



# TURNING WHEEL

*Journal of the Buddhist Peace Fellowship*

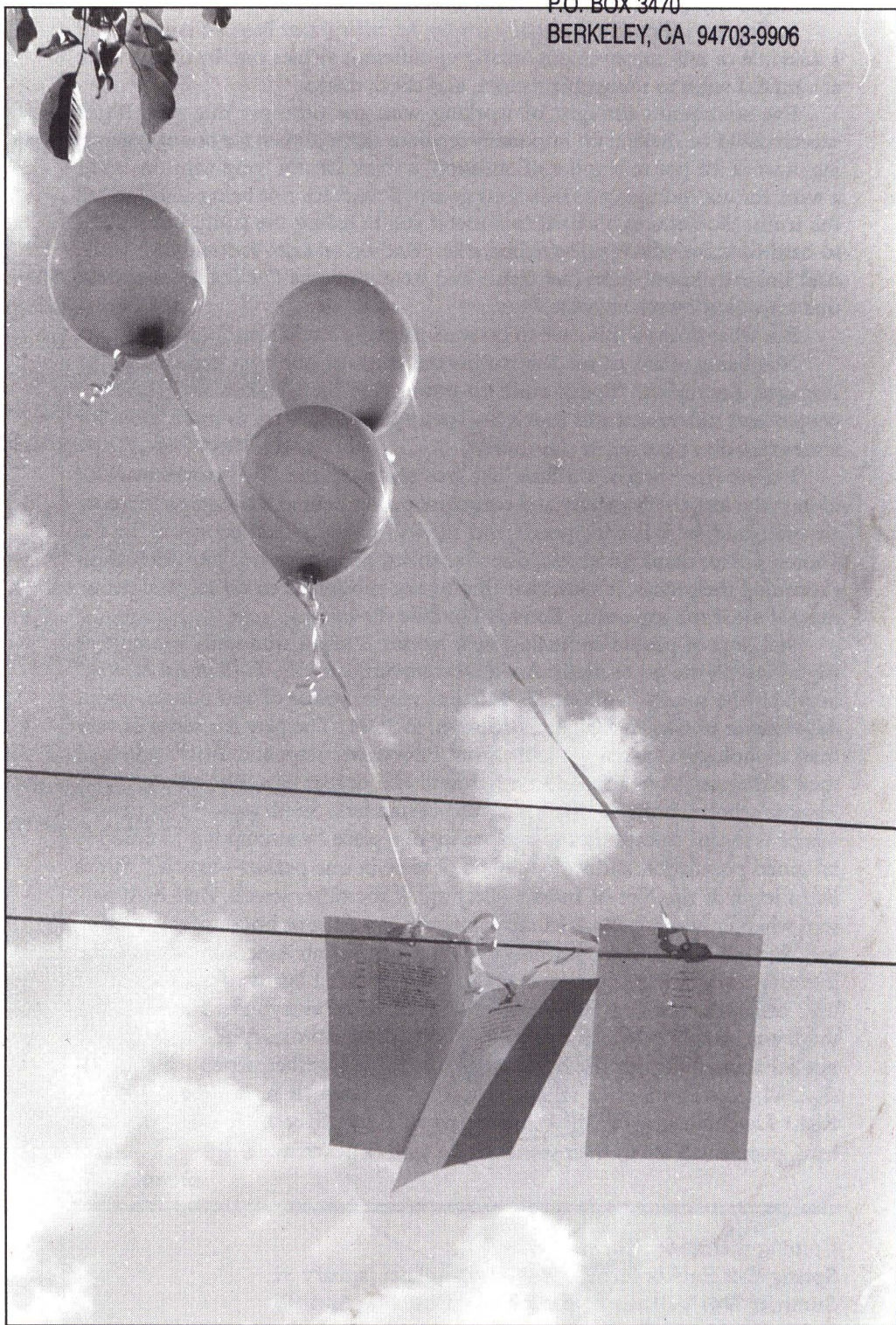
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## *RIGHT SPEECH*

*free speech  
harsh talk  
kind speech  
pornography  
write speech  
storytelling  
silence*

*INTERVIEW  
WITH  
SISTER TRUE  
EMPTINESS*



The Transportation of Poetry



## FROM THE EDITOR

Of all the Buddhist precepts, those pertaining to Right Speech are the most interwoven into our everyday lives. I, for one, have more opportunities in an ordinary day to refrain from saying something mean about somebody than to refrain from killing, stealing, or getting drunk, for example. (I'm speaking of the precepts on a practical level here, not a mystical one.)

In Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography*, he talks about how he mapped out a schedule of self-improvement, taking up different virtues one by one, a week at a time. I seem to remember a chart, and check marks.

I've sometimes thought of working with the precepts this way. Right speech could be divided up into many separate parts: a week for not exaggerating, a week for not telling lies of omission, a week for not lying with my body, a week for not indulging in malicious gossip, a week for not being afraid to tell the truth. (Sometimes it's hard to know if you're telling the truth, but it's not so hard to know when you're telling a lie.) And on and on. It could take years. And I already know, from diet charts and weight graphs I've made for myself, that it wouldn't work anyway.

But what does all this have to do with Engaged Buddhism?

Not being afraid to tell the truth—the truth of our own experience—is Engaged Buddhism. "Speak truth to power," as the Quakers say. Different people have different truths to tell. In *Turning Wheel*, we try to make room for voices that don't get heard elsewhere.

I think free speech is a little like free trade. In the "free marketplace of ideas," the ideas with money and corporate power behind them get a lot more air time, and so it is with goods and services in the global economy. In the United States, thank goodness, disenfranchised people are not *prohibited* from expressing their ideas, it's just that they're not subsidized to do so. And sometimes it's just too expensive. Too hard to raise the money.

Still, lots of people are telling their stories. I saw a wonderful example of Right Speech the other night: Anna Deavere Smith's play, *Fires in the Mirror*, in which she speaks in about 25 different voices, voices of real people, about the violence in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, in 1991. The play is a series of very brief monologues, taken verbatim from interviews. Jews and Blacks speak of their bitterness, rage and suffering around the deaths of a Black child and a Hasidic scholar, both of them innocent bystanders. Smith says, "The performance is meant to capture the personality of a place by attempting to embody its varied population and varied points of view in one person—myself." She is like a jewel in the Net of Indra, reflecting all the other jewels. And each person, whether rabbi or Black Muslim minister, rap artist or housewife, is a jewel, too. She has gotten these people to tell her, an African American woman, the intimate truth of their own experience. Through her I heard voices I wouldn't have otherwise heard. I felt as though I understood everybody. I learned that there was no wrong side in this conflict. What's extraordinary about the play is not her acting, but that she has been able to bring together, with such compassion, all these stories. She says she's learned to listen. It makes me think that Right Listening may be the biggest part of Right Speech. If we, too, listen hard, people will tell us their stories. It's a kind of peace work. ♦

—Susan Moon

Coming themes for *Turning Wheel*:

**Spring '94:** Environmental activism. Deadline: January 31.

**Summer '94:** Violence/Nonviolence. Deadline: April 18.

Please send a stamped, self-addressed envelope with your manuscript.



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Editor

Susan Moon

Advertising Director

Lewis Aframi

Consulting Readers & Editors

Lewis Aframi, Thelma Bryant, Melody Ermachild, AJ Kutchins, Patrick McMahon, Staci Montori O'Lalor, Alan Senauke, Meredith Stout

Production & Design

Lawrence Watson,

Thelma Bryant, Pat Cannon,

Susan Moon, Jordan Thorn

For advertising rate sheets, please contact the National Office.

International Advisory Board

Robert Aitken, A.T. Ariyaratne, V.B. Dharamawara, Christina Feldman, Maha Ghosanaada, Ane Pema Chodron, Mamoru Kato, Joanna Macy, Thich Nhat Hanh, Sulak Sivaraksa, Gary Snyder, Tenzin N. Tethong, Christopher Titmuss

National Coordinator

Alan Senauke

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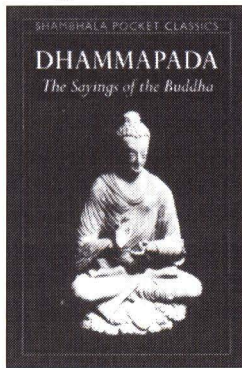


—Rebecca Sutherland



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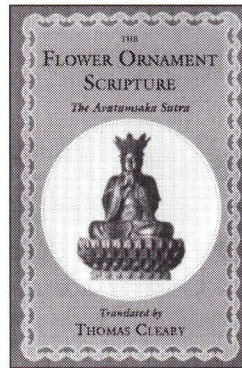
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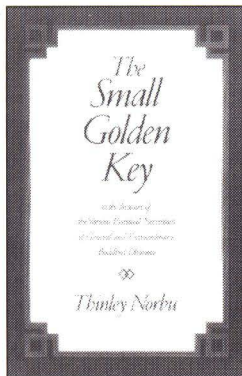


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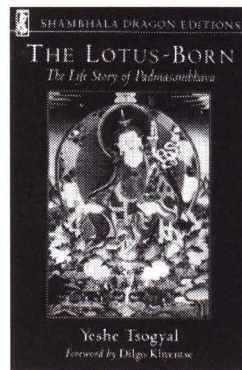
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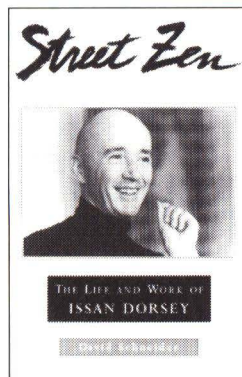
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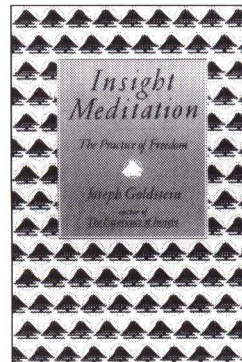
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## LETTERS

[*Turning Wheel* welcomes letters to the editor. All letters are subject to editing.]

### On Capitalism

Dear *Turning Wheel*:

I read with great interest Gordon Tyndall's "Buddhism and Capitalism" (Summer '93) and Jeff Kaplan's response (Fall '93).

Mr. Tyndall states, "The market system requires that each individual be *allowed* to pursue his or her own interests without regard to the interests of others," but that "no denial of interconnectedness is *required* by the market system," since individuals are under no obligation to behave this way.

However, the market system is based on a theoretical framework that clearly denies interconnectedness. Adam Smith and other early economists based their work on the extremely popular ideas of Descartes, Galileo, Bacon, and Newton. These men were the founding fathers of mechanistic science, which sees the world as composed of discrete, individual parts that work together like a machine. These parts are basically separate and static entities. They can be removed, fixed, replaced or thrown away as deemed necessary by the machine-master (formerly God, currently humankind). This is not the interconnectedness we've been talking about in these pages. Given the theoretical roots of market capitalism, is any (successful) participant in this system actually free to act against the system's dictates?

On the point of advertising, perhaps I can expand on what I believe to be Mr. Kaplan's position. Blaming advertising is like shooting the messenger. When the definition of success is infinite growth, corporations must sell more and more things nobody needs (Dr. Seuss' famous "thneed") in order to succeed. Therefore, they hire advertisers to seduce people to buy things. If they couldn't get anyone to do the dirty work for them, they would do it themselves. So the problem is that "our entire economy is predicated on compound interest and compound growth." This is a very important point that no one wants to hear. Get rid of the growth mentality and advertising will dry up. Besides, the advertising industry is composed largely of creative individuals who would rather be doing something more meaningful anyway.

I agree with Mr. Kaplan that regionally based economics hold great potential, while recognizing Mr. Tyndall's point that greed could be an obstacle even in that scenario. But if greed is an outgrowth of fear, as Mr. Kaplan suggests, then a regional, communitarian economy would reduce it. If one knows one can depend on family, friends, neighbors and the entire community for support in old age or illness, it would

certainly lessen the fear and the concomitant need for selfish hoarding.

—John P. Azelvandré, Brooklyn, New York

### On Racism

Dear *Turning Wheel*:

Diane Ames' recent letter to *Turning Wheel* (Fall '93) complains of certain problems within the BCA [Buddhist Churches of America], which she concludes indicate racism. Her letter is but another chapter in a long history of such allegations and betrays an apparent lack of experience in dealing with foreign cultures and acculturating immigrant groups.

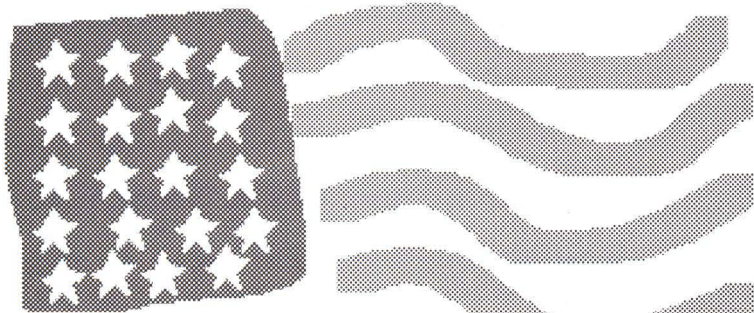
Most Buddhist groups in the U.S. fit into two categories: Asian immigrant communities (e.g., Vietnamese, Thai, etc.) or predominantly non-Asian convert communities. But the BCA, with its predominantly Japanese American membership, is unique. Failing to recognize the BCA's role as a living icon and conservator of Nikkei (persons of Japanese ancestry) community life, many Westerners misunderstand its particular situation, policies, and approaches to Buddhism.

In the BCA the non-Nikkei are fundamentally outsiders. We were not born in the community, don't know its rules, mores, values, and beliefs. The seekers among us expect Buddhism to be all about liberation and enlightenment and may dismiss the well attended funeral and memorial services as somehow connected to "Shinto ancestor worship," and therefore non-Buddhist. So it is we who intrude on a community we don't understand. And the Nikkei community is often unable to invite us in: deeply ingrained habits of the heart are rarely conscious, rendering them impossible to explain to outsiders. Thus, Nikkei tend to explain Buddhism as "a feeling," inexpressible not only in English but even in Japanese! Moreover, the temples serve as a refuge from mainstream culture, a place for Nikkei to enjoy their traditional way of life. What are they to do when the mainstream enters their refuge?

Ms. Ames refers to the ministerial candidacy screening committee as a vehicle of a racist selection process. I regard it, rather, as a prophylactic aimed at protecting a rapidly shrinking Nikkei community, as a way of selecting those most likely to succeed in community-oriented priestly roles. Nikkei have every right to preserve their culture; this right notwithstanding, the BCA has a proven track record of supporting causes and communities other than its own.

Allegations of sexism are just too insensitive to hit the mark, given the BCA's history of women priests. Part of the BCA's acculturation process has included resolving the issue of women's equality in the priesthood—and lay leadership. While the BCA is heir to the androcentric practices and presuppositions of Japanese Buddhism, its younger generation of Nikkei leaders is attempting to reconcile those standards with contempo-





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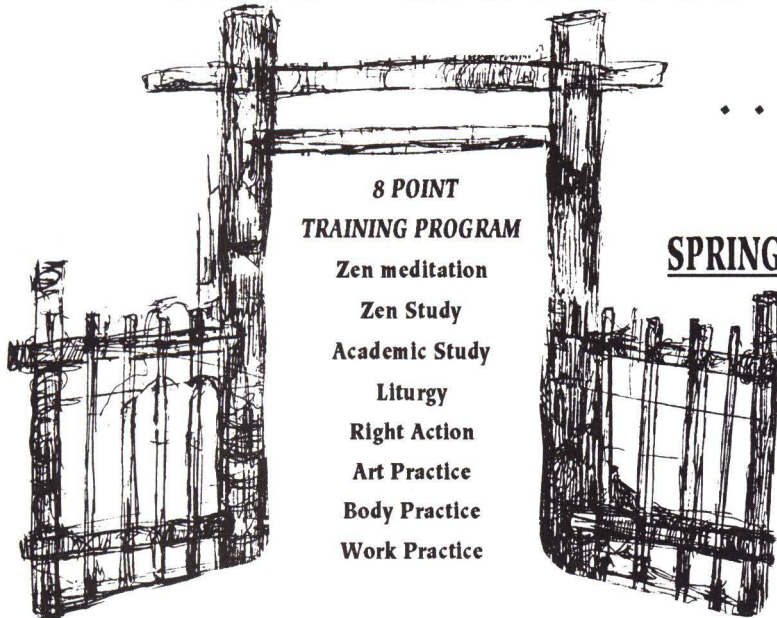
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rary life. Feminism is as foreign to those Japanese traditions as are people of other races, sexual orientations, different religious traditions, and cultural backgrounds. Credit should be given to the BCA for breaking with tradition where it has, doing far more than Shin organizations in Japan to modernize its policies and practices regarding a wide spectrum of contemporary issues.

European Americans have been ordained as priests as far back as the 1920s. The Institute of Buddhist Studies' first graduating class of 1972 consisted of two European Americans: myself and Mrs. June King. We both served as priests in BCA temples during the 1970s. I think it fair to say we were the first generation of experiments. Those times were trying for everyone concerned, since no maps existed. The BCA has had a continuing history of non-Nikkei involvement, and remains open for more. However, with its refined selection process for ordination in place, it would seem that those most likely to remain outsiders to Nikkei culture will be filtered out.

Understanding the nature of the BCA requires a cross-cultural perspective. Seeing its unique place as the Buddhist religious expression of the Nikkei community enables one to understand that allegations of racism and the like are misplaced. My chief concern lies in establishing ways of learning and practicing Jodo Shinshu and Pure Land Buddhism that make sense to Americans of diverse backgrounds.

I established the Center for Bodhisattva Awakening as an independent neo-Shin organization in 1993. The Center's mission is to provide education and training in Shin Buddhism for Americans from Western backgrounds. Like the BCA's adaptive Nikkei-heritage Buddhism, the Center's work is a revision of Shin Buddhism. While it has no connection with the BCA, it continues the Shin emphasis on Bodhisattva Buddhism, the practice of which is the art of everyday living.

—Ken O'Neill, Kyoshi, Tucson, Arizona

### ***On The Western Buddhist Teachers Conference***

***Dear Turning Wheel:***

I wish to comment about the statements concerning the Network for Western Buddhist Teachers in the Summer '93 issue of *Turning Wheel*. I have several critical concerns about this group and the meeting it had with the Dalai Lama earlier this year.

First, why wasn't a call made to all Buddhist sects in the West to form a network *before* the March 1993 conference? Who decided who was to attend this meeting?

Second, the groups that attended this conference can in no way be considered representative of the Western Buddhist Sangha. The vast majority of Buddhists in the West are practicing Japanese forms of Buddhism, in particular Nichiren, Pure Land, Shingon and Zen. Outside of Zen none of these groups were represented: over 90 percent of Western Buddhists were brushed off.

Third, I question the practice of leaving our homes to seek after diversions in exotic lands. What the Dharma needs are bold people to go into areas where the Dharma has yet to be taught, like Jackson, Mississippi. Let's face it, folks, the Dalai Lama cannot help us there, and why should he? He is the head of Tibetan Buddhism, not the Pope of World Buddhism. We need to break free from celebrity Buddhism. There can be no "sucking up to Buddhahood."

And finally, I question the need for this organization. There are already several ecumenical Buddhist organizations in existence. These organizations should first be strengthened. And if the need for an organization of Western Buddhist Teachers ever does arise, it should be organized democratically.

—Jim Davis, Springfield, Missouri

### ***On "Bloodthirsty Prosecutors"***

***Dear Turning Wheel:***

In response to Nancy Simmons' letter (Summer '93) about my article "How I Killed Robert Alton Harris" (Summer '92), I have a few non-apologetic comments and one sincere apology.

First, I do not apologize for my reference to "bloodthirsty prosecutors," nor for the fact that Nancy took the comment personally. Obviously, by saying that there are bloodthirsty prosecutors, I am not saying that all prosecutors are bloodthirsty. Although I know her only vaguely, I rather doubt that Nancy fits the description—but I have met a lot who do.

Nor do I apologize for "work[ing] towards the release of dangerous defendants back into the community." In years of practice, I have not loosed any violent malefactors on the populace. I have won freedom for (among others) the head of the poorest Indian tribe in the United States, who had been criminally prosecuted for giving out food stamps to people who were literally starving but not technically "eligible"; and for a mentally impaired drug addict, caught with two "joints" of PCP and sentenced to ten years in prison. The prosecutors in those cases were scary.

That gets to the philosophical difference between Nancy and me about what constitutes "right livelihood." I am very concerned about the threat to life posed by ruthless people who have the full power of the State behind them—more concerned than I am even about the Robert Harrises of the world. And I say that having several times been the victim of crimes, and having had people I love dearly robbed and raped by criminals; for I also remember the millions of innocents in various parts of the world (including my own relatives) exterminated by smug functionaries acting in the name of the law and with the authority of the State.

