originated at a Theravādan Monastery in Sri Lanka, at a branch of the great Abhayagiri Monastery, mentioned earlier, that was for their women monastics.

Even though Ayya Khema had been based for a number of years at her Monastery in the Black Forest, in Germany she had had numerous students in the US and a number of them were now keen to hold a memorial ceremony for her. As she had taught regularly at Green Gulch Zen Center when in the area, they had kindly offered the premises for her remembrance event.

I stay up to hear from Owen, Bhante's grandson, what has been decided with regards to his travel plans but no call comes.

**MAY 15<sup>TH</sup>**

As usual after breakfast we sort out who's doing what for the day – Peter La Rivière called early and confirmed that they wanted to release Bhante from the hospital so we organized it for Chris Bradley (a nurse in training) to go along to stay there and help out. I was due to take part in a Harm Reduction conference in Ukiah, organized by the Mendocino County AIDS Volunteer Network (MCAVN) and related groups, to prepare the ground for beginning needle-exchange in this area, so Ajahns Vajiro and Visuddhi offered to go along and help out with Bhante's move. They dropped me off at 8:40 at the Episcopal Church on Orchard Street and headed off to the hospital.

The hall was packed for the conference – at least 100 people – and all had been very well-prepared for the event. There were several sets of speakers through the day, ranging from Dr. Neil Flynn, of a medical and needle-exchange group in Sacramento (where they reckon they have a population of 14,000 intravenous drug users who inject every day: half heroin, half methamphetamine) to a drug alternative group in Santa Rosa, a housing group in Marin and a needle-exchange group in San Mateo County. Despite the fact that, according to the Surgeon General: “The evidence on needle exchange has gone beyond critical mass – it is proven beyond any doubt to improve health, slow the spread of HIV and hepatitis etc., and to save lives – however, we cannot allow it.”

Perhaps they think “users are bad people – they deserve to suffer for it” as they did with AIDS and the gay population (see Randy Schilts' *And the Band Played On*); perhaps these folks, mostly poor and African American or Hispanic (60% in Sacramento are Black women) are just getting caught in the cogs of the War on Drugs – the replacement enemy after the Soviet Union collapsed – crushed where the rubber meets the road. But, for whatever reason, it was clear, firstly, that here we had a seriously disenfranchised section of the community that were being driven to early, painful deaths by the social/political/medical systems that criminalized their drugs of choice. And, secondly, that this hall full of mostly middle-class white folk, whose compassion and will had been aroused, were not about to let them go down the tubes to hell without putting up a fight.

I suppose it is common knowledge that Buddhists are not afraid of paradoxes – even making use of them as a spiritual tool in the unanswerable questions of *koan* meditation – and this seemed to be cause of the conference organizers having invited me to speak on moral contradiction. The questions of healing or enabling? Compassion or co-dependence? were thick in the air. To some it seemed impossible that there could be any genuine virtue in giving fresh needles to intravenous drug users: “Surely this *must* be wrong!?” Like giving the keys of a Ferrari to an erratic sixteen-year-old.

The organizers had also, very wisely, structured it so that the spiritual perspective was the conclusion to the day. After all the details of sociopathology and various agency interdynamics, it was helpful to take a step back and view the picture from both a more personal and more universal perspective, i.e. “how do I deal with my doubts?” and “what is the mind-set of the nation?”

It seemed most helpful to point out the worship of moral certainty in this country and the constant intrusion of reality into that. I told the story of how I had once met Air Chief Marshall Constantine, in an Air Force hospital in England.

As young but high-ranking officer in Bomber Command, he had been responsible for organizing the raid on Dresden, in the spring of 1945, which burned 130,000 civilians alive in an undefended city.

Prior to the bombing and the subsequent fire storm, it had been a city that so rang with all the charm and elegance of Old Europe that the young American POW Kurt Vonnegut, when seeing it for the first time as he spilled out of a cattle-car with other captive US soldiers after the Battle of the Bulge, was so struck, he murmured: "We have arrived in Oz."

Here, in Air Chief Marshall Constantine, was a noble and good man, not a cold-hearted, warmongering demon, who had simply been caught in the karmic tangle of his own pronounced abilities as a leader and in the fight against the Nazi war machine. He told me that he had joined the RAF in the '30s simply as the easiest way for a lad from a poor family to get to see the world. Real war had been so far off the horizon when he joined up that, when asking his Squadron Leader: "Sir, we're called a fighter squadron, well, it might seem foolish to ask but, who's the enemy?" "Silly boy," the officer retorted, "the French, of course." There not having been a scrap with them for a few decades, there was bound to be one soon.

As Germany had risen to power, and the war had erupted in 1939, Constantine's leadership skills caused him to be promoted with great rapidity. He was an Air Vice Marshall before he was 35. In the flow of events, he just did as he was asked and was glad to – he was just a young man doing everything he could to defend his home and country. It didn't need a second thought.

He organized or flew more than 150 bombing raids over Germany, including the first consisting of more than 1000 planes. He got his orders and led his men to the best of his ability – ergo Dresden. The night before that fateful raid he had simply received a telegram from No. 10 Downing Street, saying:

DRESDEN Stop MAXIMUM IMPACT Stop

So it goes

hi ho...

People were attentive enough anyway but this story certainly caught their hearts. Especially its ending, which was that, after the war was over, ACM Constantine spent two years visiting every city he had bombed. At the conclusion of this he vowed that: "This must *never* happen again," and had dedicated his life to peacekeeping in NATO since then. He also felt somewhat vindicated by this effort since, as he pointed out, because of it, "Western Europe has had over forty years of freedom from war – that's a longer period of peace here since the end of the last ice age."

The main point of the talk was to show that the Unknown is not the enemy that we have to drive away with beliefs, opinions and explanations but, when embraced, becomes our greatest friend. It is the very space that allows intuition to arise: the silence of God, the answer of the Buddha. Was ACM Constantine right

or wrong in what he did? How can the heart hold that dilemma? Was he a good man or a bad man?

In welcoming such paradoxes into the heart we find that there is no need to take fixed rational positions with regard to them. In fact the act of welcoming is the agent via which a way forward opens up. Contradiction is to be embraced, not wiped out through opinion or belief or data. For, ironically, it's through embracing them that all paradoxes and contradictions are resolved.

This means that we don't necessarily have to come to some logically unassailable conclusion about the rights and wrongs of needle-exchange, or get tangled in a briar patch of conflicting moral certainties. We just need the presence of mind to restrain our reactivities, to open the heart to those in need and to respond as the heart guides us moment by moment. The theories and idealisms can happily be left to gather dust somewhere in the store shed.

The talk seemed to be very well-received and Geraldine Rose, our friendly lawyer, was glowing brightly at the end – she even forgave my not-so-subtle digs at the Catholic Church and the use of the lawyers as symbolic of the voices of the doubting mind.

Vince and Sunshine Taylor, and Anagarika Michael arrived late in the afternoon and, once all the good-byes were done, we headed south to Sonoma Mountain Zen Center. We had been invited to give their regular Saturday morning talk and so we traveled there the night before to meet people and settle in a little. The drive was in bright sun, after our numerous El Niño year showers and the roads were clear and open.



East of Santa Rosa, a large town 60 miles north of San Francisco, there is a long succession of rolling hills and soft fertile valleys. This is wine and horse country – broad meadows, still green from the spring rains, thick trees and plush houses of the haves. Vineyards patch the landscape and the steeper hillsides are dark with dense oak forests.

We climb and climb to the top of Sonoma Mountain and emerge from the car to be greeted by Margaret – a long-term resident student. Kwong Roshi has been living here since 1973 but most of the others are newcomers. He is a Dharma heir of Suzuki Roshi and set up Sonoma Mountain Zen Center after his teacher passed away. We had met once before, in Dharamsala at the first conference of Western Buddhist teachers with His Holiness the Dalai Lama. We had never communicated very much but, since we were such close neighbors, relatively speaking, it had been my intention to visit here many times; it was only with Vince having taken the initiative that this occasion had finally come about.

Although this center and the collective of San Francisco Zen Center/Tassajara/Green Gulch share a common spiritual ancestor in the person of Suzuki Roshi, Sonoma Mountain has maintained an independence from the others since its inception. It is not at all uncommon for the Dharma heirs of a single teacher to

go their own ways and this was exactly the situation here. Furthermore, whilst San Francisco Zen Center and its satellites had been a centerpiece of Buddhism in the Bay Area since the late '60s – forming into a large and dynamic set of interrelated communities and displaying a mixture of traditional and innovative practices that opened the door for thousands of the curious and spiritually hungry – this little group had been quietly doing its own thing, in the bucolic embrace of rural Sonoma, largely unbeknownst to the Bay Area Buddhist community. It was good to get to know them at last.

## MAY 16<sup>TH</sup>

In the evening and early morning it is cold up on the mountain – cold and very clear. To the east the land falls away and, through the screen of sturdy oaks, one can see the hazy valleys below us, tinged blue and gold in the early light. Soft hills and green curves, a fertile aura fills the air. This too looks like the paradise of Oz – a fairyland held in a precious balance.

The zendo is an old barn exquisitely converted to be the main shrine of the center. A vast Kuan Yin image, of a single piece of wood, holds the space and is the spiritual pillar of the hall, two other foot-thick wooden ones support the roof. Roosters call during the morning sitting – decorating the backcloth of deep silence with their russet and gold embroideries. We flow through an *oriyoki* breakfast (my first) with Kwong Roshi, on my right, kindly showing each move to me. The place is alive with sincerity and the light of Dharma practice. The sun glows through the leaves, all is well.

The hall was full for the talk, including one or two familiar faces. I had no special plan for the subject matter and, with some surprise, found myself doing a kind of apologia for Theravāda Buddhism – talking of the Four Noble Truths, the Bodhisattva Vows and the Heart Sutra, along with the Mañjushri/male, Avalokiteshvara/female aspects of the practice, and the *Tath-āgata/Tathā-gata*, Thus Come/Thus Gone, immanent/transcendent double entendre. As if all this were not enough I also combined it with the symbolism of the earth-touching *mudra* and the role of Maer Toranee, the Earth Mother, in the story of the Buddha's enlightenment – phew.

It was very well-received nonetheless and, after the communal meal, which was in informal mode, we packed up the car and headed out. Kwong Roshi, his wife Shinko, Dave Hazelwood and about a dozen of their students crowded into the parking lot to see us off. The day was bright and clear again as we rolled northwards to Redwood Valley.

No sooner had we got back and I had sorted through the mail than it was time for tea and then the evening session. It was a small turnout for a Saturday, when a Dhamma talk is always given after the 7:30 evening *pūjā*, but I was quite relieved – after all the grand goings on of the weekend before, it was good to be with just the home team. The Dhamma talk was on forest life, being with Nature and change and the reasons why: we contemplate death to know the Deathless; we contemplate suffering to recognize there is actually no suffering; we contemplate change

to know that no *thing* ever changes... "In this moment there is nothing which comes to be..." as it says in an ancient Zen text.

## MAY 17<sup>TH</sup>

Sunday afternoon we loaded up the van and took ourselves down to Green Gulch Farm Zen Center to participate in Ayya Khema's memorial ceremony. This had been one of the last venues at which she had taught in the USA, before her death from cancer earlier in the year. As she had been one of the great pioneer figures in the Western Theravāda monastic scene, I felt strongly that we should give her a good send-off. It seemed that she had made some strong connections with the Sangha at Green Gulch for they were also very keen to give her full honors for her farewell.

We met beforehand with Norman Fischer (the abbot), Sabine Volchek and Leigh Brasington (her senior students here) to finalize the details of the ceremony. Ajahn Vajiro and Ven. Kataññuto were already there, along with Don Sperry, having come down from Abhayagiri a day or so early to take the opportunity to make a little tour of the city.

The Zen community framed the ceremony with a procession of the Sangha into the hall, led by Norman, the ponderous thump of the pewter staff, and his opening statement of appreciation and farewell. They also closed it with a similar verse of dedication and sharing of blessings and a solemn procession out of the hall once again. In between these parentheses, in the grand, dark-brown space of their zendo and to the accompaniment of nesting swallows, we gave the Refuges and Precepts and then spoke in turn of our appreciation and recollections of her life.

She had touched many hearts over the years: there were tales of living with her on the Nuns' Island in Sri Lanka, of her visits to teach in the USA, of her supreme clarity in expounding the Dhamma and of her fondness for ice cream and spy novels. She had lived her life to the full, had chosen a courageous and noble path, had said and done all she needed to, and – at Buddha-haus in Bavaria, her own forest Monastery – had breathed her last with no regrets on a fine, bright morning.

After the ceremony we drank tea and schmoozed on the lawn. Several familiar folks were there from the Zen Center community: Meg and Jeremy Levy had come up from Tassajara and we met the newly ordained Eva and Rick. I invited Norman and the others up to Abhayagiri for the forthcoming Ten Precept ordination ceremony of their friend and former Zen Center resident Michael Dietzel – he had declined the opportunity to come on this visit to Green Gulch as he had been busy sewing his robes.

The rest of the Abhayagiri team having wandered down through the gardens to the ocean, I went with Norman and the students of Ayya Khema to see a video of an interview which had been done with her in 1994 on the subject of death. It was a telling and poignant discourse on the fragility and unsatisfactoriness of the body, and the ease with which one who has trained themselves faces the prospect of death: she was clear, cheerful and disarmingly un sentimental about the whole

affair – it should be required viewing for all who aspire to follow the Path to its end.

## MAY 18<sup>TH</sup>

The next few days were built around continued visits to Bhante Dhammavāra and his move back to the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas; enjoyment of the warm, bright weather and the flood of spring flowers; and the interviews I had with *Tricycle* editor Mary Talbot on Monday and with Kamala Tiyavanich, author of *Forest Recollections* on Tuesday.

Mary came with New York City sun tan, husband and pretty new baby in tow. After the meal we went for a hike through the forest (baby came too) and she was entranced by the woods, the *kuṭis* and the sublime landscape spread around us. There's a feeling of something between pride and *muditā* as one shows new visitors all the different aspects of the land and the way we live – a mother's guileless flush as she displays her baby to the world.

They (*Tricycle*) were doing a feature on forest monasticism and its importance in Buddhist practice, so we were up on the list of places to be seen. The forest was in full glory – as if it knew it was on show that day – the air just stirred enough to cool our brows and the land around us was thick with fresh grasses and spring flowers – we moved as if half-dreaming through the patches of sunlight and shadow, talking all the while of different dimensions of our lifestyle and the history of our community. She regretted that she had not even a note pad on her as we walked but it was probably for the best – this way she could at least be more in touch with the living framework of our lives.

As it turned out, when we got back to the house, we filled a couple of cassette tapes with dialogue on all the various issues she had touched. It will be interesting to see how it all shakes down in print.

It was the half-moon night and I realized how long it had been since that last all-night sitting I had done – probably somewhere in the middle of March. It was good to be holding the torch of vigilance once again.

## MAY 19<sup>TH</sup>

Tuesday was the interview with Kamala and the subject of forest monastic life in recent Thai history. She had written her book *Forest Recollections* on the subject of Ajahn Mun and his disciples and, more uniquely, on the effects of the religious reforms of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century in Thailand. She described how they had served to wipe out numerous local traditions and styles of practice, mostly to the detriment of the people. It was her contention that, in their efforts to centralize and purify the religion, the reformers had unwittingly sterilized the Buddha-Dhamma and lost its essence. This was however, fortuitously and ironically, an effect which also catalyzed the arising of Ajahn Mun's forest lineage.

The book had so impressed Jack Kornfield that he had asked her if she would be prepared to be interviewed by *Inquiring Mind*, the journal of his Vipassanā med-

itation community, to put some of the information about the richness and variety of Buddhist practices, and her reflections on them, out into the public arena.

It was a three-way interview and was done over the phone. Both Jack and I had a few questions that we had conjured up on reading her book and, through one means or another, contrived to get her response to all of them. It was a slightly strange experience (I had never interviewed anyone before) but, once the medium of contact had become somewhat normal, our conversation flowed easily along. Again, it will be interesting to see what comes out in print once it's all been edited down.

The afternoon took us to the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas and a meeting with Rev. Heng Sure, Peter la Rivière and Heng Hsien at Bhante's residence. Various stresses and strains had been manifesting around his treatment, the relationship of the carers, where he should stay, etc. etc. so this was an occasion to cool everything down and all get on the same page.

A few other disciples of his, including Chrissy from Virginia, had shown up by now and so there were even more irons in the fire, or storms in the teacup than before. Bhante was in fine form however and so, despite the increasing complexities of his ailments and treatment, one felt all was actually supremely simple – which of course it was.

Weary by the end of the day – the last hours march easily by – climbing the hill to my log cabin home in the sky

Sweet closure to some rich rich days.

## **MAY 20<sup>TH</sup>**

Quiet day of sun and rain – catching up on the correspondence and phone calls and starting to see the community one by one: Ajahn Visuddhi and Don. We practice the chanting for Anita's upcoming Eight Precept ceremony. How beautiful to be in the simple rhythm of Monastery life.

## **MAY 21<sup>ST</sup>**

The morning is bright and warm – Ajahn Vajiro and I take a walk up Tomki Road to the place where the blacktop runs out and Cave Creek crosses the road.

Glorious day: we climb the hill and chatter back and forth, exchanging whatever news and impressions have been left unsaid so far. All around us the spring flowers are in full flush – wild peas sprout thick and crimson purple; California poppies wag their heads in little conferences of egg-yellow orange; little stars and spires of royal blue and scarlet, clouds of daisy sprays form in patches and clusters along the banks; at the crest – as if it were some special alpine region – a few pink gentian types sit low to the ground, modest for all their rarity and delicate beauty.

We walk in a realm of heavenly grace. Passers-by wave in warm greeting. Ed Mirabito, our neighbor to the east, stops and introduces his brother. We wind through the gulches and shoulders as the road climbs upward until we rest at the creek's edge – too broad to cross without wetting our feet. Sunlight sparkles and

flashes on the running stream – “I am going...” – warms the early morning rocks and smooth shores of the creek-side. We crouch by the water, sharing each other’s company and imbibing the celestial ichor of the spring. Does life get any better than this?

The road winds on ahead of us, weaving its way through the spread of crumpled hills until it reaches Willits; stray lanes branch here and there, roaming to remote canyons yet this is the old stagecoach road that ran from San Francisco to Eureka – yes, this was the Highway 101 of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century – and it lumbers along through nine more creek beds, like some curmudgeonly old-timer from the hills, unbothered by hardship after so many years of rough treatment weathering the seasons. The road reels on ahead, but we leave it to its stillness – for the road actually goes nowhere, it’s only us humans that do the to-ing and fro-ing, the road is perfectly still: it goes “I am, now, here...”

Come the evening I decide to stay up and write the piece for the newsletter on the ordination ceremony – first keystroke at 9:45, shut down at 3:30 am, still not done but the beast is three-quarters born. I breathe out.

## MAY 22<sup>ND</sup>

Ajahn Vajiro takes his leave after the morning pūjā and is taken off to San Francisco by David De Young. After breakfast at Paul and Lili Breiter’s (incidentally they are out here almost every evening for the pūjā and meditation) we gear up for the installation of the four 5000-gallon water tanks and, with the help of Dave Rupe, our local Water God, and ten other pairs of hands, we manage to position them all in a couple of hours. No mean feat as they weigh approximately 900 lbs. each, are 9’ in diameter and about 12’ high. We even managed it without any bones being broken – only one stumble into the bushes (on tank Number One) when it rolled and knocked Eden Kark off his balance.

