

# Dharma Teacher Order Newsletter

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## Why We Need Spirituality in Oncology

What makes our reactions to a dreadful diagnosis so different?

Rev. Dr. Fernando Camacho in "U.S. News and World Report"



We need to incorporate interventions such as meditation, yoga, tai chi, reiki, arts and music into the medical world.

Illnesses tend to highlight how fleeting health can be and how impermanent our existence is. This realization tends to bring much suffering because we all want to strive to live "happily ever after." We want the good times to last forever and the bad times to never come. However, life is ever changing and you are not the same from one second to another. How can we face this uncertainty?

As an oncologist, I have to give bad news to patients about their new problems and diagnosis.

I see patients face these realizations day after day.

Some shut down and cannot deal with it and rely on family members to learn about all the details of the illness.

Others treat the news quietly, stoically, but only comprehend a small portion of it. The details and results have to be explained over and over again in the course of many future visits. Yet, others grieve when they hear the news, but are able to put it into the context of life's impermanence; being sad but not devastated. They become the anchor of the family in spite of being the patient struck by a serious illness. What makes our reactions all so different?

The difference in most of our patients is the presence of or absence of spirituality. Do not mistake spirituality with being religious. Yes, they can coexist, but they do not have to. A spiritual person is one who sees the meaning of life; sees how much we all have in common and understands that we do not control over what happens in this world. A spiritual person is also one who is able to let go of all attachments we have in this world and understands that love is what matters most. True love is not possessive, rigid or unidirectional. It is giving, kind and has no strings attached.

My patients have taught me profound lessons in spirituality. I will never forget Alysha, who when told her metastatic lung cancer was progressing and no other therapy could help her, proceeded to thank all her doctors for doing their best. She would console each one of us about how hard it must be for us. She informed us that she understood her path and was ready for it. (continued on page 2).

## Spirituality in Oncology, continued from page 1



**Dr. Fernando J. Camacho** is the Director of Community Oncology and the Medical Director of Integrative Oncology at Montefiore Einstein Center for Cancer Care, a premier cancer center in New York City. Dr. Camacho has more than 30 years of experience serving minority and medically underserved communities. He specializes in addressing the barriers that prevent oncology and benign hematology patients and families from accessing quality health care. The mission of the Community Oncology program is to provide access to preventative and state of the art cancer care and research through education, community outreach and physician engagement.

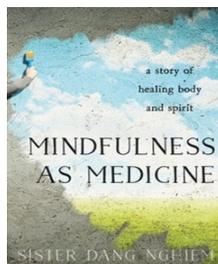
Rena was another patient who left a large imprint on my heart. She was diagnosed with metastatic melanoma while in her 80s. She reacted to the news with great equanimity, only pausing to worry about how her family would react and not wanting to be a burden. She proceeded with her illness in a dignified fashion, bearing with the complications and keeping her sweet, loving ways. She was one of my best spiritual teachers.

We need to bring spirituality to medicine, especially oncology. We need to teach it to patients, doctors, nurses and all other medical professional staff. We need to underline the need to care for one another, and we need to start with oneself. We need to value every moment and stop worrying so much about yesterday or tomorrow. The medical profession has to come to grips with the fact that we do not control everything. We must acknowledge the awe in medicine. Doctors are humans and have the same frailties and characteristics as everyone else.

So, how can we do this? How can we try to infuse more spirituality into oncology? Well, it's going to take some work! We need to start with small steps, first just by acknowledging the role of spirituality in improving our patients' well-being. This will only occur by cultivating an environment of looking after the "whole patient," not just the cancer or the organ involved.

Next, we need to incorporate interventions such as meditation, yoga, tai chi, reiki, arts and music into the medical world. Supportive activities such as those mentioned help to emphasize the importance of nurturing our spirituality. We also need to establish a nurturing, loving environment for patients and staff in which each individual is special.

In the place where I work, Montefiore Einstein Center for Cancer Care, we are trying to bring spirituality into the oncological and medical world. By offering activities such as drum circles, mindfulness meditation and peer counseling, hospitals can become more spiritual places, where our patients and staff alike can most calmly and confidently take on each task ahead.



### **Editor's Note:**

In conjunction with the theme of "Spirituality in Oncology," you might wish to read "Mindfulness as Medicine" (Parallax Press) by Sister Dang Nghiem.

