

# Writings of Ven. Sarika Dharma and Tributes to Her



**International Buddhist Meditation Center**

# Table of contents

## Teachings of Ven. Sarika Dharma

Taking Refuge	1
Following the Precepts	2
The Noble Eoightfold Path	5
Brahma Viharas--Divine Dwelling Places	10
Kwan Yin Bodhisattva	14
Letters Written to Br. Gunaratna Sarika	16
April 7, 1995	16
June 8, 1996	18
June 18, 1996	20
August, 1996	24
Emracing Our Demons	25
Muddy Waters and Howling Wolves	27
Shades of Gray	29
What Is Enlightenment?	30
Enlightenment	36
Expectations	38
What About Karma?	43
Compassion	46
No Guilt, No Shame	48
<b>Tributes from Buddhist Friends and Students</b>	49
My Friend Sarika, by Ven. Thich An-Minh	49
Kind Brown Eyes Smiling, by BabaClay Hathor	51
Skillful Means, by Maitri Vati Sarika	52
A Little Bird, by Suvarna Upeksha Sarika	53
Kwan Yin, by Rev. Vajra Karuna	
Wise and Gentle Teacher, by Pat Allen	54
Sarika Was Kind, by Jon Bono Pizzurro	
Yesterday in Meditation, by Ven. Thich An-Minh	55
Deepest Condolences, by Br. Gunaratna Sarika	56
Atypical Dedication, by Bhikkhu Chakara Dhammo	57
Condolences, by Dr. Ralph McDowell	58
To the Family and Friends, by Holley Eller	
<b>Tributes from the Interreligious Community</b>	59
Rev. Don Adams of West Hollywood Presbyterian Church	
Rabbi Denise Eger of Congregation ofKol Ami	

## TAKING REFUGE

Every morning, upon arising, Buddhists all over the world begin the new day by taking refuge in the three jewels: the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha. They say, "I go to the Buddha for guidance; I go to the Dharma for guidance; I go to the Sangha for guidance." Then they consider what this means in their daily lives.

The Buddha is the teacher, the one who discovered the path that allows us to end suffering in this lifetime. In his compassion and loving-kindness for all beings, he taught what he had discovered, knowing that he was a human being and that all human beings have the same nature, Buddha nature, the potential to become awakened.

Buddha never thought of himself as god. He allowed himself to be called Buddha, the awakened one, or Tathagatha, the thus come one. He never claimed Buddha, the awakened one, or Tathagatha, the thus come one. He never claimed to be extraordinary. Like my own teacher, Ven. Dr. Thich Thien-An, he was the most ordinary person alive. He was extraordinarily ordinary, fully developed in the way only human beings can be, that we all have the potential to be.

The Dharma is the teachings, the words that have come down to us, what the Buddha said during his lifetime. Dharma is also the words of other people who have followed the Buddha's path and have seen clearly.

In addition, all things, all processes in the world are dharma. When we get beyond our little self, we see how the world works, and we learn from the results of our actions. Everything is dharma.

Sangha technically refers to the community of monks and nuns, but, to me, the real sangha is the mahasangha, the community of people who follow the path, with no distinctions between monastics and householders. We all learn from each other and support each other in our practice. Sangha is family, people with whom we can connect, with whom we share values. No matter what Buddhist tradition we follow or what is our national origin, we are linked by a more important quest, the quest for inner peace and acceptance.

Sometimes people refer to the Buddha as the doctor, the Dharma as the medicine, and the Sangha as the nurses. We need lots of nurses to help people understand about taking their medicine. The Buddha may write the prescription, but until we get that prescription filled, it can't help us. We can carry that script around all over with us, but the piece of paper can't cure our ills. With the help of the sangha, the help of each other, we begin to understand that it's up to us to take our medicine and put it to use.

Sometimes Buddha is seen as the guide, the trailblazer, the one who found the way and marked it. Then the dharma is the trail. And the sangha becomes the pioneers following that path and seeing what lies along the way for themselves.

Buddham saranam gachami  
Dharmam saranam gachami  
Sangham saranam gachami

## Following the Precepts

After taking refuge, many Buddhists find it helpful to repeat the five precepts in order to keep them in mind during their day's activities.

"I vow not to take life.  
I vow not to take what is not given to me.  
I vow not to indulge in improper sexual acts.  
I vow not to speak that which is harmful.  
I vow not to become intoxicated."

Various traditions use different words. I like the Theravadan version that goes "for the purposes of training, I vow not to ..." That sort of goes with the raft story where the Buddha asked if you cross the river on a raft, what do you do with the raft once you're on the other side? Do you carry it on your head as you travel into the jungle. Do you hide it under the leaves so you can find it on your way back? Or do you just leave it out there for whoever else might need it? Not that we ever stop practicing the precepts. Just that at some point we become the essence and don't need to be ruled by rules.

When my teacher ordained laypeople, he always said that 100% was

the best way to keep the precepts, but that we can't always do that. So 90% is also good, and 80% and 70%, and he'd go on down to 10% and that was also good. We start where we are and do the best we can.

When we talk about not taking life, we are referring to all sentient beings, not only humans. Once we realize that we are not separate from each other, not separate from anything in the world, we know that to take the life of any being is taking away part of our own lives. Sometimes, we cannot help stepping on a bug, but it is our intention that matters the most. When I first began my practice, I was arranging flowers on the altar, and I saw a spider there. I was ready to squish it, as I always had, when my master stopped me. He told me to take the spider outside where it could continue its life. That brought me a whole new awareness.

When we remain conscious of our connection to other human beings, we not only don't take life, we don't even consider harming another person. We respect all life, knowing that others have the same nature we find in ourselves, Buddha nature, and that everyone is doing the best they can in their lives.

Not taking that which is not given to us means even more than not stealing. We also need not to covet what others have nor to help ourselves to anything that is not offered to us. This includes friendship, attention and especially sexual favors which goes along with the third precept. (This second precept, as with all of them, has various interpretations. )

Not to engage in improper sexual acts, such as adultery or rape, is vital. Even manipulation or attempts to convince someone who is not willing are improper. Sex is an expression of love and is best shared with someone whom we care about and to whom we have a commitment.

Not to say that which is harmful is extremely difficult. Sometimes we are not even aware of what is going to hurt another person. It is best to say less and to not say whatever comes into our minds. The other side of this precept is that we need to use speech that is helpful, to encourage people, to bring positive energy into interrelationships.

Not to become intoxicated has a very simple purpose. When we become intoxicated, we have no control over our behavior and end up breaking our other precepts. Our objective in our practice is to become more and more conscious. Becoming intoxicated leads us to less awareness and defeats our purpose.

The Buddha's awakening was based on his seeing his true self. When he attained **anuttarasamyaksambodhi**, complete and perfect enlightenment, he laughed. He had thought he would find what he sought outside of himself, but he discovered the truth was within all along, none other than his own true nature which was ever with him. That same Buddha nature is within all of us. We too can attain awakening.

## The Noble Eightfold Path

These are steps on the path the Buddha discovered as the way to the end of suffering. The eight steps are divided into three categories:

A. **Sila** or harmonious living

1. Right Speech 2. Right Action 3. Right Livelihood

B. **Samadhi** or meditation

4. Right Concentration 5. Right Mindfulness 6. Right Effort

C. **Prajna** or wisdom

7. Right Thought 8. Right Understanding

The "right" in every case is not spelled out in detail. Life is too complicated for that. And, because our choices are our own responsibility, we need to consider each situation as it arises; it's not helpful to make rules and assume they will cover every possible event. The criteria we need to follow is whether what we do is beneficial to ourselves and other sentient beings and is not harmful to ourselves or other sentient beings.

**Sila** tells us how to get along in the world, with other human beings, in such a way that we don't burden ourselves with negative karma. We do not live in isolation. We are part of our family, our community, our society, and, to be happy within ourselves, we must find ways to be happy in these groups. It is not practical nor is it beneficial to separate ourselves from others. In fact, as our practice develops we become more and more aware that we are connected to everyone.

The most important thing we can do in our lifetime is to attain awakening and become Bodhisattvas, helping others to end their own suffering. The Buddha did Bodhisattva work by staying in the world and teaching what he had learned. Other Bodhisattvas, such as Kwan Yin who personifies compassion, Kshitigarbha who chooses to be reborn into hell to help all beings there, and Manjusri who represents wisdom and uses his sword to help all beings cut through ignorance are all predominate images in Mahayana Buddhism.

The three steps in this category of moral behavior are Right Speech, Right Action and Right Livelihood. The hardest one for most of us is **Right Speech**. It is so easy to open our mouths and watch the wrong words come out. We may not realize that what we say is harmful until it is too late. Often we react, rather than taking time to be silent and then respond when we have a better grasp of the situation. Despite the fact

that, as children, we hear "Sticks and stones can break our bones, but words will never hurt us," words do cause pain.

Impure speech includes not only lying but actually speaking more or less than the truth; gossiping and carrying tales that cause friends to become enemies; making disparaging remarks and using harsh language that disturbs others; using manipulative ways that persuade people to do something they wouldn't do otherwise, being involved in keeping secrets, all of these can cause others harm. And if this happens, we have strayed far from the compassion and loving-kindness that moves us along the path. If we honor and respect the other person, we are less likely to be inconsiderate in our speech.

**Right action** is a further extension of the intention to do that which benefits ourselves and others and not to do that which harms ourselves or others. Here is where karma is created. If we plant a seed by our actions, that seed will grow and eventually the fruit will ripen and plop on our heads. For better or for worse. Good karma or bad. It is all a manifestation of cause and effect. And it is our intentions that create the outcome. We have no control over the results of our actions. We must consider carefully before we do something, for all our actions affect other people and the world around us.

Right Action means that we refrain from killing any living being, refrain from taking what is not given to us, refrain from impure sexual acts, refrain from becoming intoxicated. But it also means going beyond this to encourage life, to give rather than take, to have loving relationships, and to keep our minds clear. If we become intoxicated, we are more likely to break our other precepts. If we act impurely in sexual relationships, being manipulative in order to force someone to do what they do not want to do, applying pressure to get our own way, we are harming both others and ourselves.

The last of the steps under harmonious living is Right Livelihood. It is very important that we earn our living in a way that benefits the world and does not cause harm. Our livelihood should not involve breaking the precepts nor should it involve encouraging others to break the precepts. Obviously, it is wrong to earn money through degrading actions, such as procuring prostitutes or committing crimes. And manufacturing weapons or chemicals that can kill or maim other beings is also clearly harmful. Killing of humans or animals is not right livelihood, nor is dealing in the parts of slaughtered animals, their skins, flesh, bones, etc. Selling liquor or drugs may be profitable but is certainly harmful, even if we don't indulge in them ourselves. Operating



or working for a gambling casino is also harmful, not only to the gamblers, but to their families as well.

Beyond that we may need to decide whether the company we work for is doing beneficial things for society by enhancing peace and participating in good works or if it is harming the world by creating and dumping toxic wastes and otherwise destroying the environment. Some choices are harder than others, especially when the job is allowing us to support our families and when the ties to improper action are somewhat tenuous. For example, it may be beneficial to help build airplanes, but what if those airplanes carry bombs. It is good to be a farmer and help to feed the world, but what if that includes killing sentient beings. Each individual must make their own choices.

Three more steps on the path come under the heading of meditation or **samadhi**. The Buddha attained his enlightenment after meditating for six years. Meditation allows our minds to become clearer so we can see the world as it really is, without illusion. Our minds are full of many thoughts; it acts like a drunken monkey, jumping from branch to branch, never stopping. All these thoughts distract us from being in each moment. And if we are not in the moment, we have missed our lives, for the moment is all that exists.

If we have a glass of water and put some dirt in it, hoping the dirt will settle to the bottom, it does us no good to take a spoon and push the dirt down. The water only becomes muddy. However, if we let the glass sit on the counter, the dirt will settle to the bottom, and the water will become clear. We can not force that clarity. We must simply encourage it to happen by sitting on our cushions and, at least for those moments, not adding any fuel to the fire.