And I am not just talking about foreign lands or times gone by—the very day I read Nancy's letter, I also read a court decision saying that in Oregon (where



Nancy sends people to prison) it is all right for prisoners to be stripped naked en masse as a form of group punishment, and forced to "earn" back their clothing while they are fed only still-frozen generic foodstuffs. (Perhaps this was one of the "overly sympathetic" courts that Nancy referred to, that have "ignored the rights of victims and hamstrung police.") At about the same time, the United States Supreme Court announced that it is generally not their problem whether death-row inmates are factually innocent of the crimes charged. (A dissenting judge called the decision "perilously close to simple murder.")

Which leads finally to my apology. What I sense beneath Nancy's letter is the same thing I heard from my friends Zoe and Daigan (mentioned in the article)—a hurt feeling that I implied that there was something wrong with them, something lacking in their practice, because they perceive the world differently than I do. I am sorry. My beliefs are obviously passionately held, but I am not so deluded as to think that they are Buddha's beliefs, or that they are essentially more true than anyone else's. And if (as I tried to say in my article), I am not fundamentally different from or better than Robert Harris, I surely am no better or more virtuous than good people like Zoe or Nancy, or even "bad" prosecutors. It seems to me that I have again violated the First Precept, for it is this delusion of separateness, of basic difference, that really constitutes killing.

—A. J. Kutchins, Berkeley, California

**Dear Turning Wheel:**

The letter from Nancy Simmons in response to A.J. Kutchins' story disturbed me. I found it hard to believe that a person working as a prosecutor would or could be a meditating Buddhist. Such disbelief comes out of 11 years of volunteer work against the death penalty. The more I looked into death penalty cases, especially of people who were possibly innocent or unfairly sentenced to death, the more I learned about the attitudes and behaviors of legislators and prosecutors. I began to see ruthless political interests, ego and power intoxication, bloodthirstiness, and devious and unconscionable actions—to get people sentenced to death and killed.

Unfortunately, my negative thoughts spread to all prosecutors and other judicial officials. Don't get me wrong. I think that people who commit crimes against others should be punished and imprisoned. But the desire for vengeance, especially in death cases, that I have seen on the part of legislative and judicial officials continues to bother me. It's also painful to see all of this after coming to know a little about the condemned and their families and friends, and to see that many come from very brutal and deprived backgrounds. I have also come to understand that the prisoners are much more than the offenses they may have committed. Although it's difficult, I continue to practice loving kindness meditations towards prosecutors and other judicial officials. Thank you, Nancy Simmons.

—William P. Menza, Vienna, Virginia

# THE BEAUTY AND TRAGEDY OF TIBET SKY BURIAL

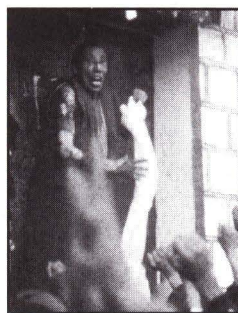
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## On Vegetarianism

Dear *Turning Wheel*:

I stewed, so to speak, for a while about the Letters section of the Summer '93 issue, and wondered how or if to respond. I don't mind provoking controversy, but I *was* curious about one of your readers' assumptions—that I wrote to “rationalize [my] diet with specious arguments about the rights of plants.” Married as I am to a vegetarian, I'm probably eating less meat these days than Lord Buddha himself!

But the real point of this letter is to report news from the biological realm. It seems scientists have now decided that mushrooms (or more properly and inclusively, fungi) do not belong in the plant kingdom. Fungi have been given a biological kingdom of their own. The problem with putting them in the plant realm has to do with their DNA; apparently they more closely resemble animals than plants.

Because their outsides don't look like our outsides, I doubt many people will take this news to heart, and quit eating the poor things, cutting them into sauces, or chewing them to get high. Given this lamentable prospect, I'm forming the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Fungi. Membership is a dollar a year (mailed to my house). You must not have eaten mushrooms for one month. We'll be gathering soon in Campbell, California, to protest treatment of the white button mushroom. They raise these things in shit, for crying out loud!

Please keep up the good work, and stay vigilant!

—David Schneider, San Francisco, California

Dear *Turning Wheel*:

In the past couple of years, I have been suffering from Candida, and in the last year have become extremely reactive to many foods. Among these foods are wheat, soy, and dairy. My digestion, never a terribly strong point, has become weakened.

For the first time in my life, I literally cannot be a vegetarian. This has brought some very interesting things to light, most noticeably, the existence of what I refer to as “vegetarian wrath” among many professed spiritual seekers. I have internalized this wrath and find myself very afraid of the food choices I must make. How sad that I should feel this way over something as necessary as food.

I used to think that diet was something that could be completely dictated by one's resolve and philosophy, that *everyone* could be a vegetarian if they “really tried.” I now know that is not true.

Dietary needs are very individual. The people who use their love of animals and their ability to be vegetarian as a way to judge others might consider whether the choices they have made are even possible for everyone.

I have always loved animals. I rejected a seal coat my parents gave me when I was a child. I took a lowered grade in seventh grade biology because I would not dissect a frog. But the ways of my body are not shaped

by my love of animals and my desire to always have them be happy and whole.

Recently, I noticed a quote from G. B. Shaw in a New Age magazine: “A man of my spiritual intensity does not eat corpses.” This captures the righteousness I have experienced both in myself and many vegetarians.

My personal situation has taught me (and I believe I'm still learning this one) that no matter what spiritual intensity I possess, I have no right to judge others since I have not walked in their shoes.

—Jane A. Rothfeld-Brunst, Vancouver, British Columbia

## Prison Dharma

Dear *Turning Wheel*:

It was a typical warm, sunny summer afternoon. We were watching a softball game, drinking cold sodas and eating ice cream. I noticed how good life is: I have more than enough to eat, a warm and comfortable place to sleep, and am relatively safe from violence. I turned to one of my friends and made the comment that I am glad that I am here at Folsom State Prison instead of in Bosnia! At first he looked puzzled, but after a few moments of thought he smiled and agreed. I have to thank my circumstances for where I am: in prison for murder, yet with a quality of life that millions only dream of. When I opened my eyes to the world of suffering, my own problems seemed to disappear. Thank you BPF and those who opened my eyes, mind, and especially my heart.

—Frank K. Benson, Represa, CA

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## READINGS

### *Destructive Burma Pipeline Project*

Despite the recent trend of corporate withdrawal from politically repressive Burma, two U.S. oil companies, Texaco and UNOCAL, are moving forward with plans to build a natural gas pipeline through one of Burma's most pristine tropical forests. The proposed pipeline will slice through the Kaser Doo Wildlife Sanctuary, one of the last remaining forest wilderness areas in Burma. Established by the local indigenous Karen, this sanctuary supports several endangered and vulnerable fauna and flora species. Besides possibly destroying a diverse and fragile ecosystem, the proposed pipeline will seriously affect the Karen and other ethnic communities who continue to suffer gross human rights violations at the hands of Burma's military regime, the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC).

In order for the construction of the pipeline to begin, SLORC must secure the area outside the reserve where indigenous groups have struggled against SLORC for decades. Securing the area will most likely involve violent military action and human rights abuses such as forced human relocation and enslavement. Deforestation will likely follow in order to prevent rebel sabotage and to make profits by selling the valuable hardwood trees.

This type of violent invasion of indigenous areas, gross human rights abuses, and destruction of a pristine ecosystem will be made possible through the investments of U.S. oil companies, UNOCAL and Texaco, along with Total from France, Nippon Gas from Japan, and Premier Oil from the UK. By investing millions of dollars in the pipeline, these oil companies not only legitimize SLORC's authority, but they also provide the hard currency that SLORC uses to continue the brutal suppression.

✉ *Please write Texaco and UNOCAL asking them not to invest in the natural gas pipeline and to withdraw from their SLORC joint ventures:*

✓ *Alfred C. DeCrane, Jr., Chairman and CEO, Texaco Inc., 2000 Westchester Ave., White Plains, NY 10650.*

✓ *Richard Stegemeir, Chairman and CEO, UNOCAL Corporation, P.O. Box 7600, Los Angeles, CA 90051.*

### *Support Progressive Movements in Vietnam*

The Unified Buddhist Church in Vietnam (UBVC), due to its independent stance and its willingness to openly criticize the current regime, has suffered the brunt of the government's attempts to destroy dissident activity. Many UBCV monks and lay followers have recently been arrested for advocating nonviolent change. The Vietnam Committee for Human Rights (VCHR) is very concerned about the health of those

currently in prison and re-education camps. The VCHR is urging NGOs [non-governmental organizations] and Buddhist groups to coordinate lobbying efforts and support progressive religious and cultural movements in Vietnam. For information on how you can organize support groups for monks and other jailed dissidents advocating nonviolent social change, please contact: *International Buddhist Information Bureau, 25 Rue Jaffeux, 92230 Gennevilliers, France. Fax #47-93-10-81.*

### *Endangered Species Markets*

Located in a region where the demand for exotic cuisine and products is high, Vietnam has become a well known "bargain" center for the wildlife and endangered species trade. Animals abducted from Laos, Cambodia, and remote regions of Vietnam are being sold for a cheap price as pets or for their body parts (pelts, horns, organs, etc.). Wealthy Asian businessmen and tourists visit the wildlife markets regularly and are responsible for maintaining the demand for this illegal trade.

According to the Endangered Species Project (ESP) of Earth Island Institute, "the rare wildlife of Southeast Asia is in jeopardy unless immediate action is taken to end endangered species trafficking." Many species such as the Indo-Chinese tiger, the Javan rhino, and the white-headed leaf monkey may completely disappear from the wild.

Although Vietnam's legislation prohibits endangered species trade, the government has done very little to stop it. ESP, along with other environmental and animal rights groups, is lobbying the U.S. government to maintain the trade embargo until Vietnam signs the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) and takes active measures to end this deadly trade. For further information on the coalition, please contact: *Earth Island Institute, 300 Broadway, Ste. 28, San Francisco, CA 94133.*

### *Chittagong Hill Tribe Update*

#### **Massacre of Tribal People in Bangladesh**

On November 17, 1993, 66 Chakma tribal people, including a Buddhist monk, were massacred in the village of Naniarchar on the shores of Lake Kaptai in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh. Soldiers of the Bangladesh Army, accompanied by armed Bengali settlers, fired on nearly 2000 tribal (Jumma) people peacefully protesting the takeover of a public shelter for ferry passengers as a military checkpoint.

According to reports from the World Chakma Organization (WCO), many people were also hacked or stabbed to death with spears, knives and machetes, or clubbed with paddles. Hundreds of people were hurt. The seriously wounded survivors were taken to local civil and military hospitals where many feel their safety may be at risk.



Many people are still missing. The bodies of some of the victims have been recovered floating in the lake. The local military authorities reportedly burned a number of other bodies immediately after the incident. The remains have not been returned to the families.

This is the most serious incident of violence in the area since the Logong Massacre in May 1992, when up to 1200 people were killed. [For orientation to the situation see "Readings" in the Summer '92; Winter, Spring, and Summer '93 issues of *Turning Wheel*.]

### Starvation and Disease Rising Among Refugees

The Humanity Protection Forum (HPF) and the Shishu Koruna Sangha (Children's Welfare Society) are seriously concerned about the deteriorating living conditions of the nearly 56,000 Jumma refugees. The Jumma people have been living in relief camps in Tripura, India since 1986, when they fled from armed conflict and massacre in their homeland, the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT), Bangladesh.

The local Indian authorities have seriously reduced food rations and stopped the delivery of milk entirely in an attempt to force repatriation. Acute malnutrition, starvation, and disease are rising at an alarming rate among the Jumma people. The refugees are refusing to return to their homeland until the government accedes to their 13 demands, which include calls for demilitarization, economic aid, a return of their traditional lands, and an impartial judicial inquiry into the human rights abuses committed in the CHT.

In response to the degenerating conditions, HPF and Shishu Koruna Sangha are requesting that appeals be sent urging the governments of Bangladesh and India to abide by international laws regarding refugees, to allow NGOs to assist the Jumma refugees, and to place the Jumma Refugees under the care of the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees until they are repatriated and rehabilitated in their native villages.

✉ Please send letters to:

- ✓ Sri. P.V. Narasimha Rao, Prime Minister, New Delhi, 110001, India.
- ✓ Sri Desharath Deb, Chief Minister of Tripura, Agartala 799 001, Tripura, India.
- ✓ Begun Khaleda Zia, Prime Minister of Bangladesh, Sugandha House, Dhaka, Bangladesh.

### Calls for Plutonium Ban

On September 13, 1993, the U.S. House of Representatives passed an amendment calling for a worldwide halt to all plutonium production, whether for civilian or military purposes. The amendment, proposed by Representatives Nancy Pelosi (D-CA), Pete Stark (D-CA), and Joseph Kennedy II (D-MA), states that "the start-up or continued operations on any plutonium separation plant presents serious environmental

hazards and increases the risk of proliferation of weapons-usable plutonium and therefore should be suspended until the related environmental and proliferation concerns have been addressed and resolved."

Pelosi, Stark, and Kennedy, along with 23 other Representatives, recently introduced legislation expressing strong opposition to the beginning of testing by the British government of its Thermal Oxide Reprocessing Plant (THORP), the world's largest plutonium reprocessing plant. According to the Paris Commission, a group responsible for enforcing pollution standards in the Northeast Atlantic, THORP would increase radioactive discharges from the Sellafield site by 1100 percent into the air and 900 percent into the sea. Greenpeace is challenging THORP in court and urges people to write letters demanding legislation banning plutonium reprocessing for military and civilian use, domestically and internationally.

✉ Please send letters to:

John Holum, Director of Arms Control and Disarmament, 320 21st St. N. W., Washington, DC 20451.



ruth Klein



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# ROCK OF MY SOUL

by Patrick McMahon

He's the stumbling block to my success as a teacher. His face, sullen and dumb, gets behind my eyes and contaminates my dreams. He's the fly in the ointment I apply to the aches and pains of my students. He gives the lie to my magnanimity, mocks my helpfulness. He's the rock of my soul, that I can't get under, over, or around.

He's Marcus, one more kid shunted from one school to another, from reading therapist to speech therapist to school psychologist, in an attempt to correct his "learning disability." It's not been working. Already he's falling behind, older and bigger than his classmates. As a latecomer to his story of failure, I find myself grasping for the straw of heroic effort: I'll work more closely with the school team, I tell myself; I'll have my aide spend more one-to-one time with him; I'll tailor assignments to his abilities; I'll institute a behavior modification program . . . Even as I reach for these solutions, though, I know that the more promises I make the more I'll break. Even if I could keep them, would they make that big a difference?

Difference? Perhaps that's the place to begin. Could it be that in wanting him to be other than who he is, I'm missing Marcus himself? Who, after all, *is* this boy,

with his slow eyes and long soft hands, and the shiny scar patching the cropped wool on the back of his head? What is he communicating in his mumbling voice? What if the real disability is not his but his helpers'? Can we restrain our helpfulness long enough to ask who it is, after all, that needs helping?

Recently these questions budged, if only a millimeter, the rock of my despair around Marcus. One morning I had my class break into small reading groups. Soon the room was a-babble with voices trying over the words, taking parts, bringing the story alive. In all this hubbub Marcus was the loose gear, bouncing from group to group, seeking to engage others in his whirl of distraction. Spotting trouble, I was just on the point of impounding him when I realized: Marcus wasn't thwarting me, he was protecting himself. But what was he protecting?

I called him over: "Marcus, come be my partner." Panic flashed up in his eyes, before the customary hood descended. "Where's your book?" I restrained my annoyance at his blank look and handed him another. He was caught and knew it, and something faltered in me at the slump of his shoulders. Out of that pause came the question I hadn't until that moment been able to ask: "Are you afraid I'm going to find out you can't read?" Jolted awake by my directness, his eyes met mine, and he nodded. We were, in the blink of an eye, on the same side now. The push and pull of teacher and student was behind us, and the road ahead of us was downhill and straight. "Marcus, I promise not to make you feel bad about what you can't do. Now let's find out what you can."

For the next 10 minutes as we read together, the voices around us receded to a buzz. I'd read a line as he'd listen; I'd read the line again in short phrases, and he'd repeat after me, following the words with his finger. Slowly I withdrew from a directive role to a listening one, until he was leading and I following. Marcus, it seemed, *could* read, not at third grade level, but at his own, and that level was higher than I'd supposed.

All too soon I looked up from our book to my other 31 students. Marcus needed more of this, and I couldn't give it. But something had shifted. He was no longer the bad boy, headed for gangs, drugs, prison. I was no longer his rescuer, headed for disappointment, bitterness, burnout. There was nothing between us to get over, under, or around. This rock of my soul, so unbudging for all my shoving, was ready to roll at a touch. ♦

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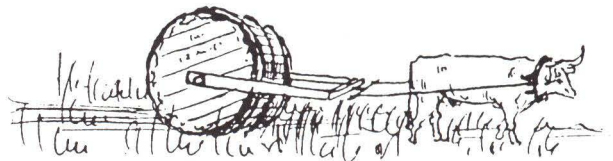
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## SINGING FOR LIFE

by Stephanie Kaza

If I ever give up on Zen as a path to enlightenment, I think I'll consider the black gospel method. At the Parliament of the World's Religions, and then again at the American Academy of Religion meeting in Washington D.C., 5,000 visitors, including me, were treated to the most illuminating love/soul music. I clapped, I swayed, I wept. The tears of joy spilled down my face. Heart music, the best, sung and delivered by young people filled with the love of Jesus. The power of that music sent all of us to our feet, one body of praise for the glory of the earth.

Now what, you may ask, does black gospel music have to do with Buddhism? Over centuries of human culture, music has served as a most elegant and moving expression of speech. In chants, ragas, hymns, sonatas, symphonies, and plainsong, people have testified to the depth and awe of life. I say that to the extent it is filled with heart, soul, love, joy, suffering—i.e., is authentic and true to human experience—music is right speech.

For some time now, I have missed the presence of music in Zen, or in most Buddhist practices for that matter. The stern rigor of monastic meditation forms seems to preclude devotional exuberance in vocal form. Perhaps silence is a more comfortable refuge than song.

I was raised in a musical family with a mother pianist and father violinist. Someone was always practicing in the house—piano, cello, violin, voice, horn, guitar. In college I sang in a finely tuned conservatory choir, learning to listen for subtleties of intonation and phrasing. I got goosebumps from the joy of thick, moving harmonics. But when I came to live at Green Gulch Zen Center for several years, I left music more or less behind.

Instead I studied "silence"—the silence at the center of Buddhist practice. Only it turned out not to be silent. In the dimming of human voices, I heard the singing of other voices—the golden-crowned sparrows, the hooting owls, the kee-kee-kee of the kestrel, the pulsing roar of the ocean. Right speech—authentic and true for each of these companions. Right listening—the chance to hear right speech in other forms, the chance to hear the silence out of which all voices sing.

The black gospel choirs sang for the joy of loving Jesus. I say, why not sing with full heart for the joy of loving Buddha, or the Dharma, or the stunning, delightful, wildly mysterious Eco-Sangha? Why not sing with the full presence of gratitude, really "getting it" that it is all impermanent? What if we stand in front of the trees and let our songs be a shield of protection, a message of soul-filled love to those who are deaf to the eloquent speech of the Tall Ones? Then, perhaps, something might shift in the dance of life in ways we could never be able to explain. ♦

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*Letter Poem*

*by Richard Kostelanetz*

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*Richard Kostelanetz is a poet and critic living in New York. Recent books include A Dictionary of the Avant-Gardes and Wordworks: Poems New and Selected.*



# RIGHT SPEECH

by Robert Aitken

*Don't draw another's bow,  
don't ride another's horse,  
don't discuss another's faults,  
don't explore another's affairs.*

This is the poetical comment by Wu-men to Wu-tsu's question, "Shakyamuni and Maitreya are servants of another; tell me, who is that other?"<sup>1</sup> People frequently complain that koans have no practical application. I agree that unless they do, we are only playing around. Here Wu-men makes it obvious that he intends Buddhist work to be relevant.

