



# DHARMA TEACHER ORDER

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## A Newsletter for the Connecticut, Florida, New York and Texas Sanghas of the Dharma Teacher Order

DTO Annual Retreat April 24, 25 and 26 at Mariandale in Ossining, New York

### From the Texas Sangha A Brief Biography of Thay from Dilys Davis

Thích Trí Hoằng (Thay) will be with us at the Annual Three-Day Dharma Teacher Order Retreat which will take place at the Mariandale Retreat and Conference Center. We are delighted to have him with us once again.

The Venerable Thích Trí Hoằng is the 9th generation in the Lieu Quan lineage, and is the 43rd generation member of the Lâm Té (Linji) lineage of Vietnamese Zen. He received his lamp transmission (Dharma transmission or end of formal study) in 1973 at the Hai Duc Temple in Nha Trang, Vietnam, from His Holiness Thích Giac Nhien, Second Supreme Patriarch of the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam.

Venerable Thích Trí Hoằng was born in Vietnam in 1949. He became a novice Buddhist monk at the age of 14 and received full ordination at 24. He has studied under many Buddhist masters, including Thích Trí Thu, Thích Huyền Vi, and Thích Nhát Hanh. He has also studied Buddhism and philosophy in India, Holland, France and China. He received a

Doctorandus in Sinology in Leiden University in Holland.

He has led Buddhist meditation retreats in Holland, France, England and the U.S. and speaks five languages including English, Chinese and Vietnamese.

He founded the Dharma Teacher Order class in 1996 at the Hai An Pagoda Buddhist Temple near Hartford, Connecticut. The decision to initiate the order came out of a desire to bring the benefit of Dharma practice and knowledge to the West.

Venerable Thích Trí Hoằng established the Prison Correspondence Course in 2001 and in 2009 became the founding abbot of Chùa Pháp Nguyên Buddhist congregation in Pearland, Texas.



Our retreat site, Mariandale, is nestled on hills next to the Hudson River. It is a very spiritual place. We are hoping that is going to lead to developing a Buddhist-Christian dialogue/exchange over the next few years. Some preliminary discussions have already taken place.

### Photos from Mariandale



The format of this year's retreat will feature a change in the schedule of evening activities Thay will be having a question and answer session on Friday evening and he will be giving a Dharma talk on Saturday evening. After the Sunday ceremonies, Thay will be doing a Buddhist blessing for children.

## From the New York Sangha - Ida Leung interviews Elena Bravocruz

**"Experiencing the power of the here and now was especially helpful for some participants who were critically ill. It was great to see a sparkle in their eye after experiencing that transformative power of meditation."**



Elena with her Mamá

Elena Bravocruz and I chatted about the meditation programs she leads in her office and in the Bronx, New York.

Ida: Tell me how this wonderful program came into being.

Elena: Well, I've always done meditation with people, in churches, my house, office – anywhere and everywhere. I already had a drop-in semi-monthly meditation program in my office. Twice a month, people stop by the office and join me to meditate for about an hour. The number participants can range from 5 to 40 attendees.

So last year, one of the participants, a director of a children's after school program, joined us for this luncheon meditation. She got very excited and asked me if I could do a "train the leaders" session so the kids in the after school program could learn. It would help the kids settle down to their projects more quickly and concentrate better.

Ida: What a wonderful idea! How did it go?

Elena: I designed a 4-hour "train the leaders" session which took place September 2014 on a Saturday and included lunch. We had about 20 participants consisting of a coalition of prevention program directors, parents, staff, family members – young and old.

We kept Noble Silence that day except for 15 minutes at the end for questions, answers and evaluations. The day consisted of 3 meditation sessions (impermanence meditation, loving kindness meditation and mindfulness meditation) mixed with dharma talks in between.

The participants ranged from total beginners to experienced meditators. For the

beginners, I reviewed some insight meditation techniques, focusing on the breath, sweeping (scanning) the body to connect with it and linking that to vulnerability and impermanence.

Some experienced meditators had gotten stuck on what to do after they arrived at a mindful place, and the guided meditations were helpful for them. I also emphasized the importance of just being in the here and now, just feel, no need to analyze.

Experiencing the power of the here and now was especially helpful for some participants who were critically ill. It was great to see a sparkle in their eye after experiencing that transformative power of meditation.

Because the kids arrive at their programs afterschool, we decided that teaching them to slow down and become more mindful just as they enter is a terrific transition for them. I showed the participants how to direct the children to focus on their breath, concentrating on breathing in and breathing out. We just called it quiet or down time (nothing related to Buddhism/meditation) and they just concentrate on their breathing for 10 to 15 minutes tops. Reports are that the kids are really benefiting and focusing on their studies much better.

Ida: What a huge undertaking. I would have been totally overwhelmed. Is there anything in your background that helped you to prepare? Elena: I have been working with large groups for a very long time and before I came to the States, I was a preacher and during that time, I lead large weekend retreats as well. And, of course, I had to prepare well.