That we cannot force this is obvious. If we try not to think of elephants, elephants come into our mind. The harder we try, the more elephants surround us. Indian elephants, African elephants, pink elephants, wild elephants like the one Devadattu sent to kill the Buddha and even Dumbo, the flying elephant, all walk across our inner field of vision. But if we just sit and watch our thoughts, without pursuing them, we see that they pass away after they arise. The elephants walk right out of our minds. It is a continual process, rising and passing away. We do not need to do anything about thoughts, simply see them and let them go.

The three steps that lead to **samadhi** are Right Concentration, Right Mindfulness and Right Effort. When we meditate, we develop our powers of concentration as well as our skill in being mindful. Different meditation techniques help us to focus on these two areas.

**Concentration** comes when we have an object of meditation and discipline our minds to pay attention to that object while allowing our thoughts to arise and fall without pursuing them. Counting the breath is one of the techniques that helps with concentration. Breathing normally, we count each exhalation, from one to ten and back down to one again. We may lose our count, find ourselves not counting at all or counting up to seventeen. No problem. Just return to one and begin again. As we repeat this practice, we find our skills of concentration growing.

For samadhi to happen, for concentration to lead to liberation, we must use an object that is free of all craving, all aversion, all desire. Concentration on an object of desire, some material thing, a potential sexual partner, a new job, will not free us, but only consume us more into the sense realm.

As our powers of concentration become stronger, we feel more relaxed and full of energy. Our breath becomes lighter and softer. As our mind reaches tranquility, our body also becomes calm and our metabolism slows down. This is very restful and allows us to maintain the state of samadhi for a longer period of time. We can stop trying and thus practice with ease.

To develop **mindfulness**, a good practice is to begin by watching the breath as air enters and leaves our nostrils. We can also watch at our abdomen, seeing the rising and falling of our diaphragm. When we have done this practice for a while, we may direct our mindfulness to other areas of our bodies. During walking meditation, we focus on the movement of our feet. Right foot, left foot, raise, push forward, step. This exercise can also be done while we are eating, being totally aware of holding our fork, picking up the food, moving the food to our mouths, chewing the food, swallowing, etc. But it all starts with mindfulness while we are seated on our meditation cushion.

**Right effort** means that we must continue to practice even when we think we are not making progress. Meditation needs to be a part of our daily lives. Just as we brush our teeth when we get up in the morning, so we need to meditate on a daily basis. It takes time to overcome the habits of a lifetime. We must work patiently and persistently to return attention to the object of our meditation whenever we have strayed. Only thus will we change the wandering ways of the mind.

The last two steps on the path come under the heading of wisdom or **prajna** and are Right Thought and Right Understanding.

**Right Thought** refers to the contents of our minds. We do not need to

be overwhelmed by negative thinking. If we continually judge ourselves and others, our minds are not at peace. Just like not opening the door of our homes to any stranger who passes by, we do not need to let just any thoughts enter our minds. And if they do get in, we do not need to pay attention to them, just let them pass through. When we worry a lot, we cannot see the beauty around us. When we fill our minds with opinions and dichotomies, we are not open to seeing reality nor finding our true selves.

**Right Understanding** is about the way things really are, the way the world works. It is the opposite of ignorance and illusion. Only when we can put our little selves, our egos, aside, can we understand how the world works. We are connected to everything and contain everything. Soto Zen teaches that we are already enlightened. We only need to brush away the clouds that prevent us from manifesting this understanding.

The Buddha's awakening was based on his seeing his true self. When he attained **anuttarasamyaksambodhi**, complete and perfect enlightenment, he laughed. He had thought he would find what he sought outside of himself, but he discovered the truth was within all along, none other than his own true nature which was ever with him. That same Buddha nature is within all of us. We too can attain awakening.

## **Brahma viharas - Divine Dwelling Places**

What keeps a lot of us Buddhists on the path is being able to see concrete results in daily life from doing the practice. Meditation, the eightfold path, taking refuge and working to keep the precepts do make a difference in the here and now of our everyday lives. Not everyone can meditate, but we can all begin to put the other practices into place - and watch how many more people smile at us. Or is that smile back at us.

Here's another practice that's quite helpful. In Theravada practice, these are listed as a group of four meditations. In Mahayana tradition, they are part of the paramitas, the practices of the Bodhisattvas.

Brahma vihara means divine dwelling place. The practitioner arouses in him/herself four positive states of mind and radiates them out in all directions. One begins this while sitting meditation and soon enough it imbues the content of our actions and our interrelationships.

The four practices are loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy and equanimity.

Metta or maitri, loving-kindness, refers to sending positive caring thoughts to all sentient beings. The best way to start is with oneself, repeating in one's mind: "May I be happy, peaceful and free from suffering." After a few months of this, we can begin to send that loving kindness out to people we love intimately and share our lives with, then to other friends and relatives, to people who cause us difficulties, to people we share the world with but don't necessarily know, and ultimately to all sentient beings.

There are many metta suttas, and one can create one's own. Here's the one I've been using during morning practice. I adapted it from one in "Entering the Stream" and have been watching it change for the past few months with suggestions from other practitioners. The words are beginning to have more relevance to our times.

### **Metta Sutra**

This is the way of those who are skilled and peaceful, who seek the good and follow the path:

"May they be able and upright, straightforward, of gentle speech and not proud, but content and easy wherever they are. May they be unburdened, with their senses calm. May they be wise and not arrogant, and live without desire for the possessions of others. May they do no harm to any living being.

May all beings be happy. May they live in safety and joy. All living beings, whether weak or strong, old or young, man or woman, smart or foolish, healthy or disabled, gay or straight, seen or unseen, near or distant, born or to be born, may they all be happy.

Let no one deceive or despise another being, whatever their status. Let no one by anger or hatred wish harm to another.

As parents watch over their children, willing to risk their own lives to protect them, so with a boundless heart may we cherish every living being, bathing the entire world with unobstructed and unconditional loving-kindness.

Standing or walking, sitting or lying down, in every moment, may we remain mindful of this heart and this way of living that is the best in all the world."

The reason we start by giving ourselves loving-kindness is that we can't love anyone else openly and freely until we love and accept ourselves. And we deserve to be loved, appreciated, respected and honored. If we can do that for ourselves we are more able to accept the love of others without question as well as give love to others.

Loving-kindness is unconditional love. It is not dependent on someone's behavior. Of course, we don't want to condone foolish behavior nor allow people to cause us suffering through their words or actions. But if we think of ourselves and others as deserving this kind of love, we are happy in our hearts, hold no ill will or animosity, and can be fully present in the moment. We let go of resentments, realize that the other person is only as far as they are and understand how they might make mistakes. (We create our own karma and get to experience the effects, so no one needs to punish us.) And we can look at ourselves the same way, without guilt and shame, knowing how hard it is to be a human being.

## Compassion

Compassion was a much easier practice for me early on, because I fell

in love with Kwan-Yin, her beautiful face, her pose of royal ease. And probably because I understood pain a lot more readily than I understood loving.

Compassion is not sympathy or pity; those are feelings that make us feel separate from the one who suffers, somehow better than. Compassion is feeling with.

Pema Chodren said something that has always stayed with me. That we need to feel our own pain fully and consciously so that we can truly understand the pain others experience. Whether we are experiencing physical, emotional, psychological or spiritual pain, we need to be fully present with it, to whatever extent we are able to be at that moment, in order to process it. Then we can begin again with compassion for ourselves. Compassion for being a human being, for experiencing the dukkha of existence, for this person who has faced so much pain in her/his life.

I am often very impressed by Thich Nhat-Hanh's insights, and a couple of issues ago in *The Mindfulness Bell* he wrote about what he calls the four mantras. I believe he spoke about this at some talks he gave, but I only saw the article. Yet I can hear his gentle voice in my mind.

He is one of the few Buddhist monks I know who is willing to talk about loving another human being intimately. The whole celibacy issue makes this difficult for monks to deal with -- either because of lack of experience or because of rejection of those intimate connections. (Celibacy not only meaning no sex, but no attached relationships.) But to Nhat-Hanh, loving another person and loving the world around us is not different. So he talks about loving as being fully present in the moment with the person you love-- your lover, your child, your friend. And these four mantras are a way to practice being totally present.

"I am here for you." To take our time and our total attention and focus it on the one we love is a true act of loving. It isn't easy, but it feels so fine.

"I know you are here for me. That is why I smile." It feels so fine to give it, and it feels so fine to get it.

"I know you are suffering. That is why I am here for you." Here is the compassion, the understanding of the other person's pain, detaching ourselves from our own buttons and ego defenses and realizing that this person here with us is caught up in dukkha -- not attacking us, but simply manifesting their suffering.

"I am suffering too. Please help me." Compassion and acknowledgement of our own suffering. Being willing to reach out and ask for help. Willingness to be vulnerable and put ourselves in a position where we might be rejected.

While our practice begins in meditation, it is fulfilled in our daily actions. If we can manifest compassion for ourselves and others, we feel our hearts open and our fears abate. We need to take baby steps, go slow, because the world is not always a safe place. But it becomes safer as we get closer to our true selves, to the Buddha nature within us.

The other two of the Brahma Viharas are **mudita** or sympathetic joy and **upeksha** or equanimity. Sympathetic joy is the joy we feel for another's happiness. Even for that person who just got the promotion we wanted and thought we deserved. (None of these practices are easy!)

Equanimity refers to our ability to see all human beings, friends or foes, as a part of our world without discrimination.

All these practices lead us to overcome ill will, gloating over others' misfortunes, discontent and deluding passions. Ultimately, they lead us to liberation.

## **Kwan-Yin Bodhisattva**

Kwan Yin in Chinese, Avalokiteshvara in Sanskrit, Kannon in Japanese, Quan-Te Am Botat in Vietnamese and Kuan-Te Am Bosa in Korean. All the Bodhisattva of Compassion, and except for the Sanskrit reference, all female.

When I first started studying Buddhism and practicing meditation in 1974, I was quite drawn to this lovely figure on the altar, the only female in the temple. One day, in the middle of a retreat, I went for an interview with my Zen master, and I asked him who was Kwan-Yin. His answer was, "You are Kwan-Yin." That totally blew me away, and I stumbled back down the stairs from the interview room to my zafu. I didn't really know what he was talking about. But since that time, I have kept Kwan-Yin in my heart/mind and hopefully my compassion grows. She is a fine companion and an even finer role model.

If you ask me who is Kwan-Yin, my dharma friends, I say, "You are Kwan-Yin."

Gassho, Sarika

Here are the vows that she has taken:

### **The Twelve Vows of Kwan-Yin Bodhisattva**

translated from the Vietnamese

I respectfully bow to Kwan-Yin, the Tathagata, with the title Boundless Understanding, the name Great Liberation, who raised the Immeasurable Vow.

I respectfully bow to Kwan-Yin, the Tathagata, of one thought and a mind of no obstacles, who vowed to stay always in the Southern World.

I respectfully bow to Kwan-Yin, the Tathagata, who vowed to stay in samsara, in the realm of darkness, listening to the cries and rescuing sentient beings.

I respectfully bow to Kwan-Yin, the Tathagata, the conqueror of raksas and destroyer of evil spirits, who took the vow to end all troubles and difficulties.

I respectfully bow to Kwan-Yin the Tathagata, who holds the bowl of pure water and willow branch, who took the vow to sprinkle sacred water to calm the mind of humankind.



I respectfully bow to Kwan-Yin, the Tathagata, the great compassionate, forgiving one, who took the vow to practice equanimity at all times.

I respectfully bow to Kwan-Yin, the Tathagata, who day and night is the destroyer of obstacles, who took the vow to destroy the three realms of suffering.

I respectfully bow to Kwan-Yin, the Tathagata, who faces south, diligently practicing, who took the vow to cut all fetters and knots.

I respectfully bow to Kwan-Yin, the Tathagata, the maker of the dharma boat which rows in the suffering ocean, who took the vow to save all sentient beings.

I respectfully bow to Kwan-Yin, the Tathagata, with streamers in front and a canopy behind, who took the vow to guide beings to the Western World.

