



# UU Sangha

Volume: XII, Number 4

Journal of the Unitarian Universalist Buddhist Fellowship Spring 2011

## CONVOCATION 2011 A RELIGION FOR OUR TIMES

### The Case for a Buddhist Unitarian Universalism

James Ishmael Ford

**T**he Unitarian Universalist divine Forrest Church used to say that our human knowing we are alive and that we will die births all religions. The great urgency to find some meaning and purpose within our fleeting existence has been the heart of the spiritual enterprise. Of course, religions, all of 'em, have been caught up in many other things, as well, sometimes much less savory. Crowd control comes to mind. Most all religions have some variation on the line: (my spiritual text) said it, I believe it, that settles it.

Of course, no it doesn't. It doesn't take complete and radical honesty to see how no religion has a monopoly on truth, or even that truth is always obvious in any, any religion's assertions.

Closer to home, and to my own experience, this discontinuity between what I saw of life and

what my childhood Fundamentalist Christian faith asserted about reality, led me out of that church. And it is what drove me into a Zen monastery. Frankly, this disconnect between assertions of what is and what was actually going on what caused me to leave that monastery, as well. This quest for a closer congruence between the assertions of reality and reality as I experience it, is what eventually led me to find another, less dogmatic Zen practice. And it is what has led me to enter the Unitarian Universalist church, and eventually to become a minister. Truthfully, I'm not done. Those constantly arising discontinuities continue to challenge and inform me.

Some time ago I wrote a blog column and titled it "all religions are false." And, let me tell you: I meant it. My experience is that the religions we've received are in fact all of them limited. They are larded with all sorts of assertions about the world that contradict what our eyes see, and assert many truth-claims about our human condition and destiny that make no sense in broad daylight. I will spare you the litany of falsehoods associated with just about all religions. But I'm sure you can think of a number of inconsistencies or right out whoppers in your favorite religions without breaking into a sweat.

And, this is equally important. At the same time, I could have, and may yet write a blog column titled "all religions are true." There is no doubt in my heart there are subtle and wonderful things to be found within pretty much all of them from Christianity to Judaism to Islam to Hinduism to the kaleidoscopic varieties of earth-centered faiths. Each contains pearls of great price. I think how we all can find those pearls by opening our hearts wide. Religions, after all, are, in addition to those less savory things, the treas-

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David Dae An Rynick Roshi and James Myoun Ford Roshi

## Notes from the Editor



Greetings.

The Convocation was a very special time. I've been fortunate in being able to attend all of them. Each has been very different and very full. In this issue we bring some of the Convocation to you.

There will be more later, especially from the joint teachings of David Dae An Rynick Roshi and James Myoun Ford Roshi, of Boundless Way Zen. Right now, we bring you James' dharma talk on the case for a Buddhist Unitarian Universalism.

Rev. Patty Franz (Chaplin Pat) works with prisoners through the Church of the Larger Fellowship and gives a practical introduction to beginning a prison ministry. Is this important? Just read the letters from the prisoner-members and decide. Not everyone can work inside a prison or jail (but there is one in your county if not your city) but please, think about being a penpal.

With this issue we begin what we intend to be a regular feature: articles on starting UU sanghas, especially peer-led sanghas, growing them, and keeping them alive and healthy. As we head toward General Assembly in Charlotte, North Carolina, it is especially appropriate that we hear from Darla Davis, founder of Piedmont Mindfulness Sangha at the Piedmont UU Church in Charlotte. We also have a story by Janet Cooper Haas on the difference that the Piedmont Mindfulness Sangha makes in the community. Read these and then write for us about your sangha.

At each of the UUBF Convocations I have found something to bring home to the Mindfulness Practice Group of Annapolis. In one of the Art Practice workshops led by Mike Gold, we made "weathergrams" (some call them "treegrams", I call them "Zen Weathergrams"). One of the ones I made at the workshop is at the top; it's also among the ones we made in Annapolis and left in the rain. Make them. Let go of them.

**Gassho, Robert Ertman, Editor**



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ure troves of human wisdom, the repositories of the deep intuitions of many generations.

The problem is that in each and every one of them, we need to sort wheat from chaff, noise from message. In order to find the true within religions we need to bring our hearts open, and our heads clear. I've spent the better part of my life engaged in this process. I started in, as I've said, a Fundamentalist Christian household. I've listened to teachers in many traditions and scoured their spiritual texts. I lived in a Buddhist monastery for several years. I'm now an authorized teacher in two Zen lineages and one of the guiding teachers of the Boundless Way Zen network. I've attended theological schools, studying not only the arts of ministry, but also the philosophy of religions, earning an academic MA as well as the MDiv. I've thought, a lot; I've prayed, more falteringly; and I've meditated, again lots; in short I've examined my life and the lives of this world in the light of several religious traditions. And over the years I've come to some conclusions about what is wheat, and what is chaff, about what in religions actually matters.