By the time all was done we had all four 5000-gallon black beauties lined up straight and level on a flat bed of sand. They looked like a bank of formless Buddhas, or at least guardian deities, arranged in their precise and stately ranks. It will be through these humble black spaces that all the water from the land of Abhayagiri will pass, to be transformed into our bodies, to wash our clothes, to quell our fires and feed our flower gardens. Quiet undemonstrative sentinels but totally necessary for survival, like the Vinaya rules that contain and guide our energies – they don’t look very glorious, but without their presence, and being well-placed and cared for, we would have no Monastery and no way to be here.

Having been up all night typing, my involvement in the tank-moving is mellow and detached, blurred a little by the stumbling and blinking of tired senses – but it is delightful nonetheless. After the meal Eden, being an old friend from the early days of Amaravati Monastery in England, wants to talk and so, for a while, we engage in the colorful labyrinths of this bright young being’s spiritual progress. By 1:30 p.m. I call a halt and go to rest.

## MAY 23<sup>RD</sup>

The evening passes quietly – Rick Williams arrives – and we merge into Saturday and the Sanghapala Board meeting. All the while I am trying to find time to polish up the Pātimokkha chanting and shake the dust out of my memory cells – Ven. Kataññuto will still be with us for the New Moon day so we will have a quorum for the recitation of the monks' rule. It will be Tan Karunadhammo's first time at this most ancient of monastic ceremonies so the heart dearly wishes to make it a suitably full and sincere one – these things can get perfunctory if one is not careful.

The Board meeting slides by easily – an afternoon spent among good friends discussing all that is suitable to be done – despite a 24-item agenda, everything gets attended to and delegated appropriately. While we are meeting, Jonathan Westphal and Ñanamuni are off obtaining computer parts and, by 7:20 in the evening, its guts are out all over the table and the surgeon is somewhat distressed: the new hard drive is not doing what it ought to...

Knowing full well that these machines, like many others, were actually invented by Māra to arouse emotional states that would otherwise remain unknown, I try to look on benignly and end up spending more time consoling Jonathan than worrying about the machine. As it happens, by midmorning of the next day all is well and our new engine is safely in place, purring happily and ready to speed out of the blocks when necessary.

In the evening we have quite a crowd gathered, to watch us give the Eight Precept ordination to Anita Wenninck. She has been a bit overcharged and nervous about the chanting but, come the big moment, she pushes through to a clear space. The Dhamma talk resolves itself around the act of renunciation – Going Forth in all its dimensions – also around how the 227 Precepts of full monastic ordination are contained in the Eight, the Eight Precepts in the Three Refuges, these contained in “*Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammā-sambuddhassa,*” and this all finally being contained in Namō! – Homage. It is the essential gesture of unselfishness: there is *something* in this world, and beyond it, worthy of being looked up to.

## MAY 24<sup>TH</sup>

How many Sundays do you get with no special event going on? Nothing even remotely scheduled? The openness of the day, draped in rain cloud and waves of showering leaves, carries a mellow and gentle mood into the air.

We hear that Bhante Dhammavāra is due to be moved back to Stockton today and so, with Peter la Rivière, a crew of us heads over to the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas. As we walk in Bhante greets us with an immeasurably warm and twinkling smile – he is fine – but he never ceases his scratching of the body. Intense debate goes on as to the nature of the ailment: scabies? parasites? poison? Who knows? He is fine... When Ven. Sarin scolds him for scratching he simply holds out his hand and gives him the eye: “OK then, YOU scratch it!” He then returns to his action with deliberate exaggeration and a wicked smirk.

The hours flow by: Chrissy and Pat appear and so do Owen (his grandson) and the monks from Stockton. There is a lot of deliberation and some serious collisions, several disappearances to huddle and confer, finally the decision is arrived at to keep Bhante at the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas and await the results of skin tests – so there is a stay, at least until Wednesday.

All the while, during these intense exchanges, Bhante just lay there and, mostly with his facial expression alone, but occasionally resorting to a word or two, managed to steer the emotional climate of the room towards respect, calm and wisdom. Like a great conductor, though he plays no instrument, he integrates the smooth functioning of the whole.

We leave Chris Bradley behind again, to help take care, and return north, still blanketed by dripping grey skies. Another substantial gathering for tea – Peter la Rivière and Mary Curran, Steve Keyes from Willits but who is now staying here, Tan Kataññuto's old friend Molly McGuire, plus the home team. Another late night on the machine and the first draft of the ordination article is done.

Mottled charcoal branch shadows move and sway over the lattice works of underbrush – matrix moving across matrix – swimming before the eyes. Light and shade, sky and earth and the living tendrils that form the interface between the two, meet the branching arms of dendrites, the medium between the eye and the light of consciousness – matrix moving across matrix – worlds within worlds within worlds.

Days begin to kaleidoscope, telescope together.

## MAY 25<sup>TH</sup> – MAY 31<sup>ST</sup>

Practicing Pātimokkha a.m., recitation p.m. such a delight to have Tan Karunadhammo there. Chatting with Ñānamuni – great energy for the all-night sitting.

Writing notes all morning and afternoon for *The Pilgrim Kāmanīta* – an old Buddhist novel I am re-editing – finishing off correspondence. Call off the evening sitting and chat with Steve Keyes.

Chat with Anita and go to pay parting respects to Bhante – Peter La Rivière and Chris Morray-Jones seem an apocalyptic Tweedledum and Tweedledee – Ven. Sarin very unhappy... (more of this later).

Hit the road in heavy rain, David de Young driving. Couple of hours with Norman Fischer at Green Gulch, just to chat and catch up. All is well – he plans to come for the Ten Precept ordination of Michael Dietzel. Much conversation on the *Buddhism in America* conference in San Diego – a bit of a wet squib.

Drive over to Yvonne Rand's home Goat-in-the-Road near Muir Beach for the evening – Ken McLeod is there already – the three of us are meeting regularly now to conjure up a Buddhist teacher training workshop, tentatively entitled *Passing on the Dharma*, to be held at Mount Baldy Zen Center, outside of Los Angeles.

The hope has been to provide the occasion, for those interested in, or who are already involved in teaching Buddhism to have some hands-on guidance with a few people experienced in the various main schools of Buddha-Dharma: Yvonne

has been a San Francisco Zen Center priest for a long time and also, more recently, a student of Tara Tulku in the Nyingma lineage of Tibetan Buddhism; Ken is student of Kalu Rinpoche and is a lama in the Kagyu Tibetan tradition; and I am the representative of the Way of the Elders – Theravāda.

The three of us had met in Dharamsala, at a conference with HH the Dalai Lama, and had formed a lasting and respectful friendship. It is indeed one of the great blessings of these times, and the newness of Dharma in the West, that such mutual support and rich cross-fertilization can occur. We have all been interested and glad to learn from each other's traditions and, hopefully, this nonsectarian spirit will convey itself to those who show up for the workshop.

We sit and schmooze for a few hours, my abstinence from steak and wine (and everything else but fruit juice) makes no dent in the conviviality of supper. Yvonne's husband Bill is somewhat preoccupied by impending witness duties for a big court case in LA but he heartfully joins in our conversations.

Rain rain rain – and a night in Baba Yagar's hut.

Discussions of the teacher training intensive all morning – more and more rain blows in. Some reservations about the ethos of the whole thing – we shall see what turns up. No blame. Down to Marc Lieberman's house in the City in the afternoon – writing writing writing, of yet another piece for *Fearless Mountain*.

Ajahn Jumniën – that great exuberant and magical Master from Wat Tum Seuer (Tiger Cave Monastery) in Thailand is back in the US, now visiting Spirit Rock. We go to see him to pay respects – he's in fine fettle as usual. Infinite energy.

Back to Marc's in the afternoon – typing typing typing – done by 10:30 p.m. phew. News arrives that Bhante finally got whisked off to his home temple in Stockton.

Marc's friends David Green and his wife and Cheryl are by – he walks us through beautiful and poignant photos of Tibet and the Tibet Vision Project – the charity that Marc has established and with which he trains Tibetan doctors, usually in remote regions of the country, to do eye surgery.

The eye-camp in David's photos operated on 92 patients in three days. Pictures of frightened, cataract-scarred and blind Tibetans, clutching the tiny hands of their still-sighted nieces and grandchildren; their faces then grotesquely patched with fresh white gauzes; then going off, gleefully seeing, two days later, waving their arms in the air – what great and beautiful work!

The team arrives from Abhayagiri and we have the whole day with Ajahn Jumniën. A delight to be on the sidelines, despite having to chime in for various translations. Anagarika Michael switches roles as my driver with David DeYoung and we head back to San Francisco via Glen McKay's studio – he shows us the Jefferson Airplane films for his show at MOMA – first hearing in 20 years.

A meditation daylong slides by at Spirit Rock – easy, peaceful, joyous. Evening comes – no great urges to be in contact or to create.

May draws itself to an end.

## PART IV

SAN FRANCISCO – PORTLAND – SEATTLE – LARCH MOUNTAIN  
– STILL MEADOW – CHICAGO

JUNE 1<sup>ST</sup>

An easy morning passes at Marc's house.

As a busy practicing ophthalmologist (he is a world-renowned expert in glaucoma) he has been hard at work setting up a new office in San Francisco before going to Tibet for five weeks for another eye-camp. His comings and goings have thus been even more of a blur than usual but his spirits are good. This morning he doesn't have to go out until 10:00 a.m. but the hours before then are jam-packed with phone calls and cheque writing and payrolls.

The dining room table has now become an extension of his office (the papers literally 18" thick on every horizontal surface there) and the phone rings day and night. Of the latter, there are also many calls for his son Michael, who will graduate from Lowell High School this week, and for us – stray bits of Monastery business and news that need attending to.

Anagarika Michael heads off to the airport to pick up Ajahn Pasanno, where he should be arriving back from visiting family in Canada. Marc remains hunched over his bits of paper, I settle myself in a corner to flip through some books until the next major phase of the day unfolds. There is a little scramble at the airport but eventually the right parties meet up; Debbie Stamp, another of the founding members of Sanghapala, arrives at Marc's house and we all are gathered for a moment or two.

Ajahn Pasanno and I start to go through news exchange and the handing over of the baton, noting amidst the flurry of information that today is the second anniversary of the opening of Abhayagiri. We pause to go for the meal at a new Thai restaurant on Church Street and 29<sup>th</sup> where the owners have expressed interest to meet us. Back at Marc's the exchange continues – matching up calendars, reports on progress, the extended low-down on Bhante Dhammavāra's return to Stockton, plans for summer building projects at Abhayagiri and the Use Permit process.

By 2:00 p.m. we're pretty much done. Arthur Martin drops by to collect the manuscript of *Where are You Going?* the tale of the 1000-mile pilgrimage on foot to the Buddhist holy places of India, made by Ajahn Sucitto and Nick Scott in the early '90s. Arthur had done much legal work for the Sanghapala Foundation throughout its early days. Now, however, having had to retire from law because of ill health (and thus forced into a three-year hiatus), he had found himself delighted to be free of the litigatory world and was considering going back into book publishing again. The manuscript is a rich and vivid description of the glories and horrors of the pilgrim's way and, hopefully, a publisher will be found who wants to put it into the broader public eye.

Farewells and fair weather: we make the run to the airport and immerse ourselves in the traveling world – polyester-clad dames with sun hats and canes, brawny lads and their girls, tattooed young things untouched by sun, and the evenly browned beach dweller – here we all are going to our places – besuited Japanese businessmen, pink Buddhist monks and all. Our ticket, our destination, our time, our place – all in order – into our steel tube we funnel, and we fly.

Bright sky and green lands below us – the blessings of El Niño glow all around – patches of field and straight ridges of hill, the broad cone of Mount Shasta, dazzling white; Crater Lake, like a child's creation of sand and sea water, passes by speckled with cloud-shadow. Greener and greener and closer it draws, then down into Portland we lower.

Mike Echols is there again to greet us – myself somewhat fresher than last time – and takes us to his home; we're welcomed there fondly by Stary (the cat) and a pot of tea. Quiet evening hours pass in conversation and a phone call or two. While I'm here I plan to meet with Tan Sudanto, an American monk just back from Thailand who is interested to come and live at Abhayagiri, as well as Ajahn Sumedho's sister Virginia Barber. She and her husband William live just across the broad Columbia River, in Vancouver, Washington; she is always glad to welcome traveling monastics of our community and hear news of her beloved brother, so far away in England.

## JUNE 2<sup>ND</sup>

A few folks show up for the morning sitting at Mike Echols' – Mike Stevens and Mimi Maduro, Barbara Backstrand, and his old buddy (another Mike) – with whom he got drunk one night back in '84 and had driven over to the coast, just to run his new car. They had ended up in the parking lot of a motel in which the Dalai Lama was staying, unbeknownst to them; they only found out about his presence there the next day, when they had sobered up and returned to Portland.

Only a few stayed for breakfast at Mike's so it was a much briefer event than it had been in previous years. They all admired the pictures of the ordination with hearts full of *muditā*.

Mike left for work and then, at about 10:30, Janné Stark showed up to take me to a local restaurant. We walked down Hawthorne Street – the main drag of the local area – past coffee shops, bookstores and a dozen other small businesses. The street is filled with an aura of youth and summer and excitement. The weather has turned bright, at last, (it had rained all May) and the locals are out to celebrate. Sundresses and skateboards, shorts and bare-chested youths roll by us on every side. The gaiety of urban summer is in the air.

We sit at a table on the sidewalk and eat our dishes of potato as we talk of their family life and their daughter Tara's growing years, the rarity of happy couples who have been together more than ten years, and the search for the perfect love by our various siblings (largely unrequited, as yet).

Grinning waitress in a black dress, black hair dye and Dr. Marten's, dragon tattoo on her shoulder, strides by us back and forth; our own server has a bril-

liant orange hennaed topknot and the mode of the unfettered twenty-something. Gazing on the street scene from the outside is a little like watching exotic fish in a tank: there is appreciation of the many-colored forms and the bitter taste of *awaré*, the transiency of beauty, ignorant of its own limitation. The painful beauty of plum blossom – because it has its moment and then a long long time of recollecting what was lost. Half-amused and half-pained by the excitement and fragility of the scene, we're glad to be looking on and not hoping to be getting something from it.

As we return to 41<sup>st</sup> Street Richard Eaton arrives – we have collected Tara from her school by this time – and we say our final farewells.

The bright clear day continues as we barrel our way northwards along Interstate 5: Vancouver, Kalama, Castle Rock, Chehallis, Olympia, Tacoma and finally the Emerald City itself. As we go along Richard and I catch up on the last month and discuss the breaking news of Christopher/Catriona Reed and his/her gender issues. For many years Christopher had been leading a Vipassanā meditation group in the LA area and had also spent the last few establishing a rural retreat place, Manzanita Village, out towards Mount Palomar. When I had visited him and his wife there a few years ago, there had been no sign whatsoever that he had been contemplating such a radical shift in his life. But then, even in California, the fact that you are pondering a sex-change is probably not something that you are going to bring up with someone who a) you have hardly ever met before, b) who is an orthodox Theravādan monk and c) who is a fellow Englishman.

Richard had spent a year at Manzanita Village, however, and so knew the situation there more directly – when Chris/Catriona asked him what he thought about his cross-dressing/transsexuality Richard had told him straight: “I thought the Buddha’s teaching was about letting go of identity, not grasping an identity we think will make us happy.” He also said he felt there was massive rationalization going on – first the desired mode of being and then the reworking of the Dharma to back it up. Chris/Catriona had not wanted to hear “that Theravāda crap” but I must say I felt Richard had hit the nail on the head. At the very least it would be sensible to back off from teaching for a while and let the world adjust to the new pattern – better to do that than desperately try to force everyone to affirm what your choice is. But maybe “being sensible” is just a sign of Englishness (on this point, see *Brief Encounter*) and is not the main issue at all.

We work our way through the streets of Seattle to the house of Stuart Gilbert and his partner John in the northeast of the city. We settle ourselves in their space, rich with curios and beautiful memorabilia from Bali and other parts of Southeast Asia. Qawali music is filling the air and incense wafts across the verandah as their cats come and introduce themselves.

I am left alone for an hour, to sprawl on a pile of cushions and inhale the fragrances of Agarbathi. Soon the moment comes and we are off for the evening talk. It had been two or three years since I last visited Seattle. Now that Tan Karunadhammo has joined us in Abhayagiri there had been no one to arrange visits for us to teach here, since as a layman he had been our stalwart Seattle contact.

So it was with glad smiles that many familiar faces greeted us: Joseph Kappel (the former Ajahn Pabhākarō, whom we had just seen at IMS) – over from the East Coast – was there with mother and sister, Mark Rasmussen and others from the Cloud Mountain retreat, Steve Willhelm, Ani Tenzin Kacho, Metta's aunt Janice Clark, Carole DeLima, August Barua, etc., etc.

The advertised title of the talk was *Buddhism from the Beginning* and it was supposed to deal with the origin of the universe, the arising of the ego, the arising of dukkha and the source of true happiness. It was a high energy affair and folks seemed to appreciate the words – I tried to keep it practical so we stayed near the likes of the Four Foundations of Mindfulness and *samatha-vipassanā* and enquiry into the feeling of self.

### JUNE 3<sup>RD</sup>

By the time we returned to Stuart and John's the batteries were pretty flat (a lot of folks had lined up to say hello and goodbye afterwards). So it was with great delight that the next morning was spent in the warm and colorful embrace of their home drinking coffee, talking of travels and tales of lessons learned, all to the accompaniment of a Japanese countertenor/castrato type and the almighty blasts of Karl Orff's *Wheel of Fortune* – bathing in nectar-flavored morning light we delighted in the sweetness of each other's company until, after Stuart's gourmet repast was over, we hit the road again – retracing the grey ribbon south to Portland.

Thin green walls of fir rib the highway, screening the desolated landscape behind them from view. Dark, snake-back road, the emerald channel and the over-arching blue – we move through patches of overcast sky every 20 minutes or so, now warm, now cool. Many trucks fill the flow of movement in both directions – rolling with us through the white man's land, where all that remain of the last 4,000 years of human occupancy are the sounds of local names, syllables of power and living beauty: Nisqually, Shummchuck River, Kalama, Onalaska. Just south of Midway Meats, Uncle Sam's reactionary billboard has moved to the other side of the freeway – today it declares: "Indians police their own salmon catch? Would you let the fox watch the hen house?" *That's* the spirit!

Rolling ever south, past the Harvest States silos at Kalama beside the river, roadsides lounge heavily speckled with California poppies, egg-orange golden in the bright light. Pulling into Vancouver a little after 4:00 p.m., we stop to say hello to Virginia and William Barber – Ajahn Sumedho's sister and brother-in-law. It has also been two or three years since I last saw them so there is plenty of news to catch up on – the opening of the California Monastery, Ajahn Sumedho's impending visit next spring, plus of course his intended trip to Tibet, to circumambulate Mount Kailash in October – now there will be a tale to tell...

Into the city of rivers and bridges and threading our way to Dharma Rain Zen Center – round the corner from Mike Echols' house, and Janné and Charles' off Hawthorne. It is not exactly an umbrella Buddhist outfit itself, more that several independent groups collaborate and use the facility for their own meetings.

We have a moment to pause before the evening's event, so they kit me out with a cup of tea and a quiet corner. Chozen and Hogen Bays appear and the session swells into shape. The talk is on *The Buddhist Practice of Moral Precepts* and is astonishingly well attended. Well-sugared and hidden amongst humorous asides we manage to give the Five Precepts the full treatment; furthermore, if the faces alight with joy around the room are anything to go by, folks seem to get it too – what a wonder.

Tan Sudanto shows up with his mother and stepfather and then trails back with us to Larch Mountain Zen Center, perched on the edge of the Columbia Gorge a few miles east of the city. It is the teaching center run by Chozen and Hogen themselves and the place where they have lived for a dozen years now. Yon-San, an American Zen monk fresh from Japan, who is helping Harada Roshi set up in a place on Whidbey Island, off Seattle, is also along with us for the evening.