I respectfully bow to Kwan-Yin, the Tathagata, who resides in the Realm of the Buddha of Unlimited Life, who took the vow to be the helper of Amitabha Buddha.

I respectfully bow to Kwan-Yin, the Tathagata, the honorable one with a body without imperfections, created by the twelve great vows.

## Taken from Letters written to Br. Gunaratna Sarika

**April 7, 1995**

Getting caught in the suffering of others is a place we all have to move through. We work toward having the compassion of Kwan Yin Bodhisattva. She is also known as "She who hears the Cries of the World." To be compassionate does not mean to take the other's suffering for your own. If you try to do that, they will not suffer less; there will only be more suffering in the world. To be compassionate is to understand what suffering is and help others find the way to alleviate suffering for themselves.

Suffering is caused by desire, anger and ignorance. When we work on ourselves, we begin to let go of these hindrances. But each person must do it for themselves. Kwan Yin is a good model. She remains serene while hearing the cries. She can help others by maintaining that equanimity. Then we can see how it is to be done and find the Kwan Yin inside ourselves.

The first time I asked my teacher about Kwan Yin was during an interview at a retreat. I was very young in my training. He spoke a little of her as the Bodhisattva of Compassion, and then he said to me, "You are Kwan Yin Bodhisattva." And immediately rang his bell, the signal for me to leave. I tripped on my own feet getting up and doing a prostration, and then stumbled out of the interview room. I was so overwhelmed with what was a totally incomprehensible idea to me at the time. I understand now.

You, Gunaratna, are Kwan Yin Bodhisattva. You will help others free themselves from suffering. But you do not need to suffer while you do it. In fact, it is your freeing yourself from suffering that will help others the most.

Pain and suffering are not the same. Pain is part of being a human being. If we didn't have pain, we wouldn't jump away from something hot and would burn right through our skin. Pain tells us when something is wrong with our bodies and psyches. It is the resistance to pain that causes suffering.

When we meditate, our legs might hurt. If we don't resist the pain, just watch it. We see it come and go, and we don't suffer as much. Of course, all these things are very hard. So we try, try, try. And progress step by step.

There is another Bodhisattva to think about. That is Jizo Bodhisattva. He chooses to be reborn in Hell each time, so he can save all beings in hell from suffering. The suffering in prison must be hell. All the pain that inmates feel, and perhaps the feeling of injustice and anger that many may carry. When we work on ourselves, others see the results of our work and realize that there is a way to transcend past mistakes, to end suffering.

Of course you want to run and hide. The amount of suffering is overwhelming. I remember when I first began to wake up, how much I wanted to go back to ignorance for a while. You know what they say. Ignorance is bliss. But it doesn't work that way, and I'm very glad it doesn't. And bliss does come with understanding. You are well on the way.

Pema Chodron, a Western woman ordained in the Tibetan tradition, says that in order to become truly compassionate, we must fully experience our own pain. Then we better understand others. When you feel pain over the sufferings of others, watch it. Just watch it, and let it go.

I believe you already know much of what I'm telling you, but we all need to remind each other so it stays foremost in our heart/minds.

In my own practice I am currently working with heart/mind and feeling/thought, rather than just mind and just thought. Sometimes we leave the feelings out; we need to honor them as well. Without them, we are not fully human.

Of course, discrimination between genders is foolishness. And the Buddha said that women and men can be enlightened. But you know what happens when someone gets in a high position and wants to wield a bit of power. Buddhist scripture wasn't written down for over five hundred years, so I am sure there were changes from when the Buddha taught them. Although people at that time had many memory techniques to use in keeping oral tradition.

Anyway I won't get started on that one. You understand, and that's important because discrimination against women is as bad for men as it is for women. It's still so ingrained in our culture that my six year old grandson already uses the word "woman" as an insult; he really blew it one time when he thought someone had called him a woman.

You're quite right about mental attachments being harder to let go of than physical. Even getting over a drug addiction -- the physical part of the addiction--can be easier than those things that feed our egos.

## from June 8, 1996

First I would like to share a special moment I experienced. I was doing morning practice in the zendo and chanting the "Veneration of the 88 Buddhas." I had left the front door slightly ajar, and suddenly I realized that there was a loud sound coming from there. A little bird, probably a sparrow, had hopped inside the door and was standing on the threshold, chirping her heart out. She joined me in the chanting for what seemed like a long time in bird attention. It was so wonderful.

One of my students said that perhaps the bird became enlightened because of me. I replied that if she comes back, maybe I could get enlightened because of her. But since there is no attainment and nothing to attain, I just enjoyed the moment.

After that, our dog, Vance, who goes out for a run around the block every morning, came in the zendo. He gets out when someone pulls their car out of the back parking lot. Then he hangs around in front until someone comes to open the gate for him and for the other dog we have, Wuffer. Sometimes Vance comes in and sits in the zendo; sometimes I let him out the back door.

I had a most pleasant practice with the animals that day. Does a dog have Buddha nature? I think Vance was a monk in his previous lifetime, even though I don't usually get into whether or not we have other lifetimes. I don't know what he might have done to get him this rebirth, but he's changing his karma this time. Sometimes he walks with us when we do walking meditation out in the yard. He's very good and will sit quietly next to me while I talk to him and sometimes we don't say a thing.

All these experiences are important in helping us see clearly. While you may have birds around, I know you do not have a dog or other pet. But the connections are everywhere. And being fully present in the moment is the best way to see them.

Buddhists teach by living their life according to the steps on the path. Others see them and wonder how they can be so calm and happy, even in difficult circumstances. Then those others are attracted and become willing to try some of the same things. This is one reason why we don't

try to convert others. Everyone must make their own choice. And in the meantime, we use the four Brahma Viharas to change the energy of the world, compassion, loving kindness, sympathetic joy and equanimity toward all beings. That practice, along with the practice of meditation, ethical conduct and wisdom as found in the eightfold path, carries us forward.

We all have attachments, so you are not alone in your difficulty of clinging. Letting go is not possible just because we decide to do it. It is a very difficult practice, as you have discovered. First I suggest that you be gentle with yourself. Being a human being is not easy.

I think the process of meditation helps us watch, see, accept, let go. (You may have heard this from me before, as it's become one of my favorite models.) When we meditate, we watch the way our minds work, watch with our senses, watch without judgement. Just watch.

This leads to seeing. We begin to become more aware of how the world works and how we fit into it. When we see this, we also see that we are not perfect and probably don't feel that we are doing our best. Again, we are faced with judgement. But if we see without needing to do anything about what we see, we make a lot of progress and will change very naturally.

Next we have to accept. Accept this human being who is not perfect. Learning to love ourselves despite anything we may think is a problem in our character is not easy; in our society, we are trained in the puritanical approach which emphasizes how wrong we are. This is too bad, because we are not wrong, just in process. After we accept the reality of our selves, we will improve in terms of Right Action and Right Speech. We will no longer act out of anger and hatred. When we accept ourselves, we can also begin to accept others.

Buddhism doesn't have guilt or shame. We don't need those things. If we make a mistake, and we see it, we don't have to repeat it. We are learning from our actions. Acceptance leads us to freedom.

And the ultimate liberation is when we let go. Let go of attachments, judgements, opinions, desire, anger, illusion. We need to do this practice moment by moment. Letting go in every moment. It gets easier as we go along. So I encourage you to watch, see, accept and let go.

**from June 18, 1996**

Your probing questions of why humans exist, of why there is suffering, of why we need to suffer in order to become awakened are very important things to consider. I will try to help both with some standard Buddhist approaches as well as with the answers I have accepted in my own search. You will find your own answers from your own search.

**Why did human kind have to come into being?** The Buddha refused to answer such metaphysical questions. He said he came to teach about the end of suffering and that other such questions were beside the point. This is when he told the story of the man who had been shot by an arrow. He asked if we needed to know who shot the arrow, why they shot it, where the archer came from or what the victim did to get shot in order to save the person's life. Better to just remove the arrow, get that person some medical care and not worry about those other things.

He also taught **pratitya-samutpada** or interdependent origination. The *Shambala Dictionary of Buddhism and Zen* says, "The doctrine of conditioned arising says that all psychological and physical phenomena constituting individual existence are interdependent and mutually condition each other; this at the same time describes what entangles sentient beings in samsara. (I will try to get you a copy of this dictionary if you don't already have one. Please let me know.)

My personal take on it, in fact something I accepted even before I started to study Buddhism, and was affirmed afterwards, is that everything in the world is simply energy. That energy manifests in a variety of ways. Human beings are a manifestation of energy—we come from energy and return to energy. There is no creator and no destroyer, no things at all, simply process and energy.

We are not separate from the rest of nature. Even though humans as a group have made many mistakes in terms of not honoring nature nor other sentient beings, we are still connected to all that exists. We can each change our own karma and the karma of the world. To see reality is the first step to allowing positive changes. We work on ourselves and the world changes. "I drink a cup of green tea, and the world is at peace."

**Why did we have to come into the suffering existence of humankind?** We can only become enlightened or awakened, fulfilling our potential, from the human condition. Young children may seem to

have the ability to be in the moment, but they don't understand what is going on beyond that. When we do understand and go beyond our suffering, we not only help ourselves but others. We need to accept that others suffer and that our only option is to help them. I know of no way to eliminate human existence, but I do know that we can go beyond our suffering and help others do the same.

Pain and suffering are not the same. We all feel pain-physical, psychological, emotional, spiritual pain. But the suffering comes when we resist that pain, when we want more than anything for it to go away. These are the hindrances of the second noble truth.

Dogen, and the entire Soto Zen tradition, point out that samsara and nirvana are the same thing. We are all already enlightened. We just need to accept and see that. Pema Chodren talks about when we are suffering, the suffering Buddha. Happy, happy Buddha. Pissed off, pissed off Buddha. Etc.

Seung Sahn Sunim also says that Buddha is shit on a stick. Meaning the same thing. Everything is Buddha when we understand. Not just the pleasant stuff. And that's okay.

To me, the reason we are born into the suffering world of samsara is to help save all beings from suffering. The Bodhisattva ideal is the most important in my practice. When I took bhikkuni precepts, I also took the bodhisattva vows as they do in China and Vietnam, that is, burning cone incense into the scalp, allowing it to burn until the hair follicles are destroyed; This constantly reminds of what I am about. Rationally, I think it is a barbaric custom, but, when I did it, I felt a most powerful affect.

I have six burns. In Taiwan I saw people with twelve. They are always given in sets of three, perhaps like Buddha, Dharma, Sangha. I took one when I became a sramanerika here at IBMC, then went with my master to Taiwan to get full ordination and got three there, finally got two more when I returned here to have a proper number. We have also given such burns here. We did at the Grand Ordination in 1994 and also for one elderly monk, Rev. Karuna's disciple, last year. But we never force anyone to do it. I have a lot of trouble participating in the ceremony to give the burns, yet I had no problem taking them.

**How did human beings lose what they already have?** You answered this one quite well for yourself. It's those hindrances again. Illusion is very difficult to overcome. We do it by practicing every day. Soon our mind becomes clearer, and we begin to get glimpses of our true selves

We really haven't lost this, just can't see it so well sometimes. When we understand how our minds work, we see how we create our problems. Then, quite naturally, we begin to create fewer problems for ourselves. Our mind changes.

"A Change of Mind" is the theme for this year's summer training. I thought about using "Changing Our Minds" but realized that when we try to change, we don't allow it to happen, and resistance makes it that much harder. So better to watch the change of mind as we experience it.

The process of meditation to me is watch, see, accept, let go. So we sit and let our thoughts settle and just watch all the things that come up in our minds. All the drunken monkey thoughts as well as all of these questions that we want to resolve. This watching needs to be done without judgement, as though it were a scientific experiment that we are carrying out in a laboratory and watching the results while we control the variables. This is exactly the process that Siddhartha went through in order to attain awakening and become Buddha.

When we watch dispassionately, we begin to see. Again we need to not judge. Just see. We may not like what we see, after all, for many people, ignorance is bliss. But ultimately the seeing is a higher joy. To understand truth is to fulfill all of our pursuits. Thoreau said, "The unexamined life is not worth living."