Ida: Are the on-going semi-

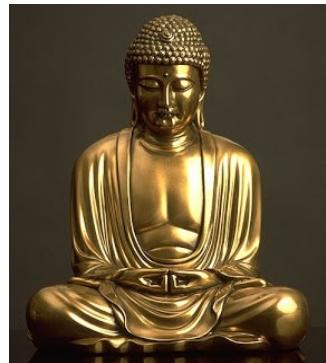
monthly meditation sessions in the Bronx also 4 hours?

Elena: Oh no, those are 90-minute regular sessions. Anyone can come and we allow 15 minutes for people to settle in; I do a brief introduction on the benefits of meditation, focusing on your breath and how it improves your health. We meditate for 40 minutes, then we review, discuss how their week went for 20 minutes followed by a short break. This is followed by questions and answers, announcements and a final loving kindness meditation.

Ida: What is your favorite part of these classes?

Elena: I love how happy and relaxed everyone is afterwards. There's an enormous release of tension, people smile and they leave with a look of dreaminess. It's also incredibly energizing for me. I practice while they are practicing and I leave feeling like I can take on the world.

Ida: Thank you for sharing your experience with facilitating meditation classes from the big to the small. I leave our visit energized as well.



## From the Connecticut Sangha -

**Michelle Härtel**

**Inspiration From an Interview with Friends**

**Michael Geres & Tom Duva"**

We all have the opportunity to learn from others in our practice. In this interview, we are gifted with the experiences of two wonderful friends who are also senior teachers in the Dharma Teacher Order. Michael Geres and Tom Duva have been practicing together for decades, and yet the Dharma is always fresh and new when practicing with them.

For this interview several questions were posed to Michael and Tom. Their respective answers have been blended together to provide insight into their practices within, and outside of, the DTO Sangha.

### How long have you been practicing the Dharma?

Both Michael and Tom started practicing 17 years ago, bringing earlier life experiences to their practice. Tom, in particular, practiced Transcendental Meditation as a teenager and found the technique helpful at the time.

### What is the name of your Sangha outside of the DTO and how did it get started?

Michael and Tom were participating in a practice based on Thich Nhat Hanh's Order of Interbeing, which has strong advocacy for Sangha building.

They started the **Po Jama Sangha** in 1998, along with a mutual friend George Lafleur. They started out simply by learning to follow the breath, working with the book *Peace is Every Step*, and expanded the practice from there. According to the two friends, "the name Po Jama was born out of a mutual deep appreciation for the guitar playing of Frank Zappa and his song about people being asleep, including ourselves". Michael states, "I guess we thought we were about to wake up. The name also came from the fact that we met at 7:30am on Saturday and some people who came to the early meetings wore pajamas."

Michael also started a new Sangha, the **Bolton Refuge Recovery Group**, which started in October of 2014. This group meets weekly and bases their practice on the works of Noah Levine (*Refuge Recovery*), focused on The Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path to recover from addictions of all kinds.

The practice at the Bolton Refuge Recovery Group starts by reading a preamble written for the book by Noah Levine, followed by sitting meditation. The group then reads a chapter from *Refuge Recovery*, with a discussion period after.

### Why did you decide to engage in additional practice outside of DTO class?

Both Michael and Tom agree that there is strong benefit to practicing with others. According to Michael, "There is a special kind of energy that came up for me when practicing with others." Both stated that there is much support in practicing with others, both in the giving and receiving of support along the path.

### Do you have any words of advice for others regarding expanding their practice?

Find a Sangha or support group for your practice was the overwhelming answer from these two friends. Personal practice is important, but it is easy to stray when not bolstered by the energy, and experience, of others.

Finally, "find a teacher".



*"If you find a wise person  
Who points out your faults and  
corrects you,  
You should follow such a sage  
As you would a revealer of  
treasures.  
It is better, never worse  
To follow such a sage."  
Dhammapada (verse 76)*

### Final words....

Tom – "I am grateful to my root teacher, Thich Nhat Hanh and his continuation in Joanne Friday. Our Dear teacher Thich Tri Hoang has been a great example of Dana in Action. A deep bow of gratitude to his leadership, knowledge of the Dharma and Buddhist jokes!"

Michael – "Investigate different forms of practice. We are not all the same. Find one that works for you. In my experience the practice truly does bring about a *Transformation of the Heart*."

### **Po Jama Sangha**

Tuesdays 7:30 to 9:00 p.m.  
North United Methodist Church  
300 Parker Street  
Manchester, CT 06042

### **Bolton Refuge Recovery Group**

Wednesdays 7:00 to 8:00 p.m.  
Bolton Congregational Church  
228 Bolton Center Road  
Bolton, CT 06043

## From the Florida Sangha

### "The Making of a Cuban Monk"

#### by Susette Couso

Noble Silence was born in Cuba as Jorge González. He immigrated to the United States in the early 1990's. For those of you unfamiliar with Cuban history, Cuba has had a communist regime for over 50 years. How is this relevant, you ask? Part of a communist regime is the elimination of all religion, which made Noble's affinity towards Eastern mysticism and religion all the more unlikely. There were these magazines in Cuba called Bohemias, and they presented articles in varying topics. Noble, as a child of approximately 9 years old encountered and read one of these magazines; it had published an article about an Indian monk that only had 18 possessions in this world. This article greatly impacted young Jorge, whose curiosity started to grow about anything Oriental. As he grew into his teenage years, he managed to find a yoga group and he also got deeply involved with Martial Arts, which he practices to this day. Noble disclosed to me that as an infant, he remembers having a recurring dream where he felt a welcoming and cozy sensation as he flew into his mother's belly – he also disclosed that he felt that very sensation when he sat down to meditation for the first time.