After a little loss of ways and roaming aimlessly in the dark, we meet up and get to the center by 11:45 p.m. – long day, deep sleep, no worries.

## JUNE 4<sup>TH</sup>

We sit and chat all morning over tea and breakfast – the skies unload a thick drizzle and cloud wraps Larch Mountain completely. We are happy to be ensconced however and talk over all manner of issues related to starting new places.

Larch Mountain Zen Center began with the vow of the late Maezumi Roshi to plant the seeds of the Dharma so firmly in the West that they would never die out. Jan Chozen Bays, a Dharma heir of Maezumi Roshi, has dedicated her life to help fulfill this vision. She was ordained as a Zen priest in 1977 and received Dharma transmission (authority to teach) from Maezumi Roshi in 1983; since his death she has continued to deepen her own practice by studying with Shodo Harada Roshi of Sogen-ji Monastery in Japan.

She is a wife, mother and pediatrician working in the field of child abuse. Hogen Bays, her husband, began practicing in 1968 with Roshi Philip Kapleau. He was ordained as a Zen priest by Maezumi Roshi in 1990. Hogen has also continued his Zen studies with Harada Roshi since 1990. He is a naturopathic doctor, holds a Master's degree in psychology and has worked for the Oregon Department of Corrections for 15 years.

In 1985 Chozen began leading a small meditation group in her home in Portland. As the need arose she began to give Dharma talks, guide students and lead intensive silent retreats. As the group grew the weekly *zazen* practice moved to the Dharma Center in Portland. Requests for residential training led to the establishment of Larch Mountain Zen Center in these forests above the Columbia Gorge.

Their mission is to make the Dharma accessible to people of all ages and backgrounds and to facilitate the transmission of an authentic teaching lineage. Their instruction is tailored to each individual and they use a variety of meditation practice techniques, including breath, listening, koan study, and others that they and the student feel are appropriate. Both Chozen and Hogen are very much in support

of Buddhist education and residential training for those who wish to dedicate their life to the Dharma.

Our conversation roams through many avenues of the subject of Buddhism in the West: the worthiness and richness of interdisciplinary meetings and events, such as the retreat we are about to lead together; the issues of ordination and training, and the differing style of the Zen priest – i.e. usually married and often with a salaried livelihood – versus the celibate monastic way, with the practice of the Vinaya discipline, traditional in the rest of the Buddhist world outside of Japan, etc., etc.

Like many others who grew up in the Zen world in America, it was something of a surprise to Chozen and Hogen to find that the rest of the world functioned so differently. The more that she had got to know the ways of the Theravāda tradition, however, the more that she felt an affinity for the clear boundaries in conduct, in particular, that both the Vinaya and the Five Precepts gave. “Zen is very high-minded and good at the absolute position but it gets a bit blurry around the world of the relative,” she observed, with a hint of long-sufferingness in her expression. Furthermore, their professional work in the realm of pediatrics and abuse had amplified in them a gut level sense for the blessings of agreed models of appropriate conduct in life.

Over the years the lack of clear moral standards in the Buddhist world of the US has led to some highly visible and painful crises, in the Zen and Tibetan Buddhist realms especially, and so the lack of blurriness embraced by the Theravādans had begun to pique their interest, as it had with people like Yvonne Rand and Norman Fischer at the San Francisco Zen Center. She had so much interest in it these days, Chozen confessed, that the Vinaya books translated by I.B. Horner (whose father was a brother of my grandfather) were some of her favorite reading and that she kept a post-it bedecked copy in the bathroom: “I hope that’s not sacreligious?”

After the meal we go for a rest, say farewell to Tan Sudanto and then meander off to Still Meadow Center – a retreat place established by one of the US’s numerous self-created fringe religious movements, The Emissaries of Divine Light – south and east of Portland. Not sure if it wants to be dull or bright, the day opts for cool and grey eventually. The Center is a well-built place in a somewhat quiet rural area – a few roads and flight paths are nearby but nothing too impactful. It’s a better scene by far than last year’s Jesuit encampment in the middle of Portland.

The retreat pattern falls into being. Chozen and Hogen have done a good job of setting it all up. The hosts (the Emissaries) are quite invisible. Forty-some odd retreatants fill the hall, including a number of familiar faces from last year and the last couple of days’ talks in Portland and Seattle.

All flows easily – we have a very open schedule and, by Friday, the sun begins to appear. Around us broad and beautiful meadows indeed spread, along with thick pine and fir forest and neck-high grasses of a thousand different greens. Talks over breakfast and the main meal go on forever, rolling with delight over the landscapes of news and views, Buddhism in the West, and a myriad sundries – only the clappers for the next sitting (3:00 p.m.) call us eventually to a halt.

There followed a good question and answer session, shared with Chozen, and an evening talk on the theme of *“The Arahant and the Bodhisattva should be friends”* (refraining from breaking into the tune from “Oklahoma!”)

As with all events that combine different conventions, forms and teachings, there are a mixture of people here from both kinds of background – in this case Zen and Theravāda. There can easily be confusions caused, or rivalries stoked, when language is used in different ways. We don’t want to fight with each other but sometimes faithfulness to what we know is good can spill over into opinionating about the other, feeling self-righteous or threatened.

The intent behind the talk is to help us understand our respective conventions a little better and to examine any assumptions we might be making about what is right and good. And, most particularly, to help us all to see the Truth beyond words and forms more clearly. We’ll find out tomorrow how it all went down. The retreatants are all so restrained and unexpressive – stern and full of the awesome manner – that it’s hard to know when one hits the mark.

## JUNE 5<sup>TH</sup>

A day flows by – cool morning, bright by midday – warm summer evening. Avid conversations on numerous Dharma themes, an inexhaustible flow of questions and their responses. Hogen and Chozen speak of his “grief based on renunciation” and it arises vividly and poignantly to order – striking in its closeness to the surface and his ability to cover it over.

After the meal we go to visit the local ancients – a couple of 600-year-old Douglas firs – and we potter through the bush and bird-filled undergrowth. A thousand types of forest plants deck the floor in dense patterns of leaf and stalk; the air is thick with life and scrambling greenery, falling over each other in the search for sunlight and air.

Questions on certainty, where does consciousness go at death? And, another favorite, what did the Buddha say about God? Come the evening, time to talk about taking the practice home (via micro-meditations and the art of going nowhere) and the place of monasteries and Vinaya for the lay community. Chozen has particularly asked for me to address this topic but (in a later breath) also saying that she didn’t want me just to impress them with how good it is to be in a Monastery and how feeble it is to be a lay practitioner. Having said that it then occurred to me: “Fine, but what about the Buddha’s own monastic vocation – he *did* chose to live as a monk himself, didn’t he? And he also regularly observed that: “The household life is crowded and dusty, the life of one gone forth is wide-open, free as air.” So we explored the issues at length (for one and a quarter hours) and failed to exhaust the subject – what will the morrow bring, I wonder?

## JUNE 7<sup>TH</sup>

The retreat held its normal rhythm until 10:30 when we had another question session – we had continued our endless discussions of the teachings and Buddhism in the West over breakfast, and it seemed that indeed, all were pleased with the

content of the previous evening's talk. Similar themes resounded during the question time and were finished off with a piece on not creating yourself, or others. Always a hit.

We held the meal in the main hall and had a general schmoozing during and after. Folks seemed well lit up by the whole event and several lingered until Chozen and Hogen called Time at 2:30-ish. Kelly Coolidge, a Korean woman who had come to the Portland talk on Wednesday, had signed up at the last minute, sat directly in front of me smiling serenely for the whole retreat, and then was practically in my lap until we got up finally to depart. We will certainly be seeing more of her before too long; Wide-eyed and enraptured with *Dhamma-chanda* (delight in the Teaching) she looked like Sister Jitindriyā had on her first retreat with us, as a yellow-haired Australian traveler, back in 1987 at Amaravati.

We headed into Portland and spent the middle part of the afternoon with Kyogen and Gyokuko Carlson – two monks out of the Shasta Abbey lineage of Rev. Master Jiyu Kennet. Through various missed and mangled communications in the mid-80s, they had ended up, still as a married couple, departing from the Shasta fold, when the rest of the Monastery voluntarily took on the practice of celibacy – a radical move for a place out of the Japanese tradition. The wounds were still open and smarting and, to add irony to insult, we had already arranged to go and have tea with Rev. Meiko, at the Portland Priory, a local branch of Shasta Abbey, later that day.

Nonetheless, the time with Rev. Meiko was sweet and mellow, a fitting contrast after the wailing and gnashing of Kyogen and Gyokuko's story. As is usual, both sides had their tales to tell and it was good to get some more of the picture. Whether or not they will ever arrive at harmonious reunion is unsayable. It sounded as though there had been a few too many "divorced from the teacher for eternity" statements to make any repairs a straightforward affair.

We sat and chatted with Rev. Meiko over tea for a good couple of hours then headed back to Larch Mountain for a break, prior to the *dtah-daeng* (red-eye) flight to Chicago.

The dialogue flowed ceaselessly on as we followed our roads to and fro, and even up to the departure gate. Both Chozen and Hogen have great sincerity and energy for the practice and seek only to make their lives authentic and of service to all. Their hunger for influence from the Theravāda tradition has enriched both their own training and also that of many of their students.

It is a great thing that these multifarious traditions should come together and meet and cross-pollinate so freely – we had great discussions on Nansen and the cutting of the cat, the quarrel at Kosambi and the sources of koan in the teachings – how often could such a dialogue have happened over the centuries? What precious times these are – even if it is only the last, 100-year blossoming before it all degenerates irrevocably, let us make full use of the contact!

How else would I have ever learned that Sogen-ji – Harada Roshī's temple in Japan is the *ONLY* Zen Monastery with a cherry tree in the whole country? Who would have thought that such a policy had been instituted since cherry blossom

was considered too arousing for monks and thus not conducive to their training? Apparently people go into paroxysms of excitement at the sight of such flowering trees in spring and that's not to be condoned for the monkly, now is it?

## JUNE 8<sup>TH</sup>

Short flight, short night and a bright blue and crimson dawn in Chicago. John Cianciosi (formerly Ajahn Jagaro, abbot of the Monastery in Western Australia and, along with Joseph Kappel, one of my teachers from the early years in Thailand) picks me up at 5:30 a.m. and we go to the apartment that he and his wife Aungchoye have just acquired. We collect her and then head off to one of those Midwestern three-kilo-per-helping breakfast joints and I put myself around an omelet that would have fed a family of five in India.

Snoozes in their new and brightly appointed home, more eats and snoozes and then off to the local Monastery, Buddha-Dharma Meditation Center by 5:00 p.m. It's the day before the full moon so I have taken advantage of the open afternoon to shave and get laundered before the next round of activity.

John and Aungchoye seem well these days – he has been working but has given up on his university course for the time being – it would either have taken too long part-time, or have been too all-consuming full-time – so it's gone by the board for the sake of giving the two of them time together. Her health (various cancers and gall-bladder problems) has greatly improved and she is now back to working full-time as a doctor at a family practice clinic in Oakbrook – a suburb of Chicago.

Broad smiles as we arrive at the Monastery in Hinsdale; Ajahn Vorasakh, Supaporn, Pitsamai et al. Richard Smith and Sulipon Surakomol are here from Michigan, plus many familiar faces from last year and the other retreats. I am getting so used to this that we fall into the opening of the retreat with scarcely a beat missed.

This is a meditation Monastery out of the Thai tradition that I have visited and taught at almost every year since arriving in the US. It has gone through many changes, good developments as well as disasters, in these eight years. The most impactful of the crises was when the much-loved and respected founder, Ajahn Sunthorn, took off to take a break from his duties and never came back. The ten thousand cares and pressures of decision making had piled too high, and his standards for his own conduct were so exalted, that he felt he could not do the job anymore. He left the robe in Thailand and now Ajahns Banyat and Vorasakh lead the place instead of him. His loss ladens the Monastery air with a sticky pervasiveness – everyone misses him dearly.

The Monastery had always had a close connection to Luang Por Paññānanda, one of the leading Dhamma teachers of Thailand, and now that Ajahn Sunthorn had made his abrupt departure, Luang Por was making great efforts to support it more directly and lend what good energy he could to its survival. It was struggling to keep its momentum, many of the lay community had lost heart, but it was still continuing to put on these annual retreats and this was certainly a well-attended, much-appreciated opportunity.

Despite the somewhat scrambled chanting and the general unpreparedness of some of the retreatants for the new environment – it's not your average retreat scene, with church pews along with Pāli chanting and Asian elements abounding – still, all is indeed well and there seemed to be a glow of glad arrival in the air, only one or two truly shell-shocked countenances visible.

## **JUNE 9TH – 12TH**

The days flow by so fast – already it is Friday and the retreatants (a few more have come, a few have left) are looking well. On the first morning the level of collapse and droop was stupendous; now, after four days there is a sparkle in the air and a bright responsiveness to the talks.

Grey skies and dense rain – now cold, now warm – have alternated with days of brilliant beauty. The bold red sun rising over the roar of the highway fills the morning mist with golden-pink light. The last two nights have been prefaced by sultry evenings – fireflies bursting into view and fading gently as they drift in the darkening air. Steamy, tropical skies as the last light fades – warm wind and low cotton balls of cloud – are framed and colored by the peachy glow of the west. The trees stir in the thrill of the caress – the arriving prince of night, draped in his steel blue cape, rolls across the landscape of lawns and suburban houses, water towers and lush patches of woodland.

In these suburbs of Chicago we wander through the labyrinths of the Dhamma – all the familiar themes: kindness, reflective thought, the hindrances and pure awareness, dependent origination and a hundred stories to color it all. The transformation – from confused and weary urbanites to gleaming yogis, blazing white in their clothes of devotion – is the most precious thing on earth. Even here, in the most mundane, materialistic of locations, the alchemy of the Dhamma does its wonders.

Thunder and lightning, warm rain and sun, come together like the atmosphere of the primal soup – to flash and bring the prokaryotes of true life into being – wonder wonder wonder. And how sweet, to have the length of retreat to go into subtleties of: the world in the mind, “What am I?” and personal and impersonal love – all this along with numerous tales of doughnuts and berry pie, Tahiti and Kapilavastu, King Pasenadi and Abhayagiri.

Yesterday Luang Por Paññānanda arrived and we spent an hour or two together. How sweet and inspiring a man he is – 88 and still cheerfully traveling the world to teach, all his faculties well in order, although he apologized for not being able to sit so long on the floor any more.

What beauty there is in a life well lived, old monk.

He has a few projects on the go but nothing left to prove. He is glad to see us but not needing anyone either. I wonder if this is admiration or Dharmic envy? “Oh that I could be, one day, such an easy, ancient being – all passions and performances laid aside!” Regardless of motivation, however, it is definitely sweet to taste the company of the wise – let us enjoy it and get to the anatomy of the subject later.

## PART V

HINSDALE – TROY – AMARAVATI – SUTTON VALENCE – CHITHURST  
– SAN FRANCISCO

JUNE 13<sup>TH</sup>

THE WINDING UP OF THE RETREAT BEGINS – as usual with firm encouragements on the restraint of *bhava*, and the multiplication of goodwill – they are given the task of a poetry assignment but, when the moment comes that evening only half a dozen of the folks have actually put pen to paper. The sharing is beautiful and warm nonetheless.

It turns out there was no need to raise the noble silence that evening – the group (by some kind of mass presumption) all started talking anyway. It also turned out that there had been considerable chatting going on *during* the retreat as well as cookies and other snacks put out in the evening. The whole affair had much more of a loose feel to it than usual retreats; whether to make anything of it and put the foot down for other years or to just allow the regime to vary, remains to be seen. No promises were made about the future.

The Sunday morning flew by with a final blessing and tying of strings. I was invited to give the Monastery's usual weekly public talk, on rebirth, and then Luang Por Paññānanda gave a talk in Thai. Amongst the many people who showed up were the Thai consul and his wife; they said a hello and joined us all for the meal after. The latter was the usual crowded and colorful event with many of the regulars whom we had not seen during the week appearing as well.

We said our goodbyes by 1:30 and I headed off with John Cianciosi to visit a bookshop and go for a little stroll. By this time the weather had turned hot and the sun cooked us as we crossed roads and parking lots. He seems well and at ease in his new life but, as yet, far from finding his way – he has a few part-time jobs at present (driving, store work and teaching a class or two at the local college) but has no eye on a full-time occupation as yet. After 25 years in the Monastery it is still early days to be making major investments of time and money into a training program. He is still reconvening and reassembling his world and will probably tread water like this for a year or two to come.

Many wildflowers were out – as were a host of mountain-bikers – and we enjoyed the cool greens and summer scents on the shady trail through the woods near the Argonne Laboratories. We had to turn around quite soon, to make our rendezvous with the others at the Monastery, but the brief spell in the magic of trees was enough at least to refresh the heart.

Back at BDMC we met with Richard, Sulipon and Maria, piled into his van and headed off towards Michigan. Since I had always flown this stretch in the past I had been looking forward to seeing some of the local, midwestern countryside – I even entertained a foolish idea that, since we would be driving around the south-

ern shore of Lake Michigan, we might actually see the water stretching out to our left. No such luck...

The drive was almost unrelentingly level freeway with the margins occupied by 300–400 yards of field or forest the whole way. Only once or twice did we climb a small rise and get a view for a few miles, but even then it merely revealed more scarcely modulated landscape of flat fields and forest. It is true that such land has its own beauty – and if you were born there it would be God’s Own Country – however it was a surprise to see how very plain it all was. And no sign of the Great Lake either – oh well.

As it transpired, perhaps the blandness of the landscape was an advantage – it certainly did not draw our attention away from the avid conversations going on inside the vehicle. Despite the fact that I had been talking nonstop for the last week, the others had not and indeed had a lot to say and (yes) many questions to ask...

So the hours rolled by – gas stations came and went – bikers from the Detroit Bad Boys and RVs, trucks and cars – all glid quietly by our windows. Cocooned in our rolling capsule, this little collective wound its way through the gathering dusk – to pull in at Richard’s house in Troy, nestled at the edges of the northern suburbs of Detroit, at 10:00 p.m. Sulipon and Maria took themselves home; we breathed out and retired for the night.

## JUNE 15<sup>TH</sup>

A long, deep sleep, filled with strange dreams (of austerity and hairy-legged humans) carried the night hours away. I had been weary after the retreat and the journey here, and it seems as though the whole system needed to release and unwind.

During the day Richard and I set to work on *The Pilgrim Kāmanīta*, picking up art supplies and getting going on the map and the layout for the illustrations. This was a book project that I had been working on for some years already. It was a Buddhist novel (written by the Danish Nobel laureate Karl Gjellerup in 1906) that another of the monks at Amaravati and I had been inspired to put into more modern English. The idea had been to redo the text and publish it for free distribution through our monasteries, in the way that almost all our literature is done.

The project had been hatched sometime in the mid-90s and, on hearing about it, Richard Smith had eagerly offered his services (and considerable funding) to help bring it into the flesh. The story is a romance set initially in the time of the Buddha, however – what with the hero Kāmanīta being gored to death before the book is half-done, and the plot eventually spreading over several lifetimes (some lasting up to billions of years) and the hero and heroine meanwhile set on the path to enlightenment – it is a very unusual and essentially mystical love story.

Now that the raw editing of the manuscript had been completed it was time to pull all of the physical elements of the book together. Richard was eminently capable of this – he had been instrumental in the publication of my earlier book *Silent Rain* – and so we had pegged out some of these days at his house in Michigan to bring *Kāmanīta* to its next stage of development.