Next we must accept. This is very hard, because we want to be better than what we are. No matter what mistakes we have made in our lives, and we have all made them, we must accept that this is who we are and this is what it means to be a human being.

We do not need to feel guilty or ashamed because we are not perfect. Stephen Levine, who does a lot of work with the dying, says "It may not be a perfect circle, but it's a perfect whatever it is." When we accept ourselves, love ourselves, realize that we only need to be in the present, we change our karma. In Buddhism, when we see we have made a mistake, we try not to repeat it. Denial, judgement, worry, anxiety -- these only distract us.

The last step is letting go. And you have made a good point in realizing that letting go can turn into another concept which we have to let go of. We try not to do the letting go on an intellectual basis, but rather encourage the letting go to happen. The result can be more obsessive



thoughts. That is truly mental health. It takes a lot of hard work to do this. But once we begin to see, there is no returning. I have been practicing and studying for 22 years now, and I continue to discover more all the time. It is a life-time project. However, the benefits begin early on, with small brief glimpses. The learning is very exciting and very practical as well.

**Is Huang Po right in saying teachers are only a tool to lead us to our own true selves?** Yes, he is exactly right. My Zen Master, Ven. Thien-An, always talked about the teacher being the finger pointing to the moon. Once we see the moon, we no longer need the finger. The moon is often a symbol for enlightenment. Yet when he died, I lost sight of the moon for a while. My attachment to his presence only lessened when I began to see his essence within me.

Suto also said that the best honor one could pay to one's teacher is to go beyond the teacher. Not meaning that we are better or more enlightened, but meaning that we have received the essential mind-to-mind transmission and let it become our own, reflecting our own experiences. Then we can teach others. People have different needs, so there are many different teachers. Some hear the best from one and some from others.

You yourself are in that position; other prisoners can hear you more easily because you understand what they experience. A monk coming to the prison can be helpful but can only imagine what it is like to be in such a position. I have a chronic illness, and others can sympathize with me, but the people who are most supportive are those who deal with what I deal with on an everyday basis. Of course, I listen to and appreciate others, as any Buddhist appreciates a talk by someone who is lucky enough to spend their full-time doing dharma, being dharma.

Back to Huang Po, yes it was one of my favorites when I began studying zen. He is very incisive. And John Blofeld is also quite a good commentator. He has another book I am very fond of, *Bodhisattva of Compassion: The Mystical Tradition of Kwan Yin*.

**Can water wash water? Can Buddha find Buddha?** Can we find our own hand? Starting with the last, yes, in fact it is wonderful to watch a baby as she/he begins to make that discovery. At first they can hold things, later actually manipulate them, explore the world-including mommy's hair and glasses, daddy's whiskers, and the glass of milk that they knock off their high chair. They don't understand how it works or why it works; that comes later. This is not different from the way we discover our spiritual answers.

Sakyamuni Buddha, when people began to refer to him as god, said that he would accept the title of Buddha, the awakened one, or of Tathagata, the thus come one. He knew that he had awakened, that he knew something very important, something he could share with all beings. And that all beings have the same capacity as he did. If he hadn't seen that, he would have to reinvent the wheel, so to speak.

I don't know if water can wash water, but I do know that we don't need to push the river. It flows very well all by itself. I have one other letter from you, to which I will respond soon. I think these are enough words for today.

**from August 5, 1996**

I'm glad you like the photo of Ven. Thien-An. I look at it, remember his compassion and kindness, and my heart fills with joy.

One thing that has always struck me about this gatha is that I drink the tea and the world outside is at peace, reminding us that a peaceful world can only come from our own inner peace.

Your understanding is good as usual in terms of my bird story. We are all already enlightened and do not need to get that from anyone, as you point out. When we see our connections, we manifest our Buddha nature and smile. Yes, the story of the Buddha, the flower and Mahakashyapa is considered the first Zen teaching. We use many words in our everyday lives, but they cannot capture realization.

Could Vance have been a monk in a previous lifetime? Does a dog have Buddha nature? Don't know! Don't know mind is clear mind.

You are quite right that we learn much from each other. And when we teach, we learn a great deal, as we must clarify our understanding and then respond to what the student needs to know in order to discover his own answers. The finger pointing to the moon must know the correct direction.

You are doing fine work propagating the dharma by being the dharma. That is all we can do, and that is everything. Perhaps you are already a monk. Certainly your life is not so much different from that of a monastic. Time to study and teach, time to practice the path, working on oneself. Yes, monks can walk out the door when they wish, but when we understand the value, we stay.

## Embarcing Our Demons

Back at the beginning of my practice, twenty-some years ago, someone told me that the Tibetans say, "Embrace your demons." I've never studied Tibetan Buddhism in any depth nor have I read many books about Tibetan practice. I don't know what techniques the Tibetans use to encourage this action, but the words stuck in my mind, and I began to look at what demons I face in my life and how I might change my approach to dealing with them. That short phrase led to exploration and to a new attitude.

Everyone has demons of some sort. One of my personal demons is the fear of looking foolish or of doing something stupid and then suffering the consequences. Yesterday, I did one of the most embarrassing things any experienced meditator can do. I tried to stand up after zazen without waiting for the circulation to come back in my foot. I got up when my foot was still asleep, fell down, and sprained my ankle. And it was especially embarrassing because I was leading the meditation, and a number of people were there to witness my accident.

Here I am, sitting in a chair, confessing to my lack of consciousness. No way to hide it. I could stay in my room until my ankle healed. That's neither practical nor honest. Better to admit to not being mindful. After all, not Buddha yet. When I say it aloud, it doesn't seem so overwhelming. We can all laugh, and I don't need to fight with this demon. I can embrace my foolishness and have compassion for this human being who makes mistakes, as all human beings do.

The demons that we talk about in Buddhism are many. One of the founders of Tibetan Buddhism, Padmasambhava, is honored for taming the indigenous demons and the forces of nature contained in them in early times in Tibet. He turned these demons into Dharma Protectors, which Buddhists continue to invoke today.

At the beginning of our three-month summer training period, we walk the edges of the compound, place incense to mark the perimeters and call on the dharma protectors to keep us safe while we stay within the temple grounds for intensive practice. What does this tell us? Can our demons also be our protectors? How can we turn them from one to the other?

In traditional Buddhist cosmology, we find asuras or evil spirits. Sometimes these are considered as lower gods who dwell on the slopes or summit of the world mountain Sumaru. They may also dwell in castles of air.

But asuras, in their demonic form, are the enemies of the gods and belong to the realm of sensual desire. Many of us find our demons in that realm.

It is not something outside of ourselves that leads us astray. Following the Middle Path helps us realize we contain everything. So we are our own demons.

When the Buddha was just on the verge of attaining enlightenment, Mara, the tempter, came to him. Mara represents the passions that overwhelm us as well as everything else that hinders our progress. And such a being would not want humans liberated from suffering.

Mara called up a horde of demons, but Buddha didn't fear them. Why fear illusion? Why fear that which we contain?

Mara said to the Buddha, "Who do you think you are? What makes you think you're so great?" We all face this demon; perhaps we ask ourselves the same question. We need to believe in ourselves, in our own Buddha nature, and not be pulled astray by the temptation of negative thoughts.

Demons are created by either/or thinking, thinking about things as opposites. If there is good, there must be bad. Short doesn't mean a thing without tall. Angels are dependent on devils for their lives to have meaning. In the Buddhist cosmology, there are both demons and dharma protectors, not only one or the other.

## Muddy Waters and Howling Wolves

The average person, before developing a meditation practice, has a mind like a drunken monkey, jumping from branch to branch, never stopping. These are our thoughts. The process of meditation helps us to first sober up the monkey, then teach it to rest, and finally turn it into a serene monkey, one with equanimity. Ultimately, there is no monkey and no mind.

To try to stop our thoughts is like taking a glass of clear water, dropping some dirt into it, and pushing the dirt down with a spoon. Of course, the water becomes muddy from our interference. But if we put the glass on the counter and leave it alone, the dirt settles and the water becomes clear again.

This is the way to clear our minds.

To go at it with gritted teeth, to fight for clarity doesn't work. If I tell you not to think of elephants, what happens? Elephants fill your mind -- Indian elephants, African elephants, pink elephants, Dumbo the flying elephant. The harder we try to push the elephants out of our mind, the more elephants parade around in front of us.

The muddy waters settle when we set up the right situation, when we provide a silent space where we do not add more dirt to the mix. Even if we practice zazen every day, the settling becomes much clearer when we do a retreat.

I remember the first weekend retreat I came to; it was here at IBMC back in 1974. I had only been meditating about a month, so I didn't know enough to be scared at the idea of sitting many hours without moving, something that was rarely possible for me at the time; I was such a fidget. I trusted my teacher as well as the other monks. I was shy and felt a bit uncomfortable, but since everyone did everything together, I saw no reason why I couldn't do it as well. I remember our Abbess' warm smile and Dr. Thien-An's compassion.

It was not easy, but it wasn't that hard either. I didn't have any expectations to make comparisons. Yet, it was extraordinarily different from any other experience in my life. I had what I later realized was my first conscious spiritual experience. Being with strangers, sitting, eating and working with them, without talking to them, I became aware of my connection to everything, connection of the heart/mind.

We had a short discussion at the end of the retreat: we went until 5 pm on Sunday in those days -- and gave feedback. I was really rather stunned by the experience. I remember saying that the quiet was so wonderful! I came from a family where either the tv or the radio were always playing and where people were constantly talking, frequently at the same time. I couldn't believe the peace I felt. I remember Ven. Karuna laughing a big laugh of understanding, and I knew I had found my home.

Most people have a positive experience in the beginning of their meditation practice. At least the ones who keep coming back do. Waters clear, inner peace arises. We may want to just keep meditating and not go back into the chaos of the external world. But everything inside of us comes up when we practice meditation: not just bliss, not just peace; the wolves begin to howl. When the water is clear, the sound carries.

Who are these howling wolves and where do they come from? To me, they are the remnants of all the feelings we have denied and repressed. Of our conditioning in our families and schools and society in general.

## Shades of Gray

From the beginnings of western civilization, from the time of the Greek and Roman philosophers, the world has been explained in terms of opposites. Everything must fit into one of two categories. Black or white. Tall or short. Right or wrong. Happy or sad.

Either/or is the mind of dichotomies and separation. It demands an unavoidable choice between two possible alternatives, with no other options available.

To have such a mind interferes with our ability to see reality clearly and to live our lives effectively. We are limited in our understanding, and that affects our thoughts and actions.

For example, if we view our behavior as either good or bad, we are proud of ourselves when we see something we see as good and we feel guilty or ashamed when we do something bad. Pride, guilt and shame are not the answer to changing our behavior. In fact, they stifle our development. Buddhism teaches us that when we make a mistake, we must try not to repeat it.

We learn and grow when we see our mistakes. There is no need to punish ourselves for them. As human beings we contain everything. And accepting that everything expands our awareness and encourages us to allow ourselves to be who we are. It is not possible to make significant changes until we accept the part of ourselves that needs changing.

Either/or thinking is apparent in the view of body and mind as two separate things. These two are not separate; they are one thing, like the two sides of a piece of paper. Mind exists in every cell of our bodies, and ultimately mind itself is body and body itself is mind.

Impermanence is a characteristic of all life. As we continue our practice, we see that form is actually activity and energy, and these are not dualistic. The Middle Way integrates it all.

Seeing thus allows us to be comfortable in the world. We don't need to constantly judge ourselves or others. Our hearts are more easily filled with loving-kindness and compassion. This is the way to make the world a better place.

## What is Enlightenment?

This morning Rev. Vajra handed me an article from Tuesday's paper. And right in front it's all about a Tibetan Rinpoche, and how many westerners, including celebrities such as Oliver Stone and Richard Gere, are embracing the teachings of Tibetan Buddhism, hoping to reach enlightenment. I guess most everyone wants to reach enlightenment. So maybe we need to figure out what it is, if we're going to get there. First, I'd like to open this up to everybody here and hear what you think enlightenment is.