Now, as most here know, I've come to stand with my feet placed firmly within two spiritual traditions. One foot stands in the reformed Zen Buddhism that has planted itself in our Western soil over the last hundred odd years. It is rooted in some ancient spiritual practices, and insights, which now live within my heart and inform who I am. Over this weekend we'll explore more closely what that means, for me, for David, and hopefully for each of you.

However, I want to hold up how many of us who also identify as Unitarian Universalists come to Buddhism with a bit of a twist. Salvation in classical Buddhism in pretty much all versions, was to end the cycle of rebirth, which was believed to be at its heart, suffering. That's not my Buddhism. Rather for the most part it is the highly psychologized Buddhisms of the West, and particularly within my experience of Zen Buddhism, that I have found salvation, the heart healing we all long for in this world marked by suffering. This healing is discovered by bringing the divided heart/mind together, binging the many parts of who we are back home, finding the many lives within this one life.

The Buddhism of my experience finds suffering and grace, hurt and joy, as well as my ethical choices are all informed by a deep knowing discovered through my disciplines and life that every blessed thing is united, is in a very real sense "one," or using a traditional Buddhist metaphor, "empty." This spaciousness, this boundlessness is our true home. And for me this discovery as a personal truth, a deep knowing, or, again, in the language of this tradition this great not knowing, is the point of all religion, and what makes it worth putting up with a fair amount of nonsense and bother.

While not a Buddhist text, the Chinese classic the *Tao Te Ching* sings of this home, as at first nameless, after all ultimately words, all words fail, hence not knowing; and then named, after all at some point we must speak, our words and actions are intimate and of great consequence: "The nameless" the *Tao Te Ching* tells us, "is the beginning of heaven and earth. The named is the mother of the ten thousand things." The nameless, the empty, the great void, the Way, if you wish God, if you wish Love: is our source, our sustenance and our eternal return. Whatever our preferred placeholder for this experience, it is our family name. And, this is equally important, it is found here in this world, in this body, by you and by me.

This is my heart's knowing. These twin truths of unity and separation birthing as love in this world informs everything I do and am.

And, as you may have noticed, my other foot is placed joyfully within Unitarian Universalism. Sometimes called "liberal religion," embracing the way of the rational heart.

And here we find the liberal of my liberal Buddhism.

I first came to Unitarian Universalism because I felt a lack in Zen as I encountered it in the sixties, seventies and eighties. As I said all religions are false, each has its limitations, none offers the truth with a big capital "T." And while Buddhism may be a bit less false than most, it too has limitations. Again, I won't bore you with details here. A little research will show you a fair amount in its teachings you can find internally contradictory, silly or wrong-headed.

The thing that mostly concerned me, however, wasn't doctrinal. The issue of whether there is rebirth in the sense of our actions directly result-

ing in the birth of a human being who in sense may be said to be me, or if each breath presents a new life, and it is all resolved right here, right now, leads to the same disciplines.

The issue that led me into the Unitarian Universalist church was that there just wasn't much attention given to community in contemporary Western Zen. Oh, a tip of the hat here and there. But, if a Western Buddhist wanted a spiritual home for their kids, pretty much everyone I knew ended up in a UU church. If someone wanted a spiritual community as something more than a place to do the discipline, sort of like going to a spiritual gym, and then home, pretty much the only place where I could go that didn't contradict the parts of Zen I found useful and true, turned out to be at the local UU church. So, bottom line I wanted full spiritual community, and there was precious little of that at the local Zen center. Instead, I found it instead at the UU church.

But, I also got something more. In fact much more.

I vividly remember my first visit to a UU church. Hoping for so much. Expecting a lot. And falling asleep during the sermon. But, as an old Zen hand, I know about falling asleep during spiritual practices. And I returned. And returned. And I found something very interesting, some healthful wheat amidst the chaff.

Unitarian Universalism has two principal currents and two methodologies that exist sometimes smoothly, sometimes not so smoothly which are derived ultimately from the two traditions that formed the Association. The first is Unitarianism, which has historically been concerned with reason and ethics. The slogan for this current has been "salvation by character." The second is Universalism, which has been concerned with healing, and for which the slogan has been "God is love." Or, "Love over creed." Love. The same love it seems as I found in my Zen practice, although in Zen this was often expressed as compassion. Love, compassion, the same or different? Maybe we can unpack that some other time.

Once I understood these twin currents, salvation by character and love over creed, I felt I'd found the completion of my spiritual quest. Not the completion of the practice, of the doing, but I had found all the parts I needed for a whole lifetime, for my spiritual maturation, and for how I

could respond in this world to what is.