He led an otherwise normal life, and married around 26 years of age. He raised his wife's daughter, who would practice sitting meditation with him in a home-made altar. He was divorced by the time he got to the US around 1993 where he first settled in Queens, NY. A cousin from LA came to visit him around 1997; his cousin knew of a Theravada temple in Queens and they both went to visit, despite Noble's hesitation since he never felt close to the teachings of the Theravada school. However, during their Saturday visit to the Theravada Temple, Noble saw advertising for sitting meditation sessions in the Chuang Yen Monastery in upstate New York. They visited the monastery the next day, where he saw an advertisement for a Sunday meditation class with Richard Baksa. Noble attended the Sunday meditation the week after.

The Venerable Thích Trí Hoằng lived in Connecticut at the time and only visited the meditation group once a month or so. After a few weeks of meditation, Noble met Thích Trí Hoằng. Noble remembers standing out at the meeting since he was a few shades darker and with a considerably thick English accent in a mostly Caucasian community. Noble's thick accent made for difficult communication with Thích Trí Hoằng, but eventually they got to know each other and Noble asked for Refuge in the Three Jewels and the Precepts. The day of his precepts ceremony he learned of the course being offered by the DTO and began attending it. A year later, Noble let Thaych Tri Hoang know he wanted to become a monk in his office in Connecticut. Noble recalled with a sense of ambivalence that Thich Tri Hoang said

Thay's office in Connecticut that he wanted to become a monk. Noble recalled with a sense of ambivalence that Thay said "ok," and that was it; however, the wheels were in motion. A month or so after that, while Noble was giving Thích Trí Hoằng a ride back from Brooklyn, Thay told him that the preparations for the monk ordination ceremony would start around 1/28, which would coincide with the celebration of Buddha's birthday. He was ordained in May 28, 1999 in the temple Hai An Pagoda in Connecticut, into the 44<sup>th</sup> generation of the Lâm Té (Linji) Dhyana School and the tenth generation of the Liễn Quán Dharma Line.

of Vietnamese Buddhism.



## Buddhist Prison Correspondence Course



The Buddhist Prison Correspondence Course is designed to help prisoners integrate Buddhism into their lives by showing how Buddhist practices can help reduce unskillful states of mind such as anger and hatred and cultivate skillful states of mind such as equanimity and compassion.

The Course covers the fundamentals of Buddhism common to all of the major Buddhist schools and familiarizes the student with the life of the Buddha, Buddhist concepts, theory, and practice. All materials are furnished to the student at no charge.

Upon satisfactory completion of the Course, a "Certificate of Buddhist Studies" is issued to the student and, if requested by the student, appropriate prison authorities are advised, in writing, of the successful completion of the Course and the awarding of the certificate to the student.

The Spiritual Director of the Course is the Ven. Thích Trí Hoằng. Ven. Hoằng was ordained in Vietnam at age 24. He has studied Buddhism extensively under many Vietnamese Venerables including Ven. Thích Nhất Hạnh. He has led Buddhist meditation retreats in Holland, France, and England for many years, and is currently the Abbot of the Chùa Pháp Nguyễn Temple in Texas.

There is a waiting list of inmates who want to take the course, but they cannot be enrolled until additional mentors are available to work with them. This is an opportunity for committed Buddhists to share their knowledge and experience with those who desperately need help and guidance to begin to change the direction of their lives.

The work of a mentor is very important. Over 65% of those released from prisons in the United States are back in jail within three years after their release. Punishment alone does not work to stop repeat crime; the right kind of education is needed. Education that helps a prisoner to understand themselves and to change their behavior. That is where you, as a mentor, can help reduce that 65% and free a prisoner from the Samsara of repeated incarceration.

Mentors receive all necessary materials free of charge. If they have any questions on the material covered they can contact Rev. Hoằng , Reverends Adrienne or Richard Baksa, or other mentors. There is also a Buddhist Correspondence Course Forum on the Internet where mentors can find Course information and can also communicate with other mentors. The Forum is limited to Course mentors only and is not accessible to the general public.

If you are interested in becoming a mentor, please contact either Rev. Adrienne Baksa at [adriennebaksa@me.com](mailto:adriennebaksa@me.com), or Rev. Richard Baksa at: [rbaksa@mac.com](mailto:rbaksa@mac.com).

*Bodhisattva Ksitigarbha vowed that he would never become a Buddha until he had emptied the hell realms of all who were suffering there.  
The American prison system is indeed a hell realm.*

***Please consider becoming a mentor!***