"I think it's perfect mental health."

Perfect is a word that comes up a lot in talk about enlightenment. Many people agree that someone who is enlightened is also perfect. So that's a good one to start with.

"A clear perception of reality." First, of course, we need to define what we mean by clear, by perception, by reality. But I think we're getting somewhere already.

Everything's all right." That leads us in the direction of the Zen idea that we are already enlightened, and we just have to get in touch with that which is already within.

I did some exploring of other people's ideas about enlightenment. I recently got connected to the Internet and discovered a way to talk to communicate with Buddhist practitioners all over the world. Here are some of their thoughts:

One person said, "I don't think enlightenment is perfection in itself, like the Christian ideal that God is perfect. Buddha made a few mistakes after his enlightenment." She referred to a specific incident where he gave a meditation on death to a group of monks and later returned to find they had all committed suicide out of despair. So, that could be seen as a mistake, yes. But whose mistake? Maybe not his.

She continues to say, "I think it is beyond anything we can imagine or comprehend in our present state of mind. I can sort of visualize it, but I can't put it into words. How can anyone comprehend ultimate transcendence if it hasn't happened yet? I think we sometimes get quick flashes of insight into this state. The main thing I know from the quick flashes is that it is nice, everything is clear."

She goes on to say that her husband feels that perfection is impossible



to attain, whereas enlightenment is not. It is difficult but not impossible. He is in the army and was in the Gulf War. He says that his experiences with meditation during the war gave him great clarity and focus of mind. And he now believes that enlightenment is there, it's just getting to it by continuing the effort. That's the clincher.

So there are two other ideas about enlightenment.

Another person says, "We are already perfect, but we don't know it. Enlightenment is knowing it."

But what is perfection? Is it doing no wrong? Is it the absence of unstructured thinking? Is it total clarity without illusion? Maybe it's being at peace most of the time, during crises as well as the good stuff and old age and death and no ending of old age and death."

Someone else said, "The Buddhist path is for its own sake, not for the sake of some mythic state called enlightenment." So this person thinks that enlightenment is a myth. Perhaps it is.

I think of it like this: we are perfect, we all have Buddha nature, but we haven't yet realized it. How can we identify this perfect state? It may be always acting so as not to harm oneself or other sentient beings and so as to benefit oneself and other sentient beings. It may be the absence of all destructive thought, or perhaps it's full clarity with no illusion. Maybe not.

Maybe it's seeing our thoughts clearly say eighty to ninety percent of the time. Maybe it's not being caught up in the self-centered dream. Maybe it's being at peace in all situations. Maybe it's when we don't hang on to the thoughts and emotions that color our experience of life.

Too many maybes. Are we getting closer? I don't know. It's beginning to sound more complicated.

Another person says, "Take a person who has attained the thing that cannot be named, are they necessarily going to be without personal flaws of all kinds?"

This is an important question. Because when we make a judgment on someone else's attainment, and we see that they still have personality traits that we consider flaws, we may think the person is not awake at all.

Someone else answered this question by saying, "The attained person

may still have flaws, but they are acutely aware of them and are diligent in clearing them away." Then enlightenment is an awareness of imperfection and a willingness to live in such a way that those imperfections don't interfere with our relationship with the world and all that's in it.

One person responded by suggesting that if I wanted to know what enlightenment was I should ask a Buddha, since Buddhas are the only ones who experience enlightenment. Well, who is a Buddha? Are there any Buddhas alive today? How can we tell?

To me, my master was an enlightened being. Many others agreed with me. He wasn't "perfect" if that means never making mistakes. One time, he locked his car with the keys in it and the motor running. He didn't get upset with himself or upset at all, actually. He laughed at his own foolishness. And then he said, "Zen mind is forgetting mind." That phrase is still used by his disciples as a good excuse.

Forgetfulness is a human characteristic. Enlightenment can only be attained by a human being. That being doesn't become super-human, but rather fully human. Ven. Thien-An had a way of being that showed he was right there in each moment. He saw clearly and was able to communicate that clarity. Thus we learned from his presence beyond what we learned from his words. He spoke with a smile of mind-to-mind transmission, the most important learning of all.

Can we really know if another person is enlightened? Maybe only the person having that experience can tell. Of course, that's very dangerous; it may be our ego that is telling us that we are attained rather than our clarity. We may not be able to discern the difference until we have expanded our ego to include all. And if we focus constantly on our state of being, focus on this abstract noun as a goal, we may miss the process of being in each moment, and thus never find it.

Another follower of the Buddhist path says, "Anything to be attained is also something to be later lost. The reference in the tradition is Nirvana, which is not enlightenment but extinction. And when the extinction is complete, that which has no beginning or ending and cannot be attained or lost is fully manifest."

There are so many many different ideas. Many many different approaches. Let's look at a few more technical definitions.

First, we need to look at the word itself. Enlightenment. This is a translation from the Sanskrit word, but English doesn't have a word that is precisely the same in meaning. Enlightenment sounds like the light is

shining, perhaps shining from a halo above the person's head. That suggests that the light makes everything clear, makes everything able to be seen. Then enlightenment is not the best word to use. Because it makes us think that the attained person would have light around them, an aura of light.

Awakening is more accurate. Being awake to our own processes, to the what is really going on in the world. Understanding how the world works, how it functions and how we function in it. Mental health? Certainly, because we are not filled with all kinds of paranoia or neuroses about how the world "treats us."

So awake we can understand that when someone insults us, it doesn't really have anything to do with us; it has to do with that person's state of being. And as much as we would like the person to give us approval rather than insult, we can't make them different, can't make them understand. If we practice not responding to insults, which is a practice monks do, we see that we are not really involved in what is happening. It is the other person who is angry, maybe about something that doesn't have anything to do with us. When we see this, we can begin to let go of our ego defenses and ultimately we will see that there is no self that needs protection.

Once the Buddha was teaching and many people came to see him. One of those people was the wife of a man who had left his home to follow Sakyamuni, and she was exceedingly angry at the Buddha for ruining her life, as she saw it. She approached the Buddha and began to regale him with epithets, blaming him for all her troubles and demanding that he force her husband to come back to his home and his responsibilities.

The Buddha listened to all her complaints with great patience and respect, but he never answered her. After a while, she ran out of steam and left. Ananda turned to the Buddha and said, "Lord, why did you not answer that woman; she is very unhappy." Sakyamuni replied, "She came to give me a gift, but I refused to accept it, so she took it back home with her."

Now that we have further defined enlightenment as awakening, let's look a bit farther into its connotations. The Shambala Dictionary delves into this and refers to "an awakening to a oneness of emptiness, in which the person is empty, even as the entire universe is empty."

Another problem, this word emptiness, **sunyata**. We usually assume that empty refers to something that doesn't contain anything, like a cup without liquid in it, like a hole that's been dug in the earth. But that is not

what empty is in the Buddhist sense. Emptiness has to do with impermanence, with no essence, with imperfection -- the three characteristics of life, of the world. Emptiness means that everything is constantly changing, that there is nothing to hold onto. No solidity, no permanent form, everything in process.

The experience of awakening enables us to comprehend the true nature of things, their emptiness. Not nihilistic, but rather unperceivable, unthinkable, unfeelable, and endless beyond existence. This is a totally new kind of experience for us, different than anything we can conceive of until we begin to get glimpses of it.

Emptiness is not an object that is perceived by a subject. Enlightenment also is now that. In this ultimate state of being, there is no object, there is no subject. There is oneness -- and connection.

The Buddhist tradition acknowledges different levels of enlightenment. Perfect, complete enlightenment or **anuttarasamyak-sambodhi**, is that enlightenment which the Buddha realized, the enlightenment that is the beginning of the Buddhadharma itself. With this view, we see that without the Buddha's enlightenment experience, there would be no Buddhism. That is, if the Buddha hadn't experienced enlightenment, he wouldn't have had anything to tell us about. But since he did, we have Buddhism and a path to follow.

Some teachers and practitioners prefer not to deal with the question of enlightenment. They object to the idea of a goal, of having to attain anything. Perhaps we do have to accept this, at least: enlightenment is a very basic concept to consider. We will find our own answers when we have a taste of the experience.

Enlightenment is by its nature always the same. Still there are different degrees of this experience. If we compare the process to breaking through a wall, then the experience can vary from a tiny chink in the wall, letting in a glimpse of light, to the total annihilation of the wall, destroying all obstacles to seeing clearly. In Zen, they call those glimpses kensho, seeing one's own true nature.

Many times these first glimpses surprise us. We like it, so we try to grasp onto it and, of course, then it's gone. It takes a while before we can just watch. If we keep on with our practice, the glimpses become more frequent and more prolonged. But, we have to be willing and diligent to continue on the path without really knowing where we're heading.

We may become confused and think that enlightenment, the experience of emptiness, is separated from the ordinary world of phenomena. It is

not. Both exist in oneness. The Heart Sutra tells us that form is no other than emptiness and emptiness is no other than form.

In profound enlightenment, the ego is annihilated; it dies. Thus, it is said in Zen that we must die on the cushion. Don't drop over dead, just let your ego die. The results of this dying, of this great death, is great life. A life of freedom and peace.

The Theravadan approach to enlightenment delineates different stages that can be attained. One moves from stream-enterer to once-returner, to non-returner, and to arhat, an enlightened being. The model also includes three stages of enlightenment: that of a noble disciple, that of one who sought only his own enlightenment, and the enlightenment of a Buddha. In this system, one moves along the path step by step.

The Zen approach uses a model of insight into unity, of Nirvana and samsara becoming one through the nondifferentiation of subject and object.

Mahayana generally recognizes three kinds of enlightenment: enlightenment for oneself which is the enlightenment of an arhat; enlightenment for the sake of others which is the enlightenment of a bodhisattva; and the complete perfect enlightenment of a buddha.

Dogen says, "To go forth and experience the myriad things is delusion. That the myriad things spring forth and experience themselves is enlightenment."

You've got to decide for yourself where you're going, where you are, seeing just your own progress and development. The *Therigata*, or songs of the elder nuns, was written by women who lived at the time of the Buddha and are considered enlightened beings. We can see what an enlightened state felt like to them.

"Buddha who set me and many others free from pain, I have reached the state where everything stops. This is my last body, and I will not go from birth to birth again."

Enlightenment as "the state where everything stops."

Another says, "I don't long to be god; there is no fear in my heart." Yet another says, "Free from ties, I live in the world without obsessions."

The latter is one of my personal goals. To not be imprisoned by my mind, by stray thoughts that return again and again, but to simply let those thoughts pass right through me.

Another of the elders says, "I have annihilated all the obsessions of the mind. When you throw away your longing to be, you will live at peace. With the roots of craving uprooted, I have become cool and quenched." So there's another aspect of enlightenment.

"Now I am quenched and still. I am careful quenched, calm and free. My mind was freed Free from all bonds. My heart was set free." Freedom.

Perhaps the light in enlightenment doesn't only refer to light that can be seen, but also to the lightness that comes with feeling free. No longer oppressed.

35

"Intent on peace of mind, untied from all that binds, my heart is at peace. The great dark is torn apart and death, you too are destroyed. Nirvana, the unchanging state, desire and hatred fall away, along with the obsessions of the mind."

Another says, "I have no thought of becoming. I know freedom from birth and death and do not grieve or weep. I am free and want nothing. I realize great joy. I have quenched the fires. My craving has died. Free of desire and its chains, your mind is free of clinging."

Perhaps when you came to services you expected to get some answers about enlightenment. And I have given you many answers. Your own answer may be different, but these ideas allow us to continue our explorations. But it's best to not look too hard for "answers." To know enlightenment, we must first learn to be, just that.

## Enlightenment

The moon is full tonight, making this Enlightenment Day of the Buddha celebration even more auspicious, for the Buddha attained his enlightenment on a full moon day.

Buddhism is a religion of enlightenment; if the Buddha had not reached enlightenment, we would have no path, no practice, no teacher. Yet we cannot make enlightenment our goal, for we know that there is no attainment and nothing to attain.