Of course there's still that all religions are false thing. The Buddha warned how we need to take up our practice with diligence, and while looking for wise counsel to never put another head on top of our own. Unitarian Universalism in practice is pretty good at the spiritual community thing. We know how to organize ourselves, to provide a nurturing shelter for our children, to engage each other, and to reach out into the world. This year's focus of this congregation in standing for marriage equality is simply part of who we have always been. We're very good at the doing.

Not so much so with the reflection part, with holding our hearts to account. When I arrived I pretty much had to bring my own spiritual practice. As most of us moved away from Christianity most also forgot how to pray, the classic spiritual discipline of Western religions. Things are getting better. Chalice circles are important. Meditation, usually Buddhist, has become common in UU churches. But, that discipline part is still pretty fragile. We need to be careful to cultivate the opportunities for deep reflection for ourselves and for each other. I hope our time together over these next couple of days will hold up some of what this might look like.

What practice is, in all its different forms is reaching out with an open heart. All we need is to stretch our hand out. It will be taken up. Call it God. Call it Lord. Call it the great Boundless. Call it the Way. It has many names. But, it will respond. Let us remember the whole way: open heart, critical mind, and a hand reaching out. This is love. This is compassion. This is the healing of our individual hearts. This is the healing of the world.

And this is my confession. This is my faith. I hope it brings you a word of hope. I hope it encourages you to trust your head and to know that doesn't mean shutting down your heart. Here are the slogans of my heart. Sit down, shut up, and pay attention. Salvation by character. And love over creed. Always, love over creed.

Our way, however we call it, is ultimately about love. It is about reaching out our hearts and hands. Do it, and you will find a hand taking yours. Call it Quanyin, call it Jesus. Love doesn't care. Love just is.

This is my faith.

## PRISON MINISTRY

By Chaplin Pat (Rev. Patty Franz)  
And Prisoner-Members of the CLF

Working with prisoners can be both joyful and challenging, so it's great when folks who are interested in prison work can connect with each other to share resources and offer mutual support. UUBF's Convocation in April 2011 offered just such an opportunity for attendees to talk together about working with prisoners interested in Buddhism in local jails and prisons, as well as by mail.

The UU Church of the Larger Fellowship [CLF] offers liberal spiritual support by mail to almost 400 prisoners around the U.S. More than 10% of the CLF's membership is behind bars! About half of them are writing to a (non-incarcerated) UU penpal through CLF's "Letter Writing Ministry", but dozens more CLF prisoner-members are still on the waitlist. Many of the CLF's prisoner-members who are interested in Buddhism are also receiving the UUBF's *Sangha* newsletter by mail (thanks to your donations to UUBF!).

The CLF's Letter Writing Ministry matches our prisoner-members with UUs around the country for an exchange of friendly letters. It's a well-structured program with ongoing support for letter-writers—but the CLF cannot guarantee to match only Buddhists with Buddhists, pagans with pagans, etc. For more info about the CLF's Letter Writing Ministry, see [www.clfu.org/prisonministry](http://www.clfu.org/prisonministry) or write to the CLF Prison Ministry at 25 Beacon St, Boston, MA 02108.

The following groups offer prisoners Buddhist spiritual support by mail, and I believe all of them are looking for "penpals" or volunteer teachers who will correspond with prisoners interested in Buddhism:

[www.liberationprisonproject.org](http://www.liberationprisonproject.org);  
[www.ratnapaceinitiative.org](http://www.ratnapaceinitiative.org);  
[www.shambhalaprisoncommunity.org](http://www.shambhalaprisoncommunity.org);  
[www.prisondharma network.org](http://www.prisondharma network.org).

The Prison Dharma Network also offers an online community for sharing resources and support. Interested UU Buddhists are invited to email Samara at [pdn2@indra.com](mailto:pdn2@indra.com) to ask to join their community site, and Samara also tells me she can send P.D.N.'s training manual and other re-

sources.

UUs can offer important spiritual support to prisoners by volunteering in their local jails and prisons—whether their focus is specifically Buddhist or more generically multi-faith /meditation—and volunteers are also often needed as library aides, facilitators for AA / NA, etc. A map of Federal prisons can be found at [www.bop.gov](http://www.bop.gov) ; for state prisons, search on your state and "Dep Corrections" and then look for a map or list of Prisons/Institutions/Facilities; for local jails, check under your county's Sheriff's Department.

### What Difference Can You Make?

When I was preparing the workshop, I decided to ask CLF prisoner-members that question. Here are some excerpts from their letters to the UUBF Convocation:

**Alton wrote:** Once upon a time, I used to go to church. In those days, I did a lot of volunteering. A group of us regularly painted members' houses; two of us went to a couple local convalescent homes and visited people we did not know and had religious services with them; I handled our church library... and a minister friend of mine and several others (including myself) went to a local Correctional Facility and had mid-week services with the prisoners there.