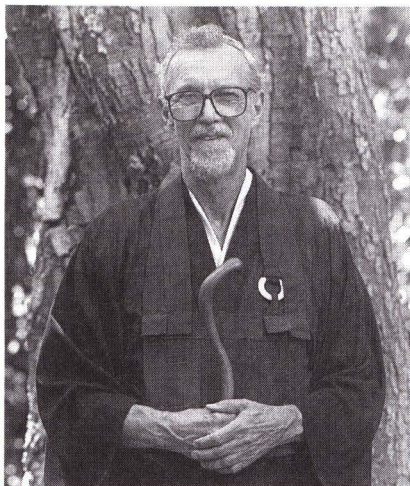
The first two lines of Wu-men's verse refer to conduct. I used to interpret them to mean, "Tend to your own business." Now I read them more broadly. Of course, the bow and the horse are the property of others. Fundamentally, however, you are responsible for them, as you are for all beings. With this responsibility, your arrow goes straight to the heart, your mount straight to the Buddha land. *Another's* bow and *another's* horse are components of an abstract world, a ruinous, loveless world, where my being and yours are exclusive. In that world we tend to our own business all right, and let the Devil take the hindmost.

It seems apparent by the parallel sequence of his lines that Wu-men expected his meaning to carry over from the first couplet to the second. If you are responsible for the bow and the horse, then surely you are responsible for your friends and family members and colleagues. Why then does Wu-men say that you should avoid discussing another's faults or exploring another's affairs? Aren't there times when you need to intervene for the sake of the sangha, the family, or the workplace? Aren't the other's affairs intermingling with ours? How should Wu-men's lines be read?

The answer isn't immediately evident, but the Buddha's teaching can help. Right Views, Right Thought, Right Speech and the other steps on the Eightfold Path clarify Wu-men's intention. The key is in the meaning of "right." The Buddha was not talking about morality—about "right" as the opposite of "wrong." He was not talking about correctness. He was not even talking about realization or enlightenment. "Right" for him was the innate nature of the universe and its beings. They are all the *Tathagata*

[perfectly enlightened one], he said, every single one unique. They come forth co-dependently in essential harmony. Each is ephemeral, with no abiding self or soul. As a being of these complementary virtues, rare and distinctive, in essential accord with everyone and everything, expiring as you inspire, your practice is to tend to the Buddha's business, as the Buddha. It is not an officious practice but altogether inclusive.

"There but for the grace of God go I," said John Bradford as he watched criminals being led away to execution. Was he thanking God for helping him to be more virtuous than the criminals? If so, he was being judgmental and aloof. I like to think that he was acknowledging the humanity of the others, and including their wrongdoing as his own.



Robert Aitken Roshi

Wu-men would have approved, I think, and so would the Buddha. Of all the steps on the Eightfold Path, Right Speech is perhaps the ultimate test of inclusion. It reveals the Buddha's great experience of the *Tathagata* most clearly. You honor your friend and your adversary alike. Like John Bradford you repent together with them. They are your companions in the Maha Sangha. They are your constituency with whom you keep faith.

I don't think that either Wu-men or the Buddha meant that we should not speak about others at all. Surely there is a neutral kind of gossip. We can speak of someone

who is not present and thereby enlarge our understanding of our friend, and of ourselves as well. I think Wu-men's admonition that we should not discuss the faults or explore the affairs of others implies that we be careful not to take a superior, exclusive position, and thereby deny our interbeing.

With Right Speech you also keep faith with the scene, the circumstances, the context of your life. You honor the dynamic panorama of events as they have unfolded and continue to unfold. You keep everything clearly in focus—as it has been, as it is now, and as it might possibly become. It can be said that events are beings. They too are your constituency. Keep faith with them. They are the turns of your Path, your own configuration there in the world.

The Buddha and his early successors understood the importance of Right Speech very well. The first precepts were seven, of which four dealt with speech: lying, slander, harsh language, and frivolous talk. In



the modern Mahayana formulation, the injunctions against harsh language and frivolous talk have been dropped, while another injunction, counseling us not to praise the self while abusing others, has been added.

Yet the old axioms are not forgotten. In his comment on the Eighth Precept, "Not Indulging in Anger," Dogen Zenji says, "There is an ocean of bright clouds; there is an ocean of solemn clouds."<sup>2</sup> Sometimes a sunny response is appropriate, sometimes a solemn one. But not a harsh one. Harsh language pollutes the Dharma.

Likewise Dogen Zenji advises, "Don't permit hap-hazard talk."<sup>3</sup> My teacher, Nakagawa Soen Roshi, used to caution us, "Don't use rootless words." His infinite patience with the chatter of his students notwithstanding, Soen Roshi was a man of few words, well chosen to bring forth the Tathagata's true meaning.

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*If I react angrily to something that seems unfair, you can support me as one with a keen sense of justice.*

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I am not always careful about this step on the ancient path, so I am talking to myself as well as to others. Everybody needs a reminder. I remind myself. We used to remind our teacher Yasutani Haku'un Roshi about his language. He was hard on Soto teachers who taught the *Shobogenzo* intellectually:

I hear there are fellows who are called professors and instructors in Buddhist universities who indiscriminately pour coarse tea into Dogen's Dharma, cheating and bewildering beginners and long-practicing Zen people as well. They are an unforgivable gang of devils, great thieves of heaven and earth, and should be termed vermin in the body of the lion.<sup>4</sup>

Skating pretty close to the edge of harsh language, certainly not winning friends in the Soto community—but our old teacher was convinced that not calling a spade a spade would be acquiescing in mistaken teaching.

I presume to criticize my old boss, however. He was attacking the persons, the characters, the nature of his fellow beings. I suggest that he might rather have taken up specific instances of mistaken teaching. Then he could let fly at the mistakes themselves, while at the same time acknowledging the sincerity and positive efforts of the scholars. The scholars in turn would not have felt personally attacked. They might have been inspired to re-examine their textual analysis in light of his cogent points, and perhaps reached some accommodation.

What is my purpose? Do I want to take a stand for the right or do I want to help to make things right? I suggest that Yasutani Roshi was taking a stand for the right but not helping it very much. You can't make things right by yourself. Turning the Dharma wheel

involves others. In this case, the old teacher did not involve his antagonists. I am sure that under his barrage, the hapless professors denounced as vermin in the body of the lion just dug their positions more deeply and maybe lobbed a few grenades in response.

I would presume to remind my old Roshi—to remind myself and everyone—that involving others is made natural and easy by Right Meditation. On your cushions, you are seeking to forget yourself. You are engaging and traversing (crossing over) with the ancient masters and with all beings. Off your cushions, you practice unselfish conduct, speech and thought—confident that you are engaging and traversing with Maha Sangha friends, as the Dalai Lama traverses with the Chinese people.

Suppose, however, that I mess up. My words and conduct are damaging the Sangha, the family, or the work place. Surely people should try to find ways to intervene. But Wu-men is right. You don't do it by assailing my faults or surveying my life. My faults are the tender places where I can grow. My life is the way I have evolved, for better or for worse, as an avatar. If you wish to intervene and help me correct myself, then address specifically my conduct and words. If I take a passive stance, then you can support me as someone who tends to be patient. You can show me how to move along steadily and get things done. If I react angrily to something that seems unfair, you can support me as one with a keen sense of justice. You can show me how to channel that hot energy into passionate words and deeds that will inspire others. Condemning me for passivity or anger, however, isn't going to help me. It will damage any link between us, as well as the links among our partisans in the Sangha, the family, and the work place.

When there is such an attack, however, how should I respond? A while back I met a prisoner with whom I had been corresponding for a while. I knew him to be a man of intelligence with some understanding of the Dharma. I asked him if he had any questions. He said, "Tell me about the precepts." I felt that he was not asking for a moral disquisition, so I said, "Tell me why you want to know about the precepts." He said, "I want to know how to respond, and not just react." Wisdom behind bars! I said, with some amplification, that to respond is to come forth from a place of peace. To react is just to bat the nasty ball right back.

It takes experience and practice to maintain a place of rest when others are restive. I find that arguments can erupt with harmful effects even in the Buddha's own Sangha. The illusion of fixed selves is reinforced.

How should the Sangha deal with harmful speech? First, it seems to me that we should identify the kinds of talk that tend to be harmful. As with Right Speech, these are of two sorts: the words that deal with other people, and those that deal with the scene generally.



Other people are betrayed by face-to-face denouncing of character, by triangling, and by malicious gossip. Direct denouncing is the malediction, "You miserable vermin!" The chance to work together to rectify a faulty situation is missed. Each party retreats from the other.

Triangulation is the tendency to complain about somebody to somebody else. Again, the chance to work together to remedy a problem is bungled. If, however, you deal with mistaken conduct or words directly and kindly, then you are helping from within the interbeing.

Malicious gossip is indulgence in triangulation. It is deliberate rather than merely thoughtless. Truth is frequently out the window, and the Sangha, family, or work place suffers. Malicious gossip is the hallmark of the one who avoids religious practice of any kind.

The scene can be betrayed by lying, by obfuscation, and by manipulation. Lying sets forth a mistaken picture.

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*Triangulation is the tendency to complain about somebody to somebody else. The chance to work together to remedy a problem is bungled.*

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No reconciliation is possible until things are set straight. Egos are reinforced with accusations and defense.

Obfuscation has a number of varieties. Commonly, it is to speak incoherently. Another variety is to take offense when challenged on logical grounds. Another would be to deny having a particular position while quoting people who speak out for it. Still another would be to wield exaggerated and inappropriate metaphors. There are more examples, I am sure. All of them confuse the issues and make reconciliation difficult.

Manipulation is related to obfuscation, but is more deliberate and thus more malicious. If it continues during efforts to reach reconciliation, it is possibly a signal that somebody doesn't belong. We try to be Saint Paul, to be all things to all people, but sometimes it doesn't work in a particular time and place.

One way to try to save everyone is with an ultimate form of Right Speech—reconciliation rituals we can generate from the human development movement or from Theravada and Vajrayana Buddhism. Recently I sat in a Sangha circle in which we first checked in with our feelings, then took up grievances. The structure of the program allowed everybody to feel safe and introspective. We came away feeling a greater measure of harmony. Thich Nhat Hanh sets forth "Seven Steps of Reconciliation" from Classical Buddhism in his *Old Path White Clouds* which offer a structure that can be modified in accordance with special Sangha needs.<sup>5</sup>

Our task is to turn the Dharma wheel and find skillful means that will reveal the Tathagata. It is important not to allow disharmony to drag along to the point where formal reconciliation is necessary. Just a little smile, just a

little wave, just two words, "Well done!" will water and fertilize the tender places. Your loving deeds and words echo through all time and space, saving beings whose names you will never know.

Finding skillful means to reveal the Tathagata is to plunge consciously into karma. The universe and its innumerable beings are once again engaged in their primordial work. The past is corrected; the future is framed.

All the evil karma, ever created by me since of old,  
on account of my beginningless greed, hatred and ignorance,  
born of my conduct, speech and thought,  
I now confess, openly and fully.

I have been corresponding with someone who is troubled by the use of "evil" in this ancient gatha. Surely, as Buddhists, we regard "good" and "evil" as judgments of the mind, he declares. That's true. At the same time, ignorant self-protection brings on antagonism, disruption, and war. Mara blows smoke from his ears and makes trouble for his family. The perennial truth of interbeing is obscured, and from the point of view of Kuan-yin, that's clearly something to be corrected. The original Chinese is plain, "evil karma." No two ways about it.<sup>6</sup>

Karma is by no means evil in itself, however. It is the essential harmony, the fact of affinity, the dynamic of relationships:

A monk asked T'ou-tzu, "All sounds are the sounds of the Buddha—is that correct?"

T'ou-tzu said, "Correct."

The monk asked, "How about when your ass-hole makes farts?"

T'ou-tzu hit him.

Again the monk asked, "Coarse words and gentle phrases all fall under the first principle—is that correct?"

T'ou-tzu said, "Correct."

The monk said, "Then may I call Your Reverence a donkey?"

T'ou-tzu hit him again.<sup>7</sup>

The denial of relationships is pernicious oneness, a malodorous cave from which arises the most mistaken of wrong speech.

Returning to the Purification Gatha, my translation is explicative. The original says, "Born of my body, mouth, and thought." Body and mouth produce conduct and speech—big troublemakers, unless we make a practice of turning the wheel at every encounter.

Hui-neng said, "A momentary thought of evil will result in the destruction of good which has continued a thousand years. A momentary thought of good compensates for a thousand years of evil and destruction."<sup>8</sup> How much more destructive an evil word! How much more beneficent a good word! With a malicious word, you are a malicious person, raising hell in the ten directions. With a loving and compassionate word, you are opening your heart and sharing the ambrosia of Kuan-yin with everyone and everything. ♦

(footnotes on page 19)



# STICKS AND STONES

by Melody Ermachild

We don't always think of speech as an *act* with karma that echoes for a long time, even into future generations. But hateful names and threats fly into children's heads and stay there, whispering self-loathing to them, sometimes for the rest of their lives.

I grew up in a U.S. Army family, and harsh words were an everyday reality of my childhood on military bases. We were migrant children, moving every year to a different community where we were always low on the totem pole. Everyone called us "brats," even our teachers. The sound of shouts directed at children was constant around the enlisted men's family housing projects. Most of our mothers meted out discipline with threats, swiftly followed by slaps or worse.

My beleaguered mother sometimes flew into rages and berated me at length: "You shit-ass bastard! You piss-ass brat! I'll beat the shit out of you!" During these harangues I tightened all my muscles and went deaf, shutting out my mother's voice by daydreaming or just going blank. Sometimes I risked surreptitiously sticking my finger in one of my ears to lower the volume, but if she saw me doing that I'd catch hell.

I know my mother used such ugly words with a sense of doing wrong, of saying "bad" words. Like many women who married soldiers to get away from the small towns which stifled them, my mother had rejected the rules of the fundamentalist Christian church of her childhood and its vengeful idea of God. But she still thought swearing was a transgression.

If any of us children said "bad" words, we had our mouths washed out with soap, a caustic attack the back of my throat will never forget. One of the times I remember this happening to me, I was five, and I had tried out telling my mother to "shut up." The hypocrisy of being punished for using words my mother used made me very angry, but I was afraid to show it.

My mother was young, only 20 years older than I, and she must have been very frustrated and unaware that she projected her own low self-esteem onto me. I know now she herself felt "shitty" most of the time. But as a child, I was terrified when my mother lost control in this way.

Having found Buddhism over 40 years later, I work with this legacy through meditation. I've found enough inner calm to try to listen deeply to what my mother

was really saying. In order to understand, I made a list of the phrases I could recall from my mother's angry language. After I began the list, more of her words came into my mind, often during or after meditation.

Looking at the list, the phrases seem archaic: strange admonishments like, "You've got another think coming!" or "I'm telling you in no uncertain terms!" I used to wonder what "uncertain terms" were. I'm sure my mother was tongue-lashed with these words when *she* was a child, probably by my grandmother and great-grandmother.

When I was young, my mother's angry words ricocheted through my mind without any meaning attached to them, except that I knew she was dangerously angry. Now I realize many are religious references twisted out of my mother's Christian fundamentalist girlhood: "I'll knock you to High Heaven! I'll knock you to Kingdom come! You're going to pay Holy Hell!"

How can Heaven and the Kingdom of God be places to which a child is "knocked"? How can Hell be Holy? I see how profanity really is *profane*—the opposite of sacred speech.

I knew I didn't want to talk to my children the way my mother had talked to me, but it took me years to become a better parent myself, especially since I started out as a young single mother. I remember a wise roommate who helped me

a lot when she simply forbade me to yell at my kids as long as she was sharing an apartment with me. That really helped! Later, I found a good parenting class where the emphasis was on how to speak to children respectfully and clearly. I got to be a better and better mom, and now I think I'm a swell grandma!

Unfortunately, my mother died when I was in my twenties, and I never had a chance to talk to her about the generations of wrong talk in our family, or show her how this chain broke at last with me. I had to wait for Buddhism to repair my own self-esteem and find a kinder voice inside my mind when I talk to myself.

I'm still hypersensitive to the way people speak to children. In my neighborhood, hurting from poverty, some mothers, especially those who drink and use drugs, don't know any better than to curse and threaten the children. I can hear their angry voices: "Don't start with me! I'll beat your butt!" It is hard to intervene, but one thing I've discovered I can do is to take time to complement such a mother on how beautiful her child is, hoping she will see it too.

*During my mother's harangues,  
I tightened all my muscles and  
went deaf, shutting out her  
voice by daydreaming.*



My job, for 14 years, has been to work on legal defenses for criminals. I've gotten to know many men in prison and on death row. I've found out that almost without exception they have memories of childhood verbal abuse running like tapes in their minds. They can still hear the scathing, disrespectful voices. Most of them do not even question whether such hateful talk is part of a "normal" upbringing. I often ask my clients to try to remember the exact words and write them down, as I did. This is a way to look at the hurt, move through anger and begin to grieve, the only path to healing such wounds. Then I ask them to see if they can tell themselves some good things they need to hear instead. It takes a lot of work to learn to hear loving words in one's mind, especially in prison.

If there could be Right Speech spoken to children, what words would a person with the heart of a loving grandmother offer to a child? The lyrics of Libby Rodrick's song come to me: "How can anyone ever tell you, you are anything less than beautiful? How can anybody tell you, you are less than whole?"

One threat my mother constantly made was: "I'll beat the living daylights out of you!" As a child I used to wonder, what *are* the "living daylights"? Now I think they are the sparkling lights of the human spirit that live in each of us.

I think the living daylights can be dimmed, but I don't think they can be completely extinguished. If there is even a tiny spark still burning, and that spark is fed, the living daylights will shine again. ♦

—Melody Ermachild is a private investigator and a freelance writer.

(continued from page 17)

#### NOTES

1. Robert Aitken, *The Gateless Barrier: The Wu-men kuan (Mumonkan)*, North Point Press, 1984, p. 94.
2. Robert Aitken, *The Mind of Clover*, North Point Press, 1984, p. 94.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 66.
4. Koun Yamada, "The Stature of Haku'un Yasutani," *The Eastern Buddhist: New Series*, Vol. VII: No. 2; October 1974, p. 111.
5. Thich Nhat Hanh, *Old Path White Clouds*, Parallax Press, 1991, pp. 311-313.
6. Hideji Morie, ed., *Zenshu Zaika Nikka Kyo*, Tokyo: Morie Shoten, 1934.
7. Cf. Thomas and J.C. Cleary, *The Blue Cliff Record*, Shambhala, 1992, p. 432.
8. Philip B. Yampolsky, *The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch*, Columbia University, 1967, p. 9.

Robert Aitken is the head teacher of the Diamond Sangha in Honolulu, Hawai'i, and one of the founders of BPF.

## IS TALK CHEAP?

by Norman Fischer

People say talk is cheap meaning it's a lot easier to say something than to do it—which is true—but this misperceives the nature of talk, that it's something in itself, creates its own chain of events in the world of thought and emotion, and might not have anything to do with what is done, though it often does—but this is really just an illusion. Still, we stand by our words and try to make them count, we mean what we say not because we misunderstand what the words are really doing, but because we know the words, though imprecise and even pernicious in many ways, are the best way we have to make clear contact with one another.

We touch each other with our words, we express our intentions, wishes and dreams—at best, our love. It's not in the words themselves but in the way we say them, because speech isn't the same as writing, in which we confront the unsayable directly and some-

*It is a great art to speak and  
listen at the same time.*

times heroically—with speech we are always adjusting according to the silent or spoken response we receive, and we are reaching one another with our voices, bodies, eyes, lips, and lungs, even more than with the vowels and consonants whose combinations are presumed to make a kind of sense. If we're afraid of each other, wary of each other or want assurance, approval, power, that's there in the talk even though we never say it or don't even know about it ourselves; if we're interested, loving, hoping neither to take nor give more than is needed then that's there too—and these are the things we are actually talking about. Sometimes "I love you" means "I love you," but other times it means many complicated things none of which are "I love you."

I have tried out many approaches in the use of speech. Recently an old friend reminded me that years ago in the monastery I used to talk a lot, especially during times when talking was disallowed. I remember now that it was a theory I had—to vocalize, improvise, not necessarily saying anything, like a bird singing, this was what a poet was supposed to do. I did that for a long while till it wore out, then gave it up and went on to silences in which the voicing of a single word, to no one in particular, bore a great profundity. I'd talk to animals or to the stars. Being silent for long periods of time then saying one or two words helped me to see how strange speech is, how the words echo back to you with a kind of hidden question. Then I worked on listening, speaking very little but searching into the



silences for the sounds that were there, and discovered how much you can discover when you shut up, how interesting it is when other people talk or when no one is talking—something is always being said. Listening is perhaps the greatest part of speech, the sensitivity to what comes in either while someone else is talking, or while you are talking. Listening is difficult though because when you listen you have to stop talking, even if you happen to be speaking at the time, so that you can actually receive what is coming in. It is a great art to speak and listen at the same time, a kind of non-speech speech, often mentioned in Zen teachings. Meditation should train us in listening, though it may not always do so. And listening is very liberating; it allows us for a time not to have to have any opinions or ideas but just to enjoy what occurs.

