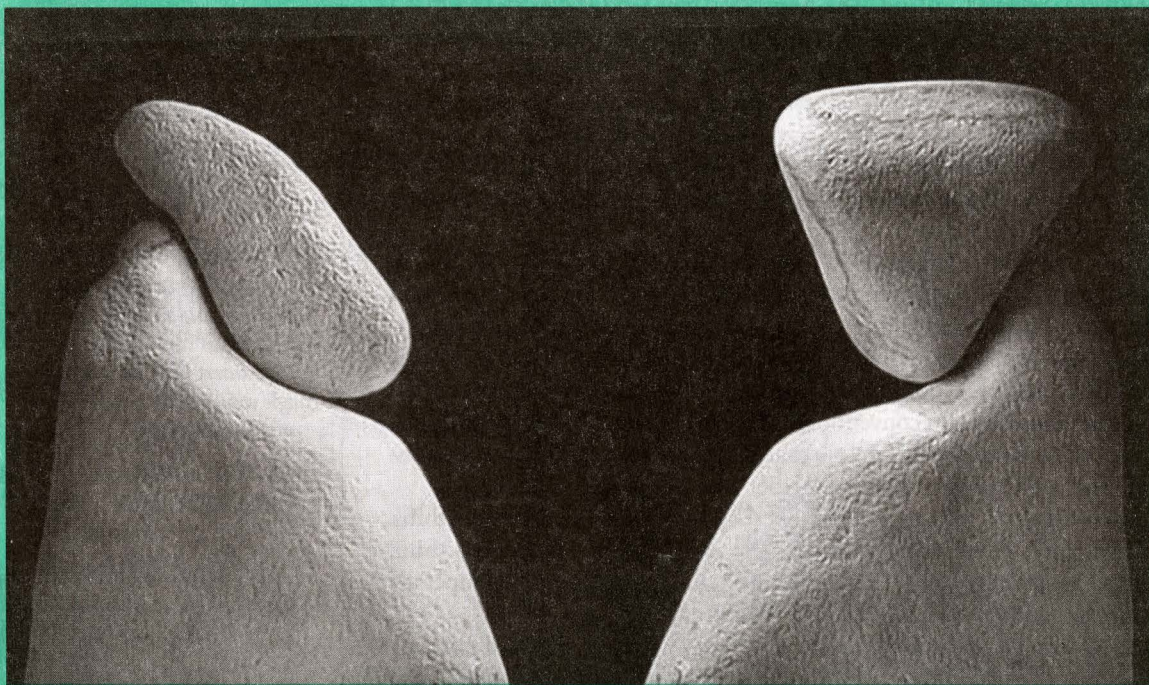


# TURNING WHEEL

*The Journal of Socially Engaged Buddhism*



## INTERFAITH DIALOGUE

**Buddhists, Christians, Jews, Muslims**



**Creating Unity, Exploring Diversity**



## From the Editor

I'm coming out as a Buddhist who believes in God. I'm a one-woman interfaith dialogue. It's a strange fact that people who believe in God are upset with people who don't believe in God, and people who don't believe in God get cross at people who do. Many Buddhists I know are slightly prejudiced against God. And some people who believe in God are angry at other people who also believe in God because they don't agree about who God really is.

What does it mean, anyway, to "believe in God"? When I was about six, my friend Donald asked me, "Do you believe in God?" I knew I didn't believe in Santa Claus, but I wasn't sure about God. My parents both came from Protestant backgrounds, but as adults they didn't follow any religious tradition, and we didn't go to church, not even on Christmas or Easter. They didn't say bad things about God, or about people who believed in God—the subject just didn't come up. So, I said no to Donald's question. I thought I was playing it safe, being polite. Saying yes would have been like pretending to know a famous person I'd never met. But Donald, to my surprise, became upset with me. He said even Cheryl, his little sister, who was only three, believed in God. The possibility that God *did* exist and that I wasn't doing anything about it interested me, and over the years, I investigated the matter further.

To say you "believe in God" doesn't have to mean that you believe God is real. I believe tropical rat mites are real, but I wouldn't say, "I believe in tropical rat mites." Believing in something means you love it. Believing in God means that not only does God exist, but that you and God have something to say to each other.

Now I *do* believe in God, even though I'm a Zen Buddhist. I believe in something a whole lot larger and more long-lasting than I am, of which I am a part. It could go by other names—Emptiness, the universe, interconnectedness—but I call it God. Nice and short. For me, *God* is a nickname for *Emptiness*. I love God because I can address myself to him (I don't mind the pronoun—it's just a convention) 24/7. He holds unlimited office hours, and his office is right inside my rib cage. I love the dharma because it teaches me that we're all in this mess together, *totally* together.

And why am I telling you this? Because some Buddhists I know think that you can't be a Buddhist and believe in God. Some Buddhists think that the great thing about Buddhism is that it doesn't support "superstitious" beliefs like the belief in an invisible God.

And many progressive people are vehemently secular, opposed not only to any religious symbolism in public life but to religion itself—the opiate of the people. But the U.S. was established as a secular state not to disallow the practice of religion, but, on the contrary, to enable people to practice whatever religion they choose, including no religion.

People should be tolerant, especially about religion, don't you agree? Let's wipe out religious intolerance! But before anyone decides that people who are intolerant should be burned at the stake, let's try interfaith dialogue. Talking to each other can dismantle much of the fear we have about other people's religions, and enable us to build bridges instead of walls. ♦ —Susan Moon

**Volunteer opportunity:** In the Spring '06 TW, we had an article about Denjong Padma Choeling Academy, a school for orphans in Sikkim. The school welcomes volunteer teachers. Contact <nathaniel-taylor@msn.com> or <nat@nhtaylor.com> or choose the Sikkim link at [www.nhtaylor.com](http://www.nhtaylor.com) for more information.

Coming deadline for *Turning Wheel*: Winter '06: **Being an Ally**. How can white people be allies to people of color? We want to hear from everyone. Deadline: September 5, 2006. Send submissions to *Turning Wheel*, P.O. Box 3470, Berkeley, CA 94703-9906, with SASE; or to <turningwheel@bpf.org>. We also welcome letters to the editor at the address above or via e-mail.

# TURNING WHEEL

The Journal of Socially Engaged Buddhism



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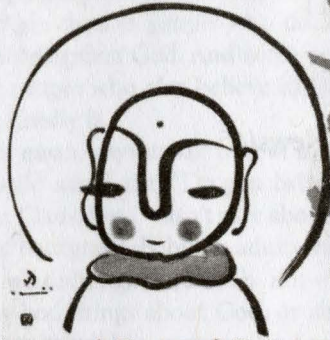
Khadijah Chadly, Ceramic tile, after a traditional Muslim design

Cover photo: Dialogue, by Doc Ross.  
Doc Ross lives in New Zealand. His work has been widely distributed around the world.

Khadijah Chadly is a ceramicist and filmmaker. Her film on Moroccan women, *Zrareet !!*, was a featured documentary at the 2006 Mendocino Film Festival. She lives with her husband and children in Albany, California.

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## Letters

We welcome your responses to what we print. Write to *Turning Wheel*, P.O. Box 3470, Berkeley, CA 94703, or send us an e-mail at [<turningwheel@bpf.org>](mailto:<turningwheel@bpf.org>). Letters may be edited.

### Personal Odysseys

Recently my sister in Seattle sent me a copy of the article "Dead or Alive?" by Anna Brown-Griswold (Spring 2006) about the author's liver transplant. In June of 1993 I had my first kidney transplant. Due to unforeseen complications, I lost the kidney. In June of 1996 I had my second transplant and have been relatively healthy since. The article really hit home with me.

—Natalie O'Dell, Goose Creek, South Carolina

I am a lifer currently housed in Tehachapi, California. I just read "Alone with Everyone" by Susan Moon (Spring 2006) in the last issue. I am from Ukiah, California, and would like to thank her, from the bottom of my heart, for taking me home for a few minutes. Satchmo looks like my old dog Gypsy. The article made me extremely homesick, and it was a really good feeling to have.

—Jimmy Rogers, Tehachapi, California

I am a Nichiren-Shu Buddhist practitioner and have supported the BPF for many years now. Considering that BPF tries to be more inclusive in all ways, I found the poem "Why I Hate the Lotus Sutra" by Everett Wilson (Spring 2006) especially vexing. Perhaps you may know that the Nichiren tradition's primary practice is to recite the mantra "Namu Myoho Renge Kyo"—adoration to the *Lotus Sutra*. In general, the Nichiren tradition is extremely diverse racially, socially, and sexually. Why even potentially offend such a group that should be at least looked at with some interest from the more "mainstream" Buddhist community? Will we see a similar piece entitled "Why I Hate the Heart Sutra"? Namu Myoho Renge Kyo.

—Marcus Barlow, Atlanta

**From the Editor:** Your point is well taken. Please know that neither *Turning Wheel* nor the poet intended any disrespect to Nichiren Buddhists. The *Lotus Sutra* is a valued text in many traditions of Buddhism, and the poem could just as well have been titled "Why I Hate the Heart Sutra" as you suggest. We take the Nichiren tradition of Buddhism seriously and appreciate its diversity.

### Disarmament

As someone who has caused great pain and suffering (with a weapon), it was with great and deep interest that I read the Disarmament issue (Winter 2005). Having been a part of the problem, I will be a part of the solution upon my release, which will be this year, at the age of 34, after 15 years in prison. I will be entering the social-work field.

However, missing from this great issue were the stories of those who have lost their lives during protests. I was surprised that you didn't cover Rachel Corrie, the young

American woman who was killed by a bulldozer while protesting the destruction of Palestinian homes. Rachel's story should not be allowed to wither away from history.

Rest assured I will continue to speak up after my release. I will shout with you. I will stand in a line and march with you. I will appear before whomever is willing to listen and testify with you. I will do all that it takes to make our world a better, safer place to live. It is possible to do this in our country without having to give up our own rights. Peace and blessings to you all, our sangha.

—Fernando A. Garcia, Frackville, Pennsylvania

I just read "Unarmed in Prison," by Billy Tyler (Winter 2005). I was shocked by the fact that the author actually believed that he had committed an act of kindness [by attacking his fellow prisoner to save him from being stabbed]. I have been incarcerated for 15 years and I fully understand the culture of violence that we live in. I also understand the fears, anxieties, and egos that go with it. I am willing to accept that Mr. Tyler thought that he was doing a good thing, but not that he boasts about it.

I do not accept that it was necessary for Tyler to smash his friend's face in. He could have warned his friend. As Thich Nhat Hanh says, "All violence is injustice."

—Edward Bryan Taylor Sr., Gatesville, Texas

I read the article about Palestinians and Israelis building peace together (Winter 2005) with tremendous happiness. I worked on peace programs in Palestine and Israel in the 1980s, when you could count the programs on your fingers. I am so amazed at how the list has grown. Maybe I can allow myself to become hopeful one more time.

—Kris Loken, via e-mail

The statement "Dharma and the Military" (Fall 2005) was short and to the point. Every legitimate religious doctrine states "Thou shall not kill," and virtually every human being recognizes this in one form or another. It's simple. Or is it? Perhaps the more important question that needs to be addressed is: At what point is killing acceptable? I seriously doubt that any mother would hesitate to kill in order to protect her child. Some would say that she is performing a selfless act. Others would say she is deluded by ignorance.

—Gary Hallford, Vacaville, California

Thank you for sharing Alan Senauke's wise words (on the BPF website) regarding Tookie Williams and all beings. We have been following the events leading to his execution for some time now. We live in Ireland and would like to let you know that the world does notice the work that you do. The BBC gave significant airtime on TV and radio to Tookie's execution and others before his. Irish news and TV also pay close attention to the American justice system. I want to reassure you and your compatriots that there are many here who would support and encourage American leaders to have more courage to be more compassionate and humane.

—Peter and Michelle Lyons, Ireland

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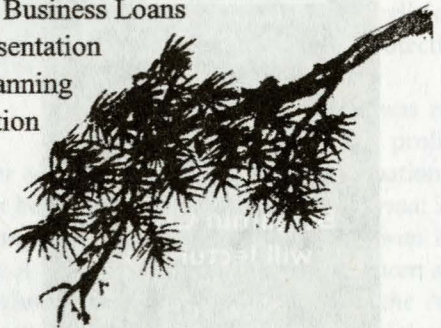
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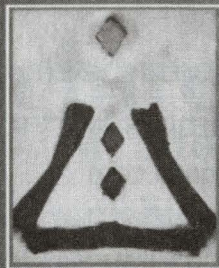


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In ***The Laws of Life***, a compilation of his most recent teachings, Maitreya addresses all aspects of life in the modern world, and provides straightforward, non-dogmatic answers to some of life’s most profound questions. Broad topics such as **freedom, awareness, and detachment** are coupled with specific information about the Middle East crisis, societies of the future, fundamentalism, and the Science of Light.

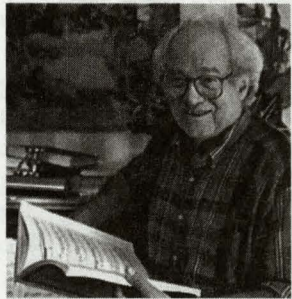
This remarkable book was compiled and introduced by British artist and esotericist **Benjamin Creme**, himself the author/editor of 10 other books about the World Teacher and the Masters of Wisdom — whose *open* mission in the world is about to begin.

## In Memoriam

### William Sloane Coffin (1924–2006)

William Sloane Coffin was a Christian clergyman and longtime peaceworker of international standing. His courage, humor, and commitment to engaged spirituality inspired generations of activists.

In his youth, Coffin was a superb athlete and a highly talented pianist. As a teenager he studied piano with the famed Nadia Boulanger in Paris.



As a student at Phillips Academy and as an undergraduate at Yale, he was a friend, remarkably, of his classmate George H. W. Bush, though their lives took them in different directions.

Coffin joined the CIA in 1950 in order to work against Stalin, but he became disillusioned with the role of the CIA and left after three years to attend divinity school. He became chaplain of Yale University in 1956.

Coffin gained prominence in the 1960s as an outspoken advocate for civil rights and against the Vietnam War. He was one of the civil rights activists known as the “freedom riders” and was arrested several times at demonstrations against segregation.

He became a leader of the group Clergy and Laity Concerned about Vietnam, which engaged in civil disobedience, including offering sanctuary in churches and synagogues to draft resisters. In 1968, along with Dr. Benjamin Spock and others, Coffin was indicted by a federal grand jury for aiding draft resisters.

He served as senior minister at the Riverside Church in New York City for 10 years, until 1987, when he resigned to pursue disarmament activism full time, saying that there was no issue more important for a man of faith. He was president of SANE/Freeze (now Peace Action), the nation’s largest peace and justice group. He prominently opposed United States military intervention from the time of the Vietnam War to the current Iraq War. He was also an ardent supporter of gay rights and of environmental activism.

He is survived by his wife, Virginia Randolph Wilson, two children, and three grandchildren. ♦

“The most urgent religious question is not ‘What must I do to be saved?’ but rather ‘What must we all do to save God’s imperiled planet?’” —William Sloane Coffin

## Indra’s Net

In the image of the “jeweled net of Indra,” found in the Avatamsaka Sutra, the universe is represented as an infinite network of jewels, each of which reflects all the others. All our lives touch each other, as symbolized by Indra’s net.

### Three BPF Activists Honored as Outstanding Women in Buddhism

On March 7, 2006, in celebration of International Women’s Day, the United Nations headquarters in Bangkok gave awards to 18 Buddhist women for their contribution to the welfare of women the world over, and for creating a culture of dialogue and peace. Among the recipients were our own Sandy Boucher, *Turning Wheel* consulting editor; Ouyporn Khuankaew of Thailand, member of the BPF International Advisory Board; and Jill Jameson, also a member of the International Advisory Board and coordinator for the Melbourne, Australia, chapter of BPF.

Most of the women honored were from Asia, many of them ordained in Theravada and Mahayana traditions of Buddhism. The annual Outstanding Women in Buddhism award was established in 2002 “in order to empower women’s leadership in Buddhism around the world.” The founders of the award “believe that women spiritual leaders bring forth peace and security, and women with their own temples protect families and offer refuges so that women

need not live in fear of domestic violence. They mobilize communities, change perceptions in values, and engage in action, research, and direct service work.” The women are recognized for what they have done in “community development, academic excellence, alleviating human suffering, promoting religious tolerance, and protecting human rights.”



Outstanding Women in Buddhism, 2006

Sandy Boucher was recognized for her prolific writing and her advocacy of women’s full participation in Buddhism. Her books include *Dancing in the Dharma: The Life and Teachings of Ruth Denison*; *Discovering Kwan Yin*; *Hidden Spring: A Buddhist Woman Confronts Cancer*; and *Turning the Wheel: American Women Creating the New Buddhism*. She was active in organizing the first Women and Buddhism conferences in the United States.

Ouyporn Khuankaew, who worked with BPF for years as a member of the International Network of Engaged Buddhists, is a distinguished specialist in gender and development who has incorporated Buddhist philosophies of nonviolence in her work. She has served on the boards of numerous international projects and has conducted training programs on peace and justice in many locations. She is

currently director of the International Women's Partnership for Peace and Justice.

Jill Jameson, an active BPF member for years, is a peace activist who draws on Buddhist principles and practices in her training programs on international conflict transformation, peace building, Deep Ecology, and empowerment. She is on the executive committee of the International Network of Engaged Buddhists.

Sandy traveled to Bangkok for the awards ceremony, accompanied by her teacher, Ruth Denison, who also received an award, and her partner Martha Boesing. (The United Nations maintains a headquarters in each major region of the world, the one for Asia being in Bangkok.) At the United Nations she met the other women and participated in the ceremony on International Women's Day, March 7.

"I felt very grateful to have my efforts acknowledged by the award," Sandy reports. "But the most powerful part for me was learning about the work these other recipients are doing. Both nuns and laywomen, they are pursuing such substantive, on-the-ground projects, very hands-on, very concrete: running hospitals and schools, working with AIDS patients, organizing to stop the international sex trade in girls and women, which is rampant in Thailand and Cambodia, working to get full ordination for nuns. It was truly inspiring, and gave Martha and me many models of determined, ongoing activism, and an inkling that perhaps as Buddhist women we can be more empowered and effective than we thought."

*Turning Wheel* congratulates these three women, and the other 15 as well, and thanks them for their work for peace and human rights, especially for women's rights.

## Torture Vigil and Teach-In

Every Thursday afternoon during the 2006 spring semester, a group of people gathered for an hour on the sidewalk outside Boalt Hall, U.C. Berkeley's law school, to protest U.S. torture practice and the dictatorial policies of the Bush administration. At the same time, in a classroom inside the building, Professor John Yoo taught a class on constitutional law. It was Yoo who authored the "torture memo" for the Bush White House, and who was the primary legal architect of the administration's torture policy. Although Yoo's reasoning is widely disputed by legal authorities, the U.C. Berkeley administration and faculty has not disassociated itself from his active espousal of torture.

This torture vigil and teach-in was organized by Rev. Taigen Dan Leighton, a Zen Buddhist teacher and peace activist. Leighton, who is on the faculty of the Graduate Theological Union associated with U.C. Berkeley, was surprised that nobody in Berkeley was responding to the presence of torture advocate Yoo, and so organized the event. Yoo has gone so far as to state that children of detainees being interrogated could be tortured at the discretion of the president. We learned at the teach-ins that such torture of children has indeed been carried out.