Perhaps awakening is a better word for the state of mind we will ultimately experience. It will come to us as a result of our practice of the path. We do not need to seek it nor concern ourselves with it. We only need to be in each moment.

Maybe enlightenment is when we stop getting in our own way. Stop sabotaging ourselves and limiting our development. We hang on to stuff -- things, ideas, relationships, feelings -- repress them, deny them. This creates our sticking points, the blockage to the flow, like a clogged artery in your body, a traffic jam on the freeway. It makes movement very difficult.

When a stream flows over rocks, it doesn't try to go straight through, it goes over, around the sides, any place where there is no resistance. Sometimes we have to break up the blocks before we can get by.

Each moment in our lives is gone before we can even name it. We can't hold onto it, analyze it, categorize it -- we can try, but these actions keep us from being in the next moment, experiencing any of them fully.

When we just watch, we see thoughts come and go, feelings come and go, sensations come and go -- then we see the process. It is the process, not the content, that we need to see clearly.

## Expectations a Christmas Talk

Last week, somebody asked "What do Buddhists do on Christmas?" This is it. We meditate. Some of us are doing an all-day meditation retreat. It is nice and quiet and peaceful here today. Unlike some of the Christmas days in my life.

Thinking about giving a talk on Christmas day brought up a lot of memories of Christmas as a child. And all the expectations that went along with it. This day is perhaps the biggest day for expectations in the year.

I was born into a Jewish family. My parents were of the generation that came of age during the depression, and they wanted their children to have a different experience, to make sure we weren't deprived of anything they could give us. So we celebrated Hanukkah and Christmas both.

Christmas, of course, was the most exciting because you went to sleep at night and then things appeared. If you're little and stay asleep, then you don't know where these things come from. But from very early on, you know that they're going to appear, and some of them will be for you. So morning comes and you wake up and go out into the front room and there're all these packages wrapped up in colorful paper with fancy bows. At least that's how it was in my house. As well as in every sitcom on television.

So everyone's real excited. Parents to see the surprise and pleasure on their children's faces and children get to tear apart the packages and others to join in the fun. We all plan for a wonderful day.

But maybe it's not so wonderful in reality. The family all gets together, maybe lots of people in and out of the house. And maybe Uncle Joe drinks a bit too much and has to throw up in the back yard. And Aunt Fanny makes a pass at her sister's husband, and the sister gets mad at both of them and pouts all day. The teenagers may be smoking dope where they think nobody can see or smell them and acting accordingly. And the little kids are fighting over whose toy is whose. We have lots of expectations. But expectations lead to disappointments.

This morning in the *L.A. Times* comic section, *Calvin and Hobbes* is very incisive. Calvin says, "I'm getting disillusioned with these New Years. They don't seem very new at all. Each new year is just like the old year. Here another year has gone by and everything's still the same."



There's still pollution and war and stupidity and greed. Things haven't changed. I say what kind of future is this? I thought things were supposed to improve. I thought the future was supposed to be better."

Hobbes replies, "The problem with the future is that it keeps turning into the present."

We have all sorts of expectations. Next week, we'll expect that things will change because we are beginning a new year. On our birthdays, we expect that being one year older will change us, we'll automatically be more mature, we'll finally get our lives together. But all of that is just notions in our heads. It has very little to do with our true understanding that comes from our bellies.

One more example. My mom, who was a real sweetheart, also had some funny ideas, not her ideas alone, but those of her generation and the culture in which she grew up. I remember one time, when spring vacation was coming up and I was teaching school so would have a week off, so I asked her to come with me and the kids and we'd go some place different for the week.

She got excited as we planned to go to Northern California to visit friends. But when we called them to confirm, it turned out that they had a houseful of guests and had no room for us. So I suggested we go somewhere else. That we go camping. I did that with the kids a couple of times a year anyhow.

Now, this was not a very realistic expectation for me to have of my mom. She was a city girl who grew up in Chicago, and even though we now lived in the suburbs of Southern California, she rarely went out in the backyard, much less to uncivilized places with outhouses and bugs and animals. But I had the strange idea that she might enjoy this experience.

She was very disappointed about not going where she had planned originally. But she kept her teeth clenched and pretended she was happy anyhow. We went out to the desert, to Joshua Tree, and put up our tent. The wind was blowing fairly constantly, and it was chilly. Every morning, she woke up, put on her deodorant and make-up and swept in front of the tent. After a couple of days, I could no longer stand watching her suffering and drove her home. Then the kids and I returned to our tent.

The problem with Mom wasn't that she couldn't enjoy different things nor even that she couldn't deal with disappointment. It was that she couldn't

let go of her expectations. She wanted things to be the way she wanted, but pretty much didn't expect them to work out anyhow. As I was growing up, I remember her often saying, "Don't get your hopes up, or you'll just get disappointed." We can say that, but we can only avoid disappointment if we let go of our attachments to our expectations.

Sometimes our expectations become self-fulfilling prophesies. We expect something of the world or of ourselves or of another person. Because we have those expectations, we behave as though they are reality. If someone says, "Did you know there's going to be a riot on

Hollywood and Vine at 10 pm tomorrow night," a lot of people would go there at that time. And if there were no riot, they might create one to satisfy their expectations.

I recently spoke to a friend of mine who lives in Utah. She told me that people in that state have a big concern about the millenium, that is, the year 2000, because they believe that the world will end at that time. If that's true, we only have a few years left. We can never tell how long we will be alive, anyhow. But apparently a lot of people are preparing for this time by buying weapons so they can protect themselves when this disaster occurs.

I don't understand why one might need a weapon if the entire world is going to end, but the important point is that they are building their lives around an idea. There is no way to know what will happen in the future and no way to know when and how we will die. A good reason for us to do the best we can in every moment.

Thoughts fill our minds, and we take them very seriously as though they are the truth revealed to us by some higher power. They are only thoughts, the sensory impressions of the working of our minds. If we see them in such a way, we have a better chance of letting them go. For that is all we need to do, see them and let them go, just as we see a butterfly, appreciate its beauty, and turn our attention to the next moment.

We can't control our thoughts by sheer will power. We need to see them and let them go, not resist them or push them away or pursue them. Gritting our teeth only gives us a pain in the jaw. If I say to you, "Don't think of elephants. Don't think of pink elephants or gray elephants or circus elephants or elephants in the wild," what is in your thoughts. Elephants, of course. We could sit an hour and try not to think of those elephants any more, but we'd probably just add different kinds of

elephants and different situations elephants might be in. Baby elephants and lumbering, trunk-swaying elephants, and we would get tense and tense, more and more frustrated, so caught up in our task that nothing else exists.

But relax and watch the elephants walk across your mind and wave so long, and they'll be no problem.

Expectations are just more thoughts. They don't have much to do with the real world. They distract us from our precious moments of here and nowness and get in the way of our seeing clearly.

We expect ourselves to be perfect, important, significant, advanced, and more. When we are not those things, we become judgemental and disappointed. This happens to a lot of people as they continue their meditation practice; it can be a sticking point.

Our minds settle, and we see more clearly. We see who we are and what we do and are not always pleased with ourselves. We may say to ourselves, "I am no good. I've failed. I can't do any better than this, and it's not good enough." So we reject ourselves, have no compassion for ourselves, and haven't yet attained the wisdom that allows us to accept with passing judgement. We are human beings, and that includes our imperfections.

Expectations prevent us from seeing ourselves and what exists in our world with clarity. For example, our relationship, marriage, partnership may break up. We may say that it was all the other person's fault because they did this and they did that and they did a very long list of transgressions that don't fit into our expectations. We may not understand that relationships are interactions and depend on both parties' efforts in order to be tenable. If it's somebody else's fault all the time, we don't have to take the "blame," but we also don't get any credit. It is up to us to do the best we can in order to be happy.

When we can't open up enough to see what went wrong, we can't have better luck with our next relationship. We push other people away out of fear of failure or we continue to have relationships that never quite work out.

A whole industry has been founded based on people's inability to stop smoking. It is a very difficult problem and can not be accomplished with sheer will power and gritted teeth. A business arose based on people's addiction to nicotine. Different methods are available to workshops,

support groups, psychotherapy, hypnosis. Paraphenalia and medications are for sale, promising to help us to overcome a habit that can shorten our lives.

Changing our habits is very difficult. Most of us expect that we should be able to do it, and then we are disappointed with ourselves. We try all the ways others suggest, and we feel like failures if we can't do what's expected. Until we can relax, open up, be clear, we can't do it.

When I first met my teacher, he smoked. He preferred a pipe, but I also saw him smoke cigarettes. After a few years, he decided to stop. He said, "A lot of my students are giving up smoking; I should also give up smoking." We didn't even realize how unhealthy a habit it was back then. But he decided, and he stopped. He never went around picking up other's cigarette packs, or borrowing cigarettes, or even sitting next to someone while they were smoking so he could inhale the smoke although I've certainly seen such behavior in others who were trying to break the habit. Suto was very zen. He didn't think about it; he just did it. Make a decision and do it. Don't wobble.

He didn't have expectations of himself, as far as I could tell. He just saw that he didn't need to do that anymore, so he stopped doing it. But he was very advanced in his practice. He was open and easy and relaxed.

I will just mention the posture of meditation, because I notice that some people sit tensely. Posture is very important in practice. If you have the position and posture down, it's much easier to reach a state of samadhi. When you sit tense and tight, you're using a lot of muscle power to hold yourself up. When you relax and sit as though you are hanging by a wire from the ceiling to the top of your head, your body is in line. Then energy flows smoothly through your chakras. Put your mind in your belly. Relax and be open and aware. Zen meditation is not about being in a trance state; it's about being as aware as possible. We don't need to take any action, but we do need to be aware.

When we expect to do something in a certain way and then we find that doesn't work, a conflict is created inside of our minds. That conflict distracts us from our real work. We need to become mindful and see this process without expectations.

What will happen to us if we drop our expectations? Will we never achieve anything? Can we never have an impact on the world? If everyone dropped their expectations, we would all live peacefully. We would be living in the moment and not living in our gray matter. Not saying things based on our intellectualization, rather on the reality of the here and now.

## What about Karma?

The other day at the grocery store, I ended up in the checkout line behind an elderly man who seemed to be having a bad day. As I maneuvered my cart behind him, someone was blocking the space, and my cart was sticking out into the aisle. He turned to look at me and said, "You're blocking the aisle," in a hostile tone. I looked up the aisle, saw no one coming either way, and responded, "No one's coming right now. I'll move as soon as there's room."

He glared at me but turned his attention away, to the woman in front of him who had just backed her cart out of the checkout line to leave it inside the market area. He pointed to the sign which read, "Please push your cart through" and spoke harshly. "You're supposed to push your cart through." She looked at him and then turned away, ignoring what he said.

I could see the frustration and anger growing out of his pores. As the customer in front of him, this woman who had ignored him, was paying for her groceries, he kept leaning on his cart, pushing it forward inch by inch, eventually running it right into her. She said, "I'm still standing here," but he barely gave way.

Finally, he checked out, paying for some basic food items with food stamps and for a quart of Scotch whiskey with cash. He walked away, surrounded by a cloud of negative energy exuding from his very being.

It would be easy to make excuses for someone like this, an old man, poor and forced to survive on food stamps, drinking to numb his loneliness. Obviously life did not provide him with what he had expected or what he wanted. Perhaps he could feel nothing but anger at the world and pity for himself and his situation. But the truth is that he was creating his own suffering at each moment. This is what karma is about.

We can search for ways to see the world. We can ask, "How did we get here? What makes us what we are? How can we change ourselves? What happens to us when we die?"

In the Theistic position God determines whether we go to heaven or hell. We achieve forgiveness by the grace of God and mediation of a priest.

From the view of Fatalism we cannot change our fate, which comes from some mysterious impersonal power.

Or we can view life as being an accident, where everything is the result of Indeterminism. We are lucky or unlucky by sheer coincidence.