The most impressive teaching about speech I know of is in Dogen's essay on "Four Methods of Guidance for Bodhisattvas," one of which is "kind speech." (I am referring to Kaz Tanahashi's version in *Moon in a Dewdrop*.) There Dogen says that the practice of kind speech can "turn the destiny of a nation." I have found this to be surprisingly true. That kind speech, really kind speech, can have supernatural powers for healing and turning minds around. It can create an atmosphere in which what seems impossible can occur. Kind speech can't be faked, however. It must come from a kind heart, from a personally realized vision that whatever you meet is actually marvelous and worthy of full respect. You work on that vision through use of kind speech (among many other ways), and as the vision comes more into focus the power of your kind speech grows.

Kind speech includes asking how people are and meaning it, saying good morning and good evening and meaning it (I often think of what it must have been like, the first person who thought of greeting someone with "good morning," how profound that must have been), comforting people when harm has come to them or expressing joy for their joy when joy has come to them. It means talking to everyone as if you were talking to a sweet baby. For people who are really rotten and don't seem to deserve our kind speech, kind speech is particularly important. With our kind speech the virtue of such a person will grow; without it the conditions that made their rottenness fester will continue unabated. Dogen says, "You should be willing to practice [kind speech] for this entire present life; do not give up, world after world, life after life. Kind speech is the basis for reconciling rulers and subduing enemies. Those who hear kind speech from you have a delighted expression and a joyful mind. Those who hear of your kind speech will be deeply touched—they will never forget it." (p. 46)

The difference between kind speech and a kind of

pleasant but foolish prattle has to do with the accuracy of the intention behind the words. One has to be realistic about the tremendous human capacity for self-deception and destructiveness; in other words compassion isn't really complete without a thorough appreciation of suffering and the inherent tragedy of being human. But to see this clearly, to include it within the love and hopefulness that is always a tone in kind speech: this is the real thing. One thinks of the great practitioners of kind speech in our own time, Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr., the truth-power of their kind words that really did turn the destiny of nations.

The other day in one of my classes a student complained to me, "Why did you tell me to shut up? She was talking too, and you didn't tell her to shut up." I said, "I never told you to shut up; I said 'Please be quiet,' but I would never tell you to shut up."

There's a big difference between please be quiet and shut up, a difference that the whole class realized then.

In fact, I never do tell anyone to shut up or ever talk disrespectfully to any of my students at any time, no matter what they are doing. I might express my frustration or displeasure, but I never use disrespectful words. I have 140 students in and out of my classroom every day, and the

truth is there is not a single one of them that I don't like or whom I don't feel I'd like to know better. And it is invariably the case that when one or more of them are misbehaving it is because there is some horrendous difficulty in their lives they can't understand or deal with.

In fact, I have found that my consistent practice of kind speech has helped to create an atmosphere of trust and kindness in the classroom so that things go more or less smoothly, and even those students who are screwing up royally feel like part of the group and know that there is always another chance, a new possibility for them to find a way to be successful. And I have found also in many other situations this magical power of kind speech to create beautiful situations, even transformative moments. ♦

*Norman Fischer is a poet, and a Zen priest at Green Gulch Farm in Northern California. He is currently teaching high school.*

*There's a big difference between  
please be quiet and shut up.*

## Right Speech

*The tongue just right  
the lips just right  
the breath just right  
the heart just right*

—Cate Gable



# WRITE SPEECH: A CONVERSATION

*The following conversation took place in the communal kitchen at Harbin Hot Springs in Northern California on December 12, 1993. It was partially recorded on tape along with the clanking of dishes and the crying of a baby, and partially recalled from memory and perhaps a little imagination. (I was so caught up in our conversation at the time that I didn't notice any other sounds. When I listened to the tape, I was surprised and shocked to hear a baby crying, sometimes so loudly I couldn't hear the words. This brings up the question—alongside of Right Speech—of Right Listening.)*

*We were six Buddhist women writers. Well, five Buddhists, plus one Buddhist sympathizer. We had gathered together at Harbin for the weekend, to read to each other, to talk about our writing and our Buddhist practice, and not least of all, to soak and steam. We were: Katy Butler, journalist; Melody Ermachild, nonfiction writer; Jane Hirshfield, poet and translator; Dorianne Laux, poet; Meredith Maran, author of the forthcoming autobiographical memoir *What It's Like To Live Now*; Susan Moon, fiction writer, editor of *Turning Wheel*.*

*The night before, we had sat for hours at the dinner table, having an extremely animated—or to put it another way, loud—conversation about freedom of speech, pornography, “women’s erotica,” violence on television, the nature of consent, the age of consent, sex, drugs, custard pie. As we staggered from the table, dizzy with ideas and full of organically grown food, a wide-eyed man at the next table asked, “What group are you?”*

*“Oh,” we said, “we’re just friends talking.”*

*It was then I had the idea of asking everyone to let me record a discussion on right speech for *Turning Wheel*. We did it the next day over lunch, and half way through I realized I’d forgotten to turn on the microphone. I lapsed momentarily into wrong speech, then turned on the mike for the time that remained to us.*

*The next morning, at home, I woke early with bits and pieces of the lost conversation drifting into my head. I grabbed pen and paper and wrote down what I could remember, like catching a dream before it’s gone. I added on what had been recorded and sent the reconstructed conversation to the participants, who made a few corrections and additions. And here it is. An exercise in right speech in more ways than one. —Editor.*

**Susan:** How does “right speech” come up in your work as a writer?

**Katy:** Constantly. A few years ago I started practicing with the idea of right speech. I adopted a practice of not talking about a person behind their back. Not saying something about somebody that I wouldn’t say directly to the person. And in my journalism, I started

always showing people what I was writing about them before it was printed.

**Susan:** What if they didn’t like it?

**Katy:** I would tell them I couldn’t promise to change it. Sometimes I would and sometimes I wouldn’t. But they wouldn’t be taken by surprise. I wouldn’t go have coffee and muffins with someone and pretend to be friends and then write some damning thing about them.

**Susan:** But in conversation, would you really not talk about someone who wasn’t there?

**Katy:** Ask Jane. We’ve been working on this together.

**Jane:** Ah, yes, gossip. I try not to create gossip. The way I define this is if somebody tells me something directly about their life, I don’t pass it on. If I hear something from several people not connected to the source, I figure it’s already in the public domain, and I’m not creating rumors by repeating it. But I always try to include the fact that it is low-quality information and that I don’t

---

*In my journalism, I started always showing people what I was writing about them before it was printed.*

---

know for sure that it’s true—to say that it’s gossip.

**Susan:** But don’t you think there’s good gossip? For example, a friend just called me and left a message on my answering machine telling me her mother died. Before I was able to reach her, I got a call from another mutual friend, and I said, “Joan’s mother died.” And she said, “Oh, I’ll call her right away.”

**Jane:** Somebody died? I think that’s just a fact.

**Susan:** Facts aren’t gossip? What if you say, “So-and-so’s marriage is breaking up. I think she needs her friends to take her some chicken soup.”

**Jane:** You might consider saying, “So-and-so is having a really hard time right now. Maybe you should give her a call.” But if your friend tells you something in confidence, don’t repeat it.

**Meredith:** I think it’s a matter of intention a lot of the time. Your gut tells you what your intention is. I believe in the gut test.

**Katy:** What if your friend tells you she’s been hurt by an affair she’s having with a Buddhist teacher?

**Jane:** If she tells you in confidence, I think you respect her confidentiality.

**Katy:** I think you have to look at who owns the information. In a community, if a teacher is secretly sleeping with a succession of women students, who owns that information? Only him and his partners? Or any woman who



might potentially be approached? Or the whole community? What if these relationships turn out to be damaging to the women? Then who owns the information?

**Jane:** I do agree, despite what I said before, that gossip can serve a useful purpose in creating and maintaining community values.

**Susan:** What if it's not in a community? What if your friend tells you she's being abused, and she doesn't want you to say anything to anyone because she feels humiliated and ashamed?

**Jane:** You have to respect that, I think.

**Melody:** What about child abuse?

**Meredith:** What if a child you know admits to you that his father beats him, but begs you not to tell?

**Melody:** Maybe he's really asking you to do something.

**Katy:** You can call child protective services, or tell his school counselor.

**Meredith:** What if he really insists he's afraid his father will kill him if the authorities find out?

**Melody:** Maybe you have to look at each case individually.

---

*What if a child you know admits  
to you that his father beats him,  
but begs you not to tell?*

---

**Katy:** See how it feels in your body.

**Jane:** You could ask, "What is the compassionate thing to do here?"

**Susan:** In writing, right speech might consist of reporting something bad that has happened, something that people need to know about. Grace Paley says the job of the writer is to bring people the news of what it's like to be alive in the world.

**Meredith:** I feel like what I write has to somehow advance the good.

**Susan:** Does everything you say have to advance the good? That seems like a heavy burden to bear.

**Jane:** But isn't that what right speech is? Speech made at least with awareness of that issue? Unless you think right speech is just not wrong speech.

**Susan:** Well, what if you say something just because you feel like saying it—it makes you feel good to say it. Does it have to advance the public good?

**Katy:** My definition of right speech is that it's honesty. Honesty about your own experience. Your body tells you if you're being honest.

**Jane:** But don't you think it's honesty plus? It's not *just* honesty? It includes the sense of interconnectedness you talked about earlier today.

**Katy:** Yes. It's honesty plus. I think it's holding both of those qualities in your mind at the same time. That you're equally compassionate and real about your small self and your small reactions as you are about some his-

torical sense you might have.

**Susan:** I'm thinking about what you said before about showing people what you write about them before it's printed. There's the question of honoring your connection to them, and balancing that with your connection to your audience, being honest to your readers. You want your readers to know the truth, and sometimes the interest of the reader and the interest of the subject might be in conflict.

**Katy:** I used to think your first loyalty was to your reader.

**Susan:** You said that to me and it was very helpful.

**Katy:** But from a Buddhist point of view maybe your loyalty is to everyone.

**Jane:** From a Buddhist point of view, surely your loyalty to your reader is no different from your loyalty to yourself or your loyalty to your dead father.

**Katy:** Another question I have is why is there such a disjunction between what people think I think of them and how I really want to write about them. I feel that that's one of the impulses out of which I write, or have written in the past. I'm afraid to say these things to people face to face, because I'm shy, or not assertive, and so I end up in my little room writing things down. It's happened with my parents—I wrote this short story . . .

**Meredith:** But aren't they lucky that unlike most parents they actually do get to hear what you think of them, even if it's not face to face?

**Katy:** We live in a weird culture where someone can go on Oprah Winfrey and say something they would feel too embarrassed to tell anyone they were actually close to.

**Meredith:** Right. Because they're talking to a camera. You don't see the person you're talking about when you're looking into a camera.

**Katy:** The power balance is different. They can't beat you up.

**Meredith:** Not right then.

**Dorianne:** And also, they'll be so impressed with you for being a star.

**Susan:** Well, are the rules of right speech different if you're writing something down for publication or just having a conversation?

**Dorianne:** Or making a speech?

**Melody:** How about writing in your journal and having all your children read it after you're dead?

**Dorianne:** Well, a big thing for me is writing about my child. How much of her life do I disclose in the disclosure of my life? How much of my family's life do I disclose in the disclosure of my life? I'm pretty clear on my parents. I figure there's never a reason to protect parents.

**Meredith:** Wow! Can I get that in writing? I love that!

**Susan:** You might not, when your kids grow up and start writing—

**Dorianne:** But with my daughter it's more complicated. My job is to protect my daughter in any way possible, and if that means I have to eliminate things I feel a strong need to say, because of her, I'll do it.



**Susan:** Meredith, tell about your system with your book and your kids.

**Meredith:** Well, the book is mostly about my kids and my lover. They're the people whose names and identities I can't conceal, so I made an agreement with them that all three of them had veto power. Nobody else does. I do what Katy's suggesting with everyone else. They all have to sign releases, so if they don't like what I've written about them I have to change it so that they can't be recognized. But with the kids and Ann, that's impossible, so they read it before it goes anywhere, and then they make me change a lot of stuff. And much more than they make me change things about *them*, they make me change things where they think I'm full of shit. I read them a part about our neighborhood, and they were hooting: "Oh, yeah, Mom, we live in the ghetto! Mom, maybe we should take you on a little ride to the ghetto, so you know where the ghetto is." They think I'm trying to capitalize on something. "You're not that stupid, Mom. You *know* we don't live in the ghetto!"

As for my lover, she's a profoundly private person. And there's a part of me that feels like I'm violating her privacy, and violating my kids' privacy—my kids are too young to know how they're going to feel two years from now about seeing this book in a bookstore—and that the whole nature of this project is wrong speech. So that's why I have to be really clear on what good

it's doing. I need to believe that something is going to be better in my kids' lives and my lover's life as a result of it, because in the immediate sense they've all been victimized by it. A piece of it was going to be published in *The Utne Reader*, and we tried to figure the whole thing out first: Who could possibly see it who's in the kids' lives? We thought we'd figured everything out. And the day it came out, Jesse's teacher, in front of the whole class, says, "Oh, I saw your Mom's story in *Utne Reader*!" He was well intentioned. But all Jesse could imagine was every kid in his class reading the article and finding out his Mom's a lesbian.

So when Ann says no, I say okay.

And then there are all the other people I've written about. There are very few people in my life who are going to say, "Oh, thank you so much for that fabulous portrayal of me in your book!"

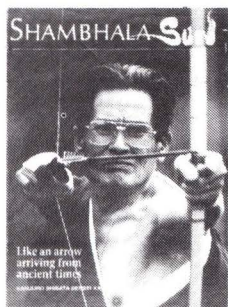
But the kids get a mom who's home and more available than I've been since they were three months old, and who's happier than I've ever been, and who's doing something that we hope will do some good in the world. But there's no guarantee.

**Dorianne:** That's the thing. You do it all on faith.

*It was time to go. We hadn't exactly figured anything out, but we'd had a good time talking about writing, using words about words, trying to stay aware of right speech as we talked about awareness of right speech. And listening. ♦*

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# STORYTELLING AS HEALING

by Caroline Sinavaiana

In Samoa where I live, “talking story” is still the national pastime. Stroll through any village on a moonlit night on any island in Samoa, and everywhere you will find small groups of people sitting outdoors, talking and laughing quietly over the day’s events. When Samoans meet for the first time, we immediately exchange genealogies. “Who is your mother?” “Oh, she’s Palepa’s daughter. From Falealili. Married to Ben Gabbard. From Leauva’a. But before that, they came from Savai’i; they had to leave because the ’afi, (a volcanic eruption in the 1920s), covered their village. I know your cousin Lewis from college in California. His father married my mother’s sister.” Likewise, traditional ceremonies invariably begin with orators from the host village reciting the genealogies of the guest chiefs, by way of polite greeting. Through such narrative rituals, we acknowledge our own relationship, by first establishing how our ancestors were related. Because we share a common pool of ancestors, we also share their stories, and we come to know how our own stories are linked, how we must somehow be connected. Through such woven filaments of story we come to know something essential about who we are.

But I have not always known such things. When I moved back to Samoa from the U.S. in my early twenties, I knew nothing of such storied webs. Like too many others from my own generation and the next, I didn’t know what it meant to be Samoan, what it meant to be Polynesian. Such knowledge has come hard and slow, along many years of study and wandering between village and university, northern city and tropical bush. For me, this crucial self-knowledge has come largely through stories; I have learned about being Samoan most profoundly through the study of traditional legends and mythology.

In a classically Polynesian fashion, I have lived in many different places. When I was two years old we left Samoa and lived in Hawai’i, northern California, and Massachusetts—a few years in each place—until we “settled” in northern Florida in the fifties. Ten years later, when I finished high school, I seized the first chance to hit the road on my own and lit out for California. After a few years of wandering, this time between Yosemite, Hawai’i and Montana, I found my way back to Samoa in 1969, after 20 years in the States.

Growing up in the Florida of the ’50s, with no other Samoans in sight outside my own household, I thought I was white. We didn’t live in the “colored” part of town, go to a colored church, or otherwise socialize with “them.” I drank from water fountains and used public

facilities marked “for whites only.” There was, nonetheless, a seed of doubt sprouting in my nine-year-old mind, planted there before our move east by a fellow third-grader in Richmond, California. Emerging from a stall in the girls’ bathroom one day, I was taken aback by a black classmate’s question: “Are you colored?” After a blank pause, I replied truthfully, “I don’t know!”

Looking back a few decades later, I can appreciate more fully the critical nature of such a question. For one thing, my black friend’s query was raising the all-important issue of racial identity at a historical time and place when skin color would all but foretell one’s destiny. Color was a kind of code for our respective genealogies, our life stories. Did we or did we not, she seemed to ask, share a mutual story? Were we “related” or not? If I wasn’t colored, just what was my story anyway? In some essential ways, my life’s work has been an exploration of that crucial question.

As a native daughter of Amerikan (AKA “American”) Samoa, I decline to accept the “legal” identity imposed upon my mother country by some committee of bureaucrats living 8000 miles away. In the late nineteenth century, our island country—home for our Polynesian ancestors for thousands of years—suddenly and mysteriously became known as “the U.S. Naval Station at Tutuila.” Shortly thereafter, we received our current identity as “American Samoa,” an “un-incorporated, unorganized territory of the United States.” A century later, this rudely imposed story about who we are has yet to be challenged, corrected, and re-told. Instead, the twisted plot continues to unwind in a classically destructive cycle of colonial violence: first bloodshed and forced treaties; then, alcohol, cash and commodities; now, substance abuse, domestic violence and other stress-related diseases. Having internalized the dynamics of this embattled plot—as have all colonized peoples—I now look for words that can reconcile the combatants. I look for stories that can cut through the veils of shadow that flutter across our faces, threatening to smother the spirit, to extinguish the breath.

Thus, I have come to think it a primary “assignment” in my own life to bring these shadow stories into the light. Once this happens, we can talk! Certain pesky demons only cause a fuss when they are ignored. What is needed here is some conversation, some talking-story, some negotiated settlement among all parties concerned.

I use stories in therapeutic workshops with youth “at risk.” Having myself grown up without tenable role models from my native culture, I am well acquainted with the demons inhabiting that void. In the whites-only Florida of the fifties, the reigning female role models



were figures like Miss America, Marilyn Monroe, and Anita Bryant. In short, no one who looked or acted remotely like me or anyone I might ever become. It was not until graduate school, many years and miles later, that I finally began to find relevant cultural role models in the study of Samoan mythology. For example, the legendary Nafanua, the goddess of war, a Samoan equivalent of the Shambhala warrior—now there's a heroine I can relate to!

Once upon a time, a young girl lived with her parents in the underworld near Savai'i, Samoa's biggest island. Nafanua ("hidden in the land") was a very determined child indeed. Although her father was a god of the underworld, to Nafanua this was no big deal. At first she was a pretty happy kid growing up in the underworld, until one day when she could no longer stand to hear the cries of distress drifting down from the earth world above. So she asked her Mom what the story was with the anguished voices overhead. "They are the cries of our people, living in our earth village above the sea. They are now enslaved and abused by a tribe of cruel invaders from far away," explained Mommy. When Nafanua heard this terrible tale, she decided that she must answer the calls of her people for help. So her Dad, the god of the underworld, sat down with his daughter to give her advice about the important task that lay before her. After giving her some special instructions, Nafanua's father also gave her four magical tools: "Take these two magical war clubs and these two oars. Use them properly and they will help assure your victory." So, Nafanua set out from her underworld home to answer the cries of her people in the upper world. Just as her father had promised, one of the magical oars turned into the boat that would carry her to her destiny. The oar turned boat had a special name, "Ulimasao," which means "do not let yourself be overcome by anger." After a long, hard sail, Nafanua finally arrived at her human village in the earth world. After a little rest, she recruited the help of the kind couple who discovered her asleep on the shore. The couple was amazed by the talk of this mysterious young woman who spoke of waging a battle against the cruel invaders. But Nafanua simply assured them by repeating the words of her father: "Do not worry; our victory is assured. Even though we appear to be outnumbered by the thousands, we will prevail. And that is because our army will consist of all our ancestors, who will take the forms of dragonflies and cicadas. The enemy will see only insects and three warriors, the two of you and myself. Our army will be invisible to their eyes, and they'll never know what hit 'em! So, the next day, the great battle took place. And just as Nafanua had promised, the bewildered enemy forces fell beneath the power of her invincible and invisible army of ancestors!