That was one of the most joyous periods in my life. I was not Buddhist then, but I am keenly aware of cause and effect presently. I can see now that a major source of my joy then, it stemmed from what I did. (I don't say this of just volunteering in prison or jails.) Just volunteering or helping another person was a direct cause that created the effect of joy and happiness in my own life back then. And - who knows?? It may do the same for other who have a desire to do something similar.

From this side of the fence... In my state, Buddhist groups usually have NO volunteers at all. It is something that many of us wish we had. It is very exciting to have sincere volunteers come inside and spend a little time and celebrate our practice together.

So. That's about it in a nutshell. Thank you for wanting to hear my opinion.

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**Robbie wrote:** For anyone interested in prison ministry, you're in for a rewarding experience. First, we are a captive audience and we're very hungry for outside input. Most prison chapels are ruled by conservative Christian groups which are for the most part good. They lack the diversity and experience of outside groups like the Buddhists and the liberal theology of the Unitarian Universalist church.

For anyone interested in coming to prison, there is a lot of work and red tape involved, but the rewards for your service are endless. To be able to connect with someone on your own spiritual path and to guide them and watch them grow in their knowledge and understanding is priceless. Your efforts will offer hope for us who are shunned by the Christian church. Your acceptance will renew our spirit and start us down the right path.

It's not necessary to come into the prison to help. You can volunteer with the CLF [as a] penpal, or even donate books. Everything you do makes a huge difference in our life.

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**Martin wrote:** [Contact with people from the] Free-World would give knowledge of another world that is real and not TV or movie, prison made up by Hollywood. Prison is more boring than dangerous. UUs would gain a friend they can help and that will enlighten their world. UU Buddhists will gain insight into prison life, like as at times I feel like a 'monk' in a cell with all the time to explore my inner self, like Buddha. UU Buddhists can make a great impact in teaching inmates another way to think and to feel that will help them, as 90% get released back to the community and need this kind of help. If they do not want to volunteer inside, they could set up a self-study course with readings and books, then issue certificates of accomplishment. Anyone can give a class and issue certificates, and it will look good toward rehabilitation for prison authorities. I would drink in any books for my thirst for knowledge and experience. So thank you for any help.

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**Allan wrote:** What prisoners most need is human contact with the free world. We lack supportive caring human beings around us. The guards and other inmates use power and control

in dominating inmates. Even many of the staff hired to service our educational, therapeutic or religious needs fail to provide positive human support. Many prisoners have no one close to visit them. The inmates that do have contacts on the outside are enmeshed in their own dysfunctional lives that helped bring the prisoner to prison in the first place. So first and most important we need someone to show they care for us as human beings. Just be present in our lives. Paying attention to another human being can be a truly transformative practice...

The interdependency of all is a common principle of UUs and for Buddhist UUs. We will be joining you outside the walls in your communities at some point. Will we come back as broken and wounded as we went in? The impermeant barrier of barb wired cannot hide the fact that we are all sown together at this moment. We are all one community.

For those who cannot physically go inside a prison what can you do? You can write. I cannot tell you how hopeful we are when the list for the days mail goes up on the wall. A letter means so much to us. You can touch someone's heart with language. You might be (will be?) touched by what we say as well.

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**Mark wrote:** I feel the UU's should think about developing an entrepreneurial/small business/microenterprise curriculum to assist incarcerated individuals to develop business concepts and plans that can be turned into successful businesses upon return to society. Because the traditional labor market is often closed to individuals with criminal records, and more individuals return from prison, many lacking educational and vocational skills necessary to complete in today's labor market, entrepreneurship may represent a means of capitalizing on an underutilized pool.

Here, the following educational courses and hobbies are offered to the inmate population: baking, cooking, cleaning service, administrative assistance, computer, personal trainer, landscaping, CAD, bookkeeping, leather craft, horticulture, ceramics, air brushing and card making. The preceding is an example of how those particular skill sets can be transferred to an entrepreneurial business model. For example, I'm a tutor in the computer lab where Microsoft Office (word,

excel, access, powerpoint) is taught. Using entrepreneurial/business concepts individuals could transfer the skill sets learned towards owning their own businesses, whether it's bookkeeping, desktop publishing, graphic design, tax preparation, etc.

The preceding short outlines are excerpts from my proposal that I will be presenting to the Warden here for his approval. In a nutshell, the proposal is to assist incarcerated veterans here to develop business concepts and plans that can be turned into successful businesses upon their return to society. My proposal is based on the ideas outlined in the monograph, "Venturing beyond the Gates" (Facilitating Successful Reentry With Entrepreneurship) [Prisoner Reentry Institute at John Jay College of Criminal Justice, Summer 2007].