In Zen Buddhism Karma is the action and reaction in the sphere of human conduct and the experience is natural law. We are present as causal determinant between past and future. Action in the present is the most important as it determines future. Every action is willfully performed, whether of thought, word or deed. No deity can suspend the law. Zen Buddhists don't pray, but rather regulate their actions to bring them into harmony with universal law: if we do evil, we try to discover our mistakes and rectify our ways. Each person and no one else is the architect of one's own destiny.

Karma is like planting a seed. Each deed we perform plants a seed which produces a fruit.

The Deed must be morally good or morally evil to produce fruit and must be conditioned by a volitional impulse which leaves a trace in the psyche of the doer and so leads his destiny in the direction determined by the effect of the deed. The effect is primarily determined by the intention not the action itself. If a deed cannot be carried out, the intention can still create karma. Only a deed that is free from desire, anger and illusion is free of karma.

Vipaka is the ripening fruit. When fruit ripens it falls on the one responsible. Karma takes effect in one way or another on the actor, in this life or another.

Karma means there is no need for guilt or self-flagellation. Create karma, receive effects, change behavior to improve karma.

Intention creates karma but one must consider those behaviors which are not conscious as well as those which are. This is why mindfulness and clear seeing are so important. We must always look to the results of our behavior even though we can't control those results. It helps us to understand connections.

Sow a thought and reap an act;  
Sow an act and reap a habit;  
Sow a habit and reap a character;  
Sow a character and reap a destiny.

Mind is the ultimate determinant of our destiny. Mind can make a heaven of hell and a hell of heaven. To change your karma, change your thoughts.

The fruits of karma don't necessarily ripen in one lifetime. We can see people get away with murder. Our Behavior is not determined. Physical limitations or dysfunctional family don't need to cripple our lives Karma helps us to understand why we react in certain ways, what our buttons are.

Rebirth is not reincarnation. There are Eight kinds of consciousness: Sense consciousness: eye; Sense consciousness: ear; Sense consciousness: nose; Sense consciousness: tongue; Sense consciousness: body. Then there is the intellectual consciousness; the ego-consciousness and the storehouse consciousness (alaya-vijnana), which is a repository which stores impressions of our deeds and experiences

The seeds are the nucleus of karmic energy. The Storehouse consciousness not only stores seeds but carries them from one moment to the next, one life to another. Life is a working out of the karmic seeds in our storehouse consciousness. It is the product of our own will

Cultivate the way of good actions, plant good seeds, reap good results A bodhisattva is concerned with what does (cause), but not what receives (effect). We cannot control the effect, but we can control what causes the effect by our attitude. Ordinarily we are always demanding something of life; we can never can be happy. If we can learn to accept life at it is and deal with it the best we can, then we will be content.

There is also Collective karma: the karma of a nation, culture or people. Peace, harmony, mutual and unconditional love begins with individual karma

If there is righteousness in the heart, there will be beauty in the character.

If there is beauty in the character, there will be harmony in the home.

If there is harmony in the home, there will be order in the nation,

If there is order in the nation, there will be peace in the world.

When we sit in meditation, we produce the pure and calm mind. This brings a calm, peaceful, happy life which transcends our ego selves and we realize True Self which is No-Self.

## Compassion, An Article for the *L.A. Times*

The other day, a friend's parked car was totaled near Melrose and Crescent Heights. Coming back from an errand, she saw that the street where she had parked was blocked off by police, a police helicopter was circling overhead, and the K-9 corps were sniffing the yards and alleys. Talking to the people who were standing around watching the action, she discovered that a man had committed two armed robberies, stolen a car, and, driving it about sixty miles an hour on this residential street, had smashed into her car, pushing it into another car. If she had returned five minutes earlier, she would have been in her car when it was hit.

Just another day in the city; random violence is not an extraordinary experience any more. Needless to say, she felt both lucky that she hadn't there at the time of impact as well as invaded by the loss of her car, her time, and her peaceful day. Her anxiety, however, was somewhat alleviated when people she had never met before reached out to her. During the three-hour wait until the police had finished their search, she was offered the use of a phone, a place to sit and wait, a glass of water or a cup of coffee, and, mainly, emotional support. Understanding. Compassion.

It's hard to be open to each other in these times. We don't feel safe. We drive around in our bubbles of glass and metal, keeping ourselves separate from the rest of the community. After the earthquake, when the freeways and roads were impassable or the drives took three to four times as long as before, people carpooled. But as things have settled down, we're back to one in a car, going our separate ways. As we walk down the street, we rarely look each other in the eye. And if there are homeless people begging, we try not to look at all.

Reaching out to help someone in need gives us a feeling of rightness, of the way things are meant to be. That better part of our selves, our spiritual aspect, deserves expression. It comes out more easily at times of crisis and disaster, when we see human beings in need and forget to ask, "Are those people like me? Is it safe to reach out to them?"

During the riots in ninety-two, people from the neighborhoods where the violence was happening went out to help the victims they saw on the TV reports. Afterwards, people came from all over the Southern California area to help with the clean-up as well as to donate food and clothing. It was the same after this year's earthquake. Fires and floods bring us together. But what about everyday life?



By closing ourselves off, we deny our spiritual nature. When we help others, we feel good, because that's what spirituality is about: finding our connections to our own better nature, to all other beings, to the earth we share together.

In Buddhism, compassion is one of the main characteristics we work to develop. It is not the same as pity or sympathy; these latter two feelings separate us from the person who is suffering, make us feel somehow better because we can afford to feel sorry for someone in trouble.

Compassion, on the other hand, means feeling with, truly understanding the other person's experience of suffering, and then being there for them (not to fix their lives, not to tell them what to do, but to help in whatever way we can, offering the needed glass of water.

As we develop our spiritual nature, we become more peaceful, happier, and ultimately enlightened beings. Progressing along the path makes us more able to reach out to others. It works the other way, too. The more we can reach out to each other, the more our own spirituality grows.

## No Guilt, No Shame

As a Westerner, brought up in a Jewish family in a puritanical country, it took a while before I could accept the lack of "sin," "evil," "guilt," "shame," or even "blame" in Buddhism. [One of our sisters] has taken an interesting look at karma, which is best seen as cause and effect, and, yes, we are responsible for our actions.

However, karma is caused by the intentions of our actions, not their result. We have no control over the results. If I jump in the lake to save someone who is drowning, but do not get to them in time, there is no need for me to be ashamed.

In Buddhism, we look at things that turn out badly as mistakes. We try to follow the path, and if we make a mistake, we need to learn from it. Guilt and shame are wasted energy. Neither of them benefits us. But to see our mistakes and not repeat them is very beneficial to ourselves and to the world.

After the Pope said some very negative things about Buddhism, showing a lot of ignorance on his part, the monks in Sri Lanka boycotted his visit and refused to meet with him. They didn't even want him to apologize. They wanted him to not do it again. No guilt, no shame, no mea culpa. Just greater awareness.

We are all connected, and everything that happens arises together. Knowing this all we can do is learn from our mistakes.

# Tributes from Buddhist Friends and Students

## My Friend Sarika

*by Ven. Thich An-Minh*

We often talk about perfection in our Buddhist zendos and temples, but there are few among us that know of it in every moment of his or her mental or ethical lives. Certainly my sister Sarika was not a fully perfected human being in either of those senses. Nonetheless, Sarika Dharma was able to root herself on the Buddhist path, and with an iron determination, and despite her crippling pain, advance down that path somewhat further than most of us, enough steps on the path to become a Bodhisattva of the first order, in the likeness of her favorite, Kwan Yin.

In my lifetime, Sarika Dharma has been my closest Dharma friend. Sarika has been my closest woman friend for the longest time. And though our interests in life diverged, we still were devoted to one another--not in the more demonstrative ways of our youth, but in a more reserved, Zen fashion of long practicing monks and nuns.

The other night, when I was breaking up during our first memorial service, Karuna leaned over to me and said, "It's hard isn't it?" What she meant was that as she had once lost her best friend and her best Dharma friend when Dr. Thien-An died, and she felt that my grief was similar. I thank her for feeling that.

You see, I have been somewhat taken aback to find out recently that no one seems to know how close Sarika and I were to one another. Not surprising, our early relationship is dated, and most of the people we shared most of our time with are gone now, or have moved away.

I first met Sarika in the Winter of 1976. She was 38 then and I was 31. I first got to know her later in the summer of the following year. She came in for summer training, and lived downstairs in our Zendo. The first thing I was attracted to about Sarika was her quick wit. And she was an incisive thinker! In those days, I had so inundated myself with all sorts of wonderful and inspirational stuff and blather--I had finally found someone to share time with and ruminate about the world with! We were both so enthusiastic about what we were experiencing here at our Center with our beloved Master Thien-An, with Shinzen, with Geshe, and a cast of many others, that our commonality of interest drew us

together. Also, we were in the process of beginning our meditation practices in earnest and were desperately trying to slow our lives down. She was pretty wild and sassy and outrageous and mischievous in those days, and I was pretty restless a lot of the time, so we became fast friends, and spent many nights on the town, when we weren't sitting of course, and sometimes we would practice sitting while we were out on the town.

For about three years Sarika and I intensified our practices and played whenever that was possible. However, Sarika was already breaking down physically during this period. It seemed like she would be in the hospital every summer for bronchial problems, and eventually she became very ill with a rare blood disease.

Around this same time, I was close to her when she went through her change of sexual orientation. We spent many long evenings going over and over what was happening to her. Mostly I listened and tried to cajole her when she was down, support her always, and hold her when necessary. She would mother me too--on the too many occasions when the young boy in me needed it.

In November of 1980 our Master and Patriarch, Dr. Thien-An died. For all at our Center this was a tremendous shock and loss. It has taken many years for us to recover some of the magic of those days with him. In recent days listening to Sarika give a talk sometimes brought back memories of his cadences and his talks, and the magic.

And then both Sarika and I moved from the Center, off in separate directions for about six or seven years. I might have talked to her twice on the phone during those years.

About seven years ago, we again had a chance to be together again here at the Center. Although we had been so distant long, our earlier closeness was easy to pick up again. But now her physical problems had become even worse, and she was coming out of a long term marriage that she didn't want to end. For some reason, my attempts at comforting her during this period were received better. As for me, I had been very reclusive for many years and her presence was most appreciated, in those first few months especially.

Unlike earlier years, our relationship in these later years has been more sedate, filled mostly with weekly or bi-weekly breakfasts where we would spend forty or so minutes checking in with one another, sharing a few thoughts about our center, that sort of thing. There have been other moments, less frequent until recently when crises have arisen in our

personal lives, when we would comfort each other the best way we could. Unfortunately, she was in so much pain so much of the time, that even my attempts at humor, which had sometimes worked in the past, mostly didn't work as well anymore.

Many of you here have known Sarika in recent years so I need only mention that the flowering of her dharma teaching, and the kinds of compassionate giving that became her nature, all came despite her pain and suffering. Many of you also saw her meditation practice and teaching come into fruition during these last years, again, despite her pain and suffering.

But I wonder how many of us really comprehended what she was going through? She was so good at masking her vast misery with an unparalleled composure, that some of you seem mystified by her seemingly sudden passing. Such courageous decorum! Finally, I need to tell you that many of her dear family and friends tried with enormous amounts of loving energy to bring her through this last of her many crises. Many of us sat with her for long hours waiting and hoping for her to wake up. For two weeks we watched our sister struggle valiantly to wake-up. But she couldn't. We joked and pleaded and chanted and cried, and sat some more, and nothing worked to revive her.

She needed the rest too much. Her human road had become too arduous, too filled with the fog of pain-killers, or the miasma of painful, sleepless nights. And though she was strong, a pug, a Taurus, a survivor, her body gave out before her heart-mind, and the best of Sarika was thus left defenseless.

## **`Kind Brown Eyes Smiling**

*by BabaClay Hathor*

Kind brown eyes smiling,  
Belly laughs,  
Sharing the Dharma,  
Over dinner.

Brown robe ahead,  
Kihin,  
Eyes cast down,  
I follow your footprints.

Bell rings,  
Sound rises and fades,  
Breath comes and goes,  
The wheel turns.