*Certain pesky demons only cause a fuss when they are ignored.*

After her spectacular victory, Nafanua set about restoring all the lands to their rightful stewards and setting up a just government for her people.

Now that we're better acquainted, Nafanua comes to my rescue on a regular basis. The first time was a few years ago in Honolulu when she turned up to keep me company at the regional office of the Army Corps of Engineers. I was there as a representative of our local citizens' environmental protection group, to ask the Corps to defer a questionable development scheme in Samoa until the completion of an environmental impact study. Foolishly, I had come alone. With my graduate student's distractedness, I had arrived dutifully clutching my list of the day's errands: "Go to library, do the laundry, sue the Army Corps of Engineers, pick up photocopies, etc." Seated in the colonel's foyer, I began to count the military bombers parked just outside the window. I was suddenly plunged into nauseating memories of a childhood spent living on air force bases. I felt alone and afraid. After mumbling a few desperate mantras, I remembered Nafanua and her invincible army of ancestors. She too had seemed to fight alone. I started breathing again.

Surely my ancestors were crowding into that stark office, to defend our endangered island and people. Thus feeling ultimately protected by my own invisible army, I ended up having a relaxed chat with the colonel.

Later, the pork-barrel development scheme in Samoa died a much-deserved death. Why? There could be any number of reasons. Only Nafanua knows for sure.

A few months ago, my favorite warrior appeared again, at a time when I was again in need of a courage transfusion. This time I had been invited to testify as an international witness at an event in Hawai'i called the Peoples' International Tribunal. Scheduled to coincide with the hundredth anniversary of the U.S. overthrow of Hawai'i, the two-week tribunal brought international jurists and witnesses together to hear testimony about "war crimes" of the U.S. in the Pacific islands. With a focus on alienation of indigenous lands, most of the testimony would come from Hawai'ians. To add corroborating testimony in an international context, representatives of several other island countries would also bear witness to parallel events throughout Polynesia. Would I consent to testify on the Samoan case?

I would be the only Samoan witness. In fact, I was the only person in my country crazy enough to even consider doing such a thing. Living in a tiny island country, with ancient cultural values emphasizing decorum and hierarchy, is a tricky proposition. I had learned to keep a low profile for my own survival. But now I was being offered the chance to tell the story of the exploitation of my people, a story which had not been told before, a story that most Samoans either don't



know or would probably deny. It was a chance to come out of the political closet, to do my job as a writer and teacher. I consulted Nafanua and again found comfort in her teaching: I would only appear to be alone on the battlefield. So, I decided to speak at the tribunal.

I knew I was risking the loss of my teaching job, but I took what precautions I could and went. As usual, Nafanua was right. Not only was I not alone, I was instead embraced for two weeks by a constellation of human rights champions from all over the world. We traveled together to sacred sites on five different islands of Hawai'i to hear testimony and bear witness. We flew on planes and helicopters, rode on buses, camped out and ate together. It felt like a watershed for indigenous peoples' movements. It felt like a meeting of the tribes. For this ragtag storyteller, it felt like refuge. Two months later, I still have my job.

Most of my literature students from the college here will move on to further university studies and jobs in places like Hawai'i and California. Far from our small islands, many of them for the first time, they are often greeted by preconceptions about who they are: football players or wrestlers, at best; more often, dark-skinned brutes; violent, crazed "banana-peelers"; shiftless, thieving "coconuts." These students—many of Samoa's "best and brightest" youth—confront such stories about themselves composed by others. In these contorted portraits, how can they recognize themselves? And at the same time, they have to operate within worlds—schools, banks, coffee shops, the 'hood—which assume their mental inferiority, the unlikelihood of their success.

As a teacher, my way of preparing them for such heavy weather ahead is to clothe them in stories that can shield and illuminate, strengthen and solace, stories in which they can take refuge. We read James Baldwin and Alice Walker, Frederick Douglass and Gloria Naylor. From antiquity, we read about Nafanua, and Lata, Samoa's legendary eco-warrior. It is the storyteller's way. From our collective story we can make a path in the present moment, in order to take the next difficult step.

For peoples who have been systematically silenced, for whatever reason and however long, this reclaiming of our own stories is the essentially empowering act. In "Sonny's Blues," his inspiriting hymn to jazz, James Baldwin writes, "While the tale of how we suffer, and how we are delighted, and how we may triumph is never new, it always must be heard. There isn't any other tale to tell, it's the only light we've got in all this darkness." I teach these stories because they are about resistance and heart, loyalty and risk. They can help to light our way. They can help us to recognize ourselves, to free our voices to seek and tell our own stories ♦

*Caroline Sinavaiana is a poet, storyteller, teacher, native Samoan, and an activist for Plutonium Free World.*

## Sa Nafanua

for my sisters

*high-stepping in pink  
patent leather boots  
arms linked, we march together  
in raggedy-assed lines, holes in our  
sequined stockings/crooked at the seams  
under rainbow-colored tights and feather  
cloaks/this band of warriors/your  
frisky daughters, my dear/  
at your service/our weapons slung  
across shoulder & hip/paintbrush & camera  
Zenith laptop & law book/your freckled daughters/  
after-jets burning away illusion/attachment/  
clearing the channel for the birth  
of ourselves & each other/your  
gypsy daughters.*

*we move down to the sea;  
our sons carry the boat  
bringing coconut, breadfruit,  
taro and papaya to plant the new land.  
babies chortle at the breast  
the bigger ones chasing sand crabs  
back into their holes/our sons  
hoist the sails & festoon us  
with maile garlands/pua & awapuhi  
flower-scented aura of our people/  
protect us mother/we follow your  
ocean path to the world above  
the dark cave/guide us mother  
the sea serpent lurks beneath waves  
monster ego/demons gnaw on the rigging  
steady us mother/your eye lights the way  
your heart moves our blood  
your hand steers our boat  
and plants us like seeds in the new  
land/sing for us tina.*

Glossary:

*Nafanua*: the Samoan Warrior Goddess, a kind of Polynesian Joan of Arc

*Sa*: canoe, vessel; collective name of extended kin group

*Sa Nafanua*: the kin group of Nafanua; used here to refer to an extended family group as passengers and crew on an early voyage of settlement

*Tina*: mother

—Caroline Sinavaiana

[Reprinted with permission from *Manoa, A Pacific Journal of International Writing*, Summer 1993.]



# SEEKING SILENCE

by Jarvis Masters

That morning, at four o'clock, I awoke earlier than usual to begin my spiritual practice of meditation. Trying not to disturb anyone sleeping in the adjacent cells on the tier, I tiptoed around my cell in my shorts, to wash up and collect myself.

Taking the blankets off my bunk, I folded them into a small mat. The quietness of San Quentin felt like a cemetery as I peered out the window at the wall opposite my cell. I quietly stared into the night frost, wondering how this prison—so violent in daylight—could now seem so placidly beautiful under the heavy, watchful light beams of the gun towers. The hard streams of light stood adrift on the air, a far distance away.

I placed the folded mat on the floor at the front of my cell. This wonderful silence of prison life, this chance to breathe softly into a state of relaxation, was a rare moment in my ten years of incarceration. I felt calm as I sat in lotus position on the mat, facing the front of my cell; I began my practice by quieting my mind with the silence of the prison around me.

I had probably been sitting there 45 minutes before I became completely relaxed, feeling all the tension in my muscles starting to flow outward, when suddenly the silence was shaken by a very loud shout—"Feed me or come fuck me up!"—from down the tier. "You motherfuckers better come feed me or fuck me up," the voice roared on, until another voice was heard.

"Hey, man," an irritated inmate yelled. "Why don't you shut the fuck up? People are trying to sleep around here. They'll feed us when it's time to eat."

"Hey, why don't the both of you motherfuckers kill that goddamn noise?" a third voice shouted.

"Ah, go fuck yourself," replied the nearby voice. "You aren't calling the shots around here, punk."

"Who you calling a punk, punk?" the angry voice asked.

"You, you motherfucker. You don't tell me what to do. I do what the hell I want around this camp."

"So who the fuck is you?"

"I'm your daddy, punk! That's who I am," shouted the nearby voice. "And you don't tell your daddy what to do, you dig? I do what the fuck I want to do, just like I told the last motherfucker."

"If you are my daddy," came the reply, "then why don't you suck my dick?"

"Sissy, you don't have one. What you have is a cunt between your legs."

"If you see a cunt then suck on it, you bitch!"

"We'll just see who's a bitch. Punk! When they rack these bar gates and all the cells come flying open, we'll

just see who is the real bitch, me or you, punk."

"Well, we'll let the gates be the bell, 'cause dude, I don't give a mad fuck. You just come out slingin' and swingin' with what you know best."

"Oh, I'm coming, punk," the voice said coldly. "You can bank on it."

I sat on the floor of my cell, listening to the enraged voices. San Quentin had come awake before I could get into a truly meditative state, and now, as I watched a beautiful morning of light appear at the window, I could think only of how to avoid being stabbed mistakenly when all the prison cells came open. ♦

*Jarvis Masters is a frequent contributor to Turning Wheel. He is an African American prisoner on Death Row at San Quentin, and a practitioner of Tibetan Buddhism. He can be contacted at: C-35169, Tamal, CA 94974.*

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*What if the words  
Broke the sun in shards  
Splintered the sun  
Into stone splinters*

*What if the words  
Were stone cutters  
And the sun burnt  
Out of them*

*What if the words  
Were arrows striking  
At the sun  
Pulling the light down  
Into nothingness*

*And what if the words  
Were nothingness  
Cutting itself up  
Into nothing  
Falling down  
Through the slices  
Of water  
Into the light*

—Noah de Lissovoy  
[from *Sun Clock*]

*Noah de Lissovoy is a writer living in Los Angeles. The cover photograph is also his.*



## A BUDDHIST LOOKS

by Susan Moon

The more I think about pornography, the more confused I get. I have strong opinions on the subject, I just don't know what they are. I certainly can't claim to represent the Buddhist perspective—different Buddhist traditions have different perspectives—I can only give you a patchwork of ideas from this particular Buddhist. And I reserve the right to contradict myself.

We Americans have "free speech." Sometimes we seem to think this means we can say anything we want. But in Buddhist terms, there is no such thing as free speech. What you say creates consequences for which you are accountable. You create karma with body, speech and mind, in descending order of importance. To rape is worse than talking about rape, which in turn is worse than thinking about rape. If you make an obscene phone call (an *unwanted* obscene phone call), there are karmic effects for both you and the recipient of the call. She may have a sleepless night, and in your next life you may be reborn as a banana slug. But more to the point, in *this* life, you are limiting yourself by acting as an abusive person.

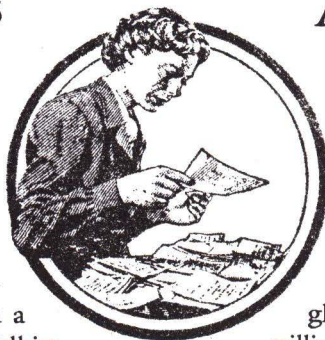
Everybody seems to be talking about pornography these days. A number of new books deal with the subject, and one of particular interest is *Only Words*

*Can we even have sex without language?*

*Would it be any fun?*

(Harvard University Press), by Catharine MacKinnon, a feminist legal theorist and currently a professor at the University of Michigan Law School. MacKinnon is not a Buddhist, but she recognizes that words create karma. She argues brilliantly, with bitter irony and lots of hyperbole, that pornographic materials are *acts* of violence against women. While the First Amendment (free speech) protects the expression of "ideas," MacKinnon says that a pornographic film of a rape, for example, is not particularly expressing an "idea." She defines (redefines, actually) pornography as "graphic sexually explicit materials that subordinate women through pictures or words." And she believes that such discrimination should be against the law.

Before I read *Only Words*, I was determined to disagree with it, sure in my belief that free speech must be protected. Reading it put some chinks in my certainty. I hadn't really thought about the various legal precedents we have for prohibiting certain words: in cases of sexual harassment in the workplace, for example, or the words "Whites Only" on a public drinking fountain.



## AT PORNOGRAPHY

And if I believe it's right that child pornography is prohibited by law, as I do, this shows I'm willing to give up some degree of "freedom of expression" where it is outweighed by an opposing value. MacKinnon forces me to ask where I draw the line. How much glorification of violence against women am I willing to tolerate for the sake of free speech?

Most people who argue against MacKinnon make the same assumption she does—that pornography is harmful—but we have to put up with it for the sake of free speech. But perhaps the problem isn't with pornography as such.

My dictionary defines pornography as "pictures, writing or films designed to arouse sexual excitement." What's wrong with this? Could it even be construed, in some contexts, as Right Speech? When you lie down with your lover, arousing sexual feelings is just what you are supposed to do. You can do it with your hands, and you can also do it with words. Sexuality and language are both basic aspects of human nature, and it would be surprising if they didn't get entangled. Can we even *have* sex without language? Would it be any fun?

Maybe what we need is better pornography.

For a long time, women have been prevented from defining, claiming, our own sexuality. Much, perhaps most, pornography has contributed to that disempowerment. But isn't it the content, not the form, that oppresses women? Susie Bright, Bay Area publisher and writer of women's erotica/pornography, reviewing (panning) MacKinnon in *The East Bay Express*, reminds us that pornography is not necessarily violence-against-women. Pornography is just a tool, and women are taking it into their own hands. There is a growing body—if that's the word—of pornography produced by and for women.

What if high school curricula included workshops in creating your own pornography? We believe in sex education—teaching young people how not to get diseases, how not to get pregnant. What about a more positive approach? It would be absurd to take a cooking class that was only about how not to poison yourself with your food. Why can't sex education be more like cooking class? Why can't it be creative?

Pornography already functions as sex education to some extent. It can bring the good news that you don't have to be heterosexual, for example. Or that you don't have to lie stiff and still on your back, under your husband, in order to lose your virginity. You can find answers in pornography to some of the questions you're afraid to ask your parents. But the bad news is that if you use pornography you feel like a pervert.

Let's make our pornography our own, instead of



passively consuming a degrading product which puts money in the pockets of the Mafia.

I have a friend, a feminist, who likes to rent pornographic videos. She says it's really a drag when she brings a video home and part way into it, just when she's starting to enjoy it, there's a rape. She says you can't always tell by the cover. She says maybe there should be a rating system: R for rape, GB for gang bang.

Another thought-provoking new book from Harvard University Press by another law professor touches on these matters. In *Sexy Dressing Etc., Essays on the Power and Politics of Cultural Identity*, Duncan Kennedy writes, "The regime of patriarchy constructs male and female sexuality so that both men and women are turned on by experiences and images of male domination of women. . . . The question then is whether it is possible for straight men and women to be sexual, to experience pleasure within the regime, without collaborating in oppression." And he elaborates: "Many men and women, including many with strong commitments to feminism, experience some images or fantasy scenarios involving abuse, including sexual domination and rape, as sexually arousing, even though they also disapprove or fear these things, and have no conscious desire to abuse or be abused in real life."

What if the dominance that's eroticized is consensual? What if it's lesbian S & M? What does a Buddhist think about that?

A few months ago, I went to a reading of "Women's Erotica" at a local cafe, because a friend had organized it and I wanted to support her. I have negative associations with the word "erotica"—I think of it as neither fish nor fowl, occupying some lame space between literature and hormonal secretion. But in this case, "erotica" turned out to be a euphemism for "pornography." One of the readers, Trish Thomas, a self-described "perverted horny bull-dagger," wore black leather and heavy boots, with various pieces of metal attached to her clothing and person, including a ring through her lower lip. She had a gentle face and had recently become a grandmother. You couldn't help liking her. In a nervous voice, she read an extremely graphic and disturbing (to me) story about a lesbian who seduces a gay man, and about the sex they have together, all of it consensual, which includes various activities and hardware I hadn't even heard of. It was a good story—full of tension, humor, excitement. It wasn't my type of scene she was describing, but it kind of churned me up and told me something about different ways of loving.

In a question and answer session afterwards, she was asked why she writes. She said, "To turn myself on." Someone else asked what was the difference between writing about things and doing them. And she said, "In my case, all the difference in the world, unfortunately. I write about things I *wish* I could do."

The evening made me wonder: What *is* the differ-

ence between talking about something and doing it? Is it okay to talk (read, write) about things that it's not okay to do—things that cause suffering, that break the precepts? Is it okay to look at photographs or films of real people pretending to cause each other suffering?

I bought the porn magazine in which Trish Thomas' story had been published (*Frighten The Horses*, No. 10, Summer 1992). In the same magazine, a reader, disturbed by images of women cutting each other with knives, writes a letter to the editor: "I believe we have to question why we are drawn to these images or we will simply remake the violence that surrounds us. . . I am incredibly hungry to see something I haven't seen before, to be encouraged and supported in new ways to love. . . Images and words have the power to heal and harm, and I want a deeper level of respect for this power and a greater responsibility to it." She sounds like a Buddhist.

I don't think we can get rid of harmful words by legislation, but I'm grateful for the publication of *Only Words*. I'm glad there's so much public debate about pornography and free speech. The more conscious we are of what we do to each other with words, the better.

In Buddhist terms, we recognize that our responses are the results of myriad causes and conditions, including "the regime of patriarchy," and we can forgive ourselves. One of the things I love about Buddhism is how nonjudgmental it is. At the same time, we can also water the seeds of love—or should I say seed the waters of love?—and we can use words and images to do so. ♦

## *The Earth Does Not Need Us*

*Light of  
yellowed*

*maples all down  
the street. Old*

*earth, what use  
words.*

*This is  
your say, this*

*warm color,  
this warm light in*

*cold  
autumn.*

—Kevin Bezner

Reprinted from the chapbook: *About Water*, by Kevin Bezner, available from Dry Creek Press, P.O. Box 44320, Lemon Cove, CA 93244. \$7 ppd.



# WALKING IN THE DIRECTION OF BEAUTY

## *An Interview with Sister Chân Không*

by Alan Senauke and Susan Moon

*Sister Chân Không ["True Emptiness"] is a Vietnamese nun who works closely with Thich Nhat Hanh, and lives in the community of Plum Village in Southern France. In the fall of 1993 she was on a teaching tour in the U.S. with Thich Nhat Hanh, and Alan Senauke and Susan Moon talked with her at Kim Son Monastery in Watsonville, California. We sat together in a grove of cypress trees overlooking the ocean, while gray-robed monks and nuns passed quietly back and forth around us, making preparations for a retreat. (To learn more about Sister Chân Không's work, read her new book, Learning True Love, reviewed on page 43.)*

**Susan Moon:** The amount of suffering that you've seen and worked with is great. One can never do enough—there is always more work to do. And sometimes you even fail at a task: for example, some boat people you are trying to help end up getting tragically drowned. How do you deal with despair in your work?

**Chân Không:** It is a matter of survival. Everyone is capable of serenity when nothing difficult is before them. But when there are bombs dropping, you can be overcome by fear and hatred. When our friends were murdered doing social service in Vietnam, we did our best to calm ourselves. We saw that in order to survive we had to walk in the direction of beauty. We were not yet able to love those who murdered our friends, but should we take guns? If we kill the murderer, how about his wife—his wife will be angry at us. And then his son will be angry at us.

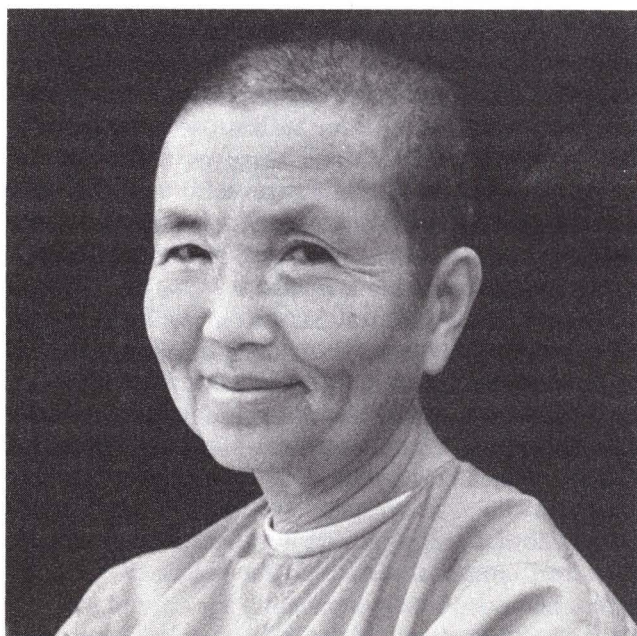
When our friends were killed, the last thing their murderers said to them was, "I'm sorry but I have to kill you." We cannot thank those who killed our friends, but we can try to find some good small seed in them.

In the eulogy read at our friends' funeral, we spoke to the murderers: "Thank you for saying 'I am sorry.' We understand that there were pressures and threats on you and if you disobeyed the order to kill our friends, you could have been killed yourselves." After that eulogy, none of our social workers were attacked.