Sulipon came for the meal offering and then left us for the afternoon. We had the first of our evening Dhamma teaching sessions for the local group (a sitting and a talk from 7:00 – 9:00) with many familiar faces appearing and acquaintances being renewed. It seemed as though I had never left – even though it had been a full two years since the last visit here.

The talk was pretty general, based around practice and spiritual empiricism versus theory and belief – especially “where does an Arahant go after the death of the body?”

## JUNE 16<sup>TH</sup>

The flow carried on through Tuesday – the map got finished and we started to scan some of the illustrations for position, sizing, etc. Richard seemed to be eternally distracted by other phone calls and duties so the hints got heavier and heavier about BEGINNING THE WORK until 3:00ish when we actually started (pew). Once we got going the progress was smooth and we soon got an idea of what we wanted to do.

It was fine weather at 5:00 when we set off for Ann Arbor for an evening talk at the Buddhist group there but we soon hit the wildness of summer in the form of thunder and lightning, hailstorms, and also restricted traffic flow because of the annual road repairs. Consequently it was 6:40 when we arrived and I had missed my appointment to meet Anagarikā Maureen’s mother and sisters at 6:00. She had started her monastic life with us at Abhayagiri last year and had recently become an anagarikā with the nuns in England. As it turned out they too had been coming over from Royal Oak (near Richard’s) and had been delayed in the same downpours so we waited around afterwards and had some time to talk then.

The evening was held at the Friends’ Meeting House and had no special title so, to keep it as universal as possible, I took *Searching for Happiness* as the theme – building it around the contrast between the qualities of worldly and transcendent happiness.

The chat with the Bodenbachs and the other goodbyes lasted until 10:00ish – it was still bucketing down as we made our way to the car and the night journey was broken over and over by bright flashes of lightning and nearby thunder, drowning out the noise of the traffic on the rainsoaked road.

## JUNE 17<sup>TH</sup>

The day’s waking hours were all consumed with the work on the book – Richard conjuring up the cover (very handsome) and I on the framing of the illustrations. The only punctuations came with the Wansome family visiting at the mealtime, when I had a long chat with the teenaged Tania and Derek, and for the evening Dhamma session (this one was on negative emotions). Before and after these, the book was all and everything.

Mrs. Wansome had brought the kids over hoping that I would give them a good talking to and tell them to stop all their teenage foolishness: Tania with her 23-year-old and multiply pierced boyfriend and Derek with his raucous rock-

music bashes. As it transpired I gave the two of them a lesson on how to handle parents who are in another world – comparing them (the kids) to how *they* were in the 1950s in Thailand – and tried to encourage mama to be more tolerant of fashion and eccentricity. I pointed out that my mother reacted to my becoming a bhikkhu in the same way that *she* reacts to Tania’s boyfriend and weekend activities.

In point of fact these young people are bright, lively and creative and – if Mr. and Mrs. persist in browbeating them – they will split at the first opportunity and never be seen again. Tania was vociferously delighted to be going off to Swarthmore in the late summer, giving her mother as clear a signal as possible of her feeling of imprisonment. Derek was very quiet but you could see he was very self-possessed also.

## JUNE 18<sup>TH</sup>

The heat and moisture of the Detroit summer draws familiar fragrances from Richard’s wild garden – its overhanging hedges and unpruned trees, squirrels dancing along their boughs in search of sycamore seeds to gorge on, and unnamed scents bring back childhood years at Farthing Green in Kent and the poignancy of a departed youth. As the mind strides through the final chapters of the *Story of the Stone* (also known as *The Dream of Red Mansions*) – a classical Chinese spiritual romance on a par with *The Pilgrim Kāmanīta* – towards the hero Bao-yu’s departure into monastic life amidst the wreckage of the Jia family, the aura of lost summers and the pains of adolescent life mingle and merge with the sounds of chickadees and buntings and the bright flash of cardinals. Woodchucks and ground squirrels, hunting cats and hidden rodents wander freely through the nooks and crannies of the garden. Standing on their haunches, nibbling on buds of lower branches, the local fauna spends a life of ease.

In the distance lawn mowers hum amid the murmur of Motown’s passing cars. All is well.



Once again the hours were passed in Richard’s basement poring over the drawing board, consuming cups of tea and finding the balances between form and space, line and limit; by the evening (at 6:00) all was done and the pen could finally be laid down. The evening Dhamma session was another crowded one (it has been about 40 people per night) and centered around the subject of *Winning* – it was a coincidence that that very day 1,000,000 people turned out for the victory parade of the Detroit Red Wings, the local ice-hockey team that had just won the Stanley Cup for the second year running.

The talk addressed the pure gratification that comes with winning, the abundant joy and sense of power, as well as the quiet arrival of fear of failure that comes with the package. We don’t realize that when we relish the peaks of delight we are usually setting ourselves up for trouble. One of our monks, who had twice been the Eastern States wrestling champion, once said: “The happiness of being the winner

lasted about ten minutes. Then I began to see the faces of the other guys who I had beaten, glowering at me from the front row. They had 'Next year...!' written all over them and immediately I was worried that I had to succeed all over again."

Fear of failure and the seductive power of success are a deadly duo – most of the folks seemed to resonate with what was said and, for once, the night ended early with everyone gone well before 10:00. A long out-breath and the silence of the night to merge into – *The Story of the Stone* reaches its dénouement and I sleep with only a couple of chapters to go.

## JUNE 19<sup>TH</sup>

Another deep slumber – these have been long hard days, 18 hours on the job at a time. There is little more to do on *The Pilgrim Kāmanīta* right now and every intuition I have says "be alone – do nothing." The last pieces of the *Stone* drop silently and sweetly into place – the hero and heroine, Bao-yu and Dai-yu, have returned to their original natures and the Twelve Beauties of Jinling have been duly honored. Waves of poignancy leap into my throat for the loss of the lovely – and the tragic vision of *The Story of the Stone's* wine-soaked author, Cao Xueqin (aka Tsao Shuechin), running out of tears before reaching even the age of 50.

Nevertheless, the legacy was left and his heart's desire was fulfilled: his beloved pure beauties will live on and be revered for as long as there is a China and human hearts to love, grieve and awaken:

"The blessed end of all things eternal,  
do you know how I attained it?

Grieving love's deepest suffering opened my eyes  
I saw the world end."

How fitting a match are Kāmanīta and Vāsithī for stone and blossom, Precious Jade and Crimson Pearl Flower.



Richard and I pack up and take to the road with Sulipon, heading a few miles north to the retreat center at Ortonville for the weekend. There is a real heat in the air and, once we reach the place, I am glad to see the cool shade of the woods all around us. Weeping willows flow in the gentle breezes and, outside my window, some kind of small-leafed maple flimmers its fingers in the late afternoon light. All is peaceful and the light is green and gold.

This is only the second retreat this group has held (Guy Armstrong led their first) so many are somewhat new to the teaching and practice. We shall see how things proceed, but the setting alone should make for a calm and delightful session. It's some kind of Jewish conference center (named after a certain Henry Butzel) and thus is very well-maintained and fitted out – the rooms even have air-conditioning and private bathrooms.

Glenn Burdick, Sandra Berman and Richard have been the putters-together of this event and all seems to have been done to a refined perfection. Our first gath-

ering reveals a few familiar faces from the Chicago retreat and many more from Richard's evening sessions. We set the stage and speak of the attitude of learning – the model of the mind's own nature as pure, infinite and bright and, like into CS Lewis' Wardrobe: the further in you go, the bigger it gets.

Warm summer night – it's 10:00ish by the time we close but the dusk light is still in the gloaming, soon it will be midsummer.

## JUNE 20<sup>TH</sup> – 22<sup>ND</sup>

Sitting in the departure lounge at Washington Dulles airport, the steam of a mid-summer afternoon and the haze of thunderstorms has filtered in here, regardless of the "passengers only" rulings. At my back the clear English accents of the stewardesses exchange their news and pass away the mounting minutes before takeoff. The air burbles and clings to the skin like peach-juice.

All the contacts with the Michiganders have faded – only Sulipon and her mother came by this morning and Richard had been busy tidying up his various stray lines of business. On our way back from the retreat at Ortonville, as we sped down the summer highway towards a temptingly empty collection of hours, he had casually mentioned that Barbara Brodski and John Orr (the former Bhikkhu Piyavanno) had also just finished a retreat in the area and (along with 20 or so of their closest students) they would be at Barbara's house that evening in Ann Arbor and would be very pleased if I were able to drop by...

"The odds are slim and getting slimmer by the minute," I replied – my energy levels and capacity for one more thing having been reduced to zero or very close to it.

The last hours of the retreat had flowed by easily. These days were the first real heat of summer and had held the broad lawns, the rush-bordered lake and the graceful silver birches in a grip like that of curling tongs. Even at 9:00 p.m., when the sun was dipping at last to the horizon and we emerged from the evening session, the air was still close and steamy. Geese grazed in the falling light by the lake and a few folks carried on with some walking meditation as the color finally disappeared from the day.

I had talked that evening on Milarepa (who was on a Thangka above the shrine, observing the Ten Commandments, also affixed to the wall), on listening and the possibilities of practice as a layperson. Simultaneously I was working my way through *Breakdown* – a novel by the painter John Bratby, recommended by Richard – which was a riot of color from the late '50s but, as a novel, about as coherent as a teddy boy rumble down at Flodden Road. It had the weakest ending of any book I have read in a long time but it made an interesting contrast to the manicured aura and order of the Henry Butzel Center and the Precepts and routine of the retreat.

Sunday morning – the Solstice – the sun rose above the trees before 7:00 a.m. and the air was still warm from the night before. Above the roof of the main building – through the white branches of the tallest of the birches – there hung a perfect fingernail moon and its accompanying morning star, poised a few feet to its left.

We diminuendoed at 10:00 a.m. closing with some more stern encouragements on the Five Precepts. Once again the folks were wide-eyed at the concept of *hiriottappa* (moral sensitivity) as blessing rather than neurosis but, by now, they seemed to get the point. Judaeo-Christian conditioning always seems to incline the heart toward identifying with the feelings of regret around harm that we have done or dishonesty that we have displayed. It inflames the feeling of “I am guilty and a bad person” whereas hiriottappa manifests without any quality of “I” involved in it at all. It’s still an emotionally painful feeling but it needs to be to do its job. Just as physical pain is nasty but by that protects the body, so too hiriottappa is painful but it protects the heart. It’s only when the ego hijacks it and takes it over that it transmutes into a neurotic guilt fixation.

Glenn, Sandra (this day was also her birthday) and others all plugged nobly for a repeat next year – to every one of these the reply was given: “The future is uncertain.”

## JUNE 23<sup>RD</sup>

The night flight passed easily and sleeplessly – washed down with *The Apostle*, *The Man in the Iron Mask* and an absurd comedy about an anthropologist in New Guinea. As the last movie drew to its close we tilted for landing and pulled up to the terminal in a chill and grey, rainy English summer morn. Welcome home.

Zippering though the arrivals, a fellow called Ray from Amaravati stepped forward to say hello and carry me off, along a mobile but depressing M25 – everything is very green but the skies are heavy and ready to deliver more of their moisture very soon.

We pull into Amaravati to be met by Ajahn Attapemo and the sight of the new cloister walls – the whole of the courtyard has now been given over to the creation of the Temple and its attendant structures and today they are pegging out, and starting the digging, on the Abbot’s kuti by the lily pond.

Stepping into the *sālā*, Ajahns Vipassi, Akiñcano and Upekkhā are clustered in a post-gruel chat together; at the other end Luang Por Sumedho is ensconced with some new visitors. Now we are really home again! The scene of hundreds of days of meeting and greeting and talking in such ways – with dear friends and Dhamma-farers – comes back with a sweet aftertaste. I sit down and join them as if no time had passed. An hour goes by in their company, then with Luang Por and then and then ... I don’t make it out of the *sālā* until 2:00 p.m., when I beg relief from the latest round of well-wishers and news bearers. I snooze deeply for an hour and then go to Luang Por’s caravan for another chat at 3:00. Patimokkha recitation at 4:00 in the Temple – fluidly rendered by Tan Jutindharo (thankfully they weren’t depending on me to do it) and then the evening flowed on to the *pūjā* and a talk from Luang Por Sumedho.

It’s a small crew of bhikkhus these days (Ajahns Viradhammo and Kusalo were away) but all seems very harmonious. By the time we got to the Dhamma talk, however, it was so harmonious I almost merged with the furniture – delirium was

setting in and so I balked at the all-night sitting and retreated to my room, overlooking the Zen garden at the monks' vihāra.

Alone at last.

## JUNE 24<sup>TH</sup>

The day broke warm and bright. After the gruel time Luang Por and I went for a walk to Frithsden beeches and admired the Temple from the path above the old railway line: to the west stands the bastion of Mammon – Ashridge Management College, to the east the portals of secular power – Gaddesden Place (formerly the local squire's residence now the home of a computer magnate) and in the center, to the north, the golden spire of Amaravati, rising from the swell of oak-green and dark red tile of the Temple roof.

We strolled along the lush lanes, thickly overgrown with the year's unnatural fecundity – more rain and warmth than ever – so that the grasses and corn are thick and green beyond imagining. The dog roses tumbled in fragrant cascades from the hedgerows, lone poppies burst forth in the field margins determined not to let the pre-herbicide days be forgotten, local gardens erupted in ferocious and divine vigor (as at Amaravati), their flower beds barely seeming able to contain their multicolored cargoes within their borders. Earth in glory and the English Way manifesting its full potential.

Following a dense-headed afternoon rest I went to chat with Ajahn Sundarā for a while – she was just back from two-and-a-half years in Thailand and other Asian parts so it was good, as an old friend from the early days at Chithurst, to catch up on her story. Following this we both went to the ongoing study group, led by Sister Kovidā, investigating this time the subject of Refuge. The ten or so folks (including George Sharp, former chairman of the English Sangha Trust, the group who invited Ajahn Sumedho to England, and who is now a resident at Amaravati) were a little nervous with the two of us “spiritual giants” present but things got more easeful after a while – it was no surprise, given our general talkativeness, that the session continued until 7:15 and narrowly escaped eclipsing the evening pūjā. The sitting was bright and serene, although somewhat thinly populated.

## JUNE 25<sup>TH</sup>

And the *morning* sitting ... well, the only bhikkhus there were Luang Por and I... all things change.

I had a chat with the new Sister Santacittā (formerly Sylvia) as well as Sisters Kovidā and Mettā at the gruel time (I went for the tea only) which metamorphosed into being surrounded by a crowd of adoring women from Amaravati: Hope, Esther, an Australian from Bodhinyana, a dreadlocked one whose name I did not catch, plus several others. It became an in-depth Dhamma discussion on non-abiding and related approaches, lively and rich, and was only drawn to a close by the need for them all to go to the community work meeting at 8:30.

Crowds of visitors of various kinds had arrived by the mealtime including, quite unexpectedly, Maer Bau and her son Jinjok – the air force officer who had

hosted Luang Por and I at Daklee Air Force Base the last time we had been in Thailand together. It was a crazy day.

My mother, sister Jane and brother-in-law Tony arrived from the West Country during the meal so I took them through the Temple, and all the new jardinettes, and improvements around the place. A lot has changed since 1995 when I left here and, when you see it all in one chunk, it makes a very striking impression. Maman, being partially sighted, had brought her binoculars to get a full view of the new building and she, along with the others, was duly deeply impressed. Tony commented on how the Temple was amazingly light and spacious, yet warm and homey at the same time, because of the building materials. It was a delight to hear this as it had been the intention of the architect, and all of us involved in the planning of the building, to engender exactly this effect.

After a cuppa with them at the Bodhi House and their picnic lunch we headed out to Ivinghoe Beacon – a tall lone hill at the end of the Chilterns and the ancient road of the Ridgeway. Our walk got rained out (no surprise) but we enjoyed the ride through the lush greenery of the beech woods and lanes anyway.

They headed off at 4:00 and I went for the train at 5:00, to make the journey through Hertfordshire, London and Kent, where I was due to visit my alma mater (Sutton Valence School) – close to our original family home – and some old friends.

The ride in the Tube was as interesting as ever. It was rush hour, and the link between Euston and Charing Cross is a densely traveled one. A sweet young thing in a low-cut dress got on and reached high to clutch the overhead rail face-to-face with me – very close. It was a blessing that her boyfriend was squeezed in behind her, as it made the task of avoiding the sight of her uncovered chest all the easier. I got the feeling that many of the folks around us were watching to see if this monk would feast his eyes on the acreage of exposed skin, so I pointedly and vacantly stared up at the adverts and across into the middle distance – hi ho – another day, another test, another chance to do our best.

A beaming Brigitte Burnett – childhood friend and the only one of my former companions who has shown any interest in Dhamma and my life as a monk – was waiting at the station in Headcorn and we walked the couple of hundred yards through the village to her parents' house. They were still conducting a meditation session with their local group there, so we sat and had some tea until they finished. It was 11:00ish by the time we had said all our hello's and exchanged our current news. We have known each other for nearly 30 years now and are all considerably greyer and more wrinkled than in those days so long gone by.

The last job I had had to earn money for my journey to the East, in 1977, had been laboring for them on the renovation of this very house – it had taken ten more years, after I struck the first blow with the sledge hammer, and it had all been finished and furnished now for 12. It is an old, oak-beamed, rambling treasure of a house but, with the sounds of the street (including a riotous fish and chip shop, and the George & Dragon pub) and the railway at the end of the garden, all is not particularly quiet here.

JUNE 26<sup>TH</sup>

The rainy morning passed with long chats and endless cups of tea, Brigitte and her mother having no shortage of material for discussion – numerous collections of photos and news of family and friends filled the hours, tales of Paris and Martinique, New York and points more humble.

We rode up to Sutton Valence School for 11 o'clock and arrived at Father John's door to be met by him alone. Jacqui, his wife, had been called away by her father's recent death and so we headed up to the schoolmasters' common room for the meal, instead of at their house as planned. Having had something of a grim experience with the school, as a rebellious yooof in the late '60s and early '70s, I had avoided all contact for years after I had left, even though my parents still lived only a few miles away. Coincidentally it had been Brigitte's late brother Jonathan (also an alumnus) who had persuaded me that they might be glad if I got in touch. To my surprise the Chaplain, Father John Watson, (a Church of England minister but with close ties to the Coptic Church) responded swiftly and expressed great interest in my coming back to the school to give some talks. By this time, in 1998, I had returned on many occasions but this day's do was to be the highest profile event for me so far – the newly instituted Graduation Day address.

Jock McCormack (my former Latin teacher) and the Headmaster joined us for the repast; the whole affair was dominated by Jock's galloping nostalgia and the account of the most recent Old Boys dinner, at Leeds Castle. It was good to hear of the catalogue of names and histories but it is also painful to be living so much in times gone by and in characters long departed from the stage; he also passed on news of Chris Oliver's funeral and gave me a transcript of a collection of his poems: pages of verses addressed to Moroccan boys and the pungent wit of an observant eye on the vagaries of human life.

The afternoon hours flew by with more cups of tea and a stroll down the lanes to the edges of the Weald with Father John. The time for the talk soon arrived and, lo and behold, all was a bit of a scramble – being sandwiched in between a prize giving and a cocktail party – there was a traffic jam in the quad and we began the service half an hour late. It was a bit of a scrappy affair – chapel half full, everyone a bit flustered and rushed – but we bowled on through and I did a spiel on Siddhartha – “Wait, fast, pray” – and “Don't just stand there like a spare groom at a wedding, Horner, *do* something.” How it went down I'm not sure (there were few grateful comments) but, if even *one* person's life is positively affected by the event, and the words are not written off as sanctimonious codswallop but hang in the memory and help them to awaken, it was worth the effort.