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**Steven wrote:** Please don't feel like you need years of practice or religious training to volunteer. Just being yourself and spending quality time with us is of enormous benefit. Most inmates have been abandoned by virtually all of their family and friends. This environment constantly berates us with the message that we are broken, unwanted, and disposable. Especially for UU Buddhists, the availability of in-house Buddhist services is rare. Most prisoners live steeped in the raw texture of impermanence and having to let go. We gravitate towards meditation and an engaged practice to help us relate to living within a system over which we have so little control. It's hard to express our gratitude for the volunteers who come to our facility. These times are our only opportunity to be around people who see us as imperfect beings still worthy of our humanity. Whether for a special occasion or for ongoing service, your open heart is always welcome.

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**Dustin wrote:** If anyone is considering volunteering, I would tell them to go into it without expectation. Not all prisoners are scary or blood-thirsty. You may be surprised by the perfectly human capability to make huge mistakes. By volunteering, you are directly supporting the wellbeing of people who will struggle to survive upon release; you are helping them gain spiritual optimism and clarity, which is a boon to them and ultimately their release communities as well.

Helping inmates re-integrate with hope and a sense of direction helps society immeasurably. There is no substitute for that kind of rubber-meets-the-road practice: here are people, most lacking help or hope, and they're willing to listen. Books and CDs are great, but what if you have questions about how to meditate? Again, this is a way to simply be available for people, for those who are seeking and don't necessarily have the means to do so. If volunteering isn't an option, I would recommend getting involved in a penpal organization, either through the Church of the Larger Fellowship or a Buddhist organization.

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**Tom wrote:** UU Buddhists could gain a lot by volunteering. Buddhists generally believe that when people do harmful acts, they are victims of their own delusions based on ignorance, desirous attachment, and anger. Buddhists also generally believe in the inherent capacity that all beings have to clear their minds and hearts. Buddhists are encouraged to cultivate an all radiating compassion that does not discriminate. Working with the incarcerated gives Buddhists and UUs an opportunity to develop their compassion and wisdom in a context where it will be difficult, but all the more enriching, due to the stigma, stereotypes, and negative emotions that are wrapped up with the idea of the convicted in this country. The dark and usually secret world of prisons can be the ideal place for free-world UUs and Buddhists to challenge and explore their own prejudices, condemnations, ignorance, apathy and compassion. Volunteers can learn about the human spirit and its capacity to change in very unsupportive and adverse conditions. No matter how disciplined a prison may be in their practice, what I have seen and experienced personally, is that the feeling of alienation from society discourages and erodes inmates. Having a relationship to people and institutions outside is usually the foundation to inmates changing their lives.

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**John wrote:** Learning about how criminal justice and prison systems operate will make you a better citizen because you'll be better informed. However, in my opinion, that's not the overriding reason to volunteer to work with prisoners in local jails and prisons. A much more important reason is this: You will connect with another

being, one who is part of this infinite web of beings to which we are all connected - a being you probably would not have had the opportunity to meet (in this incarnation, anyway) unless you take this important step and connect. Now. We have much to learn from each other, but the learning has to start with your decision to step outside of your comfort zone.

Contact the facility's chaplain, programs director or chief of security to find out how to proceed. Some jail/prison staff members may not be helpful; a few may try to dissuade you. Don't necessarily take 'no' for an answer. Try different approaches. Be persistent. If you want to start a ripple that can become a tidal wave, then teach a prisoner how to meditate and explain the benefits of right thought, right speech and right action - and then teach him to teach others. You hold incredible power inside you. Maybe it's time to release it.



## Unitarian Universalist Zen Master

By Jan Seymour-Ford

**O**n March 18, 2011, David Dae An Rynick received Inka, final Dharma Transmission from his teacher, George Bomun Bowman, leader of the Single Flower Sangha. Rynick Roshi is now a fully ordained lineage holder in the Linji tradition, an "honored older teacher." This ceremony makes Rynick Roshi the third UU to become a fully independent ordained Zen master, and the first to receive transmission within the Linji tradition.

At the ceremony, David's teacher, George Bowman, presented him with a robe, a bowl, and a horsehair whisk, traditional gifts from a teacher when conferring final Dharma transmission to a student. The Boundless Way sangha gave David an ornate brocade rakusu, also traditionally given by a teacher's students when he/she attains the status of Zen master.

After David Rynick exchanged expressions of deepest respect and gratitude with his teacher, he thanked his family, fellow teachers, friends, and sangha for the years of support and community practice. The participants were invited to share comments, memories, and congratulations. David Rynick's mother charmed the assembly,

saying she's always known her son is special, and she was happy to realize that "everyone else thinks he's wonderful, too."