## **Skillful Means**

*by Maitri Vati Sarika*

"Why do I feel so disconnected?" was the question that was churning around in my mind like a koan about the time I met a woman named Renee on the Internet. Her messages were so kind that I was immediately drawn to her. We chatted for a while, and I learned she was a Buddhist monk with the religious name Sarika Dharma. I asked her to teach me how to meditate; I was nervous about that, thinking that she might not have time for me. But she was happy to do it! She suggested that perhaps the question "Why do I feel so disconnected?" could be asked in another way: "How do I see our connections?"

After a short time under her guidance, I began to see those connections in a most profound way, and I was changed forever. When I thanked her for helping me, she would take no credit. The bliss I felt from this spiritual awakening didn't last more than a month or two, but I couldn't let go and was stuck in my mind once again. I hated myself. She suggested I send loving-kindness to myself. I couldn't do it. So she said, "practice loving me." I was so taken aback by this! Wasn't that self-serving on her part to suggest such a thing? But after a few moments reflection, I saw that this was the perfect practice for me. It fit me like a glove.

So, I whittled down that feeling of universal connection into a fine point, with her as the object. When I sent her loving-kindness, she would turn around and send it right back to me. I couldn't give love to myself directly, but when I gave it to her, it came back to me! Maybe I was beginning to learn something.

Of course, I became attached to her. This little self needed her! But then she gave me the greatest gift of all. She showed me in a way I could not deny or forget that everything is impermanent, and that we are all connected in a most profoundly ordinary way. My heart fills with immense gratitude. Thank you, Sarika, for everything, and nothing at all.

## **Little Bird**

*by Suvarna Upeksha Sarika*

So few days gone by  
Since you perched upon your zafu  
Striking the bell to the Ten Directions  
Venerating the 88 Buddhas

Perched atop your bright blue bed  
Soaking up the energy you left there  
I notice the open window  
And realize you've flown away.

Just one hour ago  
Standing at a different bed  
Where machinery clicked and gasped and glowed  
I chanted  
Hoping to call you back  
Not knowing yet  
What you'd already decided.

A little bird  
Her heart-mind filled with the joy of morning  
Hopped inside the Zendo door  
Sang with you awhile  
And then departed.

## **Kwan Yin**

*by Rev. Vajra Karuna*

Set free a friend, an ally  
From her suffering,  
Left behind an empty seat  
Few Strong enough to fill.

Thich An-Tinh

## **Wise and Gentle Teacher**

*by Pat Allen from Sarjevo*

Wise and gentle teacher, beloved friend, Rev. Sarika transformed my life. She encouraged me on the path, and she taught me what it means to give and receive unconditional love. Knowing her has been one of the great blessings of my life, and I will always be deeply grateful.

I am writing this amid the devastation of post-war Bosnia, where I'm working as a volunteer teacher. It's not easy, but ever since I became involved with this work, Sarika has encouraged me and with her love and strength sustained me, helping me look for wise ways to help beings. Rev. Sarika believed strongly that Buddhist training could be expressed through social action, but she always pointed me back to the

source, the compassionate Buddha nature.

She had much compassion for the suffering of the people of Bosnia, was glad that I found a job here to do. So I try, day by day, to do it to the very best of my ability, and I offer the merit for Rev. Sarika, and for all beings. That is my memorial and my offering for her, in gratitude and love.

**Om mani padme hum**

**The dewdrop slips into the shining sea.**

## **Sarika Was Kind**

*by Jon Bono Pizzurro*

Sarika was kind to me. She looked at me directly. She actually "listened" --deep listening as Thich Nhat Hahn says-- a rare quality. She was a friend, a teacher. We had different viewpoints, different backgrounds as we all do, but she did not make me feel excluded. I never got to say goodbye and thank you. This is my simple salutation:

**Gate Gate Paragate Parasamgate Bodhi Svaha**

So long friend,  
Your friend,  
John Bono Pizzurro



## Yesterday in Meditation

by Ven. Thich An-Minh

Yesterday, we had a meditation here in the Zendo after hearing the news of our venerable sister Sarika's death. I arrived after others were seated, and was in a position to gong the beginning of the meditation. Without much thought, I didn't. Later, Karuna joined us, and at the end of a brief chanting period, she suggested that we go on sitting. So, the meditation begun yesterday had no beginning and no ending. Sister Sarika would have had it no other way.

As we began this meditation yesterday, I was impressed with the depth of the silence, the silence of her absence. Whereas before we were gladdened with her loving grandmotherly voice, pushed to wisdom by her incisive mind, and cajoled to be lighter by her bawdy wit, now, in her absence, there was only her silence.

But she was there, as she is here right now. She touched so many of us with Kwan Yin's compassionate heart, that we are her living testament. Let us remember those moments of touching as we meditate in the coming days, widen even more their influence on us, and thus increase her legacy to all ten fold.

In our tremulous chants later, our hearts were straining to outpour the grief, and let in her lifegiving memories. Too soon. Too much in shock were the few of us who had gathered. Also, some of us knew she was in dire trouble much earlier, and had already begun to grieve. But we chanted through it all, and certainly gave the call to all devas and pretas in the ten directions that,

"Better watchout, here comes that stubborn, old, Zen Buddhist Nunk!"

And so this is but the continuation of a meditation that was never begun, and that is endless, as is Sarika, as are we all. We go on in this realm, Sarika in another realm. But there is No difference, No separation. Our mind plays tricks, and we feel loss. No loss. No-letting go either, for she is here, and we sit with her endlessly.

## Deepest Condolences

by *Br. Gunaratna Sarika*

Dear Ven. Karuna Dharma, Brothers and Sisters,

Deepest condolences to all of you there at I.B.M.C. I know that all of you are feeling the loss as I am of the wonderful and remarkable woman we all knew as Sarika Dharma, I am sending this to Ven. Karuna, but in actuality it is to all my Dharma Brothers and sisters there at I.B.M.C. and abroad.

I, unfortunately cannot be there with all of you during this time of loss, but I am very much with all of you in spirit and in heart. Every day you are all on my mind; each morning I begin my day with Loving kindness meditation, you are all there; each day I sit in meditation, you are all there; each day I walk across the prison compound here in Marion, Ohio, you are all here with me; as the Venerable Sarika Dharma so often told me, there is no you and I; there is no separateness, we are all with her wherever she may be. I like to think she is free of her suffering, as we all know she suffered much in her last days on this turn of the wheel, but I am willing to bet no one ever heard her complain as she went about her Dharma work, only concerned about easing the suffering of other Sentient Beings, a true Bodhisattva in every sense of the word.

I've been thinking a lot since Sr. Suvarna told me of her passing, besides my believing that I have found a new friend in Sr. Suvarna from our brief conversations (as I am only allowed 15 minute calls in here), her words about Ven. Sarika not wanting us to get caught up in her passing, but instead we should remember her for the person that she was. A truly remarkable, loving and compassionate being of the likes that I personally have never known. As Br. Abhaya says in his letter to me, "I would come to I.B.M.C. at 7 AM and there sat this lone monk who gave me her strength, without ever saying a word." Yes, this is the friend, Teacher, and yes, Zen Master that encouraged me in my practice especially when things were very hard for me to understand, she was there. Especially when things seemed very grim, she was there. Especially when things were confusing, she was there. Always giving, never wanting, just sitting there, pointing her finger, just the lone monk holding the mirror, never asking or taking, only offering peace, love and compassion to all alike, she did not discriminate, against any who came into contact with this incredible woman we all knew as Rev. Sarika Dharma.

I ask all of you to join me as I sit in meditation and to chant the Loving Kindness Chant with me (that Rev. Kusala was so gracious to tape for me in his deep baritone of voice). As we chant this chant, let us all focus our energies not only as individuals but also as her friends, loved ones, students and fellow path finders of the Way. Open yourselves to her, she is there. Cannot each and everyone of you feel her presence.

During these next several weeks, allow yourselves to be open to the LOVING KINDNESS I know as the Venerable Bodhisattva Sarika Dharma.

I wish to thank each and everyone of you who took the time to write me and let me know of Her illness and of her passing; her life and passing are a lesson in impermanence. Let us all rejoice that her suffering on this turn of the wheel has ceased.

I have kept you all long enough, may you all be happy, peaceful and free from suffering. . . I look forward to hearing from all of you . . . Dharma Blessings.

Namo Sakyamuni Buddha.  
Namo Amitabha Buddha.  
Namo Kwan Yin Bodhisattva.  
Namo Sarika Dharma Bodhisattva.

“When I drink a cup of green Tea,  
The world outside is at peace.”

## **Atypical Dedication**

*by Ven. Chakara Dhammo, Bhikkhu*

Atypical dedication is a generous way to describe Ven. Sarika Dharma. For the too short time I knew her in her late ministry, she was a very dedicated listener to anyone. She showed fortitude, inexhaustible patience, empathy and perseverance. Being thoughtful and mindful on different levels and planes as well as personal and social, her responses yet were collected and accurate and had common sense applicability. She had the rare insight and form to exhort unqualified openness for everyone. She wanted everything to open, not remain ensconced and encrusted. Her resources and energy were not withheld but meted out wisely into each situation she met with. Selflessly she bestowed compassion upon everyone.

May her spirit rest well. If she returns, may she have a more rewarding life and continue to be the vision of energy of making all one, by opening up everything to the spanless light! As she would say we all can do.

With great respect,  
Chakara Dhammo, Bhikkhu

## **Condolences**

*by Dr. Ralph McDowell*

I wanted to extend to you (and all the other people at IBMC) my sincerest condolences upon the death of Ven. Sarika. I am certain that she is irreplaceable. Even though I didn't know her very well personally, I was honored to be of some small assistance to her in what turned out to be her last days. What is so obtrusively disquieting about impermanence is that we are forever being reminded of it in ways that are so painful, even unendurable. Although I'm scarcely competent to under-

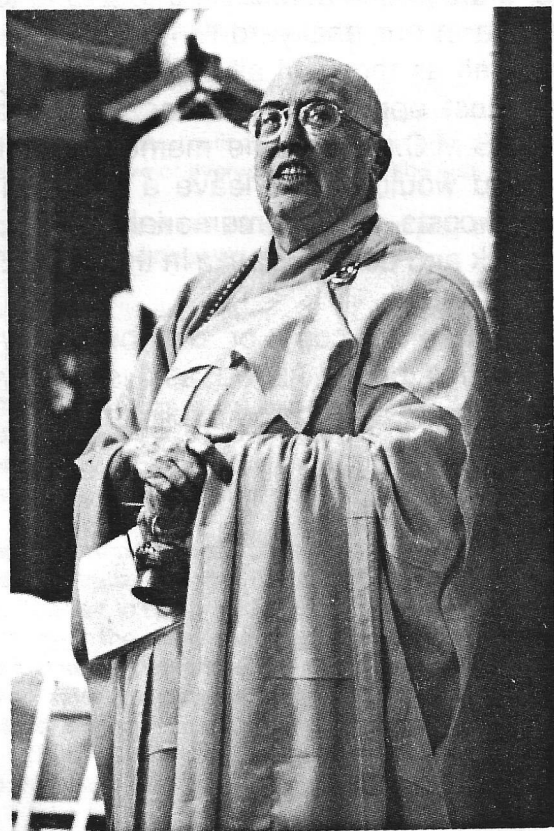
take an intellectual or spiritual venture of the magnitude she achieved, I hope that she is now somewhere or in some conscious state (and I don't pretend to know that she is), she will remember me (and all of us). For I in particular need the "merit" more than most. Later, when I get back to California and back to work, I would like to make some small contribution to whatever memorial you decide to establish in her honor. For the time being, however, I trust that she and you will accept the will for deed.

## **To the Family and Friends**

*by Holley Eller, from Cambridge, England*

Sarika was one of my closest friends, though we were separated by thousands of miles. Although I miss her most terribly, I am glad she is no longer suffering. May she be happy and well in her next life. With much metta to everyone.

# Writings of Ven. Sarika Dharma and Tributes to Her



**International Buddhist Meditation Center**