Evading the cocktail party (on Father John's recommendation) we headed back to the Burnett's for an evening of England at the World Cup defeating Colombia 2-0. Major national hysteria for this: empty streets, power surges for the kettle at halftime, crowded pubs and midnight cries of “TWO NIL!!!” down Headcorn High Street – all attested to the sanctity of the affair. Although it only means they now have to face the great ARGENTINA on Tuesday...

Apparently the US got knocked out by being beaten by Iran and, although I suspect this was not even reported west of New York, in Tehran they danced all night. Sweet justice and revenge.

Brigitte's father did not return from his meditation class until 11:00ish (he's been teaching and practicing a form of vedic spiritual training for more than 30 years) and the score had to be kept secret from him, to maximize his appreciation of watching the tape of the match. It was amazing to step into the realm of soccer, a world with which I had had zero connection for years, and to find everyone so deeply enraptured – even Brigitte knew numerous members of the England team by name.

## JUNE 27<sup>TH</sup>

Rainy and cool again the next day, Brigitte and I walked over to meet her old friend Edna, and David, another friend from the village who was a spiritualist and a medium. We spent an hour or two at her house, just past the train station, but most of the conversation was dominated by David's questions to me – Brigitte and Edna hardly uttered a peep.

After the meal we piled into their car and headed for Chithurst, motoring along the M25, the A3 and the narrow lanes with ease and speed – in two hours we were there. We walked around, picking our way through to the beautifully tidy grounds and the myriad rabbits nibbling on the lawns. All was green and glorious and pristine for the ordinations on Sunday, tomorrow.

They had prepared well: all the necessaries had been done and there were not a hundred monks and nuns flocking around with last-minute crises. The place was still and calm – a fitting environment to encourage the going forth – and decked with flowers in every corner. The bell for tea rang and the Burnetts left, I went in to join the rest of the Sangha in the reception room and spent an hour or two with Ajahns Samvaro and Chandapālo, now at the monasteries in Switzerland and Italy respectively. There was no evening pūjā so I retired early to the forest and to the dwelling I had been allotted: the Ānanda Kutī, above the weir in the western corner of the woods.

This had been newly built in a grove of silver birches and was a silent and warm little nook. Having started on *Pope Joan*, bequeathed me by Father John, I spent a few more hours devouring it: a good, page-turning yarn and a fascinating trip into 9<sup>th</sup> Century European life, in the darkest of the dark ages after the collapse of the Carolingian empire. The night is still and silent but for the roar of the weir in the muffled distance.

## JUNE 28<sup>TH</sup>

A sweet dawn broke clear and warm over the forest. I potted along to the gruel meeting in the marquee and spent a good while in further news exchange with Samvaro and the others.

The day flowed seamlessly by: tea and chat with Ajahn Sucitto until ceremonies began at 10:00 a.m. with giving the Five Precepts and chanting the paritta

blessings, to invoke all the auspicious forces to support and gladden the day. Then the rice-*pindabaht* (oh how the faces are growing older!) dear friends over the yawning years, snowy hairs and sagging jowls multiply, infants grow full-breasted and fathom-long; Noy and cousin Sisalai offer the meal.

With the early afternoon the ceremony begins and rain threatens; prayers to local *nāgas* (the dragon gods and administrators of the weather) are rapidly voiced, the ordinations being out-of-doors in the garden of Chithurst House; Nipako and Kalyano, the two noble candidates, make the leap; Mother Bee is here to see her second son go forth; tears and joy; the rain remains restrained; long chat with Nick Scott, old *tudong* companion, in the office; eventually replaced by Sister Jitindriyā and Ajahn Candasirī; we wind up at 9:00 as the wind winds down; back to the forest again: it was all a dream.

A still evening at the Ānanda Kutī, the weir roars ever on.

## JUNE 29<sup>TH</sup>

A long chat unfolds with Sister Mettā after breakfast, followed by the good Maureen, whose mother and sister I had just met in Ann Arbor. Beautiful women, pure in the aspiration, dear to the heart – before we know it the bell for the meal is ringing. *Post prandium* I beat a retreat to the woods (too many words!) and an afternoon of rest, reading and writing – plus a moment or two of undistracted non-meditation.

I came in at 5:00 for an appointment to receive offerings from the new bhikkhus but they had spaced out in conversation with Luang Por (fair enough) so I had some tea and brie with Ajahn Tiradhammo (his birthday), Ajahn Munindo, (these two were abbots of the monasteries in Switzerland and Northumberland respectively), Ajahn Attapemo, Ajahn Samvaro and Ajahn Akiñcano and then got word that Edward Lewis from Tiburon had just arrived. Finding him in the kitchen, I was also met by Robert Montague-Scott, so we repaired to the reception room and talked of Abhayagiri, Edward's Paris, etc. etc., until the bell for the evening sitting rang.

Time seemed to have contracted (and was warping through Ajahn Sucitto's chanting) and the meditation of an hour seemed extraordinarily long. So many words – the hours so densely packed – they had seemingly shortened the perceptual limit by at least 50%. It was good to be part of the stillness once again.

After the sitting Ajahn Sucitto invited me over to his kutī at the granary and we shared tea and conversation on poetry, and Sangha life, 'til well past 11:00 – we could probably have gone on for much of the night if we had chosen to but the promise of an eight-hour meeting the next day sent us bedward through the rain. It was bucketing by this time and, quite by chance, I found myself settling for a night in the house rather than the trek back to the forest – albeit only a ten-minute one. Some worldly refuges are highly attractive at times.

## JUNE 30<sup>TH</sup>

The whole day seemed to be swallowed by the Elders' Council meeting, although there were many little addenda to this also. The meeting spoke of a host of small

items needing to be sorted, but it had none of the emotive angst-laden quality of recent years. Of particular significance were: the prospect of the Massachusetts Monastery invitation, (“we can’t decide for a year,” was the reply); the continuation of the three-four month, *chee prom* model for women taking the Eight Precepts at Abhayagiri; and, lastly, the promise of Sister Jitindriyā to be with us for the winter. We also heard that Sister Thānasantī was confirmed for the October retreat at Spirit Rock and that Ajahn Sundarā is to planning to come with Luang Por Sumedho in the spring of 1999. These are good pieces of news for us in the USA.

Ajahn Karuniko was chairing the meeting – smoothly done (if occasionally hustled somewhat by Ajahn Sucitto) – and the day was punctuated by a trip to Ash House with Ven. Thānuttaro, the elder brother of Tan Kalyano and someone with whom I had been a friend since long before his ordination. We had been invited there to have a meal by Noy Thomson, a friend and supporter of Chithurst since the very earliest days of the community here. She passed on a whole slew of the latest gossip, of who is partnering whom, and her struggles with impatience and anger; we drank in her kindness with appreciation. She misses all the folks she knew and the passing of the age at Chithurst. There’s hardly any of the old crowd left – but that’s the way...

The Sangha meeting wound to its conclusion with the usual banter of exhaustion and impatience and cheerfully tied itself up on time at 5 o’clock. It’s a joy to march steadily through this tide of mundane items – all dedicated to the support and furtherance of the spiritual life – in such a civil and honest manner; different points of view get voiced, propositions made and deposed or saluted, questions are put forth and complaints heard with a whole heart. How well we humans can do when we put our minds to it: meeting, conversing and parting in harmony – not much in one sense, but in another the greatest of achievements.

Post meeting separations ensued with Ajahn Munindo, Sister Siripaṅṅā, Luang Por and Ajahn Akiñcano all heading off to their respective places. Tomorrow Sister Jitindriyā, Ajahn Tira and Ajahn Candasiṛī will depart, Ajahn Chandapālo and I on Thursday should be the last of all. The night closed with the last pages of *Pope Joan* – gasping in childbirth like Vāsithī at the Parinibbāna: consummation and demise occurring simultaneously. The night has closed in and the only sounds are the pen and the chortle of owls – goodnight.

## JULY 1<sup>ST</sup>

It seemed that very little help had come forth for Ajahn Attapemo on the subject of the opening ceremonies for the Amaravati Temple, a year from now, so I offered to sit down and brainstorm with him on the subject. He thus stayed an extra day and, after the gruel meeting, we spent the morning rattling our way through schedules, guest lists, publications and logistics. By the end of the morning there was a palpable sense of reassurance in the air and the makings of a game plan for the four-day event – whether it will actually fall out as we have planned, who knows? But, nonetheless, we have at least conjured up a reasonable shape for the beast. I will also be

plugging in with various meetings and plans over the coming months – either as I pass through England or via long-distance communication.

After the meal Anagarikā Joanne came and said hello and, in the fifteen-minute interlude that she made in her stint at the washing-up, she gave me an update on her spiritual life. She has been an anagarikā for nigh on three years now but, thankfully, has given up torturing herself to DECIDE – should she go or stay? Owing to a crucial conversation with me when she was still a lay-woman, she has made a point of checking in whenever I am passing through. As with most of the monastic community, it is revealing and remarkable the changes that we all go through – and how visible when there are months or years between contacts. She is a great being and, once she has clearly opened up the Path before her, there will be little capable of stopping her from reaching the goal.

I retreated once more to the forest for the day's abiding and resurfaced to have tea with Ajahn Sucitto and Ajahn Attapemo. Again, we spent most of the time on the Temple Opening questions and, in particular, the publications that are in the offing for the event.

The evening brought the official closing of the ordination session and a grand sharing of the remaining folks who had been gathered for the events. It was also the first anniversary of our dear old friend Alina's death – I had just spotted her burial plot out to the east of the Ajahn Chah Stupa only a day or two before.

The evening was a slow-paced session – many long silences – but it picked up energy as the night wore on and people's nervousness diminished. It can take a while for the efforts of burrowing into the heart to reach the buried gold and to feel safe enough that, when brought to the surface, raiders and raucous ones will not grab your treasure and run with it, or scorn it. Many lovely words, golden words, eventually came to light and we carried them out into the ghost-still night, bearing them in circumambulation around the Stupa. Afterwards we even came in for chai and chat before retiring – a move that the old Ajahn Sucitto would have dismissed with furrowed curtness: "What do we need tea for? We're all just going to sleep..."

## JULY 2<sup>ND</sup>

It was 2:30 a.m. after chatting, packing and cleaning up and our departure time was to be 5:30 so, after a blink of sleep we took to the road: Edward Lewis, Ajahn Attapemo, Stuart (the driver) and I. Vigorous chats on the way cut the journey down to a flash. Once at the airport Stuart drove off, Ajahn Attapemo met his lift and Edward and I parted in search of our separate planes – both headed for San Francisco but by different routes.

In lounges and on the plane I work my way through the tragedies, farces and joys of *A Fine Balance*, Rohinton Mistry's poignant tale of life in Indira Ghandi's India, finishing the epilogue a half hour before touching down in the thick fog of San Francisco's summer. Along the way we were treated to *Sliding Doors*, an intriguing romance running on two possible story-lines simultaneously, and

a highly forgettable *Lost in Space* sci-fi epic, notable mostly for the great spider-mutant villain revealing his true colors at the dénouement of the story.



As he couldn't be there to drive me himself, Edward had organized a limo for me at the airport and, to my small embarrassment, it was the grandest of the cars pulling up at the United Airlines kerbside. I piled into the huge space – complete with cocktail cabinets and TV – but soon moved close to the driver to chat along the way. To my surprise she (Helena Havelock) had been to Ubon, our home province in North-east Thailand, in days gone by and had been part of various Buddhist outfits over the years. It was one of those sweet, brief encounters – unlikely to be repeated – that recur over and over in the human realm – some strange circumstance brings you together, you meet and merge for the duration of a journey, a wait for a train, and then it's gone. A contact innocent, pure and complete like a night-flowering cactus – one blossom, one moment and it's over.

She delivered me to Edward's house in Tiburon where I found that Jean-Marie, a regular manager of Spirit Rock retreats, had been house-sitting. After unpacking I pottered for a while but, since Edward had still not arrived by 7:00 p.m. (3:00 a.m. GMT) I called it quits and faded, delivered into the sound of the gentle waves of the Bay lapping somewhere far below us.

## PART VI

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# TIBURON – SPIRIT ROCK – ABHAYAGIRI

### JULY 3<sup>RD</sup>

AFTER ALL THE TRAVELING AND VERBAL CONTACT this whole day passed by in virtual solitude – blessed aloneness hour after hour. Apart from an excursion to the Good Earth for a meal, the time was passed in the upper room at Edward’s house sitting, lying, reading, dozing: like a long long exhalation into nothingness.

Night comes over the Bay at last, as hoots of revelers and roaring boats speed by the window – yachts are gathering in the calm waters below us and the glow of the holiday weekend spreads all around. My eyes are tired and there is no room for even a faint glimmer of the desire for stimulus. To soft sounds of water I lie down and instantaneously fall into sleep.

### JULY 4<sup>TH</sup>

Interdependence Day and a time to celebrate freedom from the tyranny of Greed, Hatred and Delusion. It’s also Spirit Rock’s opening day for the new meditation hall and residence buildings and – as I sit here in one of the new bedrooms early on Monday morning, listening to the sounds of songbirds in the trees outside my window and the random gobbling of wild turkeys – it’s hard to believe that this hasn’t all been here forever.

We arrived early (Edward and I) in order to be able to look around a little and say hello to some folks before all the festivities began. It was a day of smiles and greetings and mutual congratulations and, by the end of it all, my face ached from the muscular activity which had been required of it.

It was a beautiful day: well thought-out and well-executed in all its dimensions – including the pair of pigeons who had taken up residence in the new hall, and the last minute muddle and script-collation amongst the teachers before ceremonies began.

We processed in (I placed at the head) reciting the “*Namo tassa...*” over and over. We gave the Refuges and Precepts. We read the *Satipatthāna Sutta*. We invited into the Center all the individuals and groups who had coalesced to make it happen: the staff, the Board, the teachers, the ex-helpers – one by one each was called up to received due honor – including the architects, the fundraisers, the neighboring farmer, *everyone!* For each new group or person Jack Kornfield or James Baraz gave a little background speech to expound on what they had contributed – each one a unique facet of the jewel, indispensable to the complete beauty. One of the most notable and skillful accolades was that made to the *wives* of the teachers – Jack made it very clear, especially to his wife Liana who was there, that without their direct support, the teachers would not be able to function as they did. In mid-flow Robert Hall’s partner Alfredo exclaimed: “We’ve earned this!” to a wave of agreeing nods from all those around him.

The day flowed along as easily as the sun passing across the clear blue sky, illuminating the golden grasses and bottle-green oaks around us. This day was the culmination of many years of effort and incalculable meetings. Jack's dream of a West Coast center to partner IMS had now inarguably come to fruition.

Wes Nisker and his partner Terry Vandiver sat and had their lunch with me and then all reconvened in the bright octagonal hall. All corners, every pathway, was filled with good-humored chatter and greeting of old friends – the air brimmed and bubbled with gladness and goodwill. During the afternoon we had a couple of guided mettā meditations (from Sylvia Borstein at the beginning and Mary Orr at the end), a talk from Jack (repeatedly addressed as “Our Fearless Leader”) and an open sharing from the floor time, for the assembled folks to speak of memories and their stories of Spirit Rock's foundation. All this was pretty lively – and it had been helped along in its energy by a couple of songs, in the early afternoon, from James and Wes and Terry.

As the sun dipped towards the western ridges we made our ways to the cars. Behind us, on white ribbons, our prayers and heartfelt wishes fluttered from the pillars around the courtyard in glistening dozens. Our jaws were tired from the smiling hours but the effort had been worth it – a great day to launch the ship for the next millennium. AND *nota bene*, in the face of all the colorful rituals, hardly a mention of vipassanā and its concomitants... an ironic fact indeed after the emphasis that Spirit Rock had made in its early days of consciously dispensing with the ritual element of spiritual practice in Asia. Even having co-opted a clip of people bowing and chanting from the BBC film *The Mindful Way*, of Ajahn Chah's Monastery, to show in *their* promotional film (this was back in 1990) what Spirit Rock was *NOT* going to be about. Everything changes.

## JULY 5<sup>TH</sup>

Once again Edward and I piled into his car after breakfast and headed to Spirit Rock – this time for my participation in a family day. A slightly more colorful and less controlled, but equally well-organized collage of songs and sittings, rituals and prayers and (for one group at least) even a hike through the hills. On this latter we were treated to the amazing scene of the one boy who had brought along some water, offering only to *sell* it to the others on the walk, then, the deal having been struck for 12 cents, he took the money and didn't give any water to anyone, simply raised his price to 25 cents, then to a dollar. The disgust was complete but he – what a life he's heading for – seemed oblivious to the stupidity and ugliness of his actions. Eight years old and already lost in deceit and greed. It was also interesting that none of the adults were going to force him into parting with the water – he had to work it out for himself.

Once again the day wound down around the late afternoon and the gently glowing crowds wended their way home. I took myself up to one of the corner rooms in one of the new accommodation buildings – Mettā – and ensconced myself for the evening. Even though the good Seth Castleman, head of the family program and dear friend, came with a tray of tea I could feel the batteries fading fast again –

after all of the output of the last couple of days, plus the changing time zones – by 8:00 p.m. and two strong cups of the tea the descent had not been interrupted. It became clear that resistance was futile so, with a graceful surrender into the dusk of San Geronimo valley, I bid good night to it all.

## JULY 6<sup>TH</sup>

A bright, still morning and the scent of bay trees coming through my window – all is quiet. I wander down to the kitchen/dining room and find Lizzie Gerson – freshly back from Israel and her life in Guatemala – who had put some breakfast together to offer. She asked if she could stay and chat so we spent the next hour exchanging stories and descriptions of our respective rural lifestyles: she speaking of her lake in the Guatemalan highlands, I talking of the Monastery routines and its landscape. Time flowed easily by as the day warmed up and the bustle of preparations began to gather momentum in the kitchen – the rest of the cooks and managers moving to and fro bearing boxes of vegetables and gleeful smiles.

It was soon 9:00 a.m. and the meeting for the family retreat had the honor of being the inaugural event in the new Council House. It is a beautiful, high-ceilinged, airy space with colors and furnishings that invite ease and companionship. Seth, Julie Wester, Lisa McCool and I met for a good couple of hours and ran through the mass of logistics for the weekend in August. There was a lot to figure out but, with such a crew of good-hearted, practical and skillful people at the helm, there was little anxiety or tension over the prospect of the event – more than 100 folks are expected (little and large).

Down to the kitchen again for the meal and the place is humming. I sit with my bowl at the back door, which turns out to be the high street for the veggie carriers rather than the quiet shady corner I had hoped for. A somewhat bruised and frazzled Beth Baker (kitchen coordinator) came and sat beside me for a while to cool down – I felt like an old, shady oak that does not need to say more than: “Welcome ... sit and be still, if you like.”

I had arranged to have a chat with Mary Orr at 2:00 pm; I wended my way down to the lawn in front of the Community Hall and found her walking up from the parking lot. She brought me up-to-date on the dramas of her community and also recounted how she had been becoming more and more involved in investigating prayer (in a Buddhist context) after some experiences she had had teaching at the Quaker Center in Pendle Hill, Pennsylvania.

It seems that, in many ways, the vipassanā element is becoming a smaller and smaller slice of the Dhamma pie for the Spirit Rock community – just by virtue of the various teachers discovering new skillful means, and areas of their lives that the strict *anicca-dukkha-anattā* analysis of formal meditation has failed to reach. Through her new-found Buddhist prayers Mary had begun to discover very tangible effects, and a deep sense of peace and love that she had not met before simply through concentration and insight practices. Whole worlds open up before us as we discover the other colors on the Buddha’s palette.

At 3:00 there was a meeting for the Spirit Rock teachers – partially to plot out the weeklong retreat that was to begin that evening and partially to discuss a particularly thorny conflict in the community. We started with the latter.