The ceremony took place at Mugendo-ji, Boundless Way Zen's temple in Worcester, Massachusetts. Led by Guiding Teachers, David Dae An Rynick, Melissa Myozen Blacker, and James Myoun Ford, Boundless Way Zen is creating a distinctly Western vision of Zen practice and community. Merging the Soto, Harada-Yasutani, and Linji schools of Zazen, the organization's teachings are further enriched by the commitment of all three Zen teachers to Unitarian Universalist principals. Boundless Way Zen invites all to experience how the Dharma takes root in American soil.

*Jan Seymour-Ford is a Practice Leader within Boundless Way Zen. She didn't authorize the editor to say so but he recalls that she is entrusted with the kyosaku at sesshins.*



# Aware in mind and body

## Buddhist group brings study of meditation to local Unitarian Universalist church

By Janet Cooper Haas

**T**hey come seeking peace and awareness. They might be recovering from a brutal crime, the effects of a disease, the illness of a loved one or simply workplace stress. Whatever brings them, they are finding solace in a meditation group that meets weekly at Piedmont Unitarian Universalist Church in University City, Charlotte, North Carolina.

The group, called the Mindfulness Sangha – sangha means a community of Buddhist practitioners – meets each Tuesday in the church’s sanctuary. They’ve been practicing weekly group meditation since February 2003. “Many of us are so busy looking for wisdom outside of ourselves, that our inner wisdom never can surface,” said Darla Davis, lay leader of the group and a practicing Soto Zen Buddhist.

One side of the church sanctuary boasts an expansive wall of windows, leaving an unobstructed view to the natural surroundings outside. “I like it there very much because of the trees and calming influence it provides,” said Meredith Merritt, a member of the sangha for the past four years.

After greetings and light conversation, group members quietly take their places in a semi-circle. Some sit on meditation cushions with hands and legs folded, while others fully recline or choose chairs for comfort.

Davis reads a passage from Pema Chodron’s “Practicing Peace in Times of War” as her candle flickers on the altar and incense wafts throughout the room. Setting sunrays bounce off the head of her bronze Buddha statue. Davis rings a bell three times to begin their seated meditation, or zazen. “The bells allows you to move more quickly between everyday actions you’re doing and into meditation by sort of following that sound as it goes away,” said

Davis. Except for the hum of the air conditioner, occasional street noise and creaks of the building, the sangha spends the next 25 minutes in silent meditation.

Davis rings the bell once, ending the sitting meditation. The group rises, and she rings the bell two times to signal the beginning of their walking meditation, or kinhin. Each person synchronizes his or her breath with slow, deliberate steps, taking ten minutes to complete a clockwise revolution. In addition to getting leg circulation moving, “what it helps you to do is to gradually build to the point where you can be mindful when you’re alert and doing whatever you do in your everyday life,” said Davis. After 20 more minutes of sitting meditation and another reading, their time together is over.

“We downplay much ritual,” said Davis. “We try to make it as basic as possible so that anyone would feel welcome and sit with us and find the benefits of meditation. We try to be as eclectic as possible.” Merritt said: “There are many different ways to meditate. It doesn’t really matter, as long as you do it. It’s not about getting from A to Z; it’s about traveling from B to Y. And as you practice, you will gradually become more mindful of the world around you. Meditation makes you happier and frees you up from a lot of perceptions and prejudice.”

### Solace in Meditation

Merritt turned to meditation after a near-death experience 20 years ago. She was attacked by a man who put his hand over her mouth and nose and said he was going to kill her, as he shoved Merritt’s face into the snow. Unable to breathe, she described seeing a “black space with an even blacker space, where if I had gone through it, I would have been dead.”

“When he got up, he said, ‘Oh, my God. I’ve got the wrong person.’” Then he apologized and ran off. With Merritt’s cooperation, the police were able to identify her attacker and his intended victim, his exgirlfriend who lived in the same neighborhood and who owned a white jacket similar to Merritt’s. Merritt says: “I realized that my spiritual work in this life-

time had not been completed.” Her journey into Buddhism started with reading books and culminated into a study of Tibetan Buddhism. “My goal is not to obtain enlightenment in this lifetime. I just try to get a little happier and a little kinder and little bit better able to laugh at myself and better able to accept my infirmities.”

Merritt, who was diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis nine years ago, said, “Meditation gives me quite a lot more endurance and acceptance. The phrase I use is ‘to transform suffering into compassion.’ That is my goal.”

Many Unitarian Universalists, like Davis, are attracted to Buddhism because of the clarity and insight meditation adds to their everyday lives, in addition to aiding stress relief. For some Unitarians, the spiritual framework of meditation counterbalances their secular quest for knowledge. Many Unitarians believe in karma – the understanding of the causes and effects of one’s deeds. Still others relate to Buddhism’s fundamental belief in attaining enlightenment, or Bodhi, when one is “awakened” to the truth about life.

Unitarian Universalism is a creedless liberal religion with Judeo-Christian roots. In each of the 1,041 UU congregations around the world, people of all colors, religious and non-religious backgrounds, sexual orientations and gender identities are welcomed and encouraged to seek their own spiritual path. Famous Unitarians include Thomas Jefferson, Susan B. Anthony, Benjamin Franklin, Frank Lloyd Wright, Louisa May Alcott and Christopher Reeve.

Davis, once a self-described “nightstand Buddhist” who occasionally meditated, put down the books and took her study to the next level when she attended a day of mindfulness with the Rev. Teijo Munnich of the Great Tree Zen Temple based in Alexander, N.C. After years of practice, Davis took the Buddhist Precepts in a Jukai (lay ordination) ceremony in April 2008.

First workplace stress, and then her husband Scott’s diagnosis with a terminal illness led Davis to seek refuge in meditation. She said: “I was dealing with all of that and spending so much time worrying about the future and

stressing and missing my everyday life. He needed me to enjoy our every minute together.”

In March 2001, he was diagnosed with primary amyloidosis, a rare blood disease affecting only eight out of 11 million people per year. In early 2003, after her husband underwent his second stem cell transplant and endured chemotherapy, Davis realized she needed help to “cope with the reality of life.”

It was then that she started the sangha with then PUUC minister Wyman Rousseau. Davis’ husband died in January 2006. “In order for me to be present with Scott, I had to have time and awareness of what was going on with me. I was able, I think, to stay present with him and where he was at each moment those last few years we were together, and it enabled me not to have a lot of regrets. That was such a gift.”

### Want To Go?

Join the Piedmont Unitarian Universalist Church Mindfulness Sangha every Tuesday night from 7 to 8 p.m. at 9704 Mallard Creek Rd. People of all beliefs are welcome. For more information, e-mail [info@puuc.com](mailto:info@puuc.com).

First published in *University City Magazine*, October 2008. Janet Cooper Haas is a Registered Professional Reporter and freelance writer/Web editor based in Charlotte, NC. She sits with the Mindfulness Sangha

## A LITTLE HELP FROM MY FRIENDS

*“In everyone’s life, at some time, our inner fire goes out. It is then burst into flame by an encounter with another human being. We should all be thankful for those people who rekindle the inner spirit.” — Albert Schweitzer*

By Darla Davis

**I**t began with a longing—a longing for community and support in my meditation practice. For a number of years, I had been a “night stand Buddhist”. I avidly read any books on Buddhism that I came across. One book or conversation would lead to another. Each one deepened my conviction that Buddhism was my spiritual path. At that point, I

had been a Unitarian Universalist for 20 years, was living in North Carolina and trying to develop a personal meditation practice. I was a member of a mid-sized UU congregation and there were no references to or conversations about Buddhism in the congregation at that time. I felt isolated and imagined that others didn't share my interest in developing a serious Buddhist practice.

In 1999, I discovered a small UU congregation, Piedmont UU Church, in Charlotte NC. Piedmont UU had just moved into a new building and the congregation was warm and welcoming. In Jan 2000, I became a member at Piedmont and began to get to know the minister, Rev. Wyman Rousseau. We began talking about our mutual interest in meditation and Buddhism.

In the fall of 2002, I read *Friends on the Path* by Thich Nhat Hanh. His writings were inspirational and filled with possibility. My longing for a community with which to meditate deepened. One day in conversation with Rev. Rousseau, I wondered out loud if he might be interested in meditating together. As we explored the idea, we thought it would make sense to invite anyone from the church who wanted to join us in our meditation. In February, 2003 Piedmont Mindfulness Sangha was born when a group of about 6 people began to gather each month for sitting meditation. Some sat in chairs. Others brought their zafu or a big cushion from home. Some of us had been meditating on our own for a while and others hadn't tried it yet but we were all basically beginners. We all shared a background of having read a number of books about meditation and Buddhism but our meditation practices varied greatly. Rev. Rousseau had been to Plum Village during a sabbatical but the rest of us had never sat with a teacher.

After an initial burst of enthusiasm, our small group struggled to keep going. Attendance was up and down. Some nights it was only Rev. Rousseau and me, but on other nights our little meeting room was full. Most nights we had a core group of about 5 committed meditators. We talked about the sporadic and

uneven attendance and considered whether we should discontinue the group practice. Was it worth the travel time? Would we get just as much out of our own meditation if we sat alone at home? Since, from a Buddhist perspective, we were lay led and novices to boot, was our group meditation providing any benefit to those who came? I was filled with doubts and questions but no answers.

While struggling with those doubts, I attended a daylong meditation retreat in a Winston-Salem, NC. Rev. Teijo Munnich was leading the retreat and I was eager for the opportunity to attend a retreat led by a female Buddhist priest. This retreat was a turning point in my re-commitment to our local Sangha. As a result of the retreat, I decided that my practice would be showing up consistently and holding the space for whoever came to sit with us at Piedmont Mindfulness Sangha. I set an intention to let go of the desire to control the outcome and to focus on being present.

Soon after my retreat with Rev Munnich, Piedmont Mindfulness Sangha added a second meeting each month to discuss a chapter from a Buddhist book that we selected together. This met with mixed success. People have busy lives and frequently didn't have time to read the chapter. If a person had not read the chapter, sometimes they would decide not to come that night. And if you weren't coming to every meeting, it was difficult to keep straight whether the book discussion was on the first meeting of the month or on the second one.

It seemed that each time we felt challenges, new inspiration would arrive to "rekindle the inner spirit". Another Sangha in Charlotte had received a request to host a visiting Buddhist monk who had just published a book. Claude AnShin Thomas was coming to Charlotte on a speaking tour and was looking for a space large enough to hold an event. Our sister Sangha met in a small rented space that wasn't suitable for this speaking engagement and so asked me if Piedmont Mindfulness Sangha might be interested in hosting the talk at our UU Church. As I began planning this event with Anshin and his assistant KenShin, we agreed to also hold a

mindfulness day filled with sitting, walking and mindful working. The day was a great success and many people from the Charlotte region came to the speaking engagement and/or the mindfulness day. AnShin generously donated part of the dana that he received to our Sangha for zafus and zabutons. AnShin's generosity enabled us to create a more welcoming Sangha environment for visitors by having cushions available whenever someone new arrived to sit with us.

A major turning point for Piedmont Mindfulness Sangha was when we decided to stop the book discussion, to meet every week and to focus on sitting and walking meditation. This grew out of AnShin's words: "*As a Buddhist I can not think myself into a new way of living. I have to live myself into a new way of thinking.*" We moved from a small meeting room to our large multipurpose sanctuary. The group stabilized. We had members who were interested in Insight Meditation, Tibetan Buddhism, the Mindfulness teachings of Thich Nhat Hanh and Zen. In 2008 I took the 16 lay Precepts at a Jukai ceremony at Great Tree Zen Temple where Rev. Teijo Munnich is the Abbess.

It's not easy to create and sustain a UU Sangha but it's well worth the effort. Our group today is still small. It seems that when a Sangha member moves away, another soon takes his/her place. We've benefited over the years from the support of Rev. Munnich, Claude AnShin Thomas, and many other Buddhist teachers who have given dharma talks or supported one or more of us in our practice. Most of all, I think it takes one or more very committed individuals who can let go of expectation, who will hold the space for the others, and who will have faith that those who are present each week are the ones who need to be there. And, when my faith lags, I reread this quote by Janet Quinn that is on my refrigerator:

"When you live from integrity, empty of expectations, the outcome is almost irrelevant—it's the moment by moment process that counts."

## A LETTER FROM INSIDE

John

My sincerest apologies for intruding upon your serenity through my use of three "F-bombs" in the Fall 2010 issue of the *UU Sangha*. Your straight forward letter was like a slap in the face with a wet shower shoe. I was very proud of the fact that the *Sangha* thought enough about my writing to find it worthy to include in their newsletter. I must tell you my friend, I have not done many things in my life that have made me proud. Criticizing has always been a hard pill for me to swallow. My initial reaction to your words was anger. I felt like you took the entire content of my writings and diluted it to the three "F words." It's funny how easy it is for me to lose content when caught in the grip of emotion. After rereading your editorial many times and writing several responses to you that did not include an apology my feelings started to change.

Like you, I have spent over a decade behind the walls. I am very familiar with the negativity in the speech of most of the men I am surrounded by. In the past I have often allowed the unskillful speech of others to affect how I am feeling. I certainly never intended to use the Sangha as a forum to disrupt anyone's peace of mind.

My current favorite book is written by Kevin Griffin, *A Burning Desire: Dharma God & the Path of Recovery*. Kevin says that "right speech is the quality of speaking kindly, truthfully, and wisely. Through the power of speech we heal our wounds and give of our wisdom." Did the fact that I used profanity make what I had to say unkind, dishonest, or unwise? My motivation was to simply share my experience in hopes that another person may find inspiration through me, as I have found through others.

My suffering speaks to me with words that appear harsh and unforgiving. When I change the content and intention of those same words the meaning changes also. I do understand your point of view and through understanding my compassion grows.

It's funny how this spiritual stuff (I said stuff) works. Your letter gives me a lesson in humility. For that I must thank you. All the best on your journey.

Your Brother on the path,  
Chris

*Chris is incarcerated in Maryland and is a sangha-friend of the Mindfulness Practice Group of Annapolis.*



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