Left click on the book at left and it will take you to the [ParallaxPress.org](http://ParallaxPress.org) website.

## From the Pearland, Texas Sangha by Sondra Kaighen

### Prison Chaplaincy Program

By Sondra Kaighen

Sunday, September 13, 2015, after almost 6 months of trying to get permission from the Luther Unit Prison in Navasota, Texas, Thay, Cathy Hill and I finally made the trek up to visit with the prisoners. It was a beautiful drive, in the rolling hills Northwest of Houston, taking us about 1.5 hours to get there. When we arrived we were surprised to find that only half of the group would be in attendance, as the time that the Chaplain had given us was also their dinner time. Nonetheless, ten members were present.

The leader of the group explained that there were actually more than 25 in the group! We were able to do a 20-minute sit (and they provided us blankets to sit on), a walking meditation, a Q and A period about what they have been studying and any questions they may have. Then 4 members actually took the 3 Refuges/5 Precepts. We talked a little about what their expectations were, and we made the commitment to come on the first Sunday of each month from 6:30 p.m. to 8 p.m., so as not to interfere with their dinner time.

At the time of this writing, we've now been on 3 separate occasions. Each time, we are warmly greeted, even by the guards! We've had about 6 more take the Precepts. We're now in the process of getting the "*Bodhi Day Celebration*," scheduled for December 6, immediately following our 3-day Retreat, approved by the authorities, where we will be able to spend 4 hours with the inmates, sitting, walking, mindful eating and chanting the *Heart Sutra*, with the mokugyo and bell the Phap Nguyen Buddhist Temple donated to the group. Thay has also agreed to conduct interviews with the inmates, one-on-one, for those that seek it.

Our new Prison Sangha is unfolding into such a wonderful experience, I believe, for all involved. We had one of the young inmates play his guitar and sing a song he wrote at the tender age of 16. It was so beautiful! It is obvious how the practice is directly benefitting these young men, who are determined to transform their suffering. What they may neglect to realize is that we, too, learn so much from them!

This is the fruit of a prisoner's request to find a teacher. He sent his wife on a mission to find a Buddhist teacher that could come and visit with the group. This particular prisoner became enrolled in the BCC, which led his wife to our Temple, and ultimately, Thay. Then we (the 4 of us who were so inclined), all went to the Texas Department of Criminal Justice training to allow us to "minister" to inmates in any Texas prison. After receiving our approval letters following sitting for the training, I then began petitioning the Luther Unit to try and get in. They denied us for many months but I finally wrote to the prison warden and then suddenly the Chaplain allowed us to come. - Sondra Kaighen

## From the Miami, Florida Sangha by Susette Cuoso

With the new opening of our Karuna Zen Center, we have had many new experiences. We have established communication with other healing groups in our community such as Tai Chi practitioners who have started to join our meditations. We have also started a dharma review series after our meditations every other Sunday mornings. As with all administrative endeavors, the costs of sustaining our new center have increased. Thus, we decided to start a new funding campaign through a crowd sourcing website: <https://www.gofundme.com/xd77ypu8>. We wanted to share the link with you, which is continually posted under Noble Silence's Facebook page, to see if it is possible for you to spread the word and add the link to your Facebook page as well, any little bit of help gets us to our goal. The link contains a description of our new center and a few pictures as well, here it is:

<https://www.gofundme.com/xd77ypu8>



We thank you in advance for any help and we wish you a wonderful Holiday Season from all the Miami sangha members.

### *Editor's Note:*

Let's all lend a helping hand to our Miami Sangha which is expanding and spreading the dharma. If you would prefer to send a check, please send it to: Karuna Zen Center, 10391 SW 186 Street, Miami, Florida 33157. Thank you!



## Pearland, Texas DTO Retreat by Sondra Kaighen

### PEARLAND SANGHA'S 3-DAY RETREAT

We had an awesome turnout for our 4th Annual 3-Day Retreat at *Phap Nguyen Buddhist Temple* in Pearland, Texas. Those in attendance in addition to the Pearland members of the DTO class, were: Fernando (New York) Noble Silence, Teo, Maricruz and Susette (Miami) and Robyn and Deborah (Connecticut).