When thousands of boat people were adrift on the high seas, I was filled with despair. I completely identified myself with their suffering, and after many months of meditation, I initiated a rescue project. I rented a fishing boat in Thailand, dressed up like a fisherman, and went out to sea to "fish" out the boat people.

Meditation allowed me to transform the garbage, the suffering, in me into a mercy "fishing boat." On the seas, I was fearless, even when faced by pirates, and I was even joyful because I knew I was going in the direction of beauty.

**SM:** What about when it's not a crisis situation? Do you ever feel that you just don't have enough strength or patience to keep going on?



*Sister Chân Không at Plum Village, Summer 1992*  
Photo by Howard Evans

**CK:** When my close friends died, I suffered a lot. But I kept on reciting *The Heart Sutra*: "No birth, no death, no increasing, no decreasing. . ." all day long. When I'm discouraged, it helps me a lot.

**SM:** How has being a woman affected your work and your practice?

**CK:** In Vietnam, my elder sister experienced discrimination in education. But when I grew up there was much less discrimination. So I feel fortunate. In South Vietnam we are influenced by the French, and there may be more equality for women than in Central or North Vietnam. In Saigon where I attended the French High School, girls were considered equal to boys. But in Buddhist temples we were told that we needed to be reborn several times to become a man. I always said, "Oh, I don't care to be a man. I would not feel superi-



or if I were a man, and I do not feel inferior as a woman.”

**SM:** Even without overt oppression, I think it’s still helpful to women to see you as an example of a woman who is acting out of a lot of strength.

**CK:** Here in the West in the monastery or nunnery I know that they do not have discrimination against women. And so I behave equally. But when I go to Vietnamese Temples where there are male monks, I try to behave according to the tradition. Not because I’m a hypocrite, but I want to give joy to them.

**Alan Senauke:** Do nuns take the same precepts as monks?

**CK:** I’ll tell you. I asked Thây [Thich Nhat Hanh] why women have to take 348 precepts instead of 248 precepts like men. Is there discrimination in Buddhism? In *Old Path White Cloud*, Thây explains. A woman went home alone through the forest and was almost raped by a man. So from that day on, the nuns kept one more precept than the monks: You’re not allowed to go out alone. The additional precepts are for protecting women, not because women are inferior.

The second thing Thây said was that at the time of the Buddha, women were oppressed by the society. When Buddha accepted women in the order, that was a big revolution. But even so, for two thousand years people have continued to believe that woman is inferior to man. And so they think that more precepts for women means that women are inferior. But we have to see that the extra precepts are for protecting women first.

There is another point that no other teacher has explained but Thây. When the stepmother of the Buddha asked to be ordained as a nun, Buddha at first refused her. She was a queen, and she had even more power over the country than the king. Buddha knew that she was strong and skillful. He said, “I’m worried that if my mother joins the community, she may rule everything.”

Then Ananda begged him to ordain her, and the whole community begged him, and Buddha ordained her with the condition that she agree to practice the Eight Observations of Respect that nuns have to observe towards Buddhist monks. That was for controlling her, not because she was inferior, but because she was so strong.

**AS:** So then these rules became institutionalized.

**CK:** Yes, but in Plum Village, we do not observe them because Thây says that these Eight Observations were invented to help the stepmother of the Buddha only. He says you need to keep the 14 precepts properly. That’s all. But of course he doesn’t despise the traditional precepts. And I can accept them just to give joy to the monks who practice in the traditional way. If I

can give them joy, I will have a chance to share my insights about women with them, and then they will be unblocked in their understanding.

**AS:** It’s very delicate.

**SM:** It makes me think of a story you tell in your book about when you first met Thây. You were working in the slums of Saigon at the time, and you were wearing an old dress that didn’t fit you very well. Thây said that you should wear a dress that was simple but lovely. You were surprised because you were trying to dress in a way that would make the people in the slums feel comfortable with you. Could you say any more about that?

**CK:** Thây was not against me going to the slums with a poor dress on. But I wore the same dress everywhere, and I was very proud of working with poor people. Every Sunday I went to hear Thây give a dharma talk in a huge temple. About 500 students came, and all of

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*I missed Vietnam and the image of a  
poor nun in a brown dress. So, I shaved  
my head and put on my nun’s robe  
as a kind of going home.*

---

them were dressed beautifully. It was not a slum. But I dressed in my old gray, baggy dress. When Thây called me in, I cried, because I was so proud that I worked with the poor.

**AS:** So wearing poor clothes was a mark of arrogance?

**CK:** Yes, it was like saying, “I’m not like other people. I work with the poor.” But Thây said, “You should behave in a normal way. You don’t have to wear a fancy dress, but when you are among students you, too, should look decent and simple.” But in the slum I could wear the dress of the slum people.

**SM:** And now you wear your nun’s robe and shave your head, and it’s appropriate for whatever situation you’re in, isn’t it?

**CK:** Yes. Unconsciously, I missed Vietnam and the image of a poor nun in a brown dress walking in remote areas to help children. So, I shaved my head and put on my nun’s robe as a kind of going home. Some of my friends in the West say, “I miss your hair.” When some Vietnamese monks came to the United States they decided to have long hair and wear American clothes, so as not to shock the eyes of people. At first I did that too, but slowly I changed my mind, because when a monk wears non-monk clothing, it’s fake. And when it’s fake, it will not inspire confidence. At first our shaved heads may shock people, but



if we walk mindfully, beautifully, what is inside will radiate and people will stop and ask, "Who are you?" And humbly we can explain.

**SM:** You move with a lot of dignity and grace.

**CK:** We have to, because when you wear the monk's robe you have to behave in the best way you can. If you move in an agitated way, you do more harm than help.

**AS:** I find that dressing as a priest, shaving my head, raises a very good question. Who is that person? And when you ask, "Who is that person?" you also ask, "Who am I?" So the monk becomes a mirror.

**CK:** Buddhism teaches that most of our perceptions are erroneous. We may think we understand something thoroughly, but we have to look more deeply. For example, you see a snake and you run away, filled with fear. But when you have a chance to turn on your flashlight and look again, you see that it is only a rope. When you are angry at your partner, don't think that he is a snake. Look more deeply. Maybe he is only a rope. Too often, with our beloved ones, our son or husband, our daughter or wife, we only see the snake, not the rope.

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*When you have a chance to turn on  
your flashlight and look again, you  
see that the snake is only a rope.*

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In meditation we look deeply alone. But sometimes we cannot look deeply enough by ourselves and we have to ask the other person, "If I have hurt you, please try to breathe deeply and calm yourself, first, and then come and tell me, and I will try my best to understand and correct my behavior, so that I will not take you for a snake, but a real rope."

**AS:** Keeping in mind the snake which is actually a rope, I'd like to ask you a question about the present human rights situation in Vietnam. Because it seems so confrontational. In terms of the communist government there, is there a part of it that's just a rope, not a snake?

**CK:** Our friends are in jail in Vietnam. And we try to understand that it is because the government takes us for a snake instead of a rope. Our friends in Vietnam have not been able to make it clear enough to the officials that they are not working for political power but for human rights.

**AS:** They didn't declare it in a skillful enough way?

**CK:** Maybe. However, if one side, especially the powerful side, is too sure of their wrong perception, it is difficult for the rope to reveal itself!

**AS:** Do you worry about what Western development will do to Vietnam when the embargo is lifted, which will probably be soon?

**CK:** The developers are already there.

**AS:** The country is wide open.

**CK:** There are many problems. Sometimes I feel overwhelmed. But I try to work one day at a time. If we just worry about the big picture, we are powerless. So my secret is to start right away doing whatever little work I can do. I try to give joy to one person in the morning, and remove the suffering of one person in the afternoon. That's enough. When you see you can do that, you continue, and you give *two* little joys, and you remove *two* little sufferings, then three, and then four. If you and your friends do not despise the small work, a million people will remove a lot of suffering. That is the secret. Start right now.

**SM:** I have one more question. What is it that gives you the most satisfaction in the work that you do?

**CK:** Twelve years ago, Thây asked me that same question, and I told him, "I enjoy communicating with the children in Vietnam. I enjoy wrapping the parcels of food and feeling close to them." And Thây said, "You cannot cling to this. You have to be prepared to die tomorrow without regret." And I said, "I am the only one who knows all these addresses, and if I die, who will take care of them?" He said, "Life is impermanent. You may die tonight from a heart attack." So, from that day I prepared the way for others to replace me. And I decided to write the book [*Learning True Love*] for that reason, so I can share what I have learned. Now I can have joy.

But I don't always feel happy. Even in our sangha in Plum Village we are not always at peace. When one sister or brother is unstable, the whole community is affected. So we try to be always fresh and happy and when somebody's sad, you have the serenity to overcome the difficulty.

When the fire inspectors came to Plum Village last February and wanted to close it, I tried to be calm and go slowly. They said we needed to spend about two million dollars to bring Plum Village up to code, or we would have to close. Thây reminded us, "If we have to close, we can close. We don't need to run after two million dollars." And now it turns out that we don't have to raise that much money after all. About \$500,000 is still needed. And we are just doing what we have to, slowly.

I can enjoy everything now. For me, walking is a joy, sitting is a joy. Having something to eat at mealtime is a joy. Touching the light switch and seeing the dark room bright with light is a joy. And I remember that we have a good sangha and a good teacher. My health is also good. There is so much joy for me. ♦



# THE GREEN TARA

## SOCIAL/ECONOMIC JUSTICE AND HOMELESSNESS

### *An Interview with Zenobia Embry-Nimmer*

by Thelma Bryant

When I arrived at James Lee Court, a building recently constructed to house homeless people in downtown Oakland, I saw young children playing happily in the patio, several riding tricycles, watched by smiling teachers. One of the teachers noticed me. She explained that this was a Head Start program and then showed me a preschool room crammed with a multitude of materials to stimulate the imagination of children. Fascinating, but I had another purpose in coming

here: to interview the Executive Director of Dignity Housing West, Zenobia Embry-Nimmer, a woman who knows homelessness from the inside, having been homeless herself.

Almost a year before, when I attended my first meeting of the Emergency Services Network, a consortium of agencies working in the area of homelessness, Zenobia [everyone calls her Zenobia] chaired the meeting with sensitivity and skill. I could see a woman with deep commitment, with knowledge and experience. When I called her for the interview, I mentioned that since I was writing this for a Buddhist publication, I wanted to ask her about the spiritual aspects of her life. She seemed pleased with the idea, telling me a mantra had been going through her head all day. And when I came for the interview, she *began* the discussion with the spiritual aspects, explaining that whenever she starts to work in a new office, the first thing she does is to set up an altar on her desk and put up her pictures. The walls are covered with photographs of family and friends, paintings, and posters (Martin Luther King and Malcolm X), and there are many objects on and above her desk,

objects mainly relating to her African and Native American roots. She said, "I have to have things that are beautiful and meaningful where I work."

Zenobia lit a candle, burned some sage, and chanted to the Green Tara, the goddess of compassion who alleviates suffering. Her spiritual practice weaves together many different traditions. A prayer that she learned from one church, "There is but one life, that is the life of God, that life is a good life, and that life is my life now," expresses for her the oneness of creation, the interconnectedness of all creatures and things. I asked

her about the meaning of the sage. She said it comes from the Native American tradition and "purifies the air and the thoughts and the minds and the actions." The first and last thing she usually prays for every day is "a pure heart, a clear mind, and the courage to do what's right." For her the spiritual is essential. She said, "I couldn't do what I do if I didn't have a spiritual base. There's no way. I would not have sustained twenty some



*Zenobia Embry-Nimmer* — Photo by Rufus Hockenhull

years doing this work." I asked her if the spiritual came first for her, and she replied, "Both were always strong. They've both always been there. . . both spiritual practice and addressing social and economic justice."

In 1968 Zenobia came to San Francisco from Kansas. She was nineteen years old. For almost three years she was basically homeless, staying wherever she could. Sometimes people let her sleep on their living room floor or on the couch. Sometimes she slept in abandoned buildings. She had some relatives, whom she eventually contacted, but they had a big family, so she stayed with them just part of the time. She worked whenever she could: as a waitress, selling papers on the



street, even panhandling.

What changed her life was a class she took called "Political Action for Social Change," at the Merritt College satellite in East Oakland where she had moved by this time with a cousin. Because of the class, Zenobia and her cousin started a project called the Drug Awareness Program, managed to get funding, and Zenobia worked there for seven years. This program, she feels, was the most important school she ever attended.

I asked her about the use of drugs and alcohol among homeless people. Some people blame homelessness on drug or alcohol addiction. "I don't think there's a much higher percentage of that within the homeless community than there is within our society at large, number one," she said. "Number two, it's just easier to see it because they don't have homes to go hide in. Number three, homelessness often creates drug and alcohol abuse as opposed to drug and alcohol abuse creating homelessness. I myself developed addiction problems when I was homeless, and I will tell you that I didn't start out like

that. But when you're out there and it's cold and you're hungry, and you feel alienated and shut out from society and lost and hopeless, when someone else who's in the same boat with you offers you a drink, and you know when you drink it you won't feel the cold as much, and you also won't feel, in the short term, the despair and the frustration and the pain, then it's very hard not to take that drink. And once you do and you're out there on an ongoing basis, it's very easy to fall into an addiction."

For five years Zenobia worked at Mills College in their Upward Bound program, a time she calls "sort of a five year vacation." It was a vacation because it was probably the only place she thinks she will ever work where she could see immediate results and get some immediate gratification. She loved working with the students at Mills, but says, "I left there because I had the need to be more involved in the nitty gritty, harsher realities, and in some ways Mills was like a gilded cage for me." So she went to Kairos (a Greek word meaning refuge), a group home of last resort for adolescent girls, who "bring up every unresolved issue you ever had from your adolescence." This was a place for foster care kids who had been bounced out of all their previous placements, some of them bounced out of as many as 18 placements. She went there because "there's some talent that I was given that I really wanted to use more." She wanted to do more clinical work (she had studied psychology and obtained a B.A. through an external degree program). "There's something in my psyche that understands intuitively emotional and mental disturbance, and how to help people

stabilize themselves." She worked there for two years and really liked it. But the girls in this program had major, major needs; most had been "sexually abused and more." They needed an enormous amount of her time and energy, the work was very intense, and she had a daughter, then in first grade, who needed her, too. Perhaps providentially, she saw an ad in the newspaper for an Executive Director of the Salvation Army Booth Memorial Center, which deals with pregnant and parenting adolescents. When she saw the ad, she told her husband that she had found her new job—she *knew* this was her job. It was her job for many reasons, the most important being that before coming to California she had lived in a Booth Memorial home, at that time the classic home for unwed mothers, and it was not a good experience. She knew this was an

opportunity not only to resolve her own issues relating to what had happened to her, but also, she felt, to have "a constructive impact on the program. To make sure that it was not the horrific experience for others—at least while I was there as the

director—that it had been for me." She got the job.

From Booth she moved to the Emergency Services Network of Alameda County (ESN) as Executive Director, shortly before the Loma Prieta earthquake. ESN is a diverse coalition that includes service providers, the cities, the county, elected officials, schools, churches, businesses, homeless people and other low-income people, whose purpose is to address homelessness and hunger. The earthquake was of "paramount importance" because it eliminated over 1500 units of the lowest affordable housing in Oakland. So, of course, that meant more homeless people. ESN pushed for funding, which led to the creation of the Henry Robinson Multi-Service Center, providing emergency housing, transitional housing, and a drop-in center with support services available for homeless people.

Later, Zenobia moved to Dignity Housing West, a member organization of ESN, because she believed in their philosophy of "empowerment and dignity." The word "dignity" in the name of the organization is crucial, signifying the purpose, which is to "keep people's dignity intact." And this is "absolutely connected to justice" because Zenobia believes there is no justice without dignity, and it's extremely difficult to maintain one's dignity without justice. At Dignity Housing West, formerly homeless people are represented at every level of the organization including the Board and staff. Dignity (as she refers to Dignity Housing West) was organized to build affordable quality housing for homeless people and other low-income people, and also to provide transitional housing as well as support services.

*Homelessness often creates drug and alcohol abuse as opposed to drug and alcohol abuse creating homelessness.*



Support services are crucial. "When you're in the street and you need to survive on the street, you have to have a very tough, assertive, and in some cases aggressive demeanor. You can't take anyone from an environment where they've developed survival skills that are harsh but necessary and put them in a new environment and then expect all of that to go away," Zenobia said. "It's not going to happen. So you must also provide support services and an environment that helps people learn different behaviors at this new phase of their life." Still, she is aware, "Not everybody is going to come here and adjust. It's hard for me to accept that because I know that everybody has the potential to change, but the reality is it won't happen for everyone. So sometimes you end up having to look at the greater good of the community."

Names are important. James Lee, for whom this permanent housing was named, was a homeless man who died in a fire in an abandoned house he was sleeping in. Dignity named this building after him "in hopes that there would be no more deaths for any James Lees out there." Henry Robinson, for whom the multi-service center is named, was a minister in Oakland who had fought to eradicate homelessness. He died of AIDS, homeless himself, unable to gain access to the necessary health services.

Zenobia said that Dignity believes "one must address the root issues, which are social and economic issues; therefore, we organize and train homeless and formerly homeless people to become activists." Although they certainly believe in meetings, proposals, negotiating, and public hearings, they also believe in civil disobedience. "The very survival of homeless people is threatened," Zenobia said, "and therefore we believe we are morally compelled to do whatever we can to correct homelessness, and that includes civil disobedience. It's a morality issue for us." But she emphasized they are committed to civil disobedience that is nonviolent.

What part does race play in homelessness? In this country a major part, Zenobia said, since racial discrimination affects one's ability to obtain housing, employment, and quality education. The root causes of homelessness, she believes, include racism, sexism, the economic structure, the educational system, and lack of accessible, quality medical treatment, including mental health services. The housing situation has deteriorated so drastically in the last decade or so because the federal government reduced its subsidy of low income housing by 80% in the 1980s. And, of course, unemployment has increased. As Zenobia said, "Homelessness does not happen in a vacuum. There's no one thing that causes it, and there's no one thing that will solve it." The causes are multiple and complex, and so must be the solutions. Starting, she believes, with the bottom line, which has to be social and economic justice.


After Bill Clinton's election in November of last year,

Zenobia was invited, along with about 25 other people from around the country, to meet with him in Little Rock and discuss what needs to be done about homelessness. The group emphasized that the problem was not just about shelter and building houses, but really about a great many issues including jobs and medical coverage. The Clinton administration has taken some steps, but there were things the group felt the new administration could and should do immediately that were not done. Zenobia is not surprised—not surprised because she is aware of the centuries of injustice in this country. Still, she has "a real distant hope" that maybe in her lifetime she will be able to stand up and "say with all honesty that we have liberty and justice for all. But we don't. We don't." She doesn't let that stop her. Instead, it just fuels her determination. "I think about my ancestors every day," she said, "and I think about the ones who were living here when this country was invaded, which is how I view it. I think about the ones who were brought here in slave ships. I mean I'm standing on the backs and the shoulders of my ancestors who died trying to survive for the future generations, trying to make it better, and I have a responsibility that I'm never disconnected from. Never." ♦

*Thelma Bryant is a psychotherapist in Berkeley. She works as a volunteer therapist with homeless people through Berkeley Mental Health Services and is community liaison for a center for homeless women and children.*

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## IN MY SPARE TIME I REHEARSE MY DYING

by Dean Rolston

A lingering illness no longer enjoys the pride of place it was accorded in Victorian times. A metaphysical incandescence surrounded the consumptive, who became more and more beautiful as her life energy ebbed. AIDS, by contrast to this mythology of tuberculosis, is an ugly business. The AIDS sufferer becomes more and more repulsive as his illness progresses.

Like many people in our society I have had an uncomfortable relation to my physicality. As an adolescent my back was covered with painful acne. Doctors poked and poulticed for years to no avail, except to remind me ceaselessly of the problem. For years I always made certain to present my front, not back, in a locker room, when emerging from the pool, in an intimate situation. What people might do to me from behind seemed intensely dangerous: a knife in the back at any moment would not have surprised me. "Scars have the strange power to remind us that our past is real."

Now I contend with widespread Kaposi spots. They came on violently. Within months my face was covered with purple lesions and my eyes almost swollen shut with edema. Hardly the image of a successful, healthy young man which I had long presented to my audience. I had to turn a very different face to the world. Fortunate indeed that I was surrounded by kind people. I was thrust back on more essential feelings in contrast to appearances. I let it happen. Then, with very aggressive chemotherapy, over a year, my face regained its original appearance. This was a great medical victory, almost without precedent. In Zen the teacher asks: "What was your original face before you were born?"