It became clear, very quickly, that one of the parties would accept no blame or criticism and asserted 100% victimhood. That very inflexibility was what cleared any doubts that were lingering as to how to assess the issue fairly. A cruel irony that one: our determination to stick to our guns, in the face of all the heartfelt advice of our closest friends, is the very thing that defeats our cause... If he had just said, “The situation was a mess and I too helped to create it,” that would have shifted the mood... It remains to be seen what will come of it. I was the only one who did not speak, silence seeming to be more and more appropriate as the minutes spiralled by.

After the full feeling-out of this great tangle we got on with the rest of the show – an aura of both pain and relief in the air.

I had tea alone in my room – sheltering from the blaze of the day and the jabber of conversation – and headed up to the new hall for the launch of the retreat. Folks were already gathering inside and, amidst last-minute preparatory and conspiratorial mutterings, the 18 teachers mapped out the last details of the format:

We processed in chanting “*Namo tassa...*”

Sylvia spoke a few words.

James gave an introduction to the Precepts.

I led the recitation of the Refuges, etc.

Julie gave an introduction to the *Dhammacakka-pavattana Sutta* – the Buddha’s first discourse, *The Setting in Motion of the Wheel of Dhamma*, on the Four Noble Truths.

We sat in silence for five minutes.

I recited the Sutta in Pāli – silence again.

Jack read an abbreviated translation of the Sutta, then said a few words.

We closed the evening and most departed.

It was a glorious and powerful night – the words of the chanting rolled out with power and ease – the momentum of 2500 years of faith in the Dhamma behind them. Time stopped as the Wheel was set rolling once again – it was a good omen for the ethos of Spirit Rock that it should choose these words of quintessential potency as its launching anthem. Jack bowed copiously afterwards, asking to be forgiven for having asked me for a shortened revision, Robert Hall and others were visibly moved, never having heard the like in their lives before. It was a precious and unique instant – perfect and unrepeatable – afterwards I sat up in the all until 10:30, the shades of jet lag having been banished by the Great Light of the evening.

How strange, yet familiar and fitting, that the day that the Teachers Circle made its first non-unanimous decision was the very day the Center was properly born. Welcome to real life: a beautiful day, a painful day, a good day.

A very good day indeed.

## JULY 7<sup>TH</sup>

Dawn came, still and pure – a low mist filling the valley bottom in the distance, the sky above us Prussian blue velvet, set with the morning star.

The early sitting (6:15) is in silence and is followed by a communal chattering of the teachers at breakfast – just as the sun breaks over the hill crest to the east.

Morning meditation instructions come from Julie, Guy and Jack and the hours unwind until midday – including another impromptu planning meeting in the council house. I receive my meal at the head of the line and make my way out to the sweat-lodge area, beside the almost dried-up creek. Taking a seat under the shade of a large bay tree, I spread my mat and sit down to eat alone. Dappling shade, fragrance of bay and the accumulated silence of 100 souls weaves a spell around the glade of serenity and pure life.

As I needed to leave that afternoon they gave me the early Dhamma talk slot at 3:30 – I gave the familiar outlines of Right Attitude and the essential nature of mettā. It seemed to go down well – even though the hall full of (mostly) ol' time Vipassanā warriors must have heard it all before. It is a strange crowd: probably only a couple under 35 in the whole room – the ageing faithful of People's Park and the Woodstock Nation, the well-heeled seekers of happiness beyond comfort in Marin County.

Young Aaron comes to collect and we take some tea before departure. It's 6:30 by the time we eventually leave – dropping into the ever-more-popular Council House to say a cheerio to the teachers gathered there. Broad smiles and applause for chanting, mingle with *añjalis* and waves of goodwill – and so to the road and the north, and the dear confines of Redwood Valley once again.

We arrive at Abhayagiri at 8:30, having come through the rolling, boulder-strewn country lanes of West Marin via Nicasio and the Hicks Valley Cheese Factory. By the time all the hello's have been said and a cursory glance has been given to the mail heap, it is 10:30 and feeling late.

Tired legs carry me gladly up the dusty hill into the gathering dark. The moonlight is already bright as we approach the 15<sup>th</sup> day of the lunar fortnight; silver blue shimmers call in mottled tones from the leaves of the madrones and manzanitas which line the walk.

The log cabin is at the end of the path; the lamp is charged, the water jug filled, the floor swept and the bedding laid out. In appreciation and a glow of glad return to the mountain, eventually I lie down to sleep.

## JULY 8<sup>TH</sup> – ĀSĀLHĀ PŪJĀ

### THE LAST DAY IN THE GREAT CYCLE

Following the return there is always the shaving, bathing, pile of laundry and the (almost) equally huge collection of mail – cyber and snail – that has accumulated along the way.

After giving all these a fair amount of attention in the morning, and now that we have Tan Sudanto amongst us, the four resident bhikkhus gathered to do the

Pātimokkha. This was not the first time it had been recited here – in the days of Paññasāra and Nānasobhano we did it several times, and most recently, on Visākhā Pūjā, after the ordination of Tan Karunadhammo – but it felt somehow very special in that it was, at last, four resident bhikkhus of our own lineage, gathered together in harmony.

Ajahn Pasanno did the recitation – bless his heart – I had diligently taken my Pātimokkha book along with me on my travels but, surprise surprise, found no occasion on which I felt inspired/energized/mindful enough to do more than admire its cover and the values it stands for – “How vain is the hope of man.”

After the meal I returned to the mail heap and continued digging until Norman Fischer, abbot of Green Gulch Zen Center, showed up at 3:30. Although we are close friends and I have made numerous trips to teach and visit him at his place, up until now he had never made it to Abhayagiri. Now that we had the excuse of his former student – Michael Dietzel – going forth as a sāmanera and having pressed him on the subject in public at Ayya Khema’s memorial, he had had no chance of escape and, at last, here he was.

However, it always catches me by surprise when I meet Zen priests in mufti – something is always half-expecting the flowing kimono and the butterfly sleeves, the kesa-robe arranged neatly over the shoulder – a fedora at a rakish tilt on the shaven head and Banana Republic jeans don’t quite have the same effect. Nevertheless, after a couple of blinks it all falls into place – “The abbot in jeans – OK” – and we continue on our merry way.

The weather hasn’t heated up too much yet so we go for a bit of a walk around and visit some of the kufīs: along with Norman has come a young priest who is his assistant, but none of Michael’s old buddies – Meg, Jeremy and the Charlies were all unable to make it. We ambled along and made an easy tour of it – chatting about the prospects of their new land in Lake County along the way. When we finally made it back to the main buildings there was a prodigious burble emerging from the assembled folks in the Dhamma Hall – the hordes were already gathering for the evening.

By the time that the ceremonies began quite a collection of friends and the faithful had assembled: Michael’s parents, brother and ex-girlfriend had all come down from Washington State, Anita Wenninck’s mother and stepfather were there also, Greg Scharf had appeared out of the woodwork after another stint at IMS, and Craig Randolph (a dancer with the English National Ballet, and whose family live in the Bay Area) breezed in on another trip from England. All the Sanghapala regulars were there plus a host of coastal and other stray local characters. These times are such a heartwarming charge: seeing all these dear friends gathering in good spirit, joining to wish well to Michael and Don Sperry (on his way to taking the Eight Precepts this evening) in their endeavors to realize the Truth. When humans gather to rejoice in the good, with calm and wisdom in their hearts, this displays their nature at its finest.

In fitting fatherly fashion Michael’s dad filmed the whole ceremony and was able to record the bestowal of his new name: Pāsādiko – admirable, lovely, beauti-

ful to behold. Like a marriage, an ordination is a mixture of love and loss – many tears from the mother who is losing her beloved baby but glad to see him fulfilling his own dream. The most touching of moments came when the ordination was done and his family came up to him, one by one, on their knees, and each offered him a red rose – rare, rare in the world is there such beauty, and such noble bearing of pain interwoven.

After all the festivities of the ordination and the Dhamma talk we held a candlelit circumambulation of the meditation hall. Lights, flowers and incense held in our folded palms as we recalled the ancient sacredness of that day: two months after the Buddha had realized enlightenment he had met up with his five former companions, in the deer park outside of Varanasi, and had conveyed to them the insight that he had awakened to. This was again the *Dhammacakka-pavattana Sutta*, the turning of the Wheel. About 32,000 full moons ago, as the deer browsed by the midsummer moonlight, the lean and rag-robed, 35-year-old Buddha explained the principles of the Middle Way and the Four Noble Truths to his old ascetic friends. It is said that the earth shook as the first of them understood and – in a way – the reverberations of that primal shock of wisdom’s power are still rippling around the world, 2,586 years later, to bless us all with its guiding light. It is something to celebrate.

After planting our candles and incense before the Buddha shrine on the hill, we came in and settled down for the rest of the evening – numbers of folks headed home or to their hotels at this time, the residents continued on.

I had been highly charged by the Dhamma-chanda of the evening but, by midnight, I was happy to follow Ajahn Pasanno’s encouragement to retire – it had been a long three months. Some of the brave spirits – Ñānamuni, Karunadhammo, Sudanto, et al. – headed up the mountain after midnight tea to spend the rest of the vigil communing with the moon and the wilds. Even though the bear and the mountain lion populations have escalated recently, they met none, in fact – “The worst of the wild creatures we had to deal with were the mosquitoes.”

“Yeah, they were BAD.”

*Evam.*

1999

*Rugged Interdependency*

*Generosity in the Land of the  
Individualist*

# RUGGED INTERDEPENDENCY

## GENEROSITY IN THE LAND OF THE INDIVIDUALIST

*Adapted from a Dhamma talk given at Abhayagiri Monastery on the occasion of the first Kathina ceremony held there, in October 1999.*

THE BUDDHIST FESTIVAL KNOWN AS THE KATHINA revolves around the simple act of offering a piece of cloth to a monastic. But it's really much more than that. What this ceremony symbolizes is the profound relationship between the two halves of the Buddhist community: the Sangha and lay society. In the Kathina, there is a recognition of the physical dependency of the monastics on their lay supporters.

In the US, the idea of consciously becoming dependent on others is anathema to us. This is the land of the rugged individualist, where "we don't need nothin' from nobody." We get out there and do it on our own. Plough the land. Build a house. Make our own world. The way people relate to those living on welfare, handouts, or begging illustrates society's view that dependence is a lower form of life. You have failed if you are on welfare. You are in a degraded state if you need help. Most people would probably agree that this is the national mindset.

So what on earth is this business of choosing to live on handouts for the rest of your life? The setup in the Buddhist tradition runs counter to the self-sufficient, rugged-individualistic mindset. People often say to us: "You mean you don't grow anything? You just live on what people give you?" They become puzzled or upset. These things need to be explained.

However it might be misconstrued by others, the Buddha himself was very clear about the value of monastics being physically dependent on the greater lay community. For one, religious figures often get put into a high position in society. They become invested with a lot of power and authority by people around them. Begging is a brilliant way of limiting that area of power and control. While you may be an extremely high and revered spiritual teacher, at the beginning of the day, your bowl is still empty. You have no money to buy what you want or to go where you like. There may be a lot of power and authority in some areas of your life, but there is zero in others. Physical dependence is a skillful way to keep the power given to religious figures under control and in balance.

We can also reflect on the four requisites as laid out by the Buddha: food, lodging, robes, and medicine. These are the basic supports for life. Because of our dependency, we reflect on the physical needs that we have and we learn to use frugally what we have been given. We reflect on being easy to support. Of course, these are not highly refined metaphysical reflections; they are much more basic. The monk is hungry; give him food. This one's cold; wrap some cloth around him. The relationship between the monastics and the lay community is built on that physical dependency. We are not able to ask for anything and therefore must rely entirely upon the effect of the quality of our lives. If our lives are useful and have

meaning to the greater community, then the bits of cloth will show up. The food will arrive. And if our lives are not worthy, then it won't show up.

The Buddha was a genius in establishing this kind of relationship. Simply to survive, the monastics must consciously and on a daily basis interact with the greater society. We can't depend upon ourselves. We can't live independently from you. We can't shut the door and say that you lay people are not welcome to visit us "serious meditators." Our bodies are fueled by the food you offer us. In fact, scientists say that all the cells of the body are replaced every seven years, so any of us who has been ordained for that long now has a body that has been completely donated.

Looking at our lives of dependency in this way, we start to relate to things in a different fashion. If it were not for the accumulated kindnesses, efforts, and goodwill of countless hundreds and thousands of people, this body would not be able to sustain itself. Kindness is the actual physical fabric of what we think of as Me. Monastics are made up of all those little potluck dishes you have offered to us. I find this a very beautiful and comforting thought.

In return, the monastic community endeavors to live life in a way that brings clarity of mind. Our intention is to live harmoniously and respectfully both within our community as well as within the greater world. We create and hold a space – a sacred space that encourages safety and freedom. Within this environment, the very best qualities of the human heart can be developed.

Not surprisingly, one of these qualities is that of generosity. The Buddha said: "If you knew the karmic results of giving, you wouldn't eat even one meal without sharing what you've got with somebody else." Ajahn Sumedho often adds: "Happiness is when you get what you want, but joy comes from giving." Perhaps this sounds like a line to get people to empty their pockets: "Giving is really good for you folks." As Jimmy Swaggart used to say: "The rattle of small change makes me nervous. Only folding money please."

And, of course, these kinds of teachings *can* be abused; however, the Buddha felt it was so important to establish an economy of gifts that he was prepared to be criticized on the one hand by the brahmins – who felt he had betrayed his class by forsaking his life as a noble prince and begging in the streets – and on the other hand by the *samanas*, the ascetic wanderers, who felt it was outrageous that the Buddha would sometimes accept offerings of fine food, expensive cloth, and grand dwelling places. The Buddha's reasoning on this latter point was that, as long as an offering was not solicited and the nun or monk used it for supporting the practice of the holy life without attachment, it could be considered a pure offering.

Through practice, we can experience for ourselves that giving is so powerful because it is the most practical and direct method of counteracting selfishness. That which wants to hang on to something for Me is a barricade blocking the door to liberation. Me first! means Me last to Nibbāna. That which doesn't want to bother with other people, and is concerned only with my own protection, my own comfort and my own preferences, is the real problem.

In Asian countries, babies are taught when they are about six months old to put food into the alms bowls of the monastics. The whole family applauds as the sticky rice drops from that little hand into the monk's bowl. The kid gets the idea early on: when the stuff leaves your hand, happiness happens. It feels good to give.

But generosity is not just giving material things. It's also giving one's time or attention. It's being in conversation and actually listening to what the other person is saying. How many of us can do that? That is a true form of giving. In giving our attention, we are giving our heart.

The Buddha talked about different ways of giving. There's what he might have called cheapo giving, which says: "I'm going to get rid of this anyway, so I might as well give it to you." Then there's the medium level of giving, which is sharing something that is valuable to you with others. However regal giving, or *rāja dāna*, is the most powerful form of giving. It is giving what is most precious to you. With all three forms, giving with an expectation of return is not giving at all. It's called cutting a deal. Deal-making does not bring particularly bright states of mind. It's more like a business transaction: "I'll stake this much and get back that much." Instead, giving should be done as the Christians recommend – without expecting anything in return. You are not giving in order to get; giving is a pure and unselfish act of kindness.

There is often a barrier to giving, though. When you think about giving away something that you like, questions come up: "Can I really afford this?" "Maybe I haven't got the time." We might have to exert some real effort to climb over these barriers of second thoughts, and this is not comfortable. There can be feelings of grief or pain when we give something to another person. But on the other side, there is a sigh of relief. Now we are in a space of freedom. When we make a gesture to go against self-centered habits, we feel delight.

The Buddha also made a clear reference to the fact that giving impersonally to the Sangha is of far greater karmic significance than giving to an individual, even if that person is a fully enlightened Buddha. In giving to an individual, we are still caught within the bounds of the idea of self: "This is me here giving to you there." That's the human tendency. Something in us wants to bond to a particular monk or teacher on a one-to-one basis. However, it's of far greater benefit to everyone to give from the heart whatever supports the Sangha and therefore all beings. By that very gesture, we have expanded our own heart beyond the personal, self-centered view.

It is in this way that the offering of the Kathina cloth – and all these other useful gifts for the Monastery – is the most meritorious of all material offerings to the Sangha. The simple gesture of offering cloth is a way of manifesting the interdependence of our relationship. The monastics and the lay people are a single, unified, whole community. What is given to us will be used and looked after. Your offerings will be helpful to the development of this Monastery and to this way of life for years to come, and this will be of benefit to all of us – lay and monastic alike – as well as to the greater world around us.

2007

*Epilogue*

*“... go on with your story”*

## EPILOGUE

“...go on with your story.”

MORE THAN EIGHT YEARS HAVE PASSED since the time *Golden Highways Revisited* was written. Many changes have come about in the places and people described: some have died, some have married; some institutions have blossomed, some have crumpled and disappeared.

In order to give the reader a continuing sense of the evolution and flow of these changes, here are listed some of the details of what has come after; they are arranged in no particular order.

🌸 Sāmaneras Ñānamuni and Pāsādiko both left the community within the year; the repeated absences of one of their ajahns (namely *moi*) being cited as one of the causes. My schedule for the latter part of 1998 was cut back, events were cancelled and, since this time, the community as a whole has decided on what invitations are to be accepted or not. Prior to this time it had been my choice alone. A brief tallying of the talks and retreats I gave, and the meetings and ceremonies I attended in the 105 days covered by the journal, should serve amply to show what saying Yes to everything can lead to:

Dialogues and meetings: ~ 68

Days leading retreats (i.e. usually at least one talk per day): ~ 47

Dhamma talks (not during retreats): ~ 19

Ceremonies: ~ 15

🌸 Spirit Rock has gone from strength to strength. Their retreats and classes are mostly full but there are still endless discussions about the amount to charge people and how to live as lay teachers within the *dāna* principle [[www.spiritrock.org](http://www.spiritrock.org)].

🌸 Norman Fischer retired from the post of co-abbot of Zen Center. He now heads up his own small organization, Everyday Zen, dedicated to making Buddhist practices and principles as widely accessible as possible [[www.everydayzen.org](http://www.everydayzen.org)].

🌸 Anagarika Don Sperry was ordained as Bhikkhu Jotipālo at Abhayagiri in July of 2000; after his fifth Rains, in 2005, he made a tudong pilgrimage, with a lay companion, Austin Stewart, living on alms and walking beside the Mississippi River, heading northwards from its mouth. The journey was much hindered by sickness but the account of the whole adventure can be read on the Abhayagiri website: [[www.abhayagiri.org/index.php/main/article/mississippi\\_journal/](http://www.abhayagiri.org/index.php/main/article/mississippi_journal/)].

🌸 Tan Karunadhammo has learned to recite the Pātimokkha himself and he completed his ninth Rains in 2006. He has spent time at monasteries in England, New Zealand, Australia and at Bhavana Society in West Virginia; he is now resident at Abhayagiri once again.

🌸 Ajahn Sudanto has similarly come and gone, to Thailand and Birken Monastery in British Columbia [[www.birken.ca](http://www.birken.ca)], but he is also resident at Abhayagiri these days. He and Tan Karunadhammo plan to take up an invitation to spend the Rains of 2007 near Portland OR, at the request of Portland Friends of the Dhamma [[www.pdxdhamma.org](http://www.pdxdhamma.org)].

Over these foundational years of the Monastery these two monks, along with Tan Jotipālo, have been stalwart and generous members of the Abhayagiri community. They have helped greatly to support the practice and teaching of Dhamma here, both through their own spiritual commitment, as well as through looking after guests and the physical development of the site.