After our morning meditation practice, we had reports from all of the Sanghas about the activities and programs each of the Sanghas are involved in, as well as the goals and aspirations we see moving forward. Some of the goals we strive for are: (1) providing more support for the ordained Dharma Teachers; (2) continue to strengthen the bond between the 4 Sanghas; (3) provide more support for Richard and Adrienne Baksa and the Buddhist Correspondence Course; (4) cultivating more community outreach programs, such as volunteering to feed the homeless, staging "flash mob" meditation opportunities, etc.; (5) developing a Speaker's Bureau so that those who are trained can be available for speaking engagements; and, (6) sharing our practice through this Newsletter. We are also developing a Sangha-wide contact list.

We also had a wonderful cooking class conducted by our own sweet Sister Phap Nghiem. She taught her secret recipes for her famous rice balls and eggrolls...YUM!!! Phap Nghiem and the other Sisters created beautiful food offerings for the duration of the Retreat.

We also had a joyful silent auction, where many beautiful gifts were auctioned off, including "Upsidedownism" art from our frequent visitor, and loyal friend of the Temple, Dai Giang Nguyen. He finished the mural for the 4th installation of the series "4 Noble Truths," which was exquisite. He also drew portraits of those interested, for a nominal Temple donation. At the conclusion of the retreat, it was determined that the auction, as well as the donations rendered a total donation for the Temple of \$2,323!

We hope to continue to have a wonderful turnout for years to come at this annual event. For next year, we are planning to hold the silent auction again, eliciting donations for that purpose from all 4 Sanghas to auction off. We are also planning on having a physical training session, with Noble Silence leading us with stretching, yoga and strengthening exercises. Hope to see everyone next year!



## Bodhi Day In Texas

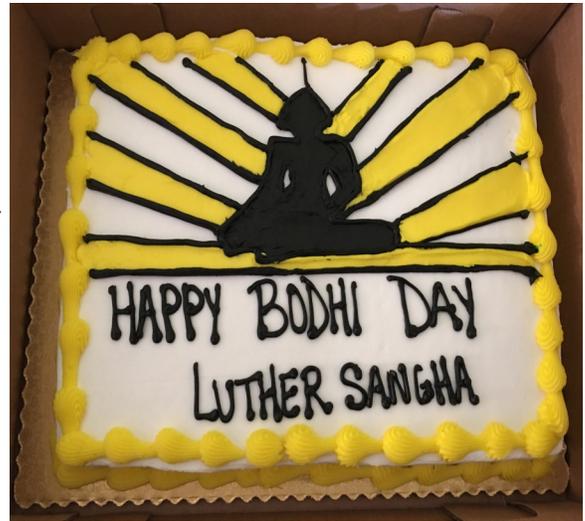
### Happy Bodhi Day!

This year, several members of the Pearland Sangha celebrated the Buddha's enlightenment in a very special way. Since August, we have been making monthly visits to the Luther Unit in Navasota, Texas to share the Dharma with a group of 20-25 incarcerated young men. Our typical two-hour visits include sitting and walking meditation, chanting, Q & A, and/or a Dharma talk by Thay. Often we have several of the men who take the Precepts as well. The first Sunday in December was just a bit different!

In celebration of Bodhi Day, we conducted a four-hour retreat which began with a buffet of vegetarian pizza, rice balls and egg rolls (lovingly prepared by our own Phap Nghiem), a large array of soda pop (and water for the less adventurous), and a sheet cake which was beautifully decorated for the occasion. After reciting the Five Contemplations, we enjoyed the meal together in silence and mindfulness. It was quite a feast. Not a crumb was left uneaten, and not a drop was left undrunk!

After the meal, DTO students, Cathy Hill and Jim Lee, led the sitting and walking meditation practice while Thay and our fourth year DTO student, Sondra Kaighen, sat for interviews. We even had time for a little bell and mokugyo practice before three more men took the Precepts. It was truly a joy-filled experience for the four of us as well as for our Dharma brothers in the Luther Unit. We are all so grateful to be able to participate in this prison ministry. Happy Bodhi Day to all of our brothers in the dharma.

Cathy Hill  
Pearland, TX Sangha



### More Photos from the Three-Day Retreat in Pearland, Texas