Both these conditions—the acne and the Kaposi lesions—concern the skin, container of selfhood, that which separates us from the rest of the world. Both of these conditions have distanced me painfully from others.

No one really believes in safe sex. As long as the issue of illness remains abstract, all is well. But confront a healthy person with someone who frankly says he or

she has AIDS and all bets are off. The healthy person will say he doesn't think he dances, thank you.

To discuss sex and death in one breath is not welcome in our world. Have sex, then die. And yet, curiously, the whole entertainment industry is predicated on exactly this combination. James Bond always fucks at the close of his murderous missions. A close brush with death, extreme danger, a narrow escape: all these experiences, it is often reported, have an erotic consequence. It is as if the contemplation of the loss of life causes a frantic reaching out for just what affirms life.

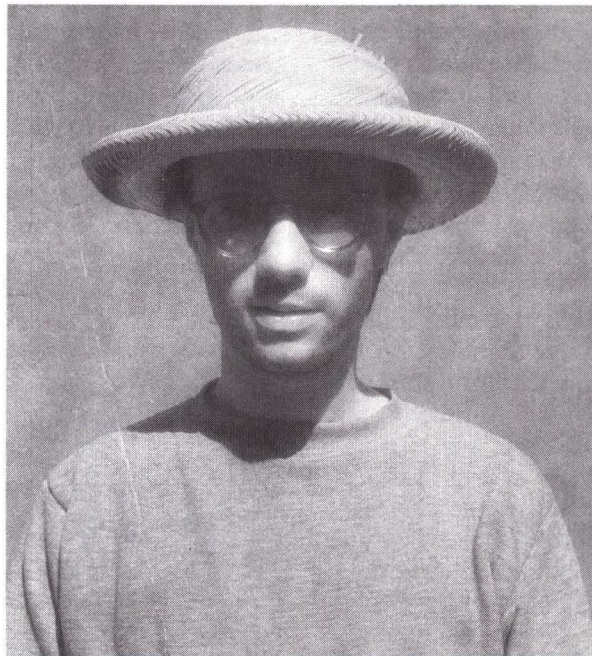
I have completely lost my libido. In many schools of meditation the practitioner is encouraged to refrain from sex, to restrain or redirect personal energy. But that is an entirely different matter. For me, choice does not enter the picture. This state resembles a sexual lobotomy: it is as if a faculty usually present has been surgically excised, leaving a great, gaping wound.

Here is an overriding image of myself in New York City in the '80s: I enter a crowded room (say, an art opening, a nightclub in full swing, a meditation session) and survey the likely candidates for fun, situating myself accordingly. Then, when flirtation has reached a high point and the program is over, off I go

into the night for another tryst. For a decade I was compulsive in the pursuit of gorgeous partners—and sometimes I came to love and respect them—but that was not the point. (Indeed, it occurred to me recently that if I were to average out this period of sexual athleticism with the last few years of celibacy, I could still be said to have an active sex life.)

By contrast, freed from these habitual patterns, the same situations can be a real bore. How does one know in what direction to move in a group of people without the needle and compass of lust? True north in our culture is where lust resides. That is, until other approaches surprisingly present themselves.

I have lost the twin stars of image and sexuality, the X and Y axes for locating oneself on the map of society. And these are the principal forces that hold us in relation



Dean Rolston at Rio Caliente, Mexico  
Photo by Cynthia MacAdams



to one another. Image pulls others in; lust pulls us out. Without these forces, what is left to hold the electrons of personal relations together? Where does a sense of identity derive from? To come to a lover without lust and image is to arrive naked—with the hope that he or she might help you discover some essential, hidden quality. And indeed something arises which a Buddhist might dub “bare relations.” It is a more essential level of reality and one permeated with affection.

I am floating on my back in the warm water of a peaceful lagoon. A cool breeze strokes my slightly sunburned face. From the shore I hear the ripple of the water on the sand, laughter, wind in the trees. I am effortlessly supported by the fingertips of my (non-)lover, buoyed up into amniotic equilibrium by the kind touch of another. This is an enlightening occasion.

In a few weeks I will accept an invitation to join some very dear friends on the Island of Saba in the Netherlands Antilles for a month of renewal and writing. My friend Keith is coming. He is a smart young man, a practicing Buddhist, an AIDS activist, and all-around charming. A friend made to order, one would think. He is also one of the few people I've had any, even modest, sexual connection with in recent years. But at this instant you might think I was preparing for a battle with a foe instead of boating with a pal. I'm in a state of terror.

*To come to a lover without lust  
and image is to arrive naked.*

I have many intimate friends. There are people I exchange body work with, whom I exchange ideas with, and emotions. But only in a relationship where one body can rest comfortably entwined with the other is a certain sort of candor possible. This surely recapitulates our childhood experience. What is wanted is really just for someone to say with open arms: “I welcome and accept you as you are.” That is all. It would be a pity to forego this physical intimacy forever only because for adults it is restricted to sexual situations.

I notice that to a degree my feelings about being with Keith are vestigial—they are not motivated by a functioning libido, but by habit. With this recognition a lot of the anxiety falls away. When lust inspires us, the result is attachment: to ownership, to dominion, to being the ongoing center of attention. Subtract lust and a gust of fresh air enters; there are many ways of being at home with a friend. Can I allow myself to look at this time as a gift? To be free from desire is a great gift; but freedom from expectation might be even better. Then, on a good day, one could reside in the present, and that is the best place to hang out. ♦

*Dean Rolston is the author of the novel, Lives of the Artists, and a collection of essays about AIDS and Buddhism, Remembering Dying. He is in training in the Soto and Kagyu lineages.*

## THE HIROSHIMA NEXT DOOR

### *Touring the Nevada Test Site*

by Jonathan Parfrey

The U.S. Geological Survey map of Yucca Flat, Nevada is crowded with hundreds of tiny concentric circles, which represent hundreds of craters, craters made by underground nuclear blasts. The map looks as though it has a bad case of acne.

And yet when you see the infamous Yucca Flat from the window of a Department of Energy (D.O.E.) bus, you're surprised by its beauty: red and pink striped hills to the east, pine mountains to the north, Joshua trees all around.

Conservationist Bob Marshall, back in the 1930s, wanted to make the site a national park. Ironically, its wilderness, its lack of roads, is why the military chose it in 1951 for a national sacrifice zone, a pretty place damned with hundreds of noxious holes.

A tour of the Nevada Test Site is easily arranged. (See next page.) No passport is required, you need only send in your name, date of birth and Social Security number. The bus leaves at 7:00 AM from the D.O.E. building in

Las Vegas. A quick 65 miles north is the company town of Mercury where you get your gamma-ray badge, sign a few papers, and voila, you are a welcome guest at the most bombed place on the planet.

Franciscan monk Louis Vitale, whose 1978 tour of the test site inspired him to found Nevada Desert Experience, says “We have not come to grips with what we Americans have done out there. The damage is so great, so widespread, so pernicious, we lack the understanding to comprehend it.”

You may remember this same test site from newsreel footage, where the wood frame houses and mannequin families get blown away, where Marines rise from their trenches and march to ground zero. This true-horror movie set, Frenchman Flat, is on the tour. It holds the dubious honor of being the place on earth where the mushroom cloud has risen most.

One hundred atmospheric tests were conducted at the Nevada Test Site from 1951 to 1963, emitting over 12,000,000,000 curies of radiation. Chernobyl,



by contrast, released 81,000 curies. The Nuclear Regulatory Commission admits that above-ground testing, as of 1967, had resulted in 85,000 deaths.

Underground testing has proved even more profitable: 825 nuclear detonations in just this one area of Nevada. (This number includes the recent revelations by the Department of Energy. On December 7, we learned that one fifth of all U.S. tests had been kept secret.) An underground explosion instantaneously vaporizes the earth, land collapses above it, and a crater is formed. The radioactive gases settle into such compounds as Strontium-90, toxic for 280 years, and Plutonium-239, toxic for 240,000 years. These poisons move slowly through the water table, and will move off the test site in future generations.

A really big hole there, Sedan Crater, is another feature on the tour. Exploded on July 6, 1962, Sedan was a 100-kiloton experiment, displacing 12 million tons of earth, leaving a crater 320 feet deep and 1,280 feet in diameter (a developer's dream). The D.O.E. lets you get out and walk to its perimeter. Like the Grand Canyon ninety miles away, the government provides a viewing platform and interpretive signs. When I saw Sedan Crater last April, I

noticed some tires dumped at its base. An experiment in disposal? I asked the driver. "No," he answered, "that's just some of the boys having fun."

Although the Cold War is over, and the dubious rationale for making nuclear bombs has fallen away, some want to keep the assembly line rolling. The national energy laboratories are frustrated by the recent international testing moratorium. After all, they recently

devised an ingenious clip-on mini-nuke to be used on highly accurate missiles. The Pentagon thinks the mini-nukes could prove a valuable "non-proliferation tool" in strikes against Third World nuclear installations. The government's enthusiasm for mini-nukes explains the Clinton Administration proposal last April to keep the U.S. testing one-kiloton nukes into the next century. That sly proposition was so roundly trashed that

Clinton did a complete turn-around and announced an extension on the existing moratorium till September 1995. His promise held true until October 5th when China exploded a nuclear device. That day President Clinton ordered the D.O.E. to prepare for a new round of testing.

So, that's where we're at. The United States may test next year, or they may not.

In a way, it doesn't matter what they decide. Peace doesn't issue from the Oval Office, or from the signed oaths of government officials. But there is peace in the desert. Lots of it. To walk and sit there is a transformative experience. In the desert the universe cannot be blocked out. The sun is uninhibited, the stars unobscured, the landscape spread out on every side, and there's so much solitude a person feels small, and small feels all right.

And while you're in the desert, go check out the big holes, those immense holes of *hubris*. And imagine in a short million years the great fiesta in heaven when the last curie fades. ♦

*Jonathan Parfrey is Director of Finance and Development for Nevada Desert Experience. He is a refugee (12 years) from the Catholic Worker.*

## Come Join Us!

### BUDDHIST WITNESS AT THE NEVADA NUCLEAR TEST SITE *Buddha's Birthday — April 7-10, 1994*

*In April 1994, Buddhists—and their friends and relatives—will gather to celebrate Buddha's Birthday with a weekend visit and demonstration at the Nevada Nuclear Test Site. After 40 years of struggle by peace activists, the superpowers are the closest they have ever been to a Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTB). But President Clinton has ordered preparations for a resumption of U.S. testing next year. In order to achieve a CTB and greater adherence to the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, which is up for renewal in 1995, the United States must not test again. We can help bring attention to this issue now.*

*For years Buddhists have gone to the test site, joining Christians and other peace activists (see TW, Summer '92, "Non-Refundable Tickets"). But Buddhist presence at vigils and demonstrations has been small. Our Buddha's Birthday gathering will bring a specifically Buddhist nonviolent perspective to this witness. Buddhists of all nations and traditions are invited, and we hope to include survivors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.*

*The event will be co-sponsored by BPF and our friends at Nevada Desert Experience, a group that for thirteen years has been bringing people of all faiths and various professions—from poets to scientists—to tour the site and bear witness.*

*The retreat will go from Thursday evening, April 7 through Sunday, April 10, and will include meditation, a tour of the site, a meeting with Western Shoshone leaders, a poetry reading, nonviolence training, a service at the test site gates, and whatever (optional) direct action is agreed upon by the group. Cost will be \$60, with some financial assistance available. To reserve a place, write or call the BPF office (510/525-8596), and we will contact you with further information about travel and accommodations. Guest teachers to be announced.*



# GARBAGE FIRST

by Kazuaki Tanahashi

"Humans who think" or "Humans who work" have been terms we have proudly used to distinguish ourselves from other species. We should not ignore, however, our distinction as "humans who create garbage."

Garbage is, by definition, something we don't want. So there is a tendency in our psyche to deny the problems of garbage. But the survival of humanity and all other species may depend on how we deal with what we least want to acknowledge.

So far, humans have been incapable of adequately disposing of or storing nuclear waste that results from weapons and energy production. Plutonium, an element created by burning uranium in nuclear reactors, provides a dramatic example. One millionth of an ounce of this element is lethal to a human being, and its half-life is 24,000 years. This means that a significant amount of the plutonium now in existence will last a quarter million years. Who can even dream of managing it for such an enormous span of time?

Management of nuclear waste was given a low research priority during the Cold War period. For the sake of "national security," the superpowers were so busy building nuclear weapons that their effort to protect the environment from radioactive pollution could not catch up. Reports from the vicinities of plutonium reprocessing plants for military production provide alarming information: At one time, 80 cows out of 200 born near Hanford Site, Washington, had birth defects. Radioactive water that had entered the Irish Sea from the plant in Sellafield, England, reached all the way to Norway. Lake Karachay in Russia became so radioactive from a nearby plant that even today, if a person stood at its shore for an hour he would die within weeks.

It is striking that a conflict between two political systems that lasted for half a century has created waste that will be a threat to the global environment for 2000 centuries. We have reached a point in our development as creators-of-garbage when the duration of waste is not only longer than a human life, but longer than a society or nation, longer than imaginable future history.

Facing this fact forces us to give the management of garbage a much higher priority than we do now. We must stop producing nuclear waste, both from weapons and from energy production.

In November 1993, the U.S. Department of Energy (D.O.E.) proposed a policy to bring high-level radioactive waste from foreign nations into U.S. ports. Both highly enriched uranium and its spent fuel, which contains plutonium, can be used to produce nuclear weapons. To avoid nuclear proliferation, the U.S. government has promised to recover spent fuel from highly enriched uranium of U.S. origin.

The United States should not be a nuclear waste

dump site for the world. The U.S. doesn't even have adequate storage sites for its own domestic nuclear waste.

The D.O.E. proposal illustrates a basic contradiction in the nuclear policy not only of the United States but of all countries that support nuclear industry. On the one hand, you don't want nuclear waste to be in the hands of people you can't trust. On the other hand, you don't want to have to deal with the waste yourself.

The U.S. policy of exporting nuclear weapon grade material and promising to accept the spent fuel is wrong. I propose that the United States establish a policy of not exporting uranium. Of course, the United States should not be the sole nation to ban uranium export. There needs to be an international agreement to end the mining and trading of uranium.

Our thinking needs to turn around. Instead of denying the problems of garbage, we need to think of garbage first. If we can't manage the garbage, we shouldn't produce these kinds of energy or weapons. The energy and defense policies of each nation and of the international economy should give high priority to the question of how to deal with garbage. To achieve this turn-around, humans need more imagination and a stronger moral commitment than ever before. ♦

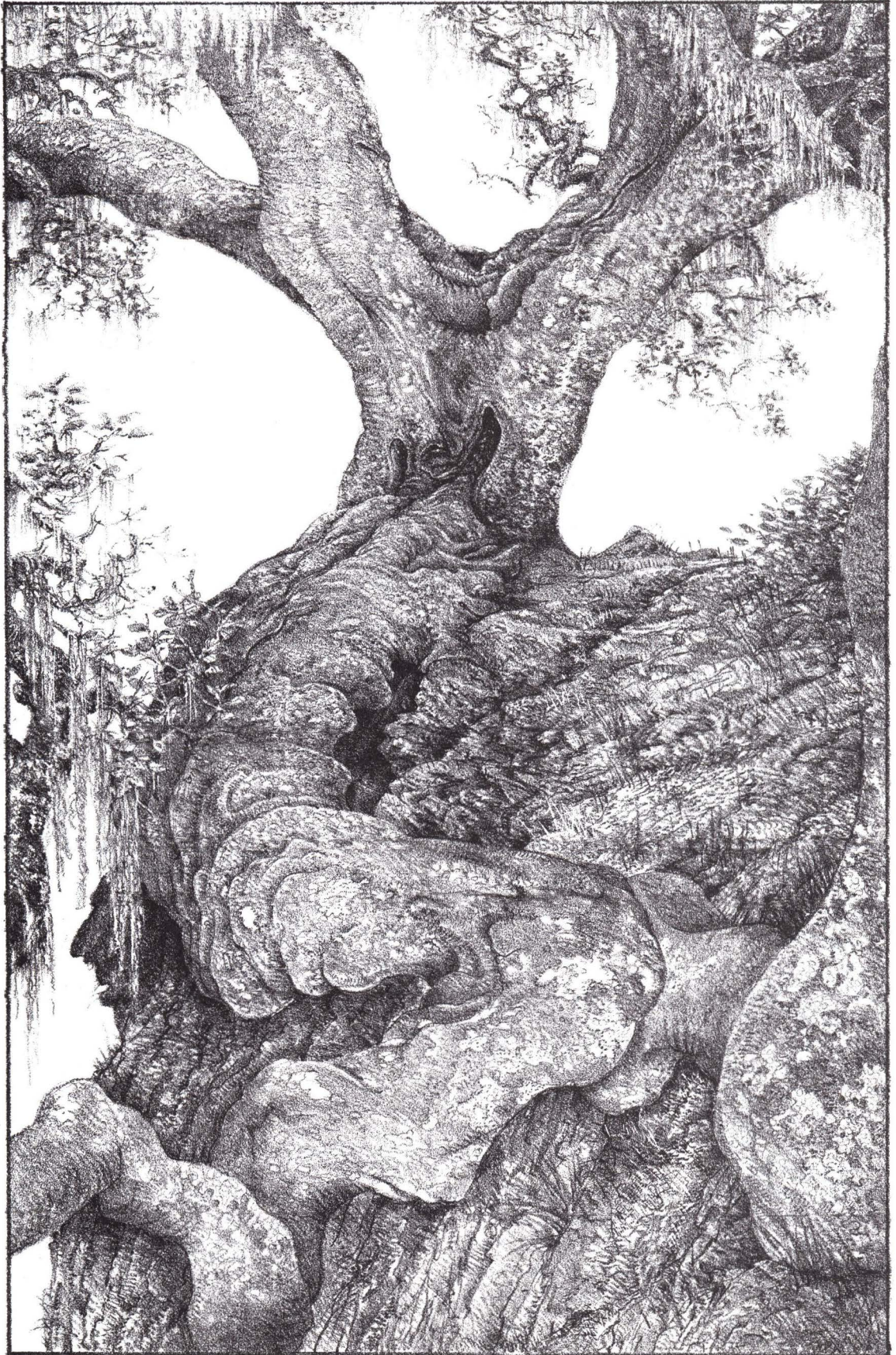
*Kazuaki Tanahashi, a painter and writer, is Secretary of Plutonium Free Future [2018 Shattuck Ave., Box 140, Berkeley, CA 94704]. This is a testimony he presented to the Department of Energy on December 8, 1993.*



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Davis TeSelle, "Grand Dragon Oak." From *The Attentive Heart: Conversations With Trees*



*The Attentive Heart:  
Conversations with Trees*

by Stephanie Kaza

Fawcett Columbine, 1993. \$17.50

Reviewed by Ken Homer

To someone immersed in Western industrial culture, the idea of having a conversation with a tree is rather incongruous. It cuts against the grain of a value system based on the conversion of natural resources into consumer goods. And it is to those individuals to whom the idea of conversing with trees seems so alien that I would commend Stephanie Kaza's delightful book: *The Attentive Heart: Conversations with Trees*. Of course, the book also belongs in the library of anyone who has ever had a love affair with a tree.

My own love of trees began early in childhood. I used to spend my summers in Sag Harbor, Long Island, at the home of my aunt and uncle. Their front yard was inhabited by an enormous old beech tree. During those magical summers that tree became my friend and my refuge. It would willingly transmogrify into whatever my boyhood imagination brought forth: a pirate ship, a space ship, a fortress or castle. Its huge trunk of elephant-like bark traveled up into a canopy of red leaves, into worlds of my own devising. I loved that tree, and I'm sure it loved me too.

As I have grown older my relationship with trees has changed. No longer do I climb nimbly to their top-most branches, or imagine them to be vehicles for interstellar travel. Now I look at them—perhaps leaning my back against some inviting trunk to quiet my mind—to listen and talk with this rooted being.

Just what does a conversation with a tree sound like? In *The Attentive Heart*, the conversations sound remarkably like conversations between intimate friends. The process of getting to know another being—even a tree—seems to follow a natural course from initial introductions to passing acquaintance to a gradual deepening into friendship and love, as intricacies of lives become revealed in the time spent together. The book contains conversations with 27 different trees.

Rooted as she is in Zen practice, Kaza's prose is often as delicately constructed as a Zen koan. She demonstrates how everything in nature is made up of patterns.