🌸 The close friendship with the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas has continued to be a blessing for both communities. We always have representatives at each other's ordinations and our monthly gatherings in the Bay Area now take place at the Berkeley Buddhist Monastery, where Rev. Heng Sure, one of Master Hua's most senior disciples, is the abbot [[www.drba.org](http://www.drba.org)].

🌸 It has now been several years since I last went to Buddha-Dharma Meditation Center in Hinsdale, IL. Times have been hard for them and attendances somewhat low. They have tried to cut out all solely cultural activities but this has proved unpopular with some.

🌸 It has also been some years since I last saw Michigan but other senior Sangha members, such as Ajahns Sundarā, Sucitto and Thānasantī, have been making regular visits.

🌸 Richard Smith still hosts the monastic visits to Michigan and continues vigorously to support the community with its book publication projects. After *The Pilgrim Kāmanīta* was printed in 1999, he produced a book of talks by the nuns, *Freeing the Heart*, in 2002. He is currently working on a book of meditation teachings by Ajahn Sucitto and also an anthology of the Buddha's teachings on Nibbāna, by Ajahn Pasanno and myself, called *The Island*.

🌸 Tan Kalyano and his brother Tan Thānuttaro are both still happily living as monks. They have stayed at various monasteries in different countries around the planet, providing their dear mother, Bee Price, with ample opportunities for

world travel as she goes to visit their multifarious homes. They were last spotted in Thailand, where Bee traveled to visit them, in January of 2006.

 Tan Nipako returned to lay life after a few years as a monk.

 My mother, who made brief appearances at the start of the journal and again at Amaravati, passed away peacefully in 2003, in her own bed, in Sherborne Dorset. She was 82 years old.

 Our neighbors at Casa Serena, Peter La Rivière and Mary Curran, both also passed away in recent years: Peter of lung cancer in the spring of 2000 and Mary of abdominal cancer in 2002. Just before her death Mary, with extraordinary yet characteristic generosity, donated her house to the Monastery thus giving us another 30 acres and a beautiful four-bedroomed amenity for women residents and guests.

 Debbie Stamp continues to live and work with unstinting selflessness at the Monastery; she has been on the Board of Directors of Sanghapala since the late '80s. She dwells in a cabin that was built for her in 1999, and she has been a much loved and helpful resident throughout this time.

 Various members of the nuns' community, particularly Ajahns Jitindriyā, Sundarā and Thānasantī have come and gone, spending a few months to a few years at Abhayagiri. It is planned that one day an autonomous nuns' Monastery will be founded somewhere in the area.

 The Spirit Rock teachers are still a strong and cohesive group: the only ones to leave the area have moved on to warmer and slightly less expensive locations (Robert Hall has gone to Baja, Mexico, while Anna Douglas has moved to Tucson, AZ) although Anna still regularly teaches at SRMC and Robert from time to time. New members have joined the circle, namely Sharda Rogell, Sally Clough, Phillip Moffat, Mark Coleman, Diana Winston and Donald Rothberg; other generations are also on their way through the teacher training process with Jack.

The Center also becomes evermore multifaceted as the years progress; the range of workshops, retreats, events and classes now includes: Dharma for singles; painting retreats; teen vision quests and solstice rituals – the term Vipassanā is becoming proportionally more inclusive in its anglicized range of meanings.

Ajahn Jumnieen comes every year to teach there.

 San Francisco Zen Center continues to be a stable and strong presence in the area. Their model of shared leadership – a collaboration of co-abbots for the three main centers but no one fixed to a single place – has served them very

well. The current co-abbots are Ryushin Paul Haller and Myogen Steve Stucky; Zenkei Blanche Hartman stepped down in 2003 and Linda Ruth Cutts in February of 2007.

🌸 Our connections with Portland have developed strongly in recent years with Sakula (Mary Reinard), who first met us when she drove Anita Wenninck to Abhayagiri, having set up a small teaching and practice center there – Friends of the Dhamma [[www.pdxdhamma.org](http://www.pdxdhamma.org)]. This center, and the group associated with it, plan to set up the temporary retreat situation for the two monks from Abhayagiri, mentioned above. One of the principal aims of this project, along with providing a useful retreat time for some worthy monastics, is to help seed interest in founding a branch Monastery in the area.

🌸 Our visits to Seattle are still sporadic; however, there is a small but dedicated group of friends and students who regularly meet and practice together in the area.

🌸 Several more ordinations have taken place at Abhayagiri over this time: Vens. Thitapuñño, Jotipālo, Phāsuko, Dhammaso, Obhāso and Ñāniko have all been given the higher ordination here by Ajahn Pasanno. He also ordained Tan Hasapañño in New Zealand when his teacher, Ajahn Viradhammo, was unable to be present. Also added to the fold has been Craig Randolph, who wound up his life with the ballet company and is now Ahimsako Bhikkhu.

Although of this group Thitapuñño, Phāsuko, Dhammaso and Obhāso have all now left the robes, the community has meanwhile grown with the addition of Sāmaneras Thitābho and Kassapo (who both started out at Abhayagiri) and Sampajāno Bhikkhu who began his monastic life in the Tibetan tradition and later became an anagarika in England. He is the most recent bhikkhu to be ordained here.

🌸 None of our original fleet of trailers remains on-site and, apart from three kutīs-on-wheels and a cloth yurt, all the other accommodations – comprising 17 kutīs and Casa Serena, the women’s guest-house – are warm, dry, legal dwellings with solid foundations. This is a big change from the tents and trailers we all inhabited in the early years.

🌸 In 1999 a group of Thai students of Ajahn Toon Khippapañño purchased a house and 240 acres of land on the eastern border of Abhayagiri, to be used as a seasonal retreat facility – it is known as KPY. Most years since then Ajahn Toon has come to visit and run retreats there for 60-100 people. We gave them most of our old trailers, which are still serving them well even though they too have built many kutīs in their own forest.

 The construction of a sizeable new building near to the main house, consisting of disabled-access accommodation, bathroom and office space was completed in April of 2006. This new amenity has helped enormously in allowing the various tasks of the community to be carried out more efficiently and peacefully, since everyone is no longer crammed into a couple of small spaces in order to do their work, as was the case from 1996-2005.

 Sakula of Portland, along with Jim Cameron of Florida, Jaya Karlson of Massachusetts and eight others, most of whom are not mentioned in these pages, have been part of a lay ministry training program known as CALM (Community of Abhayagiri Lay Ministers) since it was launched in 2001.

Some of the members of the Upasika community felt they would like more in-depth and specific training, to help them fulfill the various roles they had in leading local groups or teaching in some capacity. Thus this training was hatched.

The group of 11 trainees graduated in April of 2004. They come from California, Wisconsin, Oregon, Florida, North Carolina, Massachusetts and Alberta, Canada.

This is the first such group associated with any of the Ajahn Chah monasteries around the world; it is a very experimental venture.

The hope is that they will not only be better equipped to teach and run groups but that they will also be able to carry out functions that monastics cannot do, such as perform weddings, as well as to be chaplains for schools, hospitals or the military – some have already begun to serve in these roles.

In January of 2006 Ajahn Pasanno, Ajahn Sudanto and I took the whole group, plus a few significant others, to Thailand to visit various monasteries and highly accomplished teachers, and to attend the annual gathering at Wat Nong Pah Pong that occurs around the anniversary of Ajahn Chah's passing away.

 In 2002 Dennis Crean, one of the CALM trainees, purchased a house on 20 acres of land across the valley from Abhayagiri. At New Year of 2003, Huck Rorick purchased 220 acres adjacent to Dennis, also adjoining our property, along Russian River, in the hope of it being developed as a place for members of the lay community who want to be near the Monastery.

 In 1998 James Baraz launched an initiative through Spirit Rock, called Community Dharma Leaders. It was a two-and-a-half year program and involved about 80 participants, mostly those leading Vipassanā meditation groups around America and Canada. I came along and helped with some of the training sessions and became so impressed with the usefulness of such a training that we launched the CALM program and about half our trainees joined up as part of the second batch of James's students – CDL2.

🌸 After we launched the CALM program we found that Ven. Piyananda, abbot of Dharmavijaya Temple in Los Angeles, had also established a lay ministry training some years ago, as had Shasta Abbey.

🌸 Bhante Dhammavāro passed away aged 111, in 2000, close to his Monastery in Stockton, California. His disciples in England had gathered that day to have a celebration of his life and teachings – all those closest to him, who were not in America, were together when they got the news.

🌸 Chris Bradley became an anagarika for a year, served impeccably and has now returned to nursing in the native people's villages of Great Trout Lake in northern Ontario.

🌸 We are still friendly with the Monks of Mount Tabor but they have had some difficult years. Father Damian is now living and teaching in Utah.

🌸 Father John Watson retired from the position of Chaplain at Sutton Valence School; he and his wife now live in the West Country.

🌸 The Massachusetts Monastery never happened. The group there wisely and cautiously opted to put themselves in the role of supporting “whatever the monastic Sangha feels is appropriate.” Thus they simply became Buddha-parisā, an organization existing in order to help our community teach and travel on the East Coast, particularly in the Massachusetts area. They coordinate visits, arrange teachings and host monastics passing through.

If it came about that the monastic community let them know that there were now sufficient appropriate people, and the interest to be available, to start an East Coast Monastery, they might well make an invitation but there is no expectation or urgent intention for them to do so.

🌸 IMS and BCBS are still going strong. The Forest Refuge opened for its first 30 long-term retreatants in early 2003 [[www.dharma.org](http://www.dharma.org); [www.dharma.org/bcbs/](http://www.dharma.org/bcbs/)], [[www.dharma.org/ims/programs/fr\\_prog/](http://www.dharma.org/ims/programs/fr_prog/)].

🌸 Spirit Rock has still to build its area for monastic residents; although, as of early 2007, the plans for the next major expansion there are budgeted at ~ \$17 million, the hermitage section is not included in this.

🌸 Bodhi Tree Dhamma Center [[www.bodhitreefla.org](http://www.bodhitreefla.org)] continues to be a beacon of Dhamma faith and practice in Florida. Many Buddhist temples have appeared in urban areas in that part of the country in recent times, however, the interest in

meditation is served by very few. Jim Cameron still staunchly keeps the Center going; his leg injuries are still somewhat troublesome but he has more help with caring for the place these days. Blossom the pig passed on.

 Georgette and Maxwell are still happily ensconced in their rural retreat in Sussex, New Jersey.

 Gina Sharpe and John Fowle bit the bullet and sold their lovely home, to move to a smaller house but on 23 acres of Westchester woodland. When last seen, John was in his element trudging the leafy paths in his wellies, pondering the many wonders that the land might conjure forth.

 In the summer of 1998, having been ably guided and represented by Geraldine Rose, Abhayagiri Monastery was granted a Change of Use Permit by Mendocino County, allowing us to function and develop ourselves as a forest Monastery. The construction of the new buildings in April 2006 signaled the completion of Phase I of the four-phase plan we agreed on with the County. Phase II allows us to house up to 24 residents on the land.

 Geraldine also nursed the planning applications of Rangjung Yeshe Gomde [[www.gomdeusa.org](http://www.gomdeusa.org)], SF Zen Center's Paul and Melody Haller, the Vipassanā community of Goenka-ji [[www.manda.dhamma.org](http://www.manda.dhamma.org)] and the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas through their various stages of development – three-quarters of these were successful.

 In February of 2004 the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas received final planning approval to construct their International Institute for Philosophy and Ethics – an 800-person facility, comprising 332,000 sq. ft. of buildings – to be their main monastic training center and the new home of Dharma Realm Buddhist University. They are already the largest Buddhist institution in the USA – with a monastic community of about 90 and a lay community of about 150 persons – this new development is indicative of their continued flourishing, however, as of 2005, the project has been put on “indefinite hold.”

 Their senior and junior girls and boys schools are well-attended and so highly regarded that the head of the Ukiah school district sent his own children there rather than to the institutions he administers.

 There are many Buddhist groups, monasteries and centers in Mendocino County now (22 at the last count) despite its small human population (84,000). An annual multi-lineage Buddhist picnic *Dharma Under the Trees* is often held, usually

on Memorial Day, at Hendy Woods, Philo. The good Geraldine is the Dharma host.

🌸 The interest in ritual and devotional practices continues to develop, often mingled with other traditional forms. Joseph Goldstein hosted a day called *Devoted to Emptiness* at Spirit Rock as a fund-raiser for the Forest Refuge – the main feature was the Hindu bhajans of Jai Uttal [[www.JaiUttal.com](http://www.JaiUttal.com)].

🌸 Jack Kornfield continues to develop ritual in his role as teacher and mentor, for many events such as the graduation of his teacher trainees, with men's groups and events based upon racial and ethnic diversity.

🌸 We have added a few more chants to our repertoire at Abhayagiri, e.g. the *Brahma Vihāras*, *The Discourse on the Highest Blessings* and *The Splendors of the Buddha* – we still lead pūjās morning and evening on our retreats in Pāli and English. The Monastery mails out as many chanting CDs as it does those of Dhamma talks, and the audio and text files of our chanting are constantly being downloaded from the website.

🌸 The Zen Center Hospice, that was in its early years when *The Golden State* was written, has continued to be a bright light for many people. They have their own facility at 283 Page St, San Francisco, as well as continuing to be the main part of the hospice facility at the Laguna Honda Hospital.

Frank Ostazetski has stepped down, after 20 years in the saddle, and the organization is now being led by Marion Gruzalski, a long-time friend of ours and a student of Ajahn Sumedho. The numbers training as volunteers and the numbers of the dying who are being helped continue to stay high. [[www.zenhospice.org](http://www.zenhospice.org)].

Frank was even on the Oprah Winfrey show one day, as was, incidentally, Tara Bennet Goleman, after the publication of *Emotional Alchemy* [[www.emotionalalchemy.com](http://www.emotionalalchemy.com)].

🌸 The range of service activities in the Buddhist community has now spread to include numerous programs for youth, conferences and retreats to promote racial and ethnic diversity, and many Buddhist meditators have now trained in Mindfulness based Stress Reduction (the program devised by Jon Kabat-Zinn in Massachusetts [[www.umassmed.edu/cfm/mbsr/](http://www.umassmed.edu/cfm/mbsr/)]), and teach this in hospitals, prisons, schools and businesses throughout the USA.

🌸 There is a large network of people providing Dharma teachings all over the country for America's massive prison population [[www.prisondharmanetwork.org](http://www.prisondharmanetwork.org)]. There is a great demand for written teachings but also many people are now actively involved in regularly teaching meditation

to inmates, for example see [[www.abhayagiri.org/fm/v9n1/v9n1.pdf](http://www.abhayagiri.org/fm/v9n1/v9n1.pdf)], pages 4 and 5. A very large proportion of the free Dhamma books mailed out from Abhayagiri are for people incarcerated around the USA.

☸ Spirit Rock has established a city center in the East Bay, particularly to make the teachings more available to a wider sphere of people than the white middle-class educated crowd that usually fills the halls at the Center in well-heeled Marin County. A small group is actively involved in developing this, including James Baraz, Larry Yang, Spring Washam, Diana Winston, Kevin Griffin and Donald Rothberg [[www.eastbaydharma.org](http://www.eastbaydharma.org)].

☸ It is still true, nevertheless, that most other Vipassanā groups and retreats around the country, such as at IMS in Massachusetts or at Seattle Insight Meditation Society [[www.seattleinsight.org](http://www.seattleinsight.org)] are solidly white middle-class baby-boomer types. When Ajahn Punnadhammo and I, out of curiosity, did the stats on the ages of the group attending our IMS retreat in 2001 it was a *perfectly* symmetrical bell curve – it peaked exactly at those born in 1949, who were 18 in 1967, the Summer of Love...

☸ The Buddhist compassionate relief organization Tzu Chi Foundation has become more and more active in the US – along with centers in the major metropolises they also opened a center in Ukiah in the spring of 2004 [[www.tzuchi.org](http://www.tzuchi.org)].

☸ The US is still as intensely materialistic as it was, perhaps more so than ever, however that same intense bondage to the sense world continues to generate its opposite. The level of stimulation available to the average teenager now means that they have often seen and done it all by the time they are fifteen. Consequently Abhayagiri receives, on average, a couple of enquiries per week (usually by e-mail) from high school or college students interested in ordination.

Our Use Permit only allowed 13 people to stay on site at any one time during Phase I of the development, so a lot of people have had to be turned away. Some have gone to England or Thailand for training instead, some have waited and some have faded. Now that we have entered Phase II of our Permit we will be able to accommodate a larger number of candidates.

☸ On my first visit in 1990 it became clear that the kind of people who were attracted to Theravādan monastic practice were not looking for or expecting a quick fix. And they were not looking just for spiritual entertainment either – when, in 1991, I came with a list of suggested titles for talks like *The Myth of the Hero*, *Buddhist Metaphysics*, *The Joker* and *Navigating the Straits of Paradox*, the group looked at me plaintively and asked: “Couldn’t you just give talks on the Four Noble

Truths and the Three Characteristics, Ajahn?" In 2007 it's still the same: people *want* us to be conservative.

🌸 In the last few years Buddhism has acquired a very acceptable face in America: notable Hollywood actors have declared their interest and commitment to Buddhist practice; there have been front-cover features on it in *Time* magazine; books like *Emotional Intelligence*, by Daniel Goleman have become national bestsellers – it has become almost mainstream and (generally) has a reputation for being wise and respectable.

🌸 The Taung Palu Monastery in Boulder Creek has become a very quiet place, usually there are only one or two monastics there these days.

🌸 Metta Forest Monastery, near Escondido, California and its abbot Tan Geoff (Ajān Thānissaro) have become very prominent in the Theravāda world, particularly through his copious essays, books of his own talks, Sutta and Vinaya commentaries, and translations – released through the web via Access to Insight [[www.accesstoinsight.org](http://www.accesstoinsight.org)] and through free distribution books, mostly published by Dhamma Dana, Sati Center for Buddhist Studies [[www.sati.org](http://www.sati.org)] or through his Monastery [[www.mettaforest.org](http://www.mettaforest.org)].

🌸 The Vipassanā community of Goenka-ji have launched their own Dhamma publication distribution outlet in the form of the Pariyatti Book Service [[www.pariyatti.com](http://www.pariyatti.com)].

🌸 Bhavana Society in West Virginia, and its abbot Bhante Gunaratana have also become very well-known and much-loved in recent years. His book *Mindfulness in Plain English* has been a best-seller and sits beside the *Zen Mind, Beginners Mind* of Suzuki Roshi as a modern classic.

He has ordained numbers of monks and nuns since the Monastery was opened in 1988 and he travels the world almost constantly, giving talks and leading retreats. He has since published *Eight Mindful Steps to Happiness*, in 2000, and his autobiography was published in 2003, entitled *Journey to Mindfulness* [[www.bhavanasociety.org](http://www.bhavanasociety.org)].

🌸 In the lineage associated with Ven. Ajahn Chah, two other places have been established on the continent:

Arrow River Forest Hermitage, Thunder Bay, Ontario, where Ajahn Punnadhammo is the abbot, and often sole monastic – it is mainly a retreat facility for solitary meditation.

Birken Forest Monastery, near Kamloops, British Columbia, where Ajahn Sona is the abbot. At present there are four monks in residence and a couple of anagarikas

– it as been open (in this location) only since 2002. However, Ajahn Sona has been living as a monk in Canada (after five years in Thailand) since 1994 when he and Ven. Piyadhammo established the first Western Theravāda forest monastic site in Canada, in what came to be known as the Shack Monastery.

After four years at the Birken River near Pemberton, Ajahn Sona set up a more formal monastic community called Birken II, near Princeton. It then moved again and its current incarnation, at Smith Lake, is known affectionately as Birken III.