Our witness against torture and unchecked executive



Demonstrators at torture teach-in, Berkeley, California, April 2006

power was part vigil, with periods of silence to remember those being tortured around the world, and also an informative teach-in, with Dan Ellsberg, Joanna Macy, and a law professor expert on international human rights law (see editorial, Spring '06 *TW*), among others. This was also an interfaith endeavor, and speakers included a Quaker, several Buddhists, and Rabbi Michael Lerner. Photos of American torture practices at Abu Ghraib were also displayed. The event was initially sponsored by BPF and World Can't Wait, and was quickly endorsed by many other organizations, including the American Civil Liberties Union, the American Friends Service Committee, Global Exchange, Code Pink, Nonviolence International, and St. Joseph the Worker Catholic Church.

One Thursday I volunteered to take a turn standing on a milk crate wearing a black hood and black cape. I stretched my arms out to the side and held wires in my hands, embodying the icon of Abu Ghraib. We had learned from Andres Conteris of Democracy Now, one of the weekly speakers, that torture is particularly effective when the pain is self-imposed. When the victim has to hold up his own arms, there is an added element of self-hatred, as the victim feels himself to be his own worst enemy.

But unlike the prisoner in Abu Ghraib, I was *not* being tortured. I occasionally let my arms hang down to rest when they became unbearably heavy. I could look through the thin gauze hood and see my friends listening to the speaker, and passersby on the street.

For about 45 minutes, I stood on the milk carton with steady feet and a full heart. I *wanted* to be there. I made myself into a statue, offering my stillness to all the victims of torture. And when I rested my arms I thought about how



they cannot rest their arms.

That day the speaker was journalist David Silvester, who was about to begin serving a three-month sentence in Lompoc Federal Prison in California for civil disobedience at the School of the Americas at Fort Benning, Georgia, where the U.S. Army trains torturers from Latin America. He articulated his objections to John Yoo's book *The Powers of War and Peace*, in which Yoo argues that the Constitution need not always apply to the Commander-in-Chief.

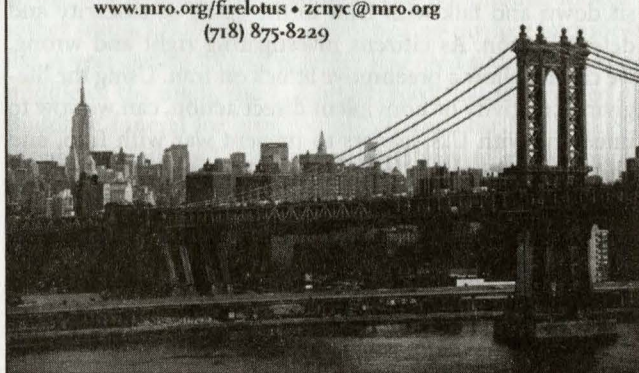
There was never a big crowd, but every week people gathered, bearing witness, learning, and sharing information about other actions. A couple of law students appeared and told us that they were organizing other law students to protest and challenge John Yoo's arguments for the constitutionality of torture. Circles expand from a small center, and you don't know who you are affecting.

The weekly gatherings will resume in the fall, when classes begin again at Boalt Hall. Interested people in the San Francisco Bay Area can find out more about these efforts at [www.bpf.org](http://www.bpf.org). Torture vigils modeled on this one are now being planned by other BPF chapters. Although John Yoo provides a clear focus, people in other areas might hold similar witness vigils outside local federal buildings or offices of congresspeople. For more info on torture, pictures from Abu Ghraib, and suggestions about how to hold vigils against torture, contact BPF Executive Director Maia Duerr at <[maia@bpf.org](mailto:maia@bpf.org)>. ♦



—Susan Moon, in consultation with Taigen Leighton

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## Statement from BPF

### The Iran-U.S. Nuclear Crisis

April 2006

In the holy city of Mashad, on April 11, dancers whirled about, raising up canisters of uranium hexafluoride in joy as Iran's President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad announced that Iran had successfully enriched a small amount of uranium. He declared, "Iran has joined the club of nuclear countries." Later, responding to international concern about Iran's nuclear program, President Ahmadinejad said, "Our answer to those who are angry about Iran achieving the full nuclear fuel cycle is just one phrase. We say: 'Be angry at us and die of this anger.'"

While we at the Buddhist Peace Fellowship are alarmed by President Ahmadinejad's inflammatory rhetoric, we are first responsible for and to our own government. For those of us who are citizens of the United States, that responsibility includes understanding our karmic ties and historical relationship to Iran. It is a history so entangled with national, corporate, and military self-interests that our present conflict with Iran comes as no surprise.

In 1953, the CIA and British MI-6 orchestrated a coup against Mohammad Mosaddegh, the elected prime minister of Iran, who had moved to nationalize the oil resources of his country. In the wake of this coup, Shah Reza Pahlavi took the reins of power and led a brutal autocracy that lasted until 1979. He was widely feared and abhorred by his subjects, but the U.S. government found him a compliant and useful ally in the Middle East. Valuing the Shah's friendship, the U.S. provided the technology for an Iranian nuclear program in the middle 1960s. This program was shut down after the Islamic Revolution in 1979, but was restarted in the 1980s when the U.S. took Iraq's side in that country's eight-year war with Iran, supplying Iraq with massive amounts of military aid, including chemical and biological agents.

More recently, U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice has said, "There will have to be some consequence for (Iran's) action and that defiance...and we will look at the full range of options available to the Security Council." A week later, President Bush, when asked whether the U.S. would consider a nuclear strike to prevent Iran from developing atomic weapons, replied, "All options are on the table."

At the Buddhist Peace Fellowship, we are dismayed by this deadly pas de deux. The circumstances call to mind the Buddha's words in a verse from the *Dhammapada*: "All tremble at violence; life is dear to all. Putting oneself in the place of another, one should not kill nor cause another to kill."

The Buddha's words point directly to the practice of nonviolence. Not passivity, not avoidance, not denial, but adherence to the belief and practice that human conflicts can be resolved by means other than the threat and actuality of killing and wounding.

President Bush claims to be looking at a diplomatic solution to this crisis. But his notion of "diplomacy" means using the United Nations to pressure Iran into compliance with U.S. wishes. This stretches the meaning of diplomacy beyond recognition.

From a Buddhist perspective, we understand that all beings exist in relation to each other, that we co-create the world in which we live. This is the law of dependent origination: this is, because that is; because that arises, this arises. In an interdependent world, diplomacy implies dialogue. We must take responsibility for our actions, and on that basis we must talk with our opponents to arrive at a resolution. The U.S. has had virtually no direct nation-to-nation talks with Iran since the fall of the Shah in 1979. Rather, there have been 26 years of threats, mutual vilification, and diplomatic isolation (with the single strange interlude of Iran-Contra, when the U.S. sold arms to Iran to raise funds for its illegal war against Nicaragua's democratically elected government in the 1980s).

The Buddha said, "Not by passing arbitrary judgments does a man become just; a wise man is he who investigates both right and wrong."

Investigating both right and wrong means looking at entangled strands of cause and effect. But the Buddhist understanding of karma is not determinism. Karma creates the opportunity for transformation. By engaging in a true dialogue, the U.S. has an opportunity to transform 50 years of manipulation, anger, and resentment in our relationship with Iran. The alternative—a preemptive attack and war with Iran, possibly involving nuclear weapons—is so potentially destructive that it must be taken off the table. Attacking Iran would invite a global war that would have no boundaries and no rules.

For the sake of peace and life, the Buddhist Peace Fellowship calls for immediate, direct negotiations and dialogue between the U.S. and Iran, and we urge our leaders to sit down and talk with Iran in the spirit of sincerity and determination. As citizens investigating right and wrong, we cannot allow a preemptive attack on Iran. Using the life-giving creativity of nonviolent direct action, can we vow to intervene with U.S. leaders to prevent war with Iran, and end the pointless U.S. war in Iraq? Trapped in their fears and beliefs, our political leaders on all sides appear to be eager to lead a dance of death, but life itself is dear to all. We yearn for a dance of life. ❖

*This statement was drafted by Alan Senauke.*

I like to believe that I am an American patriot who loves his country enough to address her flaws. Today these are many, and all the preachers worth their salt need fearlessly to insist that "God 'n' country" is not one word.

—William Sloane Coffin

## Family Practice

### Being a Buddhist Family in a Christian World

by Mushim Ikeda-Nash

My parents, both of whom were second-generation Japanese Americans (Nisei), basically skirted the whole question of religion in raising their three children. My mother came from a Buddhist family in Hawai'i, my father from a farming family of unknown faith tradition in Indiana. Dad regarded all organized religion as hypocritical and chose instead to commune with nature while sitting in a boat on a lake, fishing—that was his form of spirituality. Mom seemed to have no trouble with living in the Bible Belt of Ohio and she adopted a “go with the flow” attitude toward celebrating Christian holidays. I think she looked at holidays as a way to exercise her creativity and have fun: we have old family photos that show how she used to tape brick-pattern crepe paper onto her Singer sewing machine stand to make it into a mock fireplace. That way, Santa Claus could “come down the chimney” of our house trailer at Christmas. Since Easter had no religious meaning for us, she turned it into “All the Bacon You Can Eat Day,” which was eagerly anticipated each year. We’d get up on Easter morning, hunt the eggs we had dyed the day before, eat as much bacon as we could, chase it down with the head of a chocolate rabbit, and fall into a pleasant stupor.

Thus, I always thought of my father as an agnostic and my mother as a kind of secular humanist, but Mom threw a curve ball near the end of her life and declared that she was Buddhist. I happened to be visiting her at the time, and can still remember thinking “No way!” when my mother said casually, “I’m Buddhist,” to two women who had come from a hospice agency and were filling out forms. Not having known her previously, they simply nodded and wrote it down. My mother, who had large-cell lymphoma, looked rather smug, I thought, as I scrunched up my face in disbelief. A year earlier, when my father had died suddenly in the middle of the night, she had announced that she wanted a Buddhist funeral for him. I could almost hear Dad’s spirit shouting “Hell no!” but there was no way to stop it once Mom had made up her mind.

Unlike my family of origin, my partner, our teenage son, and I are a self-declared Buddhist family, with a Buddhist home environment and Buddhist friends. We largely ignore the fact that we, along with other Buddhists, make up only .4 percent of religious Americans, perching precariously on the margins of a predominantly Christian country. Only occasionally are we unpleasantly reminded of our minority status, such as when Joshua came home from third grade one day, reporting that one of his classmates had asked, “Is your family Buddhist?”

“Yes,” Josh said.

“Then you’re all going to hell,” the other kid said.

“I respect his religion,” Josh said sadly to me. “Why can’t he respect mine?”

Living in Oakland, California, one of the most multiracial and multicultural cities in the U.S., we’ve come into contact with people who are Muslim, Wiccan, Hindu, Jewish, Baha’i, Catholic, atheist, Protestant, Quaker, plus various mixtures, such as Buddhist Jews and Zen Catholics. How do we establish our identity as Buddhists while trying to practice non-self and letting go? How do we relate to those Christians who clearly think we are deluded and who want to “save” us through conversion to their beliefs? How do we relate to the Christian families (including our own relatives) who believe that the Bible is the basis for “family values” that we think are repressive, homophobic, and repugnant? Socializing with people who think and vote as we do seems limiting; but venturing out to try to dialogue with or work alongside those very different from ourselves is scary.

We don’t have answers. In general we avoid people who might try in an aggressive way to impose their beliefs or culture on us, whether it’s religious, political, or diet- and health-related. But I don’t think avoidance is a working model for Joshua, who is 17, and who will soon be entering a college or university environment where young adults from many different backgrounds will be thrust together in classrooms and dormitories. From what I’ve read, the resultant tensions may be one of the causes of the recent rise of hate crimes on college campuses.

Occasionally I do feel worried about being a Buddhist family in a predominantly Christian country, especially since 9/11. I’ve begun doing more interfaith work. And if the Buddha were around today, I suspect he’d say, “Deal with it.” After all, whether we’re hanging onto the margin or dancing in the mainstream, our homework assignment is still the same: Give up the old ways. ❖

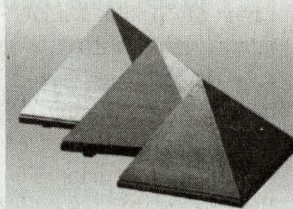
*Passion, enmity, folly.*

*Know the truth and find peace.*

*Share the way.*

—The Dhammapada: The Sayings of the Buddha,  
translated by Thomas Byrom

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## History

### The Buddha Conducts Interfaith Dialogue

by Diane Patenaude Ames

Jainism, a religion distinguished by its emphasis on the doctrine of *ahimsa*, or “doing no harm,” was founded in India by a man the Jains call Mahavira, probably in the sixth century BCE. It would appear that Jains and Buddhists competed for converts and support during the Buddha’s lifetime (540–480 BCE, more or less) and afterwards, leading at times to such strain that the murder of the Buddha’s great disciple Maudgalyayana was blamed on Jain ascetics. However, the *Upali Sutta*, a text from the ancient Pali Canon, shows that the Buddha always preferred cordial interreligious relations to conflict.

At the beginning of the sutta, one Digha Tapassi, a distinguished disciple of the Jain teacher Mahavira, pays a social call on the Buddha. Their “courteous and amiable” conversation turns into a rather arcane doctrinal discussion, something about whether evil bodily action is more reprehensible than evil mental action or vice versa. But the point is that although differences emerge, they do not quarrel, and they part on good terms.

When Digha Tapassi goes back to his teacher and reports this conversation, the rich householder Upali, a

well-known lay disciple of Mahavira, volunteers to challenge the Buddha to a debate on the doctrinal issues under discussion. However, when the debate takes place, Upali finds himself won over by the Buddha’s eloquence and asks to be accepted as the Buddha’s disciple then and there. The Buddha replies that since this is too important a step to take impulsively, Upali should take more time to think it over. At this Upali is impressed, saying that the leader of any other sect would rush to tell the world that he had converted such a well-known man as Upali instead of making this sensible suggestion. He insists all the more vehemently that he wishes to become the Buddha’s disciple. Finally the Buddha agrees, but stipulates that since Upali has always given alms to Jain ascetics, he should continue to do so. Upali agrees and studies the dharma with enthusiasm. Later Buddhist tradition credits Upali with having compiled the Vinaya, the body of rules for monks and nuns.

Although the historical accuracy of this story is open to question—it is, for one thing, far from clear whether the Buddha and Mahavira were contemporaries—it is important because Buddhists have regarded it as a model of interreligious relations from the days of the composition of the Pali Canon on. Its lesson was not ignored either. Later the great Buddhist king Asoka declared in one of his famous Rock Edicts that all of his subjects should respect and honor one another’s religions for the sake of both their own religions and those of others. ❖



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### Caring for Creation

by Stephanie Kaza

Last May several monks from Dharma Rain Zen Center in Portland, Oregon, attended an energy workshop sponsored by Oregon Interfaith Power and Light (IPL). At first the monks thought their center's budget was too limited to take up many of the suggested energy improvements. But with the encouragement of others, they decided to replace their frugal approach to energy with something more proactive. Within six months the monks had received bids for a photovoltaic system for the center's roof and learned about incentive energy tax credits.

In Vermont the local IPL recently offered a workshop in energy assessment at Charlotte Congregational Church. Churches, especially those in New England, are traditionally not very energy-efficient buildings. Many have high ceilings and are a challenge to heat and cool effectively. Since its formation just two years ago, VIPL has conducted a half dozen such workshops and walk-through energy audits at Vermont synagogues and churches.

These two state initiatives are part of a new and growing national movement toward congregational involvement in energy concerns and global climate change. Green sanctuary programs have been promoted actively by Quaker Earthcare Witness and the Unitarian Seventh Generation Project. The 2006 Earth-Day-in-a-Box theme for faith communities is "climate change solutions." The organizers emphasize that global climate issues present a "moral challenge." They cite the World Council of Churches' call to action urging congregants to respond to climate injustice:

"The problem of accelerated climate change exemplifies what has gone awry in the modern human project of dominating and managing nature for strictly human purposes of security and enrichment. In its causes and consequences it displays many of the worst injustices that prevail in relationships between rich and poor in the modern world. This threat to creation has brought the Christian community to new reflection on our faith. Through this reflection we Christians are reinterpreting our responsibility towards creation."

The first Episcopal Power and Light was formed in California in 1998 through the initiative of Rev. Sally Bingham of San Francisco's Grace Cathedral. This set the stage for interfaith engagement, and three years later California Interfaith Power and Light was founded. CIPL has clearly met a high need in the state, providing web and workshop resources for over 300 aspiring congregations. Spiritual leaders can elect to sign on to the congregational covenant and pledge to conduct an energy audit, advocate for a sustainable energy policy, or aim to become a carbon-neutral congregation. CIPL identifies itself as an earth ministry committed to supporting faithful stewards of Creation in responding to global climate change.

How can we see this earth ministry as interfaith dia-

logue? In these early stages the movement is dominated by Christian congregations; Buddhist centers are still a very small minority—one in Oregon, one in the D.C. area, four in the San Francisco Bay Area. The dialogue happens in the workshops and through follow-up support networks. Buddhist leaders meet Christian leaders as peers in the wider context of "caring for Creation." Doctrinal differences are not the focus here; rather, everyone is involved in building cooperative relations for the larger good—a sustainable planet. Understanding of denominational practices and beliefs happens in the context of becoming earth stewards together and sharing a common call to action.

Gary Gardner of the Worldwatch Institute has written in detail about the significant assets religious groups bring to environmental work. Among these are morally motivated leadership, many thousands of followers, and specific property and land to care for. The Interfaith Power and Light groups draw directly on these resources and are moving their congregations in a hopeful direction. This is good. We need these efforts. Buddhist centers need them, too, and can certainly be encouraged to join the dialogue. We are all breathing the same air and facing the same climate disruptions. It would be great to see the member lists of these IPLs filled out with Buddhist sanghas working for climate solutions. As the 2006 Earth Day theme reminds us, it is crucial that we as communities of faith become "beacons for justice in shining a light on this serious threat to the Earth." ♦

#### To find an IPL program in your state:

[www.theregenerationproject.org/ipl/index.html](http://www.theregenerationproject.org/ipl/index.html)

#### Other useful links:

- Interfaith Climate Change Network  
[protectingcreation.org](http://protectingcreation.org)
- Climate Crisis Coalition Interfaith Initiative  
[www.climatecrisiscoalition.org/mayer-call-toaction.html](http://www.climatecrisiscoalition.org/mayer-call-toaction.html)
- Evangelical Environment Network  
[www.creationcare.org/resources/climate](http://www.creationcare.org/resources/climate)
- Unitarian Universalist Ministry for the Earth  
[uuministryforearth.org/index.shtml](http://uuministryforearth.org/index.shtml)
- California Interfaith Power and Light  
[www.interfaithpower.org](http://www.interfaithpower.org)

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# Al-Budd and Muslim Me

by Mas'ood Cajee

*The human race is a single being  
Created from one jewel  
If one member is struck  
All must feel the blow  
Only someone who cares for the pain of others  
Can truly be called human*  
—Shaykh Saadi, 12th-century Persian poet

*O mankind! Lo!  
We have created you male and female,  
and have made you nations and tribes  
that ye may know one another.  
Lo! the noblest of you, in the sight of Allah,  
is the best in conduct.  
Lo! Allah is Knower, Aware.*  
—The Noble Qur'an, 49:13

Coming from a South African–Indian Muslim background, I feel relatively at ease with non-Abrahamic religious cultures. Lenasia, the racially segregated South African township for Indians in which I was raised, was dotted with Muslim mosques, Hindu temples, and Christian churches. (It was near this township, adjoining Soweto, that Mahatma Gandhi established his multiracial, multifaith experimental commune “Tolstoy Farm.”) Furthermore, my parents were intent on teaching me about a world beyond apartheid’s poisonous confines.

My family lived directly across the street from the largest mosque in Lenasia, called Nurul-Islam, “The Light of Islam.” At the five prayer times (dawn, noon, afternoon, dusk, and night) we could hear at least a dozen staggered calls to prayer coming from the amplified speakers of the surrounding mosques. Though we lived as a religious minority in a racially oppressive state governed by fundamentalist Christian nationalists, we were free to practice our faiths—within our apartheid ghetto.

As a child, I attended daily after-school religious classes. The Hindu kids had their own classes, and we Muslim kids attended what we called *Madrassah* (Arabic for “school”). We learned Arabic, Qur’an, prophetic history, and the basics of ethics, belief, and practice.

Many Muslim children in my community memorized the entire Qur’an, a process that usually takes about two years. In my family, my younger brother

and six cousins, both male and female, have become *hafidh*, or Qur’an memorizers. Committing the Qur’an to memory is often the first step to advanced study of sacred knowledge. I only memorized the most common verses, but I often spent weekends in a seminary listening to young students reciting their lessons.

My favorite part of the madrassah afternoon was storytime. The contemporary tales that my teacher told were often based on *hadith* (prophetic sayings). I recall the one about two neighbors. One was outwardly very religious, covered her hair, didn’t wear nail polish or makeup, and made a public display of her faith. However, she always criticized her neighbor, who was outwardly very worldly and would (gasp!) even go to the movies on Fridays. The worldly neighbor was kind to her cat, generous to the sick and the elderly, and never spoke ill of anyone.

“Who would go to Heaven?” my teacher asked. The prophetic tradition told of two women, one destined for hellfire because she imprisoned her cat and refused to feed it, and the other a prostitute who attained Paradise because she once filled her shoe with water to slake the thirst of a stray dog.

Still, religious rituals are important in Islam. The Prophet Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him,\* stressed the importance of performing *salaah* (the five daily prayers) in congregation with others. As a child and young adult, I attended one or two congregational prayers in the mosque every day. My grandfather, who was retired, prayed all five daily prayers in the mosque. For those who worked far

from home, that was difficult. But *salaah* can be performed anywhere; the only requirement is that one do it in a clean place. The Prophet Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him, said, “The whole earth is a *masjid*” (Arabic for “mosque,” literally a place for prostration and worship). He prayed on a straw mat or on sand. Muslims today often pray on beautifully woven rugs; however, surfaces such as sand, grass, earth, or even concrete all suffice. As for me, I pray every day on



Khadijah Chadly,  
*And He Is Among You*  
(painted tile)

a patch of grass under an oak tree outside my office or on a rug at home.

My childhood years revolved around the mosque and the Muslim holy days. Nevertheless, my parents were keen that I learn about other traditions. When I was of school age, they enrolled me in a prestigious white private school in Johannesburg, which forced the school's prominent and publicly liberal board of trustees to wrestle for over a year with the question of

whether to admit their first student of color. I was eventually accepted for second grade, having spent first grade at a segregated government school for Indians.

After my physician father had become established in his practice, my parents were able to fulfill a long-held desire to travel abroad. On a childhood trip to Japan, I was mesmerized by the Great Buddha of Kamakura near Tokyo. We visited many temples and gardens in Japan sacred to Buddhists, but the Kamakura Buddha, in particular, struck my fancy. "Who is this big man?" I wondered. "Why does he have his eyes closed?"

I enjoyed twisting my pliable eight-year-old legs into the lotus position and puffing out my tummy, imitating the jolly, big-bellied Laughing Buddha statue in the hotel lobby. My parents told me that the Buddha was a great man, originally a royal prince, named Siddhartha Gautama, whose followers had built the remarkable temples and gardens we were visiting. These temples were somehow familiar to me; they seemed like mosques...with statues.

My dad said the Buddha had achieved nirvana.

"You mean, like Nirvana Drive?" I asked. Our township's arterial road was called Nirvana Drive.

"No, silly, Nirvana Drive is named after nirvana, the state of enlightenment the Buddha achieved after meditating under a fig tree."

Figs I knew about. I had memorized the chapter in the Qur'an about figs, which were sacred in Islam. "Did Buddha receive a book under the tree, like Muhammad, peace be upon him?" I figured Buddha's experience must have been akin to the Prophet's time in the Cave of Hira. The Prophet, spurred on by dreams that he said were "like the breaking of the light of dawn," sought solace in this cave, a place "uncontaminated by the world of men." He retreated there for long periods of meditation. After several years of this, during the lunar month of Ramadan, he had the first of his encounters with the Angel Gabriel. Gabriel overwhelmed Muhammad, peace be upon him, in a suffocating embrace, and began the process of revelation of the Qur'an.

"Well, I don't think Buddha received a book," answered my dad, "so he wasn't exactly like the Prophet Muhammad, but he was also very wise. Why don't we buy you a book so you can read about him? I'm afraid I can't answer all your questions."

"But," I protested, "I have one more question! Was he Japanese?"

My father chuckled. "No, he was from India. He just looks Japanese because his followers localized him."

In Islam, any figurative representations of the Prophet Muhammad, peace and blessings upon him, or of God, are forbidden. The Prophet is to be emulated, and God alone is to be worshipped—devoid of

### Further reading:

*The Qur'an: A New Translation*, translated by Thomas Cleary (Starlatch Press, 2004)

*Vision of Islam*, Sachiko Murata and William Chittick (Paragon House, 1995). There have been countless "Islam 101" books published in the last few years, some of them of dubious quality. This book stands out in its authenticity.

*Muhammad: His Life Based on Earlier Sources*, Martin Lings (Inner Traditions, 1987). Perhaps the best English-language biography of the Prophet.

*Women of Sufism: A Hidden Treasure*, Camille Helminski (Shambhala, 2003). Profiles of contemporary Muslim women, many of them American.

*The Rumi Collection: An Anthology of Translations of Mevlana Jalaluddin Rumi*, Kabir Helminski (Shambhala Classics, 2000). Recommended introduction to the poetry of this genius of Islamic spirituality.

### Some websites:

Zaytuna Institute, [www.zaytuna.org](http://www.zaytuna.org). A leading Muslim seminary in the San Francisco Bay Area that promotes the classical tradition of Islam.

Muslim Peace Fellowship, [www.mpfweb.org](http://www.mpfweb.org). Dedicated to making the beauty of Islam evident in the world through peace, justice, and nonviolence. The Buddhist Peace Fellowship and the Muslim Peace Fellowship are both affiliated with the Fellowship of Reconciliation.

[www.danielmoorepoetry.com](http://www.danielmoorepoetry.com). Selections from the poetry, theater, and art of Daniel Abdal-Hayy Moore. His book of poems, *Laughing Buddha Weeping Sufi*, is available at [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com).

[www.masud.co.uk](http://www.masud.co.uk). Articles by leading Islamic scholars on issues of contemporary importance.

The Threshold Society, [www.sufism.org](http://www.sufism.org). Information on Sufi teachings, seminars, and literature.

[www.altmuslim.com](http://www.altmuslim.com). Commentary on current events from young (and a few old) American Muslims.

Listen to the Qur'an at [www.kitabullah.com](http://www.kitabullah.com).



human attributes like race, gender, class, and age.

That Buddha was a fellow Indian intrigued me. My family has roots in India. My childish mind imagined that perhaps Buddha was a distant relative, deep down in the family tree. Having grown up in apartheid South Africa, I was pleased that the Japanese, who had brought the world the Honda Civic and the Sony Walkman, could revere a brown Indian person—other than the Bollywood megastar Amitabh Bachchan—in this manner. To quote the United Parcel Service slogan, I felt empowered by “the power of brown.”

As I later discovered, it has been in the pluralistic religious stew of the Indian subcontinent that Muslims have encountered Buddhism more than anywhere else. The Gangetic plain was the homeland of the Buddha, and Islam, too, experienced a great flowering there.

Abu Rayhan Al-Biruni (973–1048), the Muslim polymath who spent 13 years in India exploring the land and studying ancient texts in the original Sanskrit, wrote sympathetically about Buddha and Buddhism in his epic tome, *The History of India*. He also wrote a treatise on the Buddhas of Bamiyan.

Closer to our times, the early-20th-century Indian Muslim statesman/theologian Mawlana Abul Azad published a periodical that sought to build bridges with Buddhists worldwide. He also sponsored publications that did the same for Persians and Arabs. Azad echoed earlier Indian Muslim scholarship on Buddhism by proposing that the mysterious prophet Dhul Kifl mentioned in the Qur’an could have been the Buddha.

The city of Baghdad was a great center of scholarship and translation, transmitting knowledge from Indian and other ancient sources. An unknown ninth-century Baghdad scholar translated the story of Buddha into Arabic in *Kitab al-Budaf wa Balawhar*, literally “The Book of the Bodhisattva and [his teacher] Balawhar.” Curiously, this text was subsequently translated into Georgian and Greek, Christianized, and popularized in the West as *The Legend of Barlaam and Joasaph*.

Perhaps the most notable Islamic account of Buddhism based on the Indian encounter is found in the *Kitab al-Milal wa Nihal*—“The Book of Confessions and Creeds”—written by Muhammad al-Shahrastani (ca. 1076–1153) in Baghdad. Al-Shahrastani’s history of religions contains the first accurate descriptions of Indian Buddhist traditions in Islamic scholarship. Al-Shahrastani described Buddhism as a “search for truth inculcating patience, giving, and detachment” that was “near to the teachings of the Sufis.”

Patience, giving, and detachment are indeed powerful themes in Islamic discourse, and especially in Sufism (Islamic mysticism). If Islam is an orange, a teacher



Khadijah Chadly, *Weaving Woman*  
(ceramic jar, after a traditional Muslim design)

once told me, then its hard, protective, and superficially bitter shell is the *sharia*, the religion’s vast ethical-legal corpus. Its sweet pulpy interior is Sufism, called *Tasawwuf* or sometimes *Tariqah* in Arabic. One teacher has called Sufism “the science of your Self, of fulfilling one’s fullest destiny.” Many have noted the similarities between Zen Buddhism and Sufism, especially in the storytelling and the activities of the masters.

Sufis are attached to the idea of detachment, although they generally avoid the permanent vows of monasticism and poverty that the Prophet, peace and blessings upon him, frowned upon. The Prophet did not regard monasticism itself as reprehensible. Indeed, the Qur’an exhorts believers to protect those in monasteries, especially of other faiths. However, Islam emphasizes the importance of familial relationships. Thus, the right to worship and sequester oneself must

**That Buddha was a fellow Indian intrigued me. Having grown up in apartheid South Africa, I was pleased that the Japanese, who had brought the world the Honda Civic and the Sony Walkman, could revere a brown Indian person.**

be balanced with the rights that one's parents, children, spouses, relatives, and neighbors have over you.

"The *sunna* (the path of Muhammad, peace and blessings upon him) is about detachment," insists Shaykh Abdal Hakim Murad, a prominent British Muslim theologian. He says that a Muslim has "confidence that, however seemingly black the situation of the world and however great the oppression, no leaf falls without the will of [God]. Ultimately, all is well. The cosmos, and history, are in good hands."

Thomas Cleary, the brilliant American scholar of Arabic, Japanese, Pali, Chinese, and Sanskrit, has translated both the Qur'an and many Buddhist texts, like the *Avatamsaka Sutra*. Cleary observes that in terms of doctrinal format, "Buddhism and Islam seem to be as dissimilar as religions could be.... When we look more closely at certain underlying elements, however, we find similarities."

Indeed, Buddhism and Islam have much in common, including the centrality of compassion, and a tradition of meditative practice.

Both Buddhism and Islam share a concern for ethical social action. *Adab*, a critical element of the Islamic ethos meaning "courtesy, respect, appropriateness," is roughly akin to the Noble Eightfold Path of Buddhism. According to Shaykh Kabir Helminski, "Adab creates the context in which we develop our humanness." In this regard, the Prophet Muhammad, peace and blessings upon him, said, "None of you will have authentic faith until your hearts are made right, nor will your hearts be made right until your tongues be made right, nor will your tongues be made right until your actions be made right."

Islam and Buddhism share customs, too, including a disdain for alcohol, keeping the feet bare in sacred space, sitting on the floor, touching the earth, prostrations, use of prayer beads (Buddhist *malas* usually have 108 beads while Muslim *tesbihs* usually have 99 beads), and some common sacred sites, such as Adam's Peak in Sri Lanka.

Muslims, like Buddhists, conceive of themselves as following a path of moderation. Islam, argues Shaykh Abdal Hakim Murad, is "the middle way between the incarnationism of Christianity, which posits a God of love and then cannot explain natural disasters, and the impersonal Real of most forms of Buddhism.... We are 'neither of the East nor of the West,' we are the 'middle nation.'"

Of course, differences abound. David Scott, a scholar of Muslim-Buddhist interaction, says the standard Islamic critique of Buddhism is that "Buddhism suffers from the twin evils of idolatry, through its use of richly decorated visual statues and paintings; and of atheism, through not having a theistic God at the center of their religious system."

Historically, Buddhism and Islam have had a lengthy encounter that includes both conflict and harmonious coexistence. Buddhists and Muslims have found themselves at various times and places as neighbors and as adversaries, as allies and as foes.

Muslims and Buddhists have lived for centuries together in much of Asia. Today, there are Muslim communities in Buddhist lands such as Burma, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Cambodia, and Tibet. Conversely, we find Buddhist minorities in predominantly Muslim lands such as Malaysia, Indonesia, and Bangladesh. And Buddhists and Muslims both live as minorities in China, India, Russia, Western Europe, and the Americas.

In the United States, especially in the rich cross-fertilized soils of California and New York, there are new possibilities for Buddhist-Muslim dialogue and cooperation. Buddhists and Muslims are natural partners in defending and invigorating American religious pluralism. When I was an undergraduate at the University of California-Berkeley in the early 1990s, the Berkeley mosque was actually located in the Berkeley Shambhala Center, and Telegraph Avenue's Shambhala Books was one of the best places to get literature on Islam.

In April 2006, an unprecedented Buddhist-Muslim summit took place in San Francisco which brought together the Dalai Lama, Shaykh Hamza Yusuf, and a group of prominent Buddhists and Muslims. The convening, called "The Gathering of Hearts Illuminating Compassion," generated quite a bit of publicity, with stories appearing in *The New York Times* and on Al-Jazeera. "The Dalai Lama's historic gesture of solidarity with his Muslim brothers and sisters will resonate throughout the world," remarked Shaykh Hamza Yusuf. "This meeting was a reaffirmation of and a commitment to using the wisdom of our traditions as a means to help one another overcome suffering through the core teaching of compassion, and to condemn the perversion of religion that causes so much human suffering. This unifies us all."

"The prospects for increasing contact and cooperation between Buddhists and Muslims are vast," remarks the Buddhist scholar Alexander Berzin. "They have the potential to lead to more understanding between religious practitioners as well as to more political stability in areas where the two groups live in close proximity."

Rabia Harris, coordinator of the Muslim Peace Fellowship, concurs: "Muslim-Buddhist interfaith work is an area that definitely needs more attention." Dedicated to making the beauty of Islam evident in the world through peace, justice, and nonviolence, the Muslim Peace Fellowship (MPF) is a sister organization to the Buddhist Peace Fellowship. MPF has been

involved in several peacemaking initiatives in recent years. We have, among other things, developed Muslim-Christian Conflict Transformation Training with the Baptist Peace Fellowship, collaborated on the Muslim-Christian Initiative on the Nuclear Weapons Danger, co-sponsored numerous Israel-Palestine interfaith peacebuilder delegations, and co-sponsored a recent interfaith delegation to Iran. We are currently working on projects for young Muslims, which include developing resources for conscientious objectors and nonviolence training based on Islamic tradition.

Muslims working in the wider community are cultivating relationships with allies and building coalitions. Since 9/11, there has been a blossoming of interfaith and intercultural activity. In many instances, the impetus for this movement has come from young people. A group of Jewish and Muslim female high school students in New Jersey jointly volunteer at a local homeless shelter. The California Council on American-Islamic Relations in Sacramento is one of the sponsors of the annual pilgrimage to Manzanar, where Japanese and Japanese Americans were interned during World War II. The pilgrimage gives Japanese-American and American Muslim high school students an opportunity to learn from Japanese American former internees. And, in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, 3,000 Muslims in Houston joined with other service organizations to help Katrina survivors at the Astrodome and the George Brown Convention Center.

But anti-Muslim sentiment in the U.S. is growing, and many Americans fear that all Muslims are terrorists. Erik Nisbet, a Cornell University pollster, found that half of the American public favors restrictions on the civil liberties of Muslims.

How does one respond to this situation? Imam Zaid Shakir, among the most respected and influential Muslim scholars in the West, advises Muslims to uphold the ethical standard of the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him. The Prophet called on his followers to face adversity with patience and perseverance. According to A'isha, a wife of the Prophet, peace be upon him, he said, "Good neighborliness, maintaining blood ties, and good character are the basis of civility, and they enhance civilization."

\*Muslims always bid peace and blessings on the Prophet whenever he is mentioned by name. Muslim scholar Rookeya Kaka explains that Muslims do so "out of love for him, the desire to draw closer to him, and an indebtedness to him, for there is no good we enjoy in this religion besides what has emerged from his teachings." ❖

*Mas'ood Cajee, a board member of the Muslim Peace Fellowship, lives in San Joaquin County, California. He is currently researching the stories of Muslim rescuers during the Nazi genocide. He welcomes comments at <mcajee@yahoo.com>.*

## JUST WHAT DO MUSLIMS BELIEVE IN ANYWAY?

### The Five Pillars of Islam

- \* Faith that *La ilaha ill-Allah, Muhammad-ur Rasul'Allah*: there is but One God worthy of worship, and Muhammad is his messenger, the culmination of a long line of known and unknown prophets sent by God throughout the world.
- \* Performance of prayer five times each day;
- \* Charity to the poor;
- \* Fasting during the daylight hours of the month of Ramadan if one's health allows;
- \* Ritual pilgrimage to the holy city of Mecca, if family circumstances and finances permit.

In addition to the unity of God and the prophethood of Muhammad, Muslims accept the existence of angels, of multiple revealed divine books, of multiple Messengers sent by God, of a Last Day of moral accounting; the divine measuring-out of events (everything, whether it appears to us as good or bad, comes from God); and the Rising after death.

This is our uniformity. Beyond this, a vigorous diversity begins. And God is the best of knowers.

### What do Muslims teach about ecology and interdependence?

#### Khalifa—trusteeship

God made humans to be guardians of His creation. Nature does not belong to us to do with as we wish but is entrusted to us by God for safekeeping.

"The world is green and beautiful, and God has appointed you his guardian over it," taught the Prophet Muhammad.

#### Tawheed—unity

The central concept of Islam is *tawheed*, or unity. God is unity, and His unity is reflected in the unity of humanity and nature. We must maintain the integrity of the Earth's flora and fauna and keep the balance of God's creation.

#### Accountability

We will one day be judged by God for how we have discharged our responsibilities. Have we been good trustees? Have we kept nature in harmony? There will be a day of reckoning.

#### Avoidance of waste

It is said in the Qur'an that God invites us to enjoy the fruits of the earth but to avoid excesses leading to waste, "for Allah does not love wasters."

#### Shariah—the sacred law

These principles have been translated into practical directions for how to live, embodied in the *shariah*, the laws of Islam. Shariah law protects animals from cruelty, conserves forests, and limits the growth of cities.

[Source: Alliance of Religions and Conservation, [www.arcworld.org](http://www.arcworld.org).]

# Something Larger than Me

by Billy Tyler

**M**aximum-security prisons in California are little more than warehouses filled with desperate and forgotten men. They do not foster rehabilitation. I've spent the last decade in such places with men who have lost nearly everything—family, freedom, and livelihood. Most of us came to prison already suffering from serious psychological and social problems. Harsh prison conditions only add to that suffering.

Rehabilitation does not come easy under such circumstances. But a minority of convicts do still manage to transform themselves. I bow deeply to the men who have found their humanity in prison and to those fighting to keep it. Most of them are people of faith.

When I finally began working toward my own rehabilitation in 2000, there was no organized Buddhist fellowship at my prison. Although I studied Zen Buddhism and practiced meditation on my own, I was seeking friends from different faiths—Catholic, Protestant, and Muslim. I wanted to find fellowship with the free-world ministers who volunteer to bring growth and change into this ugly environment. I wanted to unite with the few prisoners doing something life-affirming with their prison time, no matter their faith.

So I practiced broad interfaith spirituality for several years. I fasted with Muslims for the holy month of

Ramadan. I studied the Koran and the Bible. I prayed and sang with Catholics and Protestants. I learned not to take sides in arguments over sin, God, hell, the chosen people, the Apocalypse, or the like. I paid little attention to doctrines and even less attention to what people thought of my interfaith practice. I refused to declare myself Christian, Muslim, or even Buddhist. I let people assume what they would.

There were minor discomforts that called for tolerance. I had an *imam* (Islamic prayer leader) who would ask every week if I was ready to swear my *shahada*, the Islamic oath that maintains “there is no God but Allah and Mohammed is his prophet.” I tried let-

ting the imam down softly by explaining that I did see truth in Islam but could not sincerely take the oath because of my other non-Islamic beliefs. He continued asking and I continued giving excuses.

Then there was the Catholic deacon who gave Holy Communion every month. I was always limited to receiving a prayer-blessing rather than the little cracker that symbolizes the body of Christ, which is only for Catholics, I'm told. And there were several hymns that I hummed along with but couldn't bring myself to sing. “There's power in the blood of the Lamb” is one of them.

But last year I brought my closeted Buddhism out into the light and formally settled into Zen practice. Nobody disowned me. No one was even surprised; they must have known I was a Buddhist before I declared it.

But as a new Buddhist I have new fears.

I still attend sermons about the Book of Revelations in the Protestant chapel, but I've experienced prison ministers literally asking for a show of hands so that they can count how many souls in the room haven't been saved by Jesus. This is done to point out how many of us will be left behind when Christ “calls his church to heaven.” I usually sidestep such confrontations by remaining silent, but these days I feel an urge to explain the bodhisattva ideal and how I'm working out my own salvation along the Eightfold Path.

I wish there were some form of immunity to religious argument I could apply for as an interfaither. I would use it in Islamic services to exempt myself from *wudu*, the ritual washing before *salaat* (prayer). The last time I attended *jumah*, Friday prayer service, the imam kept saying, “If anyone hasn't completed wudu, please go to the sink and do so before we begin *salaat*.” He was looking right at me. It was my first Islamic service since becoming a Buddhist. I didn't want to wash because it felt superstitious. I wasn't dirty! But I wanted to perform *salaat* because I enjoy the harmonious assembly, the sound of Arabic prayers, and the unified bowing. I didn't wash, though, so I didn't perform *salaat* either, out of respect.

Now that I have a tradition of my own, I do feel awkward performing some rituals from other traditions. But without Christian and Muslim services my world would consist of my cell, the chow hall, and the exercise yard. My circle of friends would shrink. My rehabilitation would suffer. And haven't I been attending them because I believe in something larger than me and my little beliefs?

Drawing by David Byrd



(continued on page 23)

# Nonviolence and Nonconformity the Mennonite Way

*Colette DeDonato talks with Pastor Sheri Hostetler*



**I**n addition to being a poet, writer, and mother of a one-year-old, Sheri Hostetler is pastor at First Mennonite Church of San Francisco. Sheri has a master's degree in theology from the Episcopal Divinity School

in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and received further training in pastoral ministry at the Pacific School of Religion in Berkeley, California. Before becoming a pastor and spiritual director, she worked as a journalist and editor.

**Colette:** Before I met you, the only Mennonite I'd known was a gay man living in San Francisco who had been raised in a conservative Mennonite community in Iowa and who'd escaped to California. Aside from hearing his recollections, the only image of Mennonites I'd had was from a little book that someone gave to me about the Amish. In it there were pictures of women and children working on a farm, wearing bonnets. "The Mennonites" was a subsection in the book that described Mennonites as less conservative Amish. Since you live in Oakland and shop at Trader Joe's like your neighbors, are people surprised when you tell them you are a Mennonite?

**Sheri:** Our congregation once put together an ad for our church that tried to address the stereotype. It let people know that we don't drive buggies or wear head coverings. So, yes, I guess we do struggle with this stereotype. Before we can get the message out about who we are, we first have to tell people who we aren't. On the other hand, people are naturally curious about Mennonites in a way that they aren't curious about, say, Methodists. A few of our present members first came to visit us—and ended up becoming a part of the congregation—because of that curiosity. Unless you've had some firsthand experience of Mennonites, there's almost no way you'd have any other image in mind.

There's a wonderful photo in a little book I have about Mennonites and Amish. It shows two women at a Mennonite church conference. On the left is an Amish woman in a dark, plain dress that goes down to her ankles. Her graying hair is bound up in a bun, on top of which is a traditional head covering. To her right is a young woman wearing a short dress, with

long, tanned legs, long hair, and a cigarette poised in her slender fingers.

The one thing I would say that those two women have in common is their attachment to a verse from Romans that we still read today: "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds." Mennonites and Amish alike share this distinctive belief in nonconformity, a belief that we are somehow different from the rest of the world. For the Amish, this nonconformity calls for distinctive dress and modes of transportation. For Hutterites, another Anabaptist group, it means not believing in private property, believing instead that all property is held in common by the community. Or, if you are a thoroughly modern Mennonite who wears short dresses, nonconformity might mean living fully in the world, looking for the most part like everyone else, but attempting to live by a different set of values.

I grew up attending a conservative, traditional Mennonite Church in Ohio. To this day, that church would not have a woman as pastor. They felt they were making a big step when they called a woman to be an elder (a lay leader) a few years ago. So I never had any idea growing up that I wanted to be a pastor, or that I could be. It just wasn't on my radar screen. It wasn't until I became a member at First Mennonite here in San Francisco (and this is a congregation that has had a long string of female pastors) that I even began to realize that this was something I felt drawn to. I joined in the 1990s, and in 2000, the church needed a pastor and by that time I had received the additional training I needed to become one. So that's the short story of how I became the pastor at the church.

**Colette:** Can you give me a brief history of the Mennonite Church?

**Sheri:** Mennonites were part of what's called the Radical Reformation, which was a continuation, in a way, of the Protestant Reformation begun by Martin Luther. (Martin Luther could not stand the Mennonites. He referred to them as *Schwärmer*, a German word for a person driven by impulses and emotions rather than common sense.) Basically, the people who would eventually be called Mennonites came to believe that the Reformation hadn't gone far enough. In particular, they came to believe that the church should be made up of adults who have voluntarily chosen to be a part of it.

**The Mennonite Church, from early on, decided that followers of Jesus must not take anyone's life, based on our understanding of his teachings.**

They believed that only a reasoning adult could make the decision to voluntarily follow the way of Jesus and become a member of the church.

It was their insistence on adult baptism—and in particular re-baptizing someone who had already been baptized as an infant—that eventually gave the civic and religious authorities in the early 1500s the excuse they needed to persecute them. The authorities invoked a third-century law that decreed the death penalty for anyone who practiced re-baptism. The name “Mennonite” comes from Menno Simons, who was an early church leader. I believe it was more of a nickname, but it stuck.

**Colette:** How did progressive social action come into it?

**Sheri:** Well, the Mennonite Church has a strong history of progressive social action. Much of that stems from its pacifism. The church, from early on, decided that followers of Jesus must not take anyone's life, based on our understanding of his teachings. That's been a stance that historically has gotten Mennonites into a lot of trouble vis-à-vis the state, and I think it's engendered among Mennonites a certain counterculturalism and a certain suspicion toward the state.

So the church actively participates in peacemaking around the world, conflict resolution, counseling conscientious objectors, supporting people who choose to not to pay “war taxes”—that is, the percentage of their income tax that goes to the military. There's a group called Christian Peacemaker Teams that has gotten quite a bit of press lately, since four CPTers were kidnapped in Iraq and one of them, Tom Fox, was killed. The Mennonite Church was one of the founders of CPT, which places peacemakers in violent situations around the world to “get in the way” of violence. They accompany people who may otherwise be killed and they document human rights abuses.

In addition to these peacemaking activities, Mennonites have historically been involved in relief and development work around the world. I'd say most Mennonites know somebody who has given three or more years of their life to volunteer, say, in Africa, helping to develop sources of clean water or teaching in a school. There's a strong emphasis on being of practical use to others.

Our own congregation participates in these activities. A member of our congregation was in CPT for years, and we sponsored a Mennonite Voluntary Service Unit, a group of young people, usually just out of college, to live together in community and work at various nonprofits in the Bay Area. These young people are paid a very small stipend that covers living expenses plus \$40 extra in spending money per month! So, obviously, another of the values that is emphasized within this V.S. Unit (and in the

Mennonite Church) is simple living.

Living outside the lines of a consumer culture is a vital part of our belief system. “Living More with Less” is not only a dictum among Mennonites, but it's actually the name of a series of books which describe countless ways to live more simply—to recycle, renew, or, more often, just do without.

**Colette:** Many organizations, including the Buddhist Peace Fellowship, look to the Mennonite conscientious objector work as a model for developing CO programs. Our executive director Maia Duerr was inspired enough by the Mennonite Central Committee's “Ask a Vet” idea that she developed a similar one for BPF. Can you tell me a little about this CO work?

**Sheri:** Since Mennonites have historically embraced pacifism, they've been on the forefront in finding alternatives for young people who feel they can't morally participate in war.

You can go to the Mennonite Central Committee website ([www.mcc.org/co](http://www.mcc.org/co)) and read about all the CO work that is being done, including the “Ask a Vet” interviews, where military veterans and conscientious objectors talk about their experiences. All of our CO work is based on “And No One Shall Make Them Afraid: A Mennonite Statement and Study on Violence,” prepared by the Joint Committee on Violence for the Mennonite Church.

The statement says that all violence is fundamentally incompatible with the teachings of Jesus Christ. Therefore, as followers of Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace, we must directly confront the reality of violence in and around us. Jesus asks us not to resist evil with violence and to forgive rather than to seek revenge. We want to find ways to reject all forms of violence in our relationships and endeavors, and to increase our efforts to live out the nonviolent way of Jesus.

**Colette:** I read that you started a magazine called *Mennonot* to give a voice to those in your tradition who might feel marginalized.

**Sheri:** Yes, it lasted for several years. I didn't have the time to continue doing it. I started it because I felt there was no public forum in which Mennonites could be really honest about their lives.

There were so many topics that were off-limits within the mainstream Mennonite periodicals. For instance, it would be impossible to this day to imagine a mainstream Mennonite publication printing an article by a gay or lesbian person who was out and proud of it, or a woman who had had an abortion and felt that that was an appropriate moral choice. Mennonites have traditionally emphasized adhering to the group's norms. It's the shadow side of our emphasis on community. We're still figuring out how

to do open and loving debate on all sorts of issues. So *Mennonot* was a place for self-identified “Mennonites on the margins” to have a voice.

Despite my discomfort, I’d still rather deal with the ills associated with the shadow side of community than with the ills of individualism. In American culture, we virtually worship the autonomy of the individual, so that, at its most extreme, one is no longer a member of a beloved community but an individual consumer of religious products. You aren’t getting what you need from the church? Leave. When things get tough, go shopping for another faith community. To my thinking, Mennonites are a reminder of the other side of this. They remind us of community. They remind us that we are not only accountable to our own self-fulfillment but to the common good.

**Colette:** How do you see yourself in the context of the larger Christian community? In relation to the Religious Right and other more conservative Christian traditions and interpretations of the Bible?

**Sheri:** Mainstream Mennonites have tended to be socially progressive and theologically conservative. But having said that, there is an incredibly wide variety within the Mennonite Church. Our own congregation—and we are certainly not the only one—would identify itself as progressive in both social thought and theology. We participate in antiwar marches and debate the divinity of Jesus. But there are Mennonites back in my home congregation in Ohio who listen to Pat Robertson, believe that George Bush is a wonderful Christian, and think the Bible needs to be taken literally—whatever that means. I often wonder what keeps this incredibly disparate group of people together.

**Colette:** Do you or members of your congregation do any interfaith work?

**Sheri:** After 9/11, we participated in several interfaith events in San Francisco. Some of us were involved with the Alternatives to War Forum, which was an interfaith group that met monthly and brought in speakers who could talk about the efficacy of nonviolence.

**Colette:** Are most members considered culturally Mennonite? In other words, is it part of their history, just as one might be culturally Jewish? Or do you have many converts who feel oppressed by other Christian traditions and come to your church for refuge?

**Sheri:** Our congregation is equal parts people who would identify as culturally Mennonite and people who have been drawn to Mennonite belief and practice from some other (or no) religious tradition. I’m a good example of a “cultural” Mennonite. I can trace my Amish/Mennonite ancestry, on both my mother’s and father’s side, back to about the 1600s. I grew up in

a community in Ohio that was predominantly Mennonite and Amish. My father’s first language was a dialect of German called Pennsylvania Dutch.

That said, I’m particularly proud of the fact that people who are not culturally Mennonite come to First Mennonite and feel at home there. I think we create a very safe space for people who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, and/or who are questioning some core Christian beliefs. It’s a safe place to be a seeker—someone who doesn’t have all the answers. A number of people at our church are refugees from more conservative denominations. But we call ourselves Christian—we ground ourselves in that tradition. We do strive to take the ethical teachings of Jesus seriously. So people without a Mennonite background (and, of course, those who have one!) tend to be very drawn to that mix of theological openness and ethical commitment.

**Colette:** What is the most spiritually renewing aspect of your job as a pastor?

**Sheri:** Having a front-row seat in people’s lives. I have the honor of being with people and talking with them about what is most important to them, about what makes them get up in the morning. And I also have the honor of being with them at key moments of their lives—when they are getting married, when someone they love has died, when they are going through their own crisis of faith and meaning. I’ve seen people hit bottom and pull themselves back up again. In short, I am witness to these dramas of despair and redemption all the time, and that’s inspiring to me. People are incredibly resilient, and have incredible spiritual imaginations. I get to hear that, see it, and participate in it. I can’t believe I get paid to do this. ♦

*Colette DeDonato is managing editor of Turning Wheel.*

### **Billy Tyler, continued from page 20**

I don’t know. I laugh at myself. I can count all the Buddhists I’ve met on my fingers. And Buddhism is just a phase I’m going through, after all, like birth, life, or death. It’s just something that’s called for and something that will pass away.

In that light I look forward to attending Christian and Muslim services in the future. I can remain authentic in my practice by explaining that I’m a Buddhist visitor. What brings light to me may bring confusion to others. But confusion can give birth to questions. Those questions can lead to dialogue. And who knows what that dialogue might create? I promise not to allow my fears to stop me from finding out. ♦

*Billy Tyler is a Zen student and a prisoner at Calipatria State Prison in California.*

**In American culture, we virtually worship the autonomy of the individual, so that, at its most extreme, one is no longer a member of a beloved community but an individual consumer of religious products.**

# Exodus as Liberation

## A Torah Commentary

by Norman Fischer

It's no accident that the Jewish holiday of Passover and the Christian holiday of Easter come at the same time of year. Sometimes people say, "What a coincidence!" But it's not a coincidence at all. Jesus wasn't a Christian. He was a Jew who was celebrating Passover at the time of his passion. The Easter story took place during Passover, and this fact figures importantly in the Gospel story.

The meaning of the passion of Jesus is really the same as the meaning of the redemption from Egypt in the Hebrew Bible. The exodus is the story of a people and their tremendous suffering and redemption, and the same story is repeated in Christ's passion, his suffering, and his redemption.

I want to interpret the story of the exodus in the light of our meditation practice—not only what we learn on our cushions, but what we have come to understand through our experience in life about the shape of the spiritual journey.

Passover comes in the spring of the year, a season that in all cultures suggests new life, new beginnings. So it's no surprise that Passover is a holiday of renewal, a celebration of life. But Passover is also a holiday of liberation, commemorating the unprecedented and dramatic redemption from slavery of the Israelite nation. The Torah depicts this liberation in one of the world's greatest moments of imaginative history: we see this people, six hundred thousand strong, bearing all their possessions in bundles on their backs, standing on the banks of the Red Sea—before them the raging waters; behind, fierce onrushing Egyptian charioteers. At that final moment of no exit there's a sudden breakthrough: the sea parts, the people push through. The waters close behind them, and their pursuers perish.

We all know this story. We're used to regarding it as a tale of historical and political liberation, which it certainly is. But the genius of the Torah is that it operates constantly on several levels at once, and it is possible, even necessary, to read the Exodus story also as the record of a personal, spiritual event, a spiritual liberation, a breakthrough for the soul that happened once long ago, and happens again and again, in the life of each individual who suddenly recognizes that chilling existential moment of standing right here, between the relentless pursuer and the forbidding sea.

Breakthrough is exciting. That transcendent moment, the giddy feeling one has when things sud-

denly burst open, a path suddenly appearing that a moment before was not there and did not seem possible. After the breakthrough moment, when you calm down and slowly integrate the experience into a life that can actually be lived on a day-to-day basis, you eventually appreciate that what is finally more interesting than the moment of breakthrough (thrilling though the memory of it may be) is the path that led to the breakthrough—the days, weeks, months, years, even decades—that were preparatory to it. Though it may at first seem less clear, less spectacular, and less pleasant, in fact there is more to be learned from the struggle than from the victory (which, considering the ongoing biblical story, or one's own spiritual journey, is usually rather temporary anyhow). In reading the biblical Exodus story, then, it may be more profitable to look at passages preceding the moment at the Red Sea, with an eye for those moments of preparation and formation, which turn out to be, in hindsight, the seeds of liberation.

A little bit of necessary background: Throughout the bible story up until this point, the issue of generation, fertility, and legacy has been paramount. It is as if the narrative is tracing the establishment of a human race that is as yet still a tender shoot, in search of its place, its role, and its nature. In the book of Genesis we follow the fortunes of a small tribe that struggles to have children and pass on a heritage. God makes a covenant with this small ragged clan, promising that in return for their faithfulness they will multiply like the stars in the sky, and become a great nation. But this seems unimaginable.

Several generations pass. Through a long series of betrayals, disasters, and miracles, Joseph, son of Israel (Jacob), has become an honored official of the Egyptian government. Reunited with his family after long absence, he invites them to come to Egypt to escape famine. Because they are Joseph's kin they are given respect, good land, and an honorable position as shepherds. They live this way for several generations. Then a new pharaoh comes to power. He does not respect Joseph's legacy. This pharaoh sees the Israelites multiplying greatly, swarming the land like insects. Alarmed by their prodigious fertility, he decides to control them by enslaving them to the backbreaking work of building great "store cities," monuments to the power and might of Egypt. When this doesn't work to



diminish them he orders finally that all the Israelite newborn sons be sought out and destroyed.

It seems clear that this focus on generation, fertility, and legacy stands for something more than simple physical success or national dominance. At the heart of the Israelites' project of self-establishment is the covenant they have made with God. Because of this, they are constantly tested. They are involved always in a relationship with something beyond themselves and their simple self-interest. They cannot merely grow and prosper. They must grow and prosper in a particular way, in relation to God's will. Like the rest of us, they rise to the occasion sometimes; but also like the rest of us, they often backslide, returning again and again to their habit of lazy, narrow-minded self-centeredness. It seems that they need to grow up, to firm up in their commitment to holiness before they can really go forward.

In Hebrew the word for Egypt suggests "narrowness." In their enslavement, the Israelites are forced into narrower and narrower corners, more and more restriction and constriction. The logic of their self-centered blindness becomes increasingly compelling as their suffering grows. What will bring them forth from this relentless narrowness out into the open?

At the beginning of the book of Exodus the people are described almost as if they were animals. Though they suffer greatly they have no understanding of their suffering. It has no meaning. They bear it, are ground down by it, but it's as if they are incapable of really feeling it. They seem without consciousness, without passion.

Moses functions as the eyes and hearts of the people. He is the first to feel the weight of their suffering. He is an Israelite, and yet he is removed from the situation of the Israelites, not really a part of them, and so he feels their suffering as an outsider. He is choked and squeezed by the suffering. It is unbearable. He feels it with such passion that he lashes out in anger, killing an Egyptian overseer. No liberator, his sympathy is destructive, poisonous. After the murder, scorned by his own people, he flees, going out into the wilderness for, as it turns out, purification and preparation.

"It was many years later; the king of Egypt died. The children of Israel groaned from the servitude, and they cried out; and their plea for help went up to God, from the servitude. God harkened to their moaning, called to mind his covenant with Avraham, with Yitzhak, and with Yaakov, God saw the children of Israel, God knew." (Exod. 23-25, Everett Fox, translation, Schocken Books, 1995).

This passage, coming immediately after the story of Moses' flight, marks the beginning of the path toward liberation for the children of Israel. The people now transform from patient slaves into people on a spiritual and political quest. Let's examine how this happens.

The first thing to note is that the people's awakening comes finally not as a consequence of any event marking their own suffering, but rather on the death of the king of Egypt. This is strange. It's as if the people take their own condition for granted, are buried in it and are therefore oblivious to it, and only come to truly feel it when they notice the death of the king. He, a powerful man, he of the monuments, of immense power, a god in his own right: now dead. I imagine that in ancient Egypt the death of a monarch was an immense psychic event, occasioning parades, ceremonies, pageants, more monumental building, sacrifices, a complete turning upside down of all daily life that would surely have affected even the lowly slaves.

For hundreds of years these slaves suffered without



aspiration, without even any understanding of their plight—until the all-powerful pharaoh perished. Shock mixed together in them with amazement at the vulnerability of even this great patriarch, and with sorrow and fear that the beginning of a new era might bring on them even worse travail, and, perhaps, even with compassion (slaves often love their oppressors, even as they hate them).

Rocked by a cataclysmic event coming from outside themselves, the slaves were startled into looking at themselves for the first time. They saw their immense suffering, and they saw it more clearly than Moses had, for they, unlike him, were inside the suffering, and they, unlike him, were now seeing it in the light of the vanity of violence, oppression, and worldly power. Their recognition of suffering was now deep and true. It was no longer just a matter of their own discomfort, their own tragedy, but of the tragedy that we all suffer, the tragedy of all our living and dying.

Lisa Kokin,  
*History Book*

*Lisa Kokin is a mixed-media artist, whose work includes books, buttonworks, sculpture, and installation. See more of her work at [www.lisakokin.com](http://www.lisakokin.com).*

I have always seen this same deep recognition of suffering in the story of the Buddha's life. It is the suffering of sickness, old age, and death seen in others and at the same time in himself that first inspires the Buddha on his path toward liberation.

So this is the first awakening, the first step on liberation's path—a deep appreciation of one's suffering, but not out of anger or resentment, not out of a sense of chagrin over one's personal situation; rather an appreciation of one's suffering as nuanced and shared; a seeing and feeling that suffering is unavoidable, deeply connected, deeply ingrained in the nature of what is.

And what's next? Next—as the text shows—there's a groaning, and a crying out, and a plea for help. Once this immense insight into the nature of suffering arises, one can no longer be passive. But what can a slave do? A slave can groan, cry, plead. Here for the first time there is expression; there is speaking out into the void, the pain, and the anguish. And with that speaking something occurs: the listening ear of the world is activated. Something stirs. The world begins finally to turn. Although nothing whatsoever has happened in the outer world, the inevitability of liberation is set forth at this moment, when the Israelites finally touch their suffering, their actual human suffering, when they find their heart and they find their tongue.

Hearing them speaking out their pain into the world, God responds. "God heard, God remembered, God saw, God knew." In a sense, it is not God who initiates the action of the story, not God who controls things. It is the people, coming into contact with the depth of their travail and speaking it out, who activate God, causing God to stir; their voice fans the small flame of spiritual aspiration that will inevitably lead to that immense moment on the shores of the Red Sea.

This then is the process of the spiritual path. A true awakening to the human condition of suffering—connected emotionally to personal suffering but beyond personal complaint or whining—calls forth a speaking out, a reaching out, and that speaking and reaching always finds a response in the world and in what the Bible understands as God. This is how the path to liberation always begins.

In the very next verses in Exodus, God appears to Moses in the flame of the unconsumed burning bush, and in this meeting the forces of liberation are assembled.

Now let's flash forward to the last night of enslavement: "It was the middle of the night: YHWH struck down every firstborn in the land of Egypt...and there was a great cry in Egypt; for there is not a house in which there is not a dead man" (verses 29, 30).

The grief takes place, as all grief does, in the middle of the night. After a lifetime of arrogance, domi-

nance, and monument-building, pharaoh is finally brought low by insurmountable grief. He is brought low by the facts of life, by human powerlessness in the face of time and change. In his anguish he summons Moses and Aaron and tells them to go with all the people, immediately. "Go serve your God," he tells them. "And bring a blessing even on me!" (verse 32). The children of Israel make hurried preparations, so quickly that there's not even enough time to completely bake the bread. This last night before liberation is "a night of keeping watch for YHWH...a keeping watch of all the children of Israel, throughout their generations" (verse 42).

This is an immense moment, a moment of sorrow, peace, and anticipation. The antagonists are, for this one night, united in their grieving. They stand as one, side by side, struck dumb with awe in the face of God's power, the power of life and death to which we are all subject. Even the pharaoh asks for God's blessing; the oppressor too is human, and himself requires salvation in the middle of the night, just like the rest of us.

This phrase, "a night of keeping watch," moves me, because it's like our meditation practice. This is a description of what we're doing in meditation. We're keeping a night watch. We're sitting on our cushions, waiting and watching for absolute being, sitting in the present moment of breath and body and mind, not trying to do anything. Once our mind comes to some quiet, we let go of all the useful techniques that we have learned. In the end, there's no technique. We just sit there, not even any longer being anyone in particular with needs and desires, or even with spiritual aspirations, but willing to simply be there, with life as it is, alert, alive—waiting and watching for YHWH, the beyond. We're waiting for nothing at all—nothing's utter presence, nothing's immense scope.

At the outset of this essay I said that there are many levels of reading Torah. There may be an infinite number of levels, but traditionally it's said there are four, called, in Hebrew, *Pashat*, *Remez*, *Drosh*, and *Sod*. *Pashat* is "plain meaning," simply what the text is saying plainly on the surface, the narrative, the plot, the facts; *Remez* is a mystical level, bringing our heart of practice to bear on the text, finding in it the meaning that uniquely flows from our own experience and life journey, often going away from the plain meaning, sometimes even opposed to it; *Drosh* is a reading that includes various textual operations that might enhance and alter the plain meaning: wordplay, etymology, references or allusions to other parts of the text, rabbinic legends, apocryphal material; *Sod* is another mystical level of reading Torah, but this one is a more traditional mysticism, perhaps coming from Kabbalah or other secret traditions that have derived new strategies of meaning hidden to all but the initiated.

**This phrase, "a night of keeping watch," moves me, because it's like our meditation practice. ... We're waiting for nothing at all—nothing's utter presence, nothing's immense scope.**

The four letters standing for these four levels are P, R, D, and S, which in Hebrew spells *Parades*, Paradise. The Torah, finally, is said to be beyond the Torah, a text beyond the text—the letters fly off the page and into space. In the end, the whole world, inside and out, is Torah, is the text—is, when all the levels of meaning are finally brought together, Paradise.

We're all pretty good at reading the Pashat of our lives, but that's too simple. There's more going on in what happens to us than we think. The usual name for the human race is *homo sapiens*, which is doubtful terminology—"wise persons." A better name might be *homo religiosa*—"people who practice religion." Because we're born and because we die and because we know how to speak and understand speech, we have spiritual lives and spiritual needs. Through all history, recorded and unrecorded, every people has always practiced some form of religion, and there are thousands and thousands of expressions of human religious life, though usually we cite just a few that have become dominant. In modern times we have a new religion called "no religion": secular life, which sometimes works out and sometimes doesn't work out to satisfy our spiritual needs.

But simply to sit down in the midst of the present, in the immense absolute moment of being alive, to face being, to be being—this is the bottom line of all religion, the ground of religious practice. Being is mysterious, awesome, impossible.

It's not so easy to admit who we are, but when we do, when we're willing to try, we're standing on the basic ground of all religious understanding, and this is not Buddhist and it's not Jewish and it's not Christian and it's not Muslim. It just is. What's great about being's mysterious immensity is that since there are no explanations for it and no words to describe it, we can't fight about it. We can only fight about the imprecise vocabularies we fumblingly use to indicate it.

For this reason, true contemplative practice, which is grounded in actual religious experience, beyond concepts, is always radically tolerant, radically open; that's why I think it's the best way to find our commonality as human beings. When we sit together in silence we are peace. And then, of course, we have to get up. We can't be silent all the time; we have to open our mouths. And when we do, we're going to disagree, which is OK. Disagreeing is important, too. It makes things happen in the world. Through our practice we can learn to appreciate one another in our disagreements, and appreciate the larger space that holds us all. ❖

*Norman Fischer is a poet and the founding teacher of the Everyday Zen Sangha. His most recent book of poetry is I Was Blown Back (Singing Horse Press, 2005), available online or from the Everyday Zen website, www.everydayzen.org.*

## Parades

by Norman Fischer

The trees bear fruit, the book  
 Binds  
 Like water brimming in the pitcher's  
 Poured out steady till no drop remains  
 By a firm hand, a strong arm  
 The book bears them on through the storm  
 Tree tops twisting, stripped debris shattered  
 In the violent nights  
 Though the fruit's sweet lingers on the tongue  
 Like melody:  
 That's the plain meaning

Beyond that and embedded in it  
 Like seeds in a winter earth  
 (Officially only a thick layer  
 Atop a hard dark mystery below  
 Exactly as deep as the plow turns)  
 The fingers of connection reach forth  
 Like hairy roots laterally  
 Entangling other letters, heterodox meanings,  
 bits and strands

(The third level now)  
 Of lives, songs, opinions, certainties  
 Wild stories, rewordings, revisions  
 Attempts to harmonize or humanize  
 Upheaval, sickness, fierce mistaken force  
 The worm in the infinite, how sky  
 Reflects the turmoil of the sea  
 The soul's own sequential poisoning  
 In its reversing desire to crawl out  
 Of its own skin, like the famous snake  
 That spoke for it in the orchard  
 That had no hands to reach out, to hold

Then the inner turning  
 The quiet of snow falling on grass and leaf  
 With a hush beyond speculation and thought  
 A meaning pressed only into breathing  
 Or illuminated by the speechless waters  
 That suck underground  
 Into the capillary spaces that open beneath the feet  
 In the winding uncharted journey of footsteps  
 From one point of darkness to the next

# A JEWISH PRAYER SHAWL ON THE MEDITATION CUSHION

by Barbara Oldershaw

Because it was advertised as an “interfaith” retreat, I think we all came expecting to focus on our differences. Yet after a week of sitting quietly together, the overwhelming message, of course, was the truth of our similarities.

The structure of the retreat was familiar: alternating periods of sitting and walking meditation, the deep silence developing in the meditation hall, the rhythm of private interviews and evening dharma talks. A notable difference was the explicit inclusion of Western religious traditions.

Each of our three teachers—Sylvia Boorstein, Norman Fischer, and Mary Orr—maintain a monotheistic practice in addition to being dedicated Buddhist practitioners and teachers; Norman and Sylvia are Jewish, and Mary comes from the Catholic and Quaker traditions. One of the sweetest moments

*Was I “entitled” to participate in a Buddhist practice while I continued to embrace the forms of Judaism?*

of the retreat was the dharma talk when they each took turns sharing their personal histories of developing their current blend of spiritual practices.

Something about being invited so completely made me realize the extent to which I had previously felt like an outsider, even questioning whether I was “entitled” to participate in a Buddhist practice while I continued to embrace the forms of Judaism. On previous retreats I had worn my *tallit* (Jewish prayer shawl) for morning meditation, but had always felt a little self-conscious: Was I perhaps offending someone by introducing a different flavor into the meditation hall? But now when I walked through the rows of *zabutons* to get to my cushion, I noticed another *tallit* draped across a cushion, and there, over there, was another one.

I welcomed this feeling of camaraderie with other Jews on the retreat, and at the same time I became keenly alert to the signposts of Christian practice. One night we concluded our evening sitting with extemporaneous prayers, and I hesitated about what was appropriate to say in this setting. It soon became clear that many in the room were already familiar

with this practice, and had the words (and resonant voices) close at hand: “I pray for Gregory. He had brain surgery at age two and now he is having seizures again.” “I ask healing for my friend who is undergoing chemotherapy for breast cancer.”

Speaking prayers in English felt surprisingly transgressive. Was it simply the strangeness of speaking aloud in a room usually reserved for silence? Or our implied audacity in taking on the laws of karma by clearly expressing our personal preferences for how we’d like things to unfold? I had to work at accepting this practice of public pleading.

We also prayed in the Jewish forms that are familiar to me. As Sylvia and Norman led us in humming the wordless *niggun* (melody) often associated with the Hebrew chant, *Hiney ma tov*, I felt that I was arriving home.

Along with the comfortable familiarity of praying in Hebrew, I appreciated the opportunity to hear dharma talks that reframed Western theology from the perspective of Buddhist practice. We were encouraged to consider mindfulness practice as a *Shabbat* of the mind (when the mind rests from all work to be simply present in the moment), and Psalm 23 became a reminder of the equanimity offered by practice: “You prepare a table for me even in the midst of my adversity.” Norman’s comparison of the Jewish exodus to Christ’s rebirth and the Buddha’s experience of awakening was an auspicious preparation for the upcoming Holy Week and Passover.

In the opening session of the retreat, Sylvia coyly referred to her delight at being able to use “the P word” and “the G word” during this retreat. As a new student of the Theravadin tradition, I sifted through my limited Pali vocabulary. “Is she referring to the *Paramitas*?” I wondered. “Or to *Gate* and *Paragate*?” Then I realized she meant *prayer* and *God*. Whatever religious traditions we had brought with us, we all clearly agreed on the “D word.” Thus the week was spent quieting our minds and awakening to the Divine.

What an inspiration it was to realize that the Retreat Hall at Spirit Rock is large enough to hold all kinds of prayer.

*Hiney ma tov u’ma na’im, achim achayot gam ya-chad.*  
How good, how pleasant it is for brothers and sisters to sit together.

May whatever merit we accrue from our practice be to the benefit of all beings.

Amen. ❖

*Barbara Oldershaw lives with her teenage daughter in Oakland, California, where she serves as program coordinator for a progressive Jewish Renewal synagogue and advocates for prison abolition. She is grateful to encounter ample opportunities to pursue the Ten Perfections.*

# Leading a Meditation Group in Prison

by Alan Senauke

For the last six or seven years, I have been going into the women's Federal Correction Institute in Dublin, California, and to the lower-security prison camp across the street, to lead a meditation group. Several of us take turns leading the group, and I've been going once or twice a month. Wendy Palmer, a martial arts teacher, began the group, and Maylie Scott was the first person who went in as a Buddhist. We're supervised by the chaplains there—primarily by Chaplain Hans Hoch, the Protestant chaplain and a very good person.

There are four of us who trade weekly slots, and each of us has a different routine. I usually do about a half hour of seated meditation, some walking meditation, and then either a brief teaching or a council-style check-in. Then I have to leave and eat lunch in the parking lot, and do the same routine again on the prison camp side. These are completely separate facilities.

The program began as "meditation and stress reduction," but the current group leaders are all Buddhists. Leaders have been Zen types—lay and ordained—and vipassana practitioners. All of us present Buddhism without any proselytizing or compulsion—it's ecumenical. The prisoners, a self-selected group, include Jews, Protestants, Muslims, and quite a few Catholics. Most of the prisoners at this facility are Hispanic women. And I'm sure there are atheists in the mix.

There are always a few Buddhists among the prisoners as well—we've had Tibetan Buddhists, Theravada Buddhists, and a woman who had practiced at Zen Center of Los Angeles. Over time, a number of women in our group have become Buddhists. But I try to present Buddhist teachings as teachings for life, not teachings for a kind of conversion. Over the years I've done several simple precept ceremonies [lay ordination] for individuals who want to take refuge. I've seen some of these women after they get out, from time to time, in our meditation centers. But it's really interfaith work.

We're not contradicting anybody's established religious beliefs or practices but looking at how we interpret them. We often discuss people's experience during meditation. Their experience is not necessarily like my own. Depending on the women's culture and core faith, they have all kinds of religious images that come to mind. I appreciate that.

The group has been growing. There are now 15 to 25 women each time, and a lot of continuity. Many of the women have been coming for a number of years. Some of them are serving long sentences. One woman,

who is kind of a mainstay, has an 80-year sentence.

Since we don't ask the women about their cases, I usually don't know about their convictions and sentences. The exception has been that we've had, from time to time, women who have been arrested in the School of the Americas demonstrations down in Georgia, and they are sentenced to three or six months at FCI Dublin. And there have been other political prisoners over the years. You tend to know who the political prisoners are. I support them. One woman was in the group for six months, and after she got out I ended up working with her, coincidentally, on the 60th anniversary of Hiroshima and Nagasaki at the Nevada Nuclear Test Site, through the peace organization called Nevada Desert Experience.

We tread an interesting line at the prison. On the one hand, we do all this meditation. The main thing we offer is time to really be in contact with yourself, and to do it in safety with other women, together, in a room where it's quiet and there's not a lot of stimulation. There's no talking. The women are good about maintaining silence. Meanwhile you hear people walking by, or talking in the hall outside. You hear the birds chattering and then you hear gunfire from the pistol range where guards are practicing. So there's the clatter of small-arms fire while you're meditating. But given the prison context, it's a relatively low-stimulation environment, which the women are grateful for. I am prohibited from touching the women, so I can't adjust their posture, which ordinarily I would do. And, of course, hugs are not allowed, either, although a light one-armed hug may spontaneously happen from time to time.

Every few months, we have a daylong meditation, or what counts as a day—from 8:30 AM until 2:30 PM. We'll have several periods of meditation, some yoga



Jan Eldridge,  
*Silent Cities #41*

or *chi gong*, a talk, and a discussion. Because of the strange rules of the federal prison system, the women have to go to lunch around eleven, and we have to leave the prison grounds while they eat, so we break for an hour in the middle. I really encourage the women to keep silence during that time. Then we come back after lunch and continue the day. The meditation is very strong and quiet. Even the new prisoners really enjoy these daylongs.

Chaplain Hoch has told me that he sees women changing as a result of our “program.” I don’t think of it as a program, I just think this is what we do—we offer women an opportunity to practice. But in official prison terms it’s a program.

The women are curious about Buddhism, and they like having some ritual. When I go in, we offer incense and we do three deep bows towards the altar. I show them how to do it and I explain that we are bowing to the Buddha not as an external deity but as a way of surrendering to the reality of who we are. Then we chant the *Metta Sutta* (lovingkindness meditation) simultaneously in English and Spanish. There’s a wonderful cacophony. Then we do three bows into the middle of the circle—to each other.

We had a ceremony for our new Buddha. We have an altar, and the chaplain bought a nice Buddha and an incense burner and provided candles. Not long ago, someone asked for a *mala* (prayer beads). I looked into the regulations and found out you can have a mala if it’s made of plastic beads. So I got some malas from friends over at the Numata Center. I wanted to make them available to everybody. We had a little ceremony, saying a verse and distributing the malas.

Over the years, I’ve taught on the Four Noble Truths, the Eightfold Path, and other points of basic Buddhism. At the same time, I try to be low-key about presenting teachings. I know that many of the women continue their own traditional religious practice, whether it’s Christianity or something else. So what we’re doing really is an interfaith practice.

I’m curious about how people hold their beliefs. In the prison setting, what I get to see is how deep people’s faith is, in their heart. I see women who have a sense that there’s something larger than themselves, that they’re held within a larger container of life. Some of them feel that they’re in prison for a purpose. And while they’re there, they have an opportunity to do some work. No one wants to be in prison—and my sense is that many of these women should not be in prison—but they can either make it an opportunity or they can nurse their bitterness. The truth is, the people who are doing the latter are not usually the ones who are coming to meditation.

I don’t hear about much violence at FCI-Dublin, but there’s a lot of conflict and power-tripping.

There’s ethnic and racial tension, and also harmony. Women live together in “pods,” four people to a room.

A prison is all about social control. So the authorities can and do invoke rules at will. They can take things away. The institution is constantly shaving away at whatever opportunities the women may have, or rights, for that matter. It’s a difficult place.

I’ve noticed that when women are released from the prison, they are often deported, if they are from Latin America. Their release is deportation. I don’t know what they’re in for—immigration violation, or some kind of drug charge, I imagine.

In our discussions, their suffering comes forward. The vast majority are mothers, whose children may be in another country. A lot of women get no visitors. And, of course, they worry about their children’s upbringing, illness in the family—all the things you have to deal with in life. We’ve had very good discussions about karma. “How did you get here? What are the causes and conditions?” I don’t press them to bring forth their stories, because I think that would be crossing a boundary of confidentiality, but I do ask them to reflect on karma. Some are plain angry, and I just try to listen to them.

Last month I was having a conflict in the community where I live. I was sharing it in the prison meditation group, and I said, “What do you think?” And somebody reflected back to me in the same way that I might have reflected back to her: “What are you concerned about in this? What is your interest? What are you holding on to? Why wouldn’t you just go talk to this person?” It was very helpful. At times I feel very close to these women.

We’re not supposed to talk about politics. We’re supposed to be an impersonally reflecting mirror. Women are not supposed to call us by our first name, we’re not supposed to call them by their first names, we’re not supposed to develop personal relations. It’s just nonsense, an attempt to dehumanize the prisoners, and separate them from us.

Mostly I try to honor the rules, but I’m clear about my opposition to the war in Iraq, and my opposition to policies of locking everyone up and hiding the key. The women’s ability to do anything in the political realm is slight. Some people there are very strong activists who write and have a public presence even though they are locked up. But inside, the opportunity is to really meet yourself. So I think it helps prisoners to know that some of us who come in are working as their allies out in the world. We’ve had good discussions about the war, and about Abu Ghraib. They see television, they listen to the radio, and they are aware of what’s going on in the world. Prison is part of the world, and my own ability to connect with them includes showing them how I feel.

(continued on page 32)

**We chant the lovingkindness meditation simultaneously in English and Spanish. There’s a wonderful cacophony.**

# Twenty Years of Christian-Buddhist Dialogue

by Rosemary Radford Ruether

One of the longest sustained groups of Buddhist-Christian dialogue is the International Buddhist-Christian Theological Encounter. Founded in 1984 by John Cobb, a Methodist theologian teaching at Claremont School of Theology, and Maseo Abe, a Japanese Buddhist scholar, the dialogue worked for over 10 years on discussing parallel theological or doctrinal themes. The pattern was to choose themes that seemed parallel in the two religious traditions and discuss their similarities and differences in-depth over a three-day meeting. The purpose is not to convert anyone, but to open oneself to the other tradition in a way that deepens one's understanding of one's own faith.

The group worked its way through a series of parallel themes. One of them was Ultimate Reality: God or Nirvana. Other meetings tackled the similarities and differences between the view of material existence: creation or Maya; the path of transformation: conversion or enlightenment; the founding figure: Jesus or Buddha; and the religious community: church or sangha. In each meeting four primary papers were written on these topics, two from Christians and two from Buddhists, and eight response papers, with one Christian and one Buddhist responding to each paper. Writers and respondents came from different traditions or "lineages" in order to represent the variety within each faith.

About 50 scholars have participated in the dialogue over the years, and each meeting usually draws about 25 to 30, all sitting around the table and participating together. The ground rules are that all those invited are not simply scholars of the faith they represent but committed practitioners. These have included Asian Buddhists from several Asian countries, such as Korea, Japan, and Thailand, and Western Buddhists, such as Rita Gross of the University of Wisconsin and Judith Simmer-Brown of the Naropa Institute in Colorado. The Christians are mainly theologians from the U.S. and Europe—Catholic, Protestant, and Eastern Orthodox. These have included David Tracy of the University of Chicago and Hans Küng of Tübingen University in Germany.

I was myself originally somewhat reluctant to join the dialogue for various reasons including my belief that Buddhism seemed a contemplative religion somewhat detached from the world. But that view has changed over the years as the complexity of the Buddhist worldview in its different traditions has been disclosed to me.

Several Buddhist themes have become very signifi-

cant for me, such as the non-substantial view of the self and the call to compassion "for all sentient beings." The non-substantial view of the self accords with a longheld intuition of mine that there is not an immortal soul separable from the body. It also fits well with contemporary postmodern views of the socially constructed self. Compassion for all sentient beings expands the understanding of love and care for others beyond the human circle, which as an ecofeminist I like very much. I also find very helpful the practice of mindfulness. I find it useful in stressful situations, like traffic jams on freeways, to consciously calm down and become very present to where I am at the moment.

The difference between Buddhism and Christianity has come to seem, for me, like the difference between the wave theory and the particle theory of light: both explain the world, but in a way that cannot be reduced to one commonality.

In the mid-1990s the Buddhist-Christian Theological Encounter adopted a new focus on social issues. Part of this second stage of the dialogue came from the movement for engaged Buddhism led by the Thai Buddhist activist Sulak Sivaraksa. At the international meeting of the Society for Buddhist-Christian Studies in Chicago in August 1997, the parallels of engaged Buddhism and Christian liberation theology were explored.

In these conversations we became aware of how much we were already learning from each other. Many of the Western converts to Buddhism came from Christian traditions that they had moved beyond, and yet they still retained some aspects of their former worldview. Thus some feminist Buddhists of Western background recognized that the Judeo-Christian tradition of prophetic critique of society still shaped the worldview that they carried over into Buddhism. Some Buddhists, such as Sulak Sivaraksa, also acknowledged that Christian liberation theology had shaped his development of engaged Buddhism, even as he drew its primary vision from basic Buddhist concepts. Thus, just as Christians were enriching their



Prudence See, *Angel*

*Prudence See is an artist living in Saugerties, New York*

worldview from Buddhism, so also Buddhists were either carrying over ideas from Christianity or learning from Christianity.

The dialogue then took up a series of issues—ecology, war and peace, poverty and the global economy—and explored each. Particularly striking for me was one session where we took up the topic of violence and peace from Christian and Buddhist perspectives. In the Buddhist tradition the normative teaching is complete pacifism, seeking to purge inner violence in order to overcome interpersonal and social violence. The Christian tradition has been divided between the mainline Protestant and Catholic endorsement of the just war tradition and the pacifist view endorsed particularly by peace churches, such as Quakers, but claimed also by significant Christians of other traditions, such as Jesuit Daniel Berrigan.

Underlying the difference are different theological anthropologies. The major Western Christian traditions, rooted in the Augustinian doctrine of original sin, see humans as trapped by sinful violence, unable to extricate themselves by their own powers. Buddhists view the human as having a deep center of calmness and peace that can be attained by meditation, overcoming the violence that swirls around the illusory self.

These different views of the self also seemed to shape the style of the dialogue. The Western Christian theologians often seemed aggressive, engaged in harsh critiques of their own traditions. In discussing war and peace, the two Christian papers, one from myself and the other from David Lockhead of the Vancouver School of Theology, critiqued Christianity as having deep tendencies to sanctify violence. The Buddhist papers, particularly the responses from Western Buddhists, acknowledged that Buddhism has often failed in practice to promote pacifism in society.

Yet I sensed a certain puzzlement on the Buddhist side of the dialogue. Angry critique of their own traditions by Westerners seemed to overwhelm any real advocacy of peace. Unfortunately, the Christian side lacked an advocate of the Christian peace tradition. The Buddhists expected us to move on to a serious quest for peace. The Christians seemed mired in violence. Even as they denounced Christian tendencies to violence, they held out no hope of overcoming it. Perhaps this tells us something about the problem of our Christian tradition, but where is the hope? This may be the still-unrealized promise of the Buddhist-Christian Theological Encounter: for Christians to commit themselves wholeheartedly to peace. ❖

*Rosemary Radford Ruether is a Christian feminist theologian who is author or editor of 45 books, most recently the Encyclopedia of Women and Religion in North America (Indiana University Press, 2006). She has been a member of the Cobb-Abe Buddhist-Christian dialogue group for 20 years.*

### Prison Meditation, continued from page 30

The hardest part is just holding the suffering that arises. When I look at these women's lives, I want to communicate patience. That's one of the main teachings that I share with them, the *paramita* of patience—patience with insult, patience in enduring the conditions of our life. I'm moved by the difficulty of their circumstances. Day to day, it's hard to deal with the irrationality of the prison system.

Before I go out to any prison, I sit in the car for a minute or so and collect myself. I remind myself that I can meet any kind of person, no matter what situation I find myself in within the prison. And I may not even get in that day. They may be on lockdown. Or, if the weather is extreme—too much rain or fog, for example—the women are confined to quarters. Sometimes my paperwork is screwed up. And recently I arrived and there was no one to take me in—the chaplain had an emergency. Sometimes you encounter officers who are curt and officious. I try to go in with a friendly attitude and with very low expectations. I may not get in, and if not, that's OK.

The most satisfying part for me has been seeing people change. I remember a new woman inmate who was really pissed off for months. She complained about everything. I watched that edge slowly melt away as she took up her regular practice. I'm not under the illusion that the seed of anger has been removed entirely, but she learned that it can be worked with. Seeing some of the women's real steadiness is very moving to me. Every now and then I've encountered somebody for whom the practice really clicked. And I appreciate my relationship with Chaplain Hoch. We talk frankly about the difficulties of the prison system.

Working in an interfaith context, you see all beings as having the same valence, the same kinds of sorrows, the same kinds of joys. You learn not to put people into any particular religious box. That's the great challenge of interfaith work. One of the strengths of Buddhism is our nondual way of looking at the world, bridging the illusory separation between you and me. Seeing "we" is an important survival tool. You may be in prison now, but it's not that far from life outside. When we say all beings are Buddha, we're not just talking about Buddhists. Even a woman who sees me as a devil worshipper—how is that person a Buddha? I try to see Buddha in everyone. ❖

*Hozan Alan Senauke is a Soto Zen priest and head of practice at Berkeley Zen Center in California. He lives at BZC with his wife, Laurie, and their two children. He serves as senior advisor at BPF, and in spare moments, he performs American traditional music.*



# Appreciating Differences, Creating Solutions

*Colette DeDonato talks with Paul Chaffee*

**T**he son of Presbyterian missionaries, Paul Chaffee spent much of his childhood in Asia. This set the stage for his future interfaith vocation, which consists of building bridges of respect and relationship between different spiritualities and religions. In the 1970s Paul was the pastor of the Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples and in 1995 he became founding executive director of the Interfaith Center at the Presidio in San Francisco. He is actively involved in the North American Interfaith Network, the United Religions Initiative, and the Parliament of the World's Religions.

**Colette:** The work you do at the Interfaith Center is based on the idea that “we are interdependent and each of us depends on the well-being of the whole,” which is also a Buddhist belief. This means that we must treat others as we wish to be treated. What is your primary goal in working with people of different faiths?

**Paul:** Our goal is to create a spiritual awakening about building relationships with the stranger, “the other.” We live with a religious diversity—in the United States, and increasingly elsewhere—that has never been known before. It’s part of globalization, and it may be the most significant development in the history of religion since people started to discover a spiritual impulse in themselves and wanted to get together in community to do something about it. This new diversity creates a wonderful opportunity for all of us.

People have rarely, if ever, lived so closely together in peace as we do here today. So the challenge is to build strong, healthy relationships. Those already engaged in interfaith dialogue find that our own faith is not converted but deepened. This dialogue can renew you, it can even be transformational—it does not take anything away from you. We are not trying to start a new religion but to learn to respect each other amid our religious differences.

In discovering the ways that people love God, or the source, or the ground of our being, we get to see the many paths and take some of them back home with us. For instance, I’ve learned more about prayer from Muslims over the last 10 years than from anyone else. The Protestant tradition is not particularly known, except in some Black American Protestant churches, for its deep spiritual practices. But being exposed to all sorts of spiritual elements in other faiths is renewing and invigorating!

I think that interfaith dialogue is a potential life-

saver for the human family. Without dialogue at both the local and leadership levels on politics, theology, philosophy, values, and spiritual practice, we are all in trouble. The recent foray into Buddhist-Muslim dialogue initiated by the Dalai Lama here in San Francisco is long overdue and critically important.

**Colette:** What are some of the problems that you encounter in your work with communities—and why is it so hard to unite religious communities?

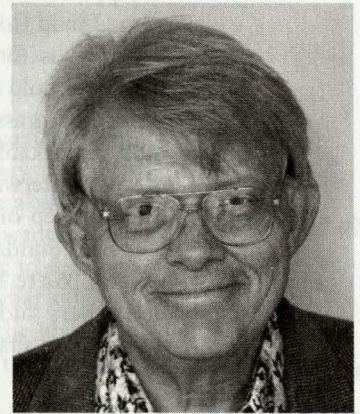
**Paul:** Religious communities often have their own rules and protocols, values and hierarchies, rewards and punishments. Cultures have their own peculiar judgments. And since we have lived so separately from each other, it’s easy to demonize the person from another culture, race, or religion. But when you actually get to know people and start to make friends, the demonization disappears, or at least starts to fade.

I think when people get stressed, when tough emotional issues come along that really push their buttons, it becomes easier to act with hate and violence. Since 9/11, our Muslim brothers and sisters in the U.S. have been vulnerable to bigotry, as Asians were in earlier times. We try to meet that bias not so much by looking for bigots to criticize as by affirming and supporting those who reach across the boundaries to meet the “stranger” with respect. We try to reframe the problems in order to see the opportunities for enriched dialogue and relationships with people who were previously strangers.

**Colette:** How does reframing a difficult problem work to fix it?

**Paul:** Let’s say that every Saturday night the kids downtown are tearing everything up, and it’s an awful problem, and the only way we’re going to solve it is to get a dozen more cops on weekend duty. That’s a real problem-centered way to address that issue. An alternative “reframing” of that same situation would be to identify creative ways to sit down with these folks and find out what they really enjoy, what they would really like to be doing.

Now a cynic might say that they really want to go burn donuts in the middle of intersections and wreck cars; but in fact, when people are asked what they



love, what they really like to do—and we’re hardly ever asked that—wonderful new opportunities emerge. Reframing is trying to find a candle in the dark and then working on the candle, instead of being scared of the dark and overwhelmed by it.

Appreciative Inquiry (AI), developed by a man name David Cooperrider, is a new discipline which is teaching us to focus on cultivating what we most value and hold dear, and this is a good way to understand our grassroots interfaith activity. One of the most remarkable stories following 9/11 came a couple of weeks afterwards. About 30 Muslims showed up on the doorstep of First Congregational Church in San Jose on a Sunday morning at 11:00. They said to the ushers, “We’re Muslims. Are we welcome?” The startled ushers said, “Of course, come in!” The Muslims went in and shared the service.

than it creates. In fact, it often leaves a wake of woe and sadness behind it.

They developed a paradigm that uses a positive principle, which urges us to look at what we most appreciate, what we value. It doesn’t mean putting on rose-colored glasses. It’s not about asking us to be optimists. It asks us to seek out what is good, say, in our family lives, or in our work lives. You focus on the good stuff—you pay attention to it, you nurture it.

At AI events, we usually begin with one-on-one interviews, then move to small groups, and only then work as a committee, or as “the whole.” Whatever the subject, people focus on what they most appreciate about that program and what they hope for. They are asked to imagine best-case scenarios for the future of the program. Then people start working on designing and actually creating that future. It’s the process we are using to create a peaceful interfaith culture for the future.

When I was learning about AI, I wrote an article after interviewing my denomination’s leaders in Northern California. I said, “I know we have our problems, but let’s put them on the shelf for a moment. Tell me why you are in this church, and what brought you here the first time. What do you get out of it? What makes it valuable?” It was very hard for them to talk about why they love the church without first talking about the problems. But once they got to what they loved, they started to cry, to laugh, and to tell stories—it was a joyful, joyful occasion.

In this work we steer away from deficit language—what doesn’t work—and aim at identifying what does work, using asset language.

**Colette:** How does AI create more diversity within a sangha or a community or a workplace?

**Paul:** AI takes away our fear of diversity and gives us ways to appreciate and even enjoy it.

We had a seminary student come to us years ago. She told us a story about coming out at the age of 17 as a lesbian to her older sister, who had just become a fundamentalist Christian. The two of them went through years of unhappiness, and the younger sister was anxious to rebuild a relationship with her sister.

Using AI, she organized a discussion group comprised of equal parts lesbian and gay Christians and fundamentalist Christians. She got them to agree to meet for a number of weeks. They finished the first session absolutely surprised. The first question they were asked was “What do you find most valuable about your relationship with Jesus Christ?” That question started them on the path to friendship and away from demonizing each other.

**Colette:** You also say that practicing AI makes you a “better husband and father.”

*The nations may have failed to make peace, but at least they have tried. What have religions done?*

Afterwards the Muslims said, “You know, we’re your neighbors, we live here, and we just thought that we should know each other.” A whole series of Muslim-Christian encounters in the South Bay at Congregational Churches came out of that.

**Colette:** Can you tell us a little bit more about AI, how it started, and how it is being used in grassroots interfaith activities around the world?

**Paul:** David Cooperrider, the son of a Lutheran pastor in the North End of Chicago, remembers waking up late at night and listening to board members from his dad’s church cursing his father, saying, “You’ll never integrate our church.” David’s father went through a 16-year struggle, had a heart attack, and almost died trying to get his church integrated. David figured there should be an easier way.

Later, while getting a degree in organizational development, David was assigned to work on improving personnel relations at the famous Cleveland Clinic. After three months he went back to his professor and said, “I have nothing to help these people. They are happy, fiscally very sound, their patients love them, they have great collegial relationships, and they are doing cutting-edge science.” And his professor said, “Why don’t you try to figure out why it works.” David changed his focus, and people from various disciplines came on board. They posed the question, What makes a community vital and alive?

Two years later David and his professor published an essay that claimed that problem-solving had been run into the ground, and that it often destroys more

**Paul:** Sure. When my son was headed off to college I called him up and said, "You never told me what you love best about your life. You never told me about the things that opened to you that you want to explore now at university. Can you share some of the good stuff with me?" We had a wonderful time talking about all of this. He's one of my best friends now. It's a gift. He absorbed AI like a sponge and now is a lobbyist for the largest antipoverty lobby in the country.

**Colette:** So what is this United Religions Initiative?

**Paul:** When the United Nations asked Episcopal Bishop William Swing if it could use Grace Cathedral for its 50th anniversary, he said yes. Later that night he was upset thinking that the nations may have failed to make peace, but at least they have tried. What have religions done? What have Buddhists, and Christians, and Jews, and Muslims and other people of faith done for peace? Very little, Bishop Swing thought.

He decided that what we needed was a United Religions Initiative. It was a new idea, and many people discouraged him. He took a sabbatical and traveled the world asking every religious leader he could find if they thought religious communities should relate to one another about creating peace. Most of them said yes.

When he came back, a two-paragraph article showed up in the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* about his idea, and David Cooperrider read it. David called the bishop and said, "I work on getting people who don't like each other to collaborate, and I think a United Religions Initiative is one of the best ideas in the world!" David and others began to build a new interfaith network around the world. It was amazing to watch it happen. URI today has more than 300 interfaith groups networked in 70 countries, and a new group joins about once a week. Turns out people everywhere love appreciative interfaith relationships.

**Colette:** I'm interested in some of the principles you use in your AI work, especially the Anticipatory Principle, which is about creating the future. It seems to be based on the idea that the way you think about where you are going helps determine where you go. How does this affect organizations?

**Paul:** There are some elements of sports psychology in AI. For example, when a runner at the starter's block imagines winning, he's a lot more likely to win than if he is just tense. A critical piece of David's research was the discovery that "You become like the things that you look at." If you look at the problem all day long you can become burned out.

Here's another example: Take 30 kids and tell a teacher that these kids are all professors' kids. The teacher then treats them all like young Einsteins, and

they behave that way. If you tell the teacher that the kids all have problems and may not make it through the year, even though it is the same group of kids the teacher will treat them differently.

**Colette:** Let's talk about making peace. Dedicated international peacemakers have tried for decades to abolish war, but you propose that shifting the focus to creating cultures of peace is more practical, fruitful, and transforming.

**Paul:** You always need someone at the barricade. Power is power, and appreciative methodology can, in my experience, break down in the face of naked power at the top, the kind of tyranny that doesn't want to do anything but control. That is very, very hard to deal with.

But remember, being right about what side of the march you marched in or being right about condemning Rumsfeld and Cheney doesn't transform the situation!

Cynthia Sampson is a Christian Scientist who has organized a positive peacemaking group. Some years ago she edited an Oxford anthology about the role of religion in politics around the world. It includes an essay about how the CIA studied absolutely everything about Iran during the time of the Shah of Iran—except religion, which they concluded doesn't make a difference in the modern world. So they paid no attention to Islam in Iran!

More recently Cynthia has helped organize conferences bringing together peacemakers from Bosnia, West Africa, the Middle East, and other troubled spots. They've worked on how appreciation can be an antidote to violence.

**Colette:** What are you working on right now?

**Paul:** Most of our energy these days is going towards trying to raise money to renovate and renew the Main Post Chapel, the Interfaith Center's home in the Presidio. We have Sunday morning services with presenters from different religions, a second Tuesday potluck and program each month, and we offer classes occasionally. You can get all the details at [www.interfaith-presidio.org](http://www.interfaith-presidio.org).

**Colette:** What's the future look like for you?

**Paul:** The mantra that keeps us all going is Catholic theologian Hans Küng's: "Until religions are at peace, the world will be at war; and until religions are in dialogue they will not be at peace." This is the challenge and it gets me up every morning happy to go to work. ❖

*Colette DeDonato is managing editor of Turning Wheel, and editor of an anthology of poems about peace, City of One: Young Writers Speak to the World (Aunt Lute Books, 2004).*

**Being right about which side of the march you marched in or being right about condemning Rumsfeld and Cheney doesn't transform the situation!**

# An Interfaith Training Program in Socially Engaged Spirituality

by Donald Rothberg

**W**e live with great challenges—increasing conflict, violence, and fear; the mounting gap between rich and poor; ecological crisis; and challenges to democracy and civil liberties in an age of globalization, militarism, and imperial ambition. It is my belief that challenges such as these call for a spiritual response in order to summon the *depth* required to face them skillfully, and that such a response needs to be unified across many traditions and approaches in order to offer enough *power* to meet them adequately. This makes strengthening interfaith collaboration an urgent priority.

I did not always hold this perspective. I used to think that interfaith dialogue was superficial and overly intellectual, not reaching the depth that is available by staying focused within a particular tradition. I found more value in speaking with those with whom I shared the most basic principles and practices—in my case, those doing Buddhist practice and particularly those who were socially engaged. I was little interested in discussing philosophical or theological differences separate from practical concerns.

When I lived in Kentucky in the mid-1980s, I participated as a practicing Buddhist in a small ongoing group at the Abbey of Gethsemani, the monastery where Thomas Merton had lived. Our “Thomas Merton Group” consisted of a few monks from the abbey, several activist nuns from the nearby Sisters of Loretto convent, and a number of lay Catholic contemplatives living nearby. In this group, I wasn’t drawn to discussing the differences between Buddhist and Christian concepts and philosophies, although I learned much from reading Merton’s work. Rather, we discussed our own experiences in more practical terms: What helps us to work with fear and develop courage? How do we contend with the increasing busyness of the contemporary world? What are the challenges of the contemplative life? I didn’t consider my participation in the group as interfaith work.

But after moving to California in 1988 and working more actively with BPF, its BASE program, and the International Network of Engaged Buddhists, I began to develop, along with others, an interfaith vision of socially engaged spirituality. If we were interested in connecting individual and social transformation, we couldn’t rely solely on Buddhist approaches and per-

spectives. Also, we needed to draw from the resources of Gandhi and Hindu traditions, King and the Civil Rights movement, Catholic liberation theology and the base community movement in Latin America and Asia, Native American spiritual perspectives on ecology and community, and the secular social analyses and movements of the last two centuries.

I soon realized, in meeting those from other traditions who also wanted to connect spiritual and social transformation in “progressive” ways, that we were really sharing the same concerns, whether those concerns were the larger issues of society, or how we would develop spiritually grounded social change movements. We had much to share with and learn from each other.

## An Interfaith Program in Socially Engaged Spirituality

Based on these insights, and inspired and energized by my experiences with the BASE program, I started a two-year interfaith program in Socially Engaged Spirituality (SES) at Saybrook Graduate School in San Francisco in the fall of 2001. We are currently in the midst of the third program, now 18 months long. The program brings together people from diverse backgrounds unified by a common interest in linking their own spiritual perspectives and practices with action in the world.

The three faculty members—myself, Dr. Ann Masai, and Dr. Jürgen Kremer—focus on three complementary approaches, which together provide an interfaith foundation for the program. 1) There is an emphasis on contemplative practice, particularly the Buddhist mindfulness and lovingkindness practices in which I have been trained. We have also explored Jewish and Christian contemplative practices. 2) There is an emphasis on social justice, as developed in Jewish, Christian, Islamic, and contemporary secular traditions. Ann Masai brings a background in African American spiritual and political traditions, experience living as a child in Dorothy Day’s community, and diversity, conflict resolution, and hospice work. 3) There is an emphasis on the earth-based community perspectives of indigenous traditions. Jürgen Kremer has worked for several decades with many native teachers and communities on the contemporary

**At times, there was such a hunger for personal healing that the social context was neglected.**

recovery of indigenous traditions. On the basis of such an integrative framework, we have developed a program in which participants attend six retreats over 18 months, concentrating on several interconnected components:

- \* A commitment to ongoing spiritual practice. Each participant follows his or her own particular approach along with the three foundational emphases.
- \* Engagement in the world. Each participant has a “field of application” for his or her practice.
- \* Participation in community, both in the SES program itself and in local groups and organizations.
- \* Personal reflections, shared regularly with others in the group through various kinds of communications, including the group’s online forum.
- \* The study of many approaches to socially engaged spirituality, both traditional and contemporary.
- \* Social analysis. We look particularly at spiritually grounded analyses, such as those developed by Roger Gottlieb, Gustavo Gutierrez (and other liberation theologians), Rita Gross, Ken Jones, Michael Lerner, David Loy, Rosemary Ruether, Sulak Sivaraksa, Jim Wallis, and Cornel West.
- \* Practical trainings—in contemplative practices; spiritually grounded speech and communication (e.g., the Buddhist practice of right speech and the contemporary practice of nonviolent communication); group dynamics; working with issues of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation; and bringing spiritual approaches to conflicts.

Our students’ work and interests are varied. A woman active in her Christian church in Cleveland is working to pass health-related legislation at the state level; a former Washington, D.C., lawyer is helping to develop a spiritually grounded ecological education center and intentional community in rural Ohio. We have a woman active in Native American organizations, a man who provides training for emergency medical crews in the U.S. and in the Middle East, a woman who leads workshops on gender reconciliation, several social-service providers and teachers, and several people bringing socially engaged spiritual perspectives into the business environment.

One student who had worked for many years with delinquent youth and who also had a background in the martial arts and meditation developed a training group for youth. Members of the group studied martial arts, meditation, and scriptures from several spiritual traditions, and the group became known as the “Body, Mind, and Spirit” sangha. Combining firmness with openness and love, this student guided a number of very troubled young people to turn their lives around.

## The Challenges and Fruits of Interfaith Collaboration

In the history of the program, we have faced a number of challenges. Some of these are typical of interfaith work. There was a need, for example, for the exchange of diverse practices and ways of knowing and being; for reflection about whether some approaches were being privileged above others; for recognizing similarities as well as differences; and for developing common frameworks and practices.

One of the larger challenges was that it often took considerable effort to connect inner and outer transformation. At times, there was such a hunger for individual spiritual exploration and personal healing that the social context was neglected.

There were also a number of fruits, some unanticipated, which can be seen in the story of one student, whom I will call Rachel. Rachel came from Israel, where she worked in enrichment programs for elementary school students, including those with special needs. She had developed an interest in ecofeminism and was beginning to facilitate groups between Jews and Arabs, and between religious and secular Jews. Like many participants, she felt poised to grow spiritually. She made a commitment to come to all of our retreats, traveling to the U.S. eight times in two years.

When our first retreat ended—on the morning of September 11, 2001—it was particularly agonizing for Rachel, who was concerned about the possibility of attacks on Israel, where she lived with her three children and husband. For a number of days until flights were once again possible, she stayed with other program members (another group of six students rented a van and drove across the country together). As the group bonds strengthened, the program members declared that they constituted a “lifelong learning community.”

After the participants went back to their families and workplaces, they continued to communicate very

*(continued on page 43)*



Katrina Van Male,  
*Storyteller*

*Katrina Van Male is a sculptor who lives in Benicia, California.*

# Ajahn Buddhadasa and Interreligious Understanding

by Santikaro

Ajahn Buddhadasa Bhikkhu was one of the most influential figures in Thai Buddhism during the last century. His progressive and reformist character, as well as his profound but extremely straightforward dhamma teachings, made a lasting impact on Theravada Buddhism. This year, 2006, is his birth centennial. This is the second in a series of *Turning Wheel* articles in his honor.

One of Ajahn Buddhadasa's lasting influences has been his friendliness toward and interest in other religions, and his efforts at interreligious cooperation and understanding. For many decades, he was the leading Buddhist voice in Thailand speaking for mutual understanding and cooperation among religions. Toward the end of his life, a visiting American Catholic monk who had come for a conference in Bangkok was brought to Suan Mokkh by one of Thailand's Catholic bishops. Christians visiting Thailand who wanted to meet a prominent Buddhist were usually taken to see Ajahn Buddhadasa.

When Bishop Manat brought this American Catholic to visit, I was the resident foreign monk at Suan Mokkh and looked after such guests. I was struck by how proud of Ajahn Buddhadasa the bishop was. I found this heartening, given how often in our world religion is used to incite sectarian conflict. Here was a Catholic bishop expressing pride in "our" Buddhist monk, someone he clearly took to be the most significant religious figure in the country. Nor was he the only Thai Catholic bishop who was a fan of Ajahn Buddhadasa, which tells us something about the open-mindedness of Thai culture.

In the 1970s, Ajahn Buddhadasa was the first Buddhist speaker to give the annual lecture series at Thailand's main Protestant university. He gave three talks that were published in one volume as *Christianity and Buddhism* (presently out of print, but a new edition is forthcoming). Later, he gave a series of talks at Suan Mokkh published as *The Essence of Christianity as Far as Buddhists Should Know*. He emphasized that Buddhists have much to learn from Christian teachings about the practice of *metta* (lovingkindness), that *metta* requires more than just sitting on the cushion wishing other beings well. He recognized that Christian tradition has a more developed and focused history of social service

than do the disorganized Buddhist traditions of Asia.

Even as a young monk, Ajahn Buddhadasa made friends with followers of other religions. In the early 1930s in Bangkok, he was close to Swami Satyanandaburi, an Indian Vedantist who wrote about the social sciences. They frequently talked about their respective religions, modern developments, and what they shared in common. Unfortunately the swami died in a plane crash in Burma not long after that.

One of Ajahn Buddhadasa's leading students was Haji Prayoon, a Muslim from Bangkok who became a regular visitor at Suan Mokkh after reading articles by Ajahn Buddhadasa. Haji Prayoon wrote books about religious cooperation and openly spoke of Ajahn Buddhadasa as one of his teachers. By the end of Ajahn Buddhadasa's life there were Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, and Hindus who considered him to be their teacher.

Ajahn Buddhadasa also encouraged Theravadins to open up to other Buddhist traditions. The Dalai Lama made two visits to Thailand before opposition from the Chinese government made it politically impossible. Ajahn Buddhadasa first met the Dalai Lama in Bangkok in 1964. A few years later, the Dalai Lama visited Suan Mokkh, mainly to discuss *anapanasati* (mindfulness with breathing). The Dalai Lama felt that Tibetan Buddhists needed more practice cultivating *samadhi*, and he saw Theravada Buddhism as the principle resource concerning *anapanasati*, the classic meditation practice of early Buddhism. At that time, the two men also discussed the possibility of Tibetan monks coming to live at Suan Mokkh, and Ajahn Buddhadasa began to draw plans to build a Tibetan *gompa* (temple) in one corner of the monastery. Unfortunately, due to Chinese opposition, this never came about.

Ajahn Buddhadasa translated major parts of the *Lankavatara Sutra*, an important Mahayana text, as well as two classic Zen texts, *The Platform Sutra of Hui Neng* and *The Zen Teachings of Huang Po*. Thus, the first widely known Zen translations in Thailand were done by him.

## Religion or Sasana

In interreligious dialogue, it is important to be mindful of our terminology. English terms inevitably carry Christian connotations that may not jibe well with other traditions. The Pali word *sasana* is commonly used to translate the English word "religion" though

the two words are not actually equivalent. Concerning *sasana*, Ajahn Buddhadasa wrote, “*Sasana* is not merely teaching [its basic meaning], but refers to activity that brings about survival, or salvation.” There’s a bit of a pun here. The Thai word *raud* means survival but is also used to translate the Christian term “salvation”.

*Religion* comes from roots meaning both “to observe” and “to bind.” Combining these two meanings results in “the action in line with divine teaching that bears the fruit of unifying humanity with heaven or God.” Thus, religion is about action. In Buddhism, the Buddha called this *dhamma* and *brahmacariya*, not *sasana*, because he stressed action.

Later, Ajahn Buddhadasa came to speak about “universal *sasana*” or “universal religion.” From his reading of the Koran, the Bible, the Upanishads, and other great texts, and from meeting with followers of different religions, he came to believe that at bottom all religions perform the same basic function of saving us from selfishness and suffering.

*Sasana* is action that leads to salvation. It’s a response to the instincts of fear and wanting to survive. The basic struggle is the same in all forms of life, only differing in the level on which it operates. For this reason, all people are the same people; all religions are the same single religion.

At other times Ajahn Buddhadasa focused increasingly on what he liked to call the heart of all religions—unselfishness. He would point out, for example, that Christian teachings and practices were for the sake of unselfishness. If one really takes on the belief that God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son, and if one obeys the commandment to “love thy neighbor as thyself,” it is impossible to be selfish. He also described the discipline of Islam as a way to restrain and overcome selfishness. In Buddhism he stressed how the teaching that all phenomena are not-self and that there is nothing worth clinging to as “me” or “mine” leads to the realization of selflessness. In all the different traditions, he saw the common element of overcoming selfishness.

He expressed his own intention regarding religion in terms of three vows. He vowed to do everything in his power

- 1) to help others to realize the heart of their own religion;
- 2) to work for mutual good understanding among the religions;
- 3) to cooperate in dragging the world out from under the power of materialism.

People must understand the core of their own tradition in order to have interreligious exchange and cooperation. Only when we can speak from our own deep experiences of our respective traditions will there

be a basis for understanding the religions of others. (Of course now we have a new problem that Ajahn Buddhadasa didn’t face, which is that many people don’t have any tradition at all and are piecing together a hodgepodge of whatever the market offers.)

Ajahn Buddhadasa felt that all the religions have a common enemy—materialism. Political materialism, hedonistic materialism, and spiritual materialism all perpetuate selfishness. They provide justifications for selfishness. Nationalism in many of its forms is also a justification for self-centeredness. Modern individualism is a justification for self-centeredness. Ajahn Buddhadasa believed that *sasana*, when it is true to its primary mission, is humanity’s most effective way to free us from selfishness.

Ajahn Buddhadasa wasn’t an activist in the sense of organizing interreligious conferences; however, people who were influenced by him did just that. In Thailand, one prominent lay Buddhist strongly influenced by Ajahn Buddhadasa is Sulak Sivaraksa, who founded many NGOs (nongovernmental organizations). One of them is called the Thai Interreligious Commission on Development. This was one of various groups that worked to promote interreligious understanding within Thailand. Sulak, myself, and other students of Ajahn Buddhadasa were also involved in the Asian Cultural Forum on Development (ACFOD), which had a strong interreligious component. At Suan Mokkh, Christian groups would come for retreats. The Catholic meditation teacher, Father Laurence Freeman, and I led a retreat there that brought together Christians and Buddhists, both Asians and Westerners.

Ajahn Buddhadasa was not uncritical of the various religions. Just as he had an ongoing critique of Buddhism, he at times would critique other religions as well. He could be critical of what was sometimes called “Hindus swallowing up Buddhism.” In Suan Mokkh’s Spiritual Theater, a building covered inside and out with carvings and paintings expressing Buddhist themes, there is a picture of a Brahmin priest swallowing a Buddhist monk. On the other hand, he pointed out that the main reason for this swallowing is the inability of Buddhists, and especially Buddhist teachers and leaders, to be clear about what Buddhism is and is not. Buddhism in India became overly involved in ritualism, priestly hierarchies, and tantra, none of which were true to the Buddha’s original teaching. Even worse, they lost track of liberation in this life by overemphasizing rebirth moralism. Because Buddhism wasn’t able to stick to its original inspiration, it became in many ways indistinguishable from Hinduism.

He was critical of attempts by Christians to buy converts. One of his journals noted of Christian mis-

**Modern individualism as well as nationalism in many of its forms are a justification for self-centeredness.**

sionaries, "If you buy our stupid ones, we'll get your smart ones." When a religion stoops so low as to use either force or bribes to gain converts, it loses the very people who see through such manipulation. He was critical of Buddhism and other traditions when he felt they were behaving superficially, such as giving too much importance to rituals or individual teachers. In his understanding, even the founder, the Buddha himself, should never be put above the dhamma.

Ajahn Buddhadasa spoke of seven misperceptions concerning sasana, or religion:

- 1) The attitude that religion is not necessary in the modern world, that we have somehow advanced beyond the need for religion.
- 2) The attitude that nonreligious phenomena such as psychic powers and emotional exuberance are religious or spiritual.
- 3) The attitude that denies true religion, claiming, for example, that freedom from greed, hatred, and delusion is not the basis of liberation, or that such defilements somehow make us stronger.
- 4) The attitude that religion is about "getting something" such as material security, merit, and

the answers to our prayers.

- 5) The attitude that religion is the enemy of socio-economic development.
- 6) The attitude that religion provides a competitive advantage in worldly matters, e.g., in countries where religious majorities use religion to monopolize power and resources.
- 7) The final and most dangerous is the attitude that other religions are opposed to our own.

Ajahn Buddhadasa felt that as long as we hold these attitudes, especially the last, religion will never be powerful enough to do its job—to bring us salvation and peace. The fighting, competing, and arguing that ensue from such attitudes make world peace impossible. Teachers like Ajahn Buddhadasa, with their valiant friendliness towards others and untiring efforts to understand the great variety of religions in the world, are true peacemakers to be studied and emulated. May we take him as our inspiration to work for cooperation and understanding for the benefit of all. ❖

*Santikaro lives, practices, and teaches at Liberation Park outside Chicago. He lived with Buddhadasa during the last eight years of his life and was his primary translator. New translations are in the works. See [www.liberationpark.org](http://www.liberationpark.org) for more information.*

### After Reading Thich Nhat Hanh

For Greg & Samina

by Sally-Ann Hard

Clouds, of rain, of not rain  
Woolpack, cauliflower, thunderhead,  
Mute or talkative, are still clouds.

A sky, full or empty, is still sky.  
I am a cloud of rain  
And not rain, tethered to the earth

By lightning, tethered to the Ironbark  
My son's tiny blue shoes,  
A small clay cup given to me

By a girl in Varanasi. The cup  
Waited in the earth the way ash  
Waits in wood, before flames fire mud vitreous.

I am unfired, a raw clay cup.  
When thrown to earth I will melt  
Into myself with the coming rain.

*Sally-Ann Hard's poems have appeared in The Gwendolyn Brooks Journal of Black Thought and Literature among other literary journals. She has been featured at several reading series in New York City, where she lives.*



Davis TeSelle, Cup



# We Are Sisters

by Nami Kim

Seventeen years ago in Seoul, South Korea, a group of nuns from three different religious traditions began to meet on a regular basis. They were Catholic, Anglican, and Buddhist. In this way, *Samsoehoe*, which means “three laughing together” in Korean, came into existence.

During the time of the Seoul Olympics, Samsoehoe organized a benefit concert for the physically handicapped. Thereafter, Samsoehoe’s gatherings symbolized the harmony of all religions.

They hold their prayer meetings at the main Cathedral in Seoul. The first prayer meeting was organized on behalf of the “comfort women” who were once forced to be prostitutes for the Japanese soldiers during World War II. The Catholic and Anglican nuns knelt down and offered rosary prayers, followed by the Buddhist nuns, who bowed down and offered a prayer to the Buddha, and then the Won Buddhist nuns, who offered a special silent prayer to the Unitary Circle. This gathering attracted lots of attention from the mass media.

The head of Samsoehoe is Rev. Ji Jeong, the oldest of all the members. Sometimes members of the group get together informally in between the regular monthly gatherings. One summer day, two Buddhist nuns visited the nunnery of a Catholic member, Sister Marie. When they saw each other, they burst into laughter, hugging each other. Then the three nuns walked into the chapel hand-in-hand and prayed together in front of the Virgin Mary.

After the prayers the women’s faces were even happier. Ven. To Seung says, “Building walls is not the will of any of the sages and saints who have come to earth. They all came at different times and different places but what they meant was all the same. When we walk hand-in-hand down the street, people look at us and smile. They see us as one beautiful garden with differ-

ent colors of flowers.”

Yes, they are flowers of different colors, but they are alike despite the fact that they wear different robes and different hair styles. I asked, “How is it that you are the same?” The simple answer from the three laughing ones came back. It was just this:

“Although we all come from different backgrounds, we are connected as One Soul.”

Sister Marie added, “From time to time people ask us ‘Why only nuns in your group?’”

Nuns care so much that they give up their lives to be dedicated to the path. One of these nuns gives dharma talks and another hosts her own program at the Korean Buddhist radio station, presenting Buddhist voices. Sister Marie teaches at the Catholic school. Nevertheless, they all have the intention to encourage the followers of their own faiths to learn about other faiths.

“We come across people who have conflicts in their families when there are different faiths under one roof. We each

encourage the members of our own church to learn about other faiths, too. World peace is possible when there is peace at home.”

In February 2006, all the members of Samsoehoe traveled together on pilgrimage to holy places including Jerusalem and Bodhgaya, Dharamsala and the Vatican. They met the Dalai Lama and the Pope. Every day during the trip, they prayed together for an hour for world peace.

I see the Buddha in the eyes of the Christian sisters; I see Jesus in the hearts of the Buddhist nuns. ❖

*Originally published in Korean in Joongang Ilbo (The Central Daily), a Seoul newspaper with a circulation of 2.2 million.*

*Nami Kim is a Korean journalist who has just completed a research fellowship at the Stanford Center for Buddhist Studies at Stanford University in California.*



## “남들이 자매 같대요”

17년 전 가톨릭 수녀, 불교 비구니 스님, 원불교 교무 등 12명의 여성 성직자들이 한 자리에 모이면서 삼소회는 태어났다. 1988년 장애우 돕기 삼소음악회가 계기였다. 이후 이 모임은 종교 간의 화합의 상징이었다. 일테면 수녀들의 주도

함께 길동무 하며 거리를 걸을라 치면, 주변 사람들이 눈을 떼지 못해요. 그러면 또 우리는 우리대로 즐겁지요. 들뜬 꽃을 보면 다른 꽃들이 함께 있어 색을 더욱 풍요롭게 하잖아요.” 양 교무는 19살 출가 뒤 만덕산훈련원

Left to right: Rev. Yang, Sr. Marie, Ven. Jimyong



## Book Reviews

### **The Way of the White Clouds: A Buddhist Pilgrimage in Tibet**

by Lama Anagarika Govinda  
Overlook Press, 2005, \$27.95

### **Visions of Tibet: Outer, Inner, Secret**

Photographs by Brian Kistler  
Overlook Press, 2005, \$49.95

### **Reviewed by Jan Eldridge**

The 1966 edition of *The Way of the White Clouds* has been out of print for quite some time. In his introduction to this new hardcover edition Robert Thurman describes our Western culture as one of violent destruction and thoughtless consumption that includes a total disregard and disconnect toward the environment and other beings. Thurman is the founder and president of Tibet House, a nonprofit organization dedicated to the preservation and promotion of Tibetan civilization. He explains that Buddhism is only one-third religion. It is primarily a way of life and a pattern of ethics, one that deals with the interconnection of all life and the realities of life and death. His conclusion is that this may be just what we need.

Lama Govinda points out that while the Chinese continue to try to crush Tibet by brutal force, the spirit of Tibet is gaining an influence upon the world. The ruthlessness of the Chinese invasion has resulted in the destruction of over 6,254 monasteries, the deaths of over 1.2 million, and the total suppression of the political and cultural autonomy of the Tibetan people. A counteractive result is that many exiled Tibetan lamas now bring a new form of spiritual teaching and practice to the Western world. And they bring with it an emphasis on compassion, which according to the Dalai Lama means "a sense of responsibility and commitment."

Lama Anagarika Govinda was born Ernest Hoffmann in Germany in 1896. At 18 he had already written his first book, *The Fundamental Ideas of Buddhism and Their Relation to the Concept of God*. The book was a com-

parative study of three world religions: Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism. In reality it was a search for the clarity to find his own religion. Hoffman began practicing Buddhist meditation and later encountered a Buddhist teacher in Sri Lanka who gave him his dharma name.

The white cloud is found throughout Buddhist symbolism, and is not merely an evocative image but a spiritual state. A pilgrimage does not follow a fixed plan but relies on an inner urge that operates on the physical and spiritual level. In his pilgrimage, Govinda frequently seems led, drawn, pulled from one mystical encounter to the next.

Early in his quest young Hoffmann experienced one of his previous incarnations. The form was both physical and literary, a striking resemblance to a German writer from an earlier century whose unfinished metaphysical novel was nearly identical to what Govinda had written.

Lama Govinda lived for a while in a monastery, where he met his guru Tomo Geshe Rinpoche and was accepted as his disciple. We follow the journey of his lifelong devotion to his guru and his personal awakening as he encounters many strange events.

Most of the incidents are inexplicable. For example, at one point in a retreat from danger Govinda becomes a *lung-gom-pa* (trance walker) without realizing until later that this had happened. Ordinarily arduous training is needed to control the breathing and concentration necessary to move with great speed over vast distances, to seem to fly.

Other challenges to ordinary reality that he experienced include seeing strange floating lights that moved about in an eerie fashion, and, on another occasion, innumerable upright detached hoofs of horses that looked as if a herd had been swept off their feet, leaving their hoofs behind.

In his journey and spiritual awakening Govinda found in Tibetan Buddhism an alternative to the destructive materialism of both communism and capitalism. For the reader on this pilgrimage with him he answers many questions about Tibetan Buddhism: What is the meaning behind the ritual symbolism, the bizarre images of deities, prayer, the role of karma, the relationship of disciple to guru and death to rebirth? His poetic narrative is a clear defense of an endangered religion, culture, and people

## **B h a v**

by George Gott

Shall we prefer our illusions?

Shall we pretend  
that the rotten flesh  
of our bodies  
will sing like a nightingale?

And what shall we do  
to establish peace?

First we must agree  
warfare is not peace.

Also we must agree  
warfare will not lead to peace  
but will lead to hell  
in all its aberrations.

Furthermore we must learn  
that peace is the food  
of the pure in heart  
and is never negotiable.

Either we love each other  
or we depart from the truth  
and suffer a wilderness.

*George Gott recently retired from teaching writing and literature at the University of Wisconsin. His poems have been published in magazines throughout the U.S.*

that merits our respect and support.

Lama Govinda painted vivid pictures with words, and both he and his artist wife recorded impressions and details of the sites of their pilgrimage. Govinda's spiritual journey took place on the brink of the Chinese communist invasion and occupation of Tibet.

Robert Thurman uses the outer, inner, and secret levels, often referred to in Vajrayana Buddhism, to outline the content of Brian Kistler's powerful photographs in *Visions of Tibet*. These images vividly depict the tangible outer world, the inner life of the Tibetan people, and the open quality of the heart unique to this culture. Kistler shares his devotion and reverence as Govinda did, but his is the artistic vision of a contemporary artist and pilgrim who over a 15-year period documented the landscape and life of a Tibet that was no longer intact when he was there.

These two books are excellent companions. Kistler's photographs show us the Tibet that Govinda loved and explored and wrote about. These images translate the written word of Govinda into large, vivid, richly colored forms, often in double-page format.

Tibetans in Tibet are no longer free. The Tibetan flag is outlawed in the homeland. There are over 300,000 troops stationed in Tibet. Every monastery has a cadre of Chinese who run it. Tibetan pilgrims have to stand in line and buy tickets to visit the Potala (the former home of their exiled spiritual leader, the Dalai Lama), and Lhasa, the place of the gods, now houses over 600 brothels to service Chinese troops. The massive relocation of Chinese into Tibet and the flight from Tibet of thousands of native Tibetans has amounted almost to a form of ethnic cleansing. The lack of involvement of the U.S. is a mirror of its priorities. The Tibetans have not lost courage and the hope to be free but they need the support of other members of the human family.

Kistler's photographs, chosen from thousands, bring us dramatic glimpses of the landscape and people as well as tangible reminders of the suffering there. I have seen a lot of coffee-table volumes of photographs that document the land and the people of Tibet, but none captures so well the spirit of the sacred that permeates every aspect of the land and the people. ❖

*Jan Eldridge is a professor of art and a student of Vajrayana Buddhism.*

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## Rothberg, continued from page 37

actively with each other. Rachel regularly sent us messages about everyday life in Israel, about the latest violence, and about her two sons, who during the two years of the program had both turned 18 and entered the Israeli Army. Like many others in the program, Rachel overcame feelings of isolation and began to articulate much more fully her own voice and aspirations. She became one of the leaders in the group, helping to plan and facilitate retreat sessions, and eventually giving talks at conferences on themes related to the program.

Rachel also crossed a powerful threshold in her own spiritual evolution by beginning to explore her ambivalence about being an immigrant in Israel, her great concern for Israeli society, and how she held all of this in her own body, heart, and psyche. She carried out a deeply courageous inquiry, which eventually became her dissertation. Opening to indigenous approaches, Rachel began to articulate a multicultural, ecofeminist vision for healing Israeli society, which included recovering its ancestral spirits.

At the end of the program, Rachel summarized her transformative journey in a way that echoed the reflections of other program participants: "I was seen, but more than anything else, I was heard. SES showed me that I indeed had a voice." After the program ended, she began to cofacilitate regular workshops.

Our small experimental interfaith collaboration helped Rachel to birth a new incarnation of herself, nourished by a community encompassing many traditions. Her story inspires us to see how similar collaboration might help birth a new world and new human beings, now waiting patiently to be born out of the challenges and crises of our times. ❖

*Donald Rothberg, a member of the Spirit Rock Meditation Center Teachers Council, writes and teaches classes, groups, and retreats on meditation, daily life practice, and socially engaged Buddhism. He has been an organizer, teacher, and board member for BPF. He is the author of The Engaged Spiritual Life: A Buddhist Approach to Transforming Ourselves and the World (forthcoming, Beacon Press).*

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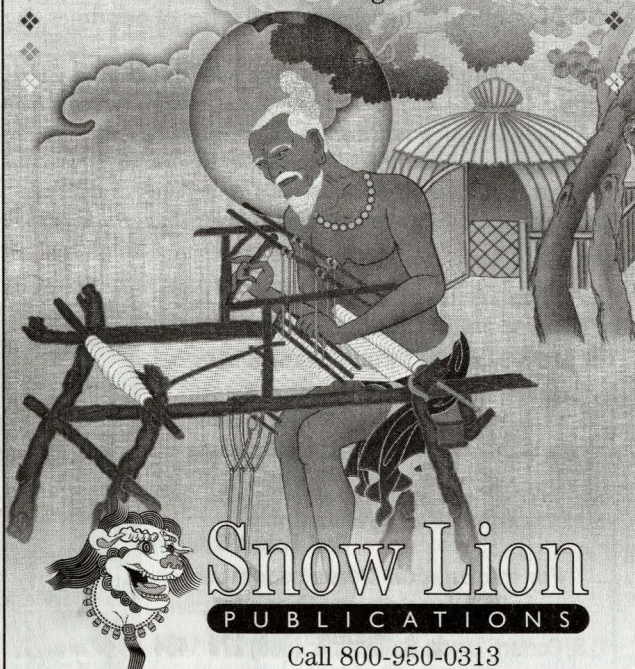
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# Prison Program News

by Michael Callahan

"Life is a dream." —*Diamond Sutra*

Hong Chingkuang and I received an invitation from Jin Ryu Ei Shu of the Buddhadharma Sangha. The letter was postmarked November 1, 2005, San Quentin State Prison.

On a warm summer day, one of our first together on the job, Hong and I strolled down Alcatraz Avenue talking about our lives. As the birds chirped and the cars whizzed by, the dreams we had each been dreaming discovered their lodestar: The Coming Home Initiative.

We used different words and ideas to express our visions, but our Chinese and Irish tongues couldn't eclipse the bright matter of liberation. Inspired from somewhere deep in our histories, we decided it was time to build a new railroad, one that brings practitioners home from prison.

The letter from Jin Ryu Ei Shu rebirthed a fellowship born in 1999 when Vincent Russo (before being ordained Jin Ryu Ei Shu) asked Diana Lion, Alan Senauke, and Lee De Barros to help practitioners at San Quentin set up the Buddhadharma Sangha.

The Coming Home Initiative is the flowering of this original seed. It's an idea whose time has come.

The parole system and reentry programs in California continue to ignore the core challenges people face leaving prison, and there remains a critical need to develop holistic alternatives that address the complex needs of those returning home.

The four cornerstones of this initiative are:

**Decarceration:** An innovative approach to trauma recovery, emotional transformation, and reconciliation. Coming home from prison is akin to coming home from war. Many individuals suffer from post-traumatic stress. Daily meditative practices will help participants transform anger, fear, and violence into compassion, lovingkindness, and wisdom.

Somatic exercises and therapy will facilitate mental, emotional, and physical healing from the trauma experienced through ritualized and institutionalized violence in prison. When appropriate, transformative justice will provide community members and individuals who caused direct suffering the possibility for accountability, reconciliation, and forgiveness. The process of decarceration will replace negative conceptions of self with bodhicitta, restore people's dignity, and reconcile past harmful actions.

**Housing:** The Coming Home Initiative will provide a safe place with a heart for participants to ground themselves and continue to deepen their practice upon parole, a critical touchstone for their successful transition back into the community.

**Self-Sufficiency:** The Buddha recognized 2,500 years

ago that in order to curb crime, a society has to improve the economic well-being of its members. This is practiced through right livelihood and generosity. BPF will foster opportunities for participants to express their truest selves through a meaningful livelihood that benefits themselves and the larger community. This will be accomplished through skills development, education, mentorship, and community networking. In partnership with local Buddhist centers, organizations, and businesses we will develop informal services and internships to sustain individuals upon their release.


Our long-term vision is to develop a business plan to establish an entrepreneurial cooperative that serves a real need in the community. The cooperative will generate funds to ensure the sustainability of the initiative while having a beneficial economic impact on the broader community. This cornerstone addresses the direct connection between poverty, crime, and imprisonment.

**Social Justice Organizing and Advocacy:** The initiative will focus on the causes and conditions that perpetuate widespread interpersonal and institutional violence in our communities. This cornerstone will rest upon the practices of right intention and right action—the path of the bodhisattva!

BPF will work with community partners to infuse a dharmic perspective on transforming the gross social, economic, and political inequalities that underpin the prison-industrial complex.

By putting into practice Thich Nhat Hanh's 14 precepts of interbeing, we will demonstrate viable community solutions to punitive public policies and practices based in fear, discrimination, and narrow conceptions of public safety. This will be accomplished through outreach, education, campaigns, and community economic development.

We hope you will support us in this endeavor and become part of a constellation that emanates the bodhisattva light. Until we all are free, *Namo Amithabha*. ❖



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