Take, for example, this passage from the opening chapter on sycamores, which I learned from this book are trees that are found close to water:

The large tree has several convoluted branches, twisting like snakes in the upper reaches of the tree; these mark the site of a former injury and the tree's effort to recover. It is as if the tree swallowed up the shape of the river and then let it loose to heal the wounded limb. And now the flow of water is the centerpiece of the tree, the place of testing and

resilience. In healing itself the tree has made visible for others the healing power of water.

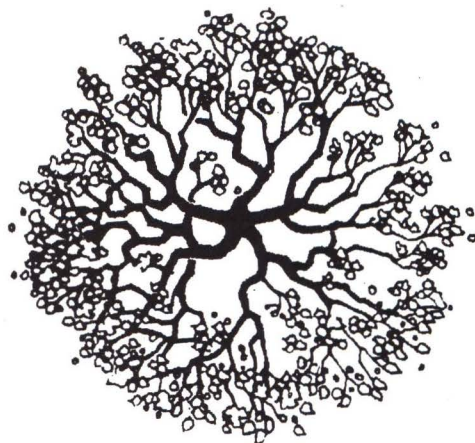
Most of the trees in this book are in California. We meet a redwood, a manzanita, a bristle cone pine. Time stretches out to encompass centuries filled with rain, draught and fire, on this journey from seed to full growth, maturity and decay in the ancient cycles of life. The chapter entitled "Gift Beyond Measure" recounts the life and death of the Deyerville Giant, once the fourth tallest tree in the world. Estimated to be some 1400 to 1500 years old, it crashed to the ground during a heavy storm in March of 1991. There was much controversy about what to do with the enormous mass of wood resting heavily on the forest floor. It was ultimately decided to leave the tree in place to decay at its own pace, returning its life force slowly to the earth and providing nourishment to the rest of the forest. It will also provide nourishment for people, as Stephanie points out:

I see the Deyerville Giant as a great teacher, filled with the truth of its own evolutionary integrity. When a great human teacher dies, his or her followers continue to learn from the teacher's presence. The teacher is still alive in the mind of the student. When a great tree dies, it can still teach the student of trees. Its presence remains a conspicuous part of the landscape for many hundreds of years. To choose to leave the tree intact increases the odds of recognizing the tree as teacher.

The book is handsomely illustrated throughout with stunning lithographs by Davis Te Selle. As I have seen all of the lithographs full size (they were on display at Green Gulch Zen Center), I am saddened to report that the smaller size reproductions in the book fail to capture the magnificent level of detail contained in the originals.

On occasion the conversations lapse into monologues about the author's feelings for trees. But overall this is a fine book which greatly deepened my appreciation for trees and for the people, like Stephanie and Davis, who take the time to educate the rest of us about how to converse with them. ♦

Ken Homer is coordinator for the Marin County Chapter of BPF.





***Sky Burial: An Eyewitness Account of China's Brutal Crackdown in Tibet***

by Blake Kerr

Noble Press, 1993. \$21.95

***My Journey to Lhasa***

by Alexandra David-Neel

Beacon Press, 1993. \$14.00

**Reviewed by Alan Senauke**

The anguish of Tibet is increasingly clear with each passing day. Chinese population transfers, forced sterilization of Tibetans, rape of the environment in a region that is the source of most Asian watersheds—these are documented facts of history and of everyday life. Sometimes the enormity of such events is so great that we lose sight of the individuals who suffer them; we lose our own ability to see ourselves in their place. Two recent books, in very different ways, bring our attention back to the details of history, the grit and determination that grows from adversity and resistance, and gives us all courage.

Blake Kerr's *Sky Burial: An Eyewitness Account of China's Brutal Crackdown in Tibet* is the work of a young doctor fulfilling a dream of travel in Tibet at the very moment that resistance and repression came to a violent head in the autumn of 1987. Kerr draws us in with a politically aware travel narrative of wild bus rides over high passes from China to Lhasa, trekking to what remains of the great monasteries, hauling supplies up to 23,000 feet for an American expedition on Mt. Everest.

But returning to Lhasa, Kerr and several other Westerners were drawn into a deeper story of brutal occupation and violence. With few supplies at hand Kerr and others were called on to tend the wounded and dying Tibetans, injured by Chinese soldiers in demonstrations for a free Tibet. He and his close friend John Ackerly were briefly arrested and closely watched by the Chinese authorities. Nevertheless, they were able to get news out to the world about events that the Chinese desperately wanted to keep hidden.

Kerr speaks plainly but passionately of the "riots" he witnessed, the shooting and death of monks. But I was most affected by his reporting of the compulsory abortion and forced sterilization of Tibetan women. On a return visit to Tibet in 1991, armed with a video camera and a medical degree, Kerr was able to document this genocidal policy in rural areas and cities, sometimes with the unwitting assistance of Chinese medical authorities.

*Sky Burial* is a compelling account of the human rights violations Kerr has professionally documented for the international legal and medical community. The stories he tells are full of hope and courage, but with the book's last words he reminds us that for Tibet, "there is little time left."



Madame  
Alexandra  
David-Neel

Seventy years ago, dying her hair with ink, hiding notebooks, camera and revolver in her ragged pilgrim's robes, Alexandra David-Neel, a French woman of fifty-five, made an incredible trek on foot from China through Tibet, to become the first Western woman to walk the streets of Lhasa, Tibet's then "forbidden city." *My Journey to Lhasa* is the classic story of this difficult and dangerous journey. First published in 1927, it has just been reissued with a forward by His Holiness the Dalai Lama, and an excellent context-setting introduction by Diana Rowan.

Tibet in the 1920s was an independent land, a place of vast spiritual wealth and mystery, variously inhabited by rough-hewn people capable of great kindness and great cruelty. But even in David-Neel's own introduction it was clear that the old ways were in jeopardy. With the British regulating the southern border, and China poised to claim any areas not staunchly defended, it is not surprising that the Tibetans attempted to exclude all outsiders. In an uncharacteristically political tone, David-Neel writes, "The Asiatic who sees his country enslaved is still more justified in lacking friendly feelings toward the people who have robbed him of his possessions, whatever methods, diplomatic ruses or sheer violence they may have used." And so through her eyes, we have vivid pictures of a land and people radically altered even within the lifetime of David-Neel, who died in 1969 at 101.

With her companion Yongden, a young Sikkimese lama, Alexandra David-Neel plays the role of a devout pilgrim/mother, taking care neither to betray her knowledge of Mahayana and Tantric Buddhism—something beyond the ken of most rural women—nor to give any hint of being a Westerner. Many of the adventures in *My Journey to Lhasa* play on this very dissembling, so difficult to maintain in the rigors and intimacy of travel. And the tension kept me turning pages right to the end, rooting for her incredible chutzpah to triumph, which (without giving away all the surprises) it does.

While this is not overtly a work of "engaged Buddhism," Alexandra David-Neel's uncompromising engagement with life, people, Buddhism, and Tibet make it so. She faces each adversary, human or otherwise, with compassion and acceptance, and a willingness to stand her ground. That's the stuff of heroes in any age. ♦



## *Learning True Love: How I Learned and Practiced Social Change in Vietnam*

by Chân Không

Parallax Press, 1993. \$16.00

### Reviewed by Alan Senauke

[An interview with Sister Chân Không appears on p.30.]

Over lunch yesterday I looked through a friend's photographs from a recent trip to Vietnam and it was clear that the war is not over. Bullet-pocked walls and unreconstructed homes are everywhere. Bare defoliated hillsides defy the natural lush greenery. For Americans today the Vietnam War is as distant and mist-shrouded as World War II was when I was a child. But while Japan and Germany rebuilt rapidly after WW II with active support from the victorious United States, Vietnam is still condemned to poverty and abuse for the crime of winning their independence in a war we tried and failed to define.

Chân Không's long awaited autobiography, *Learning True Love: How I Learned & Practiced Social Change in Vietnam* is a stark view from the war's other side. For years now the Buddhist community has seen Sister Chân Không, or "True Emptiness," as a close student and right hand support for Thich Nhat Hanh, and now she has become a strong teacher in her own right. Thanks to Therese Fitzgerald and Arnie Kotler of Parallax Press, who lovingly shaped this book from hundreds of hours of tape, we have her story, unlocking an inspiring history of Engaged Buddhism. It's a history we all should understand.

She was born into a farming family on the Mekong River Delta, and her whole life has been marked by war and by a search for social justice and inner peace. As the French Colonial system collapsed, and was gradually—then massively—replaced by American occupation, Sister Chân Không, then Cao Ngoc Phuong, began her long association with Thich Nhat Hanh, as one of the young founders of the School of Youth for Social Service, a mass movement that reached across Vietnam to aid desperate people in the rural areas. There is such a fullness of collective effort and suffering to this story that a short review can do no justice.

In Vietnam her life was constantly in jeopardy from all factions. She saw friends arrested and murdered. Her Dharma sister, Nhat Chi Mai, immolated herself before the Tu Nghiem Pagoda in 1967. She helped shelter thousands of displaced people in the makeshift compound of SYSS. In exile from Vietnam, she broke her heart trying to rescue boat people while the world looked the other way. She helped Thich Nhat Hanh build a Vietnamese community and international retreat at Plum Village in France. Her tireless work has created a strong

network of direct medical aid to indigent people in her homeland. There were also great joys, too; the smiles of children that give us the strength to keep on. *Learning True Love* is compelling and inspiring, without any taste of saintliness that might separate rather than unite.

I'll leave you with Sister True Emptiness's own vision of self. "Who is Sister Chân Không? . . . She is made of her ancestors, the land called Vietnam, the air, the suffering, the friendship, the teachings, the cruel ignorance of the war makers, and the love and understanding of several previous teachers and friends during her first thirty years in that spot of the world, and then another twenty years among many Bodhisattvas in the West. The experiences in this book are the collective experiences of all who have shared my life with me." ♦

## CHAPTER NEWS

The **Sonoma County (California) Chapter's** Fall/Winter newsletter lists an impressive number of local activities and projects. Chapter members are working with prisoners, Tibetan resettlement, and feeding people with AIDS. Among their recent activities have been death penalty vigils, an "Alternatives to Violence" workshop, and a planning meeting for efforts in 1994.

Washington DC area's **Cherry Blossom Chapter** continues to meet monthly at the Buddhist Congregational Church in DC, including meditation, discussion, and a potluck vegetarian lunch. One evening a month members staff a van that feeds some of Washington's homeless people.

BPF affiliate, **The Gay Buddhist Fraternity**, though based in the San Francisco Bay Area, has been receiving mail and inquiries from all over the country as more people learn of their existence. Their monthly newsletter is first rate, pointing to the richness of Buddhist practice in the Bay Area, and the resources that particularly relate to gay/lesbian and engaged Buddhist communities.

**Marin County (California) Chapter** has also gone the publication route, with a recent newsletter which includes a list of chapter and related area activities, an article on community, and a wonderful poem by William Stafford, who died last Labor Day Weekend.

Northern California's **East Bay Chapter** collected toys for Salvadoran immigrant children over the holidays. Monthly meetings and letter-writing continue, as well as regular afternoons of mindfulness.

Finally, we know that Socially Engaged Buddhism is not just a California phenomenon, though you could hardly tell that from this month's column. Please send us news from your chapter and area for the next issue. ♦



## Coordinator's Report

"Most 11-year-olds think about their funerals all the time," says Jessica Bradford, a sixth grader in the District of Columbia, our nation's capital. She lives with death and gunfire in the streets as daily facts of life, as do her parents and friends. I read about her in an article in the *Washington Post*, in which children, with a precise and chilling vision beyond their years, described just how they wished to be buried—which clothes and songs, what floral arrangements.

3000 miles west of Washington I walked with others through a Berkeley neighborhood just a quarter mile from my home. In the last five years, 16 African American young people were murdered on these streets. At each locus of death we left flowers, prayers and a name to be remembered. Someone's son or brother or friend.

To the south and east of here, tribal lands belonging to the Western Shoshone people are pitted with craters where the land has collapsed around a thousand underground nuclear tests. The Department of Energy recently revealed there have been two hundred and forty unannounced nuclear tests on the Nevada Test Site. They didn't mention the huge open pools filled with contaminated wastes. Who will care for this poison over thousands of years?

Sliding back nearly fifty years, we also learned that our government secretly studied the effect of nuclear materials on helpless and uninformed Americans. These experi-

ments included injecting people with plutonium just to see what would happen. Need I point out that these experiments were undertaken even as we were learning about the horrifying work of Nazi doctors? Is there a shade of moral distinction my eyes can't make out?

Violence is not an accident. Someone has to will it, has to be angry enough, or greedy, or scared, or mad enough to not care. And lurking behind him or her (usually 'him'), is someone ready to make a profit selling weapons, selling empty hopes of triumph or vindication.

In recent years BPF has been deeply committed to international issues of human rights—in Burma, Tibet, Thailand, Bangladesh, and elsewhere. Often BPF and *Turning Wheel* have given voice to suffering and to accomplishments that would otherwise go unheard by most of us. We are aware, as well, of the great and growing suffering in our own midst, in our cities, towns, and neighborhoods. Can we work for peace on our own block without falling into traps of racism, classism, and hatred? Without judging, can we feel the great pain that causes neighbor to harm neighbor, and can we turn that pain to something that is life-giving?

Violence—whether around the world or around the corner—has the same root, but more than that, it is usually part of the same system that profits from armed conflict and misery. It is hard to imagine the United States "solving" the problem of violence at home while it remains the world's largest arms dealer. And BPF can't effectively stand up for social justice and peace abroad, if we don't confront such matters at home.

For myself, there is some fear of entering the territory of local conflict and violence. There is fear of failure, and fear of my own lack of resources and understanding. Deeper than that is plain fear for my physical and emotional safety. But there's no room on this path just to be an observer. Failure and danger are precisely what we risk through inaction. It's guaranteed.

While these thoughts are my own, I know that the BPF board and many of you are in the middle of the same discourse. I hope we can work together these next few years and see real kindness blossoming from the decay of postmodern life. We start by talking and studying together, so please send us your thoughts.

I hope that many of you will be able to join us for the Buddha's Birthday Witness at the Nevada Nuclear Test Site, April 7-10. Details can be found on page 38. Nuclear weapons and nuclear testing provide a near perfect example of how violence is at once international and localized. The threat of nuclear war seems to call for new weapons, new testing, new threats of war in one continuous spiral. Meanwhile, indigenous people are driven from their ancient lands to a harsh life in the cities, and our environment is destroyed over hundreds of square miles, with immeasurable consequences far beyond ground zero. We can help break this cycle for the sake of all beings. Please come. ♦ —Alan Senauke

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# ANNOUNCEMENTS & CLASSIFIEDS

## Announcements

**VOLUNTEERS NEEDED** in Guatemala. The Jaguar Project of the Seva Foundation (an international non-governmental, non-religious, progressive, development organization) is now recruiting volunteers to provide accompaniment and support for returned Guatemalan refugees. A commitment of at least 3 months is necessary, as well as good health and proficiency in Spanish. Volunteers finance their own travel; Seva pays in-country expenses. Please call or write: Seva Foundation, 38 Village Hill Rd., Williamsburg, MA 01096. 413/268-3003.

**VIETNAM PEACE AND FRIENDSHIP TOUR.** Global Exchange is arranging a tour of Vietnam from Hanoi to Ho Chi Minh City for citizen peace makers. Discover the rich culture and history of Vietnam as you meet with people from all walks of life. Learn about Vietnamese culture, internal politics, and prospects for future relations between our countries. Tour dates are from July 28 to August 14, 1994. For information about this and other trips, contact: Global Exchange, 2017 Mission St. #303, San Francisco, CA 94110, 415/255-7296.

**PRISON DHARMA NETWORK** is a nonsectarian Buddhist support network for prisoners interested in Dharma practice and study. PDN emphasizes the discipline of sitting meditation as a practical approach to dealing with the day-to-day stress of prison life. PDN especially welcomes the contribution of dharma books you do not wish to keep in your personal library (and some you do!). For information or to send materials, contact: Prison Dharma Network, P.O. Box 912, Astor Station, Boston, MA 02123-0912.

**NEEDS OF HOMELESS WOMEN AND CHILDREN.** Can you help with donations of such items as toothbrushes, toothpaste, cereal/soup bowls, plates, kitchenware, kitchen towels, and plastic rain ponchos, for homeless women and children at a center in Berkeley? For information, contact the Women's Daytime

Drop-in Center at: 510/548-6933, or call Thelma Bryant at: 510/524-2468.

**THE 2ND ANNUAL** International Race "Through the Native Land of Ghengis Khan," July 2-9, 1994. From Khar-Khorum, the ancient capital of Mongolia, to Ulaanbaatar, the modern capital. For more information, contact: Association of Mongolian Runners, P.O. Box 596, Central Post, Ulaanbaatar 13, Mongolia. Fax: 976-21-05211.

### FOR SALE FROM BPF:

☉ Thich Nhat Hanh tapes:  
"Touching Peace," talk given in Berkeley, CA, November 1993.  
2-tape set: \$18, *postage paid.*

**INTERNATIONAL BUDDHIST CHILDREN'S RELIEF PROGRAM** seeks sponsors for needy children in Sri Lanka, India, and Chile (\$16/month). Contact them at 1511 Alencastre St., Honolulu, HI 96816, 808/593-6515.

**DHARMA GAIA**, an INEB affiliate, would like to start contacts with BPF members, particularly in Europe, and would like to offer hospitality for short visits (5-10 days with a contribution to food expenses and housework) to share experiences and meditations. Write to: Dharma Gaia, attn. Sergio Orroa, Vico Hanbury 3, 18030 Latte (IM), Italy.

**REFUGIO DEL RIO GRANDE** shelters refugees fleeing persecution in the Rio Grande valley. It provides a place of rest to people who urgently need that refuge to consider the next step in organizing their lives. The Refugio is urgently in need of both courageous volunteers and money—to buy mattresses, to build, to buy food, to keep the camp open. Please send donations or requests for more info to: Refugio del Rio Grande, P.O. Box 3566, Harlingen, TX 78551; or call 210/425-9416.

**GAY BUDDHIST FRATERNITY** publishes a monthly newsletter, with information about their activities in the S.F. Bay Area and longer articles on top-

ics of concern to gay Buddhists generally. \$15/year. For subscriptions or information, write GBF, 2261 Market St. #422, San Francisco, CA 94114; or call their information line, 415/974-9878.

**SULAK SIVARAKSA**, Thai social critic and founder of the International Network of Engaged Buddhists (INEB), is involved in what will certainly be a lengthy court case (see Summer 1993 *Readings*), and needs money for this purpose. If you would like to help, send a check payable to INEB and marked "Sulak/lese majeste." Sulak will be told the names of contributors but not the amounts. However small your contribution, Sulak will certainly feel grateful for it and be encouraged in this difficult time. INEB, 127 Soi Santipap, Nares Road, Bangkok 10500 Thailand.

**CHUSHI GANGDRUG** is the organization that escorted the Dalai Lama and others in their flight from Tibet. Chushi Gangdrug is making an appeal for funds to build a home for 75 elderly Tibetans in Dehra Dun, U.P., India, and to establish a stipend fund for another 100 who do not wish to move to the home. The two year project will cost more than four million rupees. To help with a donation, please write to Chushi Gangdrug Defend Tibet Volunteers Assn., 39 New Tibetan Camp, Majnu-Ka-Tilla, Delhi 110054 India.

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**BUDDHIST** stationed in Yokosaka, Japan seeks Zen and Vajrayana practitioners with whom to correspond. S. George, Comfleact Code 200, PSC 473 Box 1, FPO AP 96349-1100.

## Classifieds

**TEACHING CIRCLE** is a bi-annual journal by and for educators with a meditation practice. For more information contact Patrick McMahon, 2311 C Woolsey St., Berkeley, CA 94705.



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## BPF National Office

P.O. Box 4650  
Berkeley, CA 94704  
tel. 510/525-8596  
fax 510/525-7973

## CHAPTERS

### Cambridge/Boston BPF

Jim Austin  
43 Richfield Road  
Arlington, MA 02174  
617/643-2343

### Durham BPF

Jackie Wilson  
1004 N. Buchanan  
Durham, NC 27701  
919/286-2005

### East Bay BPF

Margo Tyndall  
88 Clarewood Lane  
Oakland, CA 94611  
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Ken Homer  
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- ◆ To make clear public witness to Buddhist practice as a way of peace and protection of all beings;
- ◆ To raise peace, environmental, feminist, and social justice concerns among Western Buddhists;
- ◆ To bring a Buddhist perspective to contemporary peace, environmental, and social action movements;
- ◆ To encourage the practice of nonviolence based on the rich resources of traditional Buddhist teachings;
- ◆ To offer avenues for dialogue and exchange among the diverse American and world sanghas.

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