There *was* a third place on the continent, a branch of Birken Monastery, that was being founded in the mountains of Vera Cruz province in Mexico. It had its official opening in November of 2004, with Tan Thitapuñño as the senior monk there, however he decided to leave the robes soon after and the Monastery has since closed.

 Cloud Mountain has been through a few changes but is still a strong and vibrant place [[www.cloudmountain.org](http://www.cloudmountain.org)]. David Branscombe and Laura are still faithfully guiding and managing its care and development, although Northwest Dharma Association (originally the support group for Cloud Mountain) have become an independent organization [[www.nwdharma.org](http://www.nwdharma.org)].

 The City of Ten Thousand Buddhas, despite extensive and sterling efforts to connect with the Caucasian American population, in particular through translation of talks and scriptures, still finds itself heavily dominated by interest from the Asian community. The Berkeley Buddhist Monastery, headed by Rev. Heng Sure, has made something of a change in this pattern, drawing numerous students from the University and other Berkeley locals; and, at the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas itself, the opening of their vegetarian restaurant to the public (best vegetarian food in Mendocino County, take it from me!) has created a very popular avenue of connection – few of the diners, however, take the opportunity to look in the bookstore or the 10,000 Buddha Hall.

 In the late '90s Brother David Steindl-Rast spent three years living at Esalen Institute, invited there to develop community integration and to boost their dimension of spiritual presence. He now lives alone at a small hermitage in upstate New York [[www.gratefulness.org](http://www.gratefulness.org)].

 I have not been back to Esalen since late 1997 – it had become too commercially oriented (e.g. \$2135 for 7 days, in a standard single room in 2004) and, by my last visit there, I felt my time was largely being wasted [[www.esalen.org](http://www.esalen.org)]. Nevertheless, it should be acknowledged that that last occasion enabled me to meet Jonathan Birks, a young South African on the staff there; he eventually joined our community in England and was ordained as a novice, Sāmanera Appamāno, in New Zealand. He became a bhikkhu at Aruna Ratanagiri Monastery, in Northumberland [[www.ratanagiri.org.uk](http://www.ratanagiri.org.uk)], however he too has recently returned to lay life.

🌸 Huge numbers of people now “virtually visit” Abhayagiri and download audio Dhamma talks and chanting, texts and books from the website. Similarly many individuals and groups have made large amounts of Dhamma books, Sutta translations, talks and pictures available through their own free websites, links and chat groups.

The Abhayagiri Upasika community, a group of some of the most committed friends and supporters of the Monastery, even have a virtual Uposatha Observance through the Upasika chat list on the nights of the lunar quarters.

🌸 Michael Lieberman graduated from the University of Texas, in Austin, and Chris Morray-Jones quit his professorship at UC Berkeley, teaching Religious Studies; they both then joined Berkeley University’s Boalt Hall School of Law. Michael graduated from there in 2006 – having also managed to acquire a Master’s in International Relations from Tufts University at the same time – and has now moved to Washinton DC. He works in a legal consultancy there (“... earning more money than I’ll ever see,” quoth his father, Dr. Marc) and is keen to enter the political arena.

🌸 I met Father Kevin Hunt once more at Gethsemane II, a Buddhist/Christian inter-monastic dialogue, held at Father Thomas Merton’s Monastery in Kentucky, in the spring of 2003. Ajahn Sundarā, Rev. Heng Sure, Joseph Goldstein and Norman Fischer were also there, along with 70 or so other bright lights of the American monastic world. Brother David was invited but chose to stay in his hermitage.

🌸 Rachel Mend Ropp had a beautiful baby in 2001 – Simone Marie – and another one, a boy, in 2005. She and her family have been living on Native American reservations for some years where her husband, Andy, works as a physician.

🌸 Edwin Kelley resigned from his position as Director at IMS; Myoshin Kelley is now one of the main resident teachers at the Forest Refuge – Edwin is reckoning on taking it easy (workwise) for a few years.

🌸 In the first few years after Abhayagiri was founded we saw very few Thai people. As the name has become more well-known, and as Ajahn Pasanno has become more famous in Thailand, the numbers of Thai visitors has greatly increased.

One of the main things he became well-known for was counseling Jay Siripongs, a Thai man who was executed in San Quentin in February of 1999, over the last days and hours before his death. More than 100,000 copies of the book describing that encounter have been printed in Thai.

Incidentally, Helena Havelock, the limo driver mentioned in the above journal entry in for July 2<sup>nd</sup>, spoke to me about Jay’s case as we drove in the car that day;

she was an active member of a group opposing the death penalty and wanted to know if I had heard of the case or met Jay, as he was a Buddhist. As it transpired we got a call asking if we could help only days before the execution was due.

🌸 One of the main sources of support since my early visits to the Bay Area has been Ajahn Maha-Prasert, of Wat Buddhansorn in Fremont, in the southeast corner of the Bay [[www.watbuddha.iirt.net](http://www.watbuddha.iirt.net)]. When we first met, back in 1990, he surprised me by his wholehearted enthusiasm for our plan to found a forest Monastery.

In Thailand there is often a lot of antipathy between town monks and forest monks – the latter gaining more praise, as being meditation monks, than the former.

He was delighted, and said, “Can I help you? I cannot start a meditation Monastery here, that’s not what the people have invited me for, but I can help you to do it!” I was delighted and a firm friendship was formed. I also found out then that he had studied with Ajahn Chah when he was a young monk in northeast Thailand.

In 1995 my surprise was compounded when I told him about the new land we’d been given in Redwood Valley, north of Ukiah. “I know that place, I have been there,” he said. Assuming he couldn’t really mean this obscure little valley and that he meant he had been to see the giant redwood trees elsewhere in the County, I pointed to the map and said, “It’s here in this little town...”

“Yes, I know that place,” he replied again. “That’s where my friend Doctor Peter lives, and.... Mary, that’s right, his wife is called Mary.”

Just the day before I had managed to track down the name of the neighbor to the immediate north of the land Master Hua had just given us: Dr. Peter La Rivière. “You know Peter La Rivière? But there are no Thai people at all in that whole county! What were you doing up there? How on earth do you know them?”

It turned out that Mary and Peter were indeed the only people that he knew in Mendocino County, and they just happened to be our new next-door neighbors. Ajahn Maha-Prasert seemed surprised that we were surprised.

He explained: “When my 90-year-old teacher came from Thailand he got sick on the plane, Doctor Peter was looking after the emergency room in the hospital in LA at that time. By the end of the night we had become good friends. I go up to their place every year...”

🌸 Nowadays many younger Thais (and some older) have failed to encounter or develop any interest in Buddhism either in Thailand or, if they have grown up in the West, here in the USA. Now, as they see so much interest in Buddhism here, they become intrigued and start to investigate their own heritage. They are also more urbanized (and therefore stressed) and are eager for some peace.

So a lot of young Thais now practice Buddhism for the first time because of hearing about places like Wat Metta, Abhayagiri, Birken and also Bhavana Society.

They are not generally so keen on the city temples, which tend to focus on cultural elements rather than just on meditation and spirituality. Gwendolyn Cadge, of Princeton University, has written on this kind of cross-pollination and the fact that one can't truly say that there is one Buddhism in America for the white middle class and one for the Asian immigrants – *Seeking the heart: The first generation practices Theravāda Buddhism in America* [[www.cis.org/articles](http://www.cis.org/articles)].

 Ajahn Maha-Prasert has ordained a young Caucasian American man, Tan Michael, at his temple in Fremont. Along with the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas monastics who come to our ordinations, Ajahn Maha-Prasert always either comes himself or sends representative monks. During 2006, while Ajahn Pasanno was away in Thailand on sabbatical, Ajahn Maha-Prasert graciously stepped in to act as preceptor for the bhikkhu ordination of Tan Sampajāno.

He has also become a teacher and mentor for the former Yeo-Kwang Sunim, now better known as Ayya Tathāloka Bhikkhunī, an American nun originally ordained in the Korean tradition. He has taken her along with his group when returning to visit Thailand and has offered to help her stay there if she would like to. He sees her example could be a great encouragement for Thai people to accept the reintroduction of the bhikkhunī order.

She has now established, with the vigorous encouragement of Ajahn Maha-Prasert, her own Monastery in Fremont, called Dhammadharini [[www.dhammadharini.org](http://www.dhammadharini.org)].

 In the late 1990s Thich Nhat Hanh shifted the emphasis of his teaching, from lay students and a group of trained lay teachers (*Dharmacariyas*) onto the monastic order. He began vigorously to encourage monastic training and, consequently, many young people have gone forth under his guidance since then – their monastic community now numbers more than 200, mostly ordained within the last ten years.

Maple Forest Monastery (for monks) was founded in Vermont in 1997, as the first branch of Plum Village – their main center in France – and Green Mountain Dharma Center (for nuns), also in Vermont, opened in 1998; Deer Park Monastery, Escondido, California was founded shortly after. In February 2004 Thich Nhat Hanh gathered all 200+ of his monastics together at Deer Park for a three month retreat.

 Chozen and Hogen Bays, finding the development of their community constantly frustrated by planning restrictions, finally moved away from the Columbia Gorge in 2002. The newly opened Great Vow Zen Monastery [[www.greatvow.org](http://www.greatvow.org)] is just outside the town of Clatskanie, about 40 miles northwest of Portland. They continue to be keen on inter-lineage Buddhist exchanges; in the autumn of 2003 I co-led another retreat with Chozen and Hogen there, as a way of offering support to their new venture.

🌸 The constant drift toward commercialism in the Buddhist world also continues to create its opposite: that retreat at Great Vow was run solely on dāna (freewill donations) and even all the food and drink used was donated, prepared and offered by the retreatants. All Abhayagiri retreats are now done on dāna and groups in Santa Fe, Bellingham WA, and the monastic retreats at Spirit Rock and IMS are now all done on a dāna basis too.

🌸 Gil Fronsdal and his many students in the Palo Alto/Silicon Valley/Stanford University area, opened their own center in 2002 as a branch of Spirit Rock. Its classes are currently brimming and the new facility is already being pressed for space. Known now simply as the Insight Meditation Center, all their events are run solely on dāna moreover, Gil and his family have no other source of income [[www.insightmeditationcenter.org](http://www.insightmeditationcenter.org)].

🌸 Shasta Abbey and its branches are still going very strong, even after the death of their founder and teacher Jiyu Kennett Roshi in 1996. Their community has put considerable effort into connecting with the wider Buddhist world in recent years and they too are appreciative of the cross-fertilization and mutual support that has come from contacts with the Chinese Ch'an tradition, Tibetan monastic orders and with Theravāda [[www.shastaabbey.org](http://www.shastaabbey.org)].

Their community has by far the largest number of Western monastics who have been ordained for 15 or more years – probably 20 of the 35 monks living there.

🌸 Since 1994 there has been an annual conference held in California, for ordained celibate Buddhist monastics living in the West. Abhayagiri first got involved in the autumn of 1998 when it was held at Shasta Abbey; previous gatherings had been at Land of Medicine Buddha and Vajrapani Institute. Subsequent ones have been at the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas, Vajrapani and Land of Medicine Buddha again, and at Bhavana Society.

About 30-40 nuns and monks of all major lineages participate each year for this delightful and informal get-together; it has proved to be invaluable as an occasion for sharing the joys and sorrows of monastic life and learning valuable lessons across traditions about how to live most skillfully as a monastic in this current era.

🌸 San Francisco Zen Center never got an Eight Precept standard going at Tassajara. However, in 2000 a small hermitage called No Abode was set up close to Green Gulch, to be a celibate monastic residence in their lineage, largely on the initiative of one sincere and dedicated priest, Luminous Owl.

There were many struggles involved, particularly: how do you run a celibate monastic community as a subset of a lay priesthood, especially when 100% of the main teachers of the community are married or in relationships?

Few other SFZC students spent time with him there and the overall response to this initiative from his community was lukewarm at best.

Even if alone, however, Luminous Owl would regularly go out for alms in Mill Valley, having been inspired by his times in Thailand and Japan. Sadly, however, the hermitage has now closed and Luminous Owl has moved back into community at Green Gulch Zen Center.

🌸 The Sangha at Abhayagiri goes through Ukiah, and usually Redwood Valley, every week on alms-round, on the Observance days of lunar quarter. We always receive far more food than we can eat.

🌸 There are several places calling themselves Zen monasteries around the US nowadays – such as Zen Mountain Monastery in Mount Tremper, NY [[www.zen-mtn.org](http://www.zen-mtn.org)], Tassajara Zen Mountain Center [[www.sfzc.org/zmcindex.html](http://www.sfzc.org/zmcindex.html)], Great Vow in Oregon – they are modeled on the great Japanese training centers, however all these are headed by married lay priests, rather than the celibate teachers that would be found at such centers in Japan.

There often seems to be a gentle tide of confusion arising in the residents of such places: people practice *very* sincerely but can't quite figure out exactly what a monk/priest is supposed to be: at Mount Tremper, for example, residents are expected to be celibate during the week but at weekends it's optional; at Tassajara, residents are forbidden to form new relationships whilst on site but can go away for a few days and come back to the Monastery as a couple...

Shasta Abbey [[www.shastaabbey.org](http://www.shastaabbey.org)] is almost the only place out of the Japanese tradition that is joyously free of this conundrum, although One Drop Zen Monastery, Whidbey Island, WA [[www.itteki-ji.org](http://www.itteki-ji.org)], established in 1995 by students of Shodo Harada Roshi, a celibate Japanese monk of very high repute, is also worthy of mention in this regard.

🌸 In 1999 Spirit Rock hosted a conference for 220 Buddhist teachers of all lineages with HH the Dalai Lama. Amongst the organizing circle who pulled the event together were: Yvonne Rand, Norman Fischer, Jack Kornfield, Lama Surya Das, Ken McLeod, Tsultrim Allione, Bodhin Kjolhede (Roshi Philip Kapleau's Dharma heir), and myself. Norman Fischer and I gave the non-keynote or off-keynote talks during the event.

🌸 *Tricycle* Magazine [[www.tricycle.com](http://www.tricycle.com)], established in 1991, has continued to be an influential presence in the USA and was joined by *Buddhadharma* [[www.thebuddhadharma.com](http://www.thebuddhadharma.com)], an offshoot from Shambhala Sun, in 2002.

🌸 More Asian people are sitting on our meditation retreats these days; out of the 80 or so gathered for one recent retreat at Angela Center, Santa Rosa, CA, there were representatives from eight different Far Eastern nations.

🌸 A lot has changed in New York City since my first visit there. Needless to say, the destruction of the Two Towers had a radical effect on the local consciousness, inclining a lot more people toward reflection and meditation. Many more senior teachers visit there these days; New York Insight has a brimming catalogue of events and a steadily growing family of committed members [www.nyimc.org].

🌸 Paul and Lili Breiter moved to Florida so that he would be in closer proximity to his aged parents. He has now translated and published several books: *Venerable Father*, a memoir of his time with Ajahn Chah, *Being Dharma* (Shambhala Publications), *Everything Arises, Everything Falls Away* (also by Shambhala Publications), and *Everything is Teaching Us*, a collection initially published for free distribution in Australia – these latter three volumes are all anthologies of Ajahn Chah’s teachings.

🌸 Chuang Yen Monastery of upstate New York and Bodhi Monastery of Lafayette, New Jersey, have also been prominent in cross-tradition activity in recent years. The latter is a Ch’an Monastery in the lineage of Master Yin Shun.

I first heard of it through Georgette Siegel; when she took me to visit there I was shocked to see, as I entered the front door, reprints of several Ajahn Chah and Ajahn Sumedho books sitting on a rack, for free distribution. When I picked one up I was even more startled to see it had been printed by Chuang Yen Monastery. They were exceptionally interested in and knowledgeable about Theravāda Buddhism.

In 2002 Bhikkhu Bodhi, an American Theravādan monk and scholar who had been resident in Sri Lanka for more than 30 years and editor of the Buddhist Publication Society, moved in there and, in 2003, Ajahn Sundarā spent the Rains Retreat there as well.

🌸 The journal of the Indian pilgrimage made by Ajahn Sucitto and Nick Scott, named in the account as *Where are You Going?* was finally published by Wisdom, in 2006, under the title *Rude Awakenings*. Regrettably they felt that the entire account would be too long to be commercially viable so they only printed the first half – there is no sign yet of them undertaking Part II...

🌸 In recent years several teachers of hatha yoga, all of whom have long-standing experience with Buddhist meditation, have begun to develop styles of yoga practice that include Buddhist principles. Among these are Jill Satterfield [www.vajrayoga.com], Mary Paffard [www.yogamendocino.org] and Sarah Powers [www.sarahpowers.com]; the former two have taught yoga on several of our ten-

day meditation retreats and I have collaborated with them a number of combined yoga/ Buddhist meditation events.

 In 1999 I was invited to co-lead a ten-day retreat at Spirit Rock with the Dzogchen master Tsokny Rinpoche; it was said to have probably been the first Theravāda/Vajrayāna collaborative event since Nalanda University was destroyed in the 12<sup>th</sup> Century CE. The talks I gave at that retreat were published in 2003 as a book, *Small Boat, Great Mountain*; apparently it has been a very popular item to download from the Monastery website [<http://www.abhayagiri.org/index.php/main/book/138/>].

In 2000 the students of Tsoknyi Rinpoche and his elder brother Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche opened the retreat center, Rangjung Yeshe Gomde, near Leggett, on the Eel River about 60 miles north of Abhayagiri.

 More than five miles of footpaths, bridges and steps have been gently carved into the hillsides of the Abhayagiri forest. The loop trail that circles the whole of the interior of the bowl of our valley is two-and-a-half miles long and has thirteen footbridges over the creeks that crease the precipitous hillsides.

 The junior monks have continued to keep up the practice of traveling away from the familiar environs of Abhayagiri, after a few years of training: Tan Hasapañño has gone to Thailand and has settled there, although at the time of writing he is on a sojourn in Australia; Tan Nāniko also spent a year in Thailand but is now back at Abhayagiri; Tan Ahimsako is spending his time away in England; he is due to return to Abhayagiri in June of 2007.

 Several of the other characters mentioned in these narrative have also gone through major transitions: John Cianciosi and Aungchoye Thrupkaew are no longer together, however, Joseph Kappel and Katherine were married in the fall of 2004; Ajahns Vipassi, Akiñcano and Samvaro have all disrobed, while Kris, our trusty botanical guide in New York and the sister of Jill Satterfield, got married recently and already has two children to occupy her in another kind of nursery.

 Since the latter half of 1998 both Ajahn Pasanno and I have made the training of the monastic community the number one priority at Abhayagiri. From the beginning (i.e. 1996) it was clear we did not need to try to be all things to all people – a problem that Spirit Rock continually wrestles with – but we saw that, in order to do what we really wanted to do here, and to offer that which so few other places were providing (i.e. thorough training in classic Theravādan monastic practice) we had to narrow the focus even more. We have learned to say No to a lot of things.

☸ At least half of the day's hours of the residents of Abhayagiri are spent alone in our kutis. They are all out of sight of each other and mostly out of earshot too.

☸ In 2004, seeing that the Monastery had by then been open for seven years and that all seemed reasonably well-settled, Ajahn Pasanno and I decided to take sabbaticals for a year each.

From June 2004 to June 2005 I traveled in India, visiting the Buddhist holy places; from February 2006 to February 2007 Ajahn Pasanno was on solitary retreat in Thailand. During the absence of one co-abbot, the other simply stayed in residence at Abhayagiri and looked after the needs of the community. These times away proved very beneficial for both of us, in many and various ways.

**Finally: the very fact that you, dear reader, are perusing this book means that you too are part of this ongoing story. May its recounting help to lead you to Awakening and the heart's true release from all dukkha.**



*The Golden Gate, the fog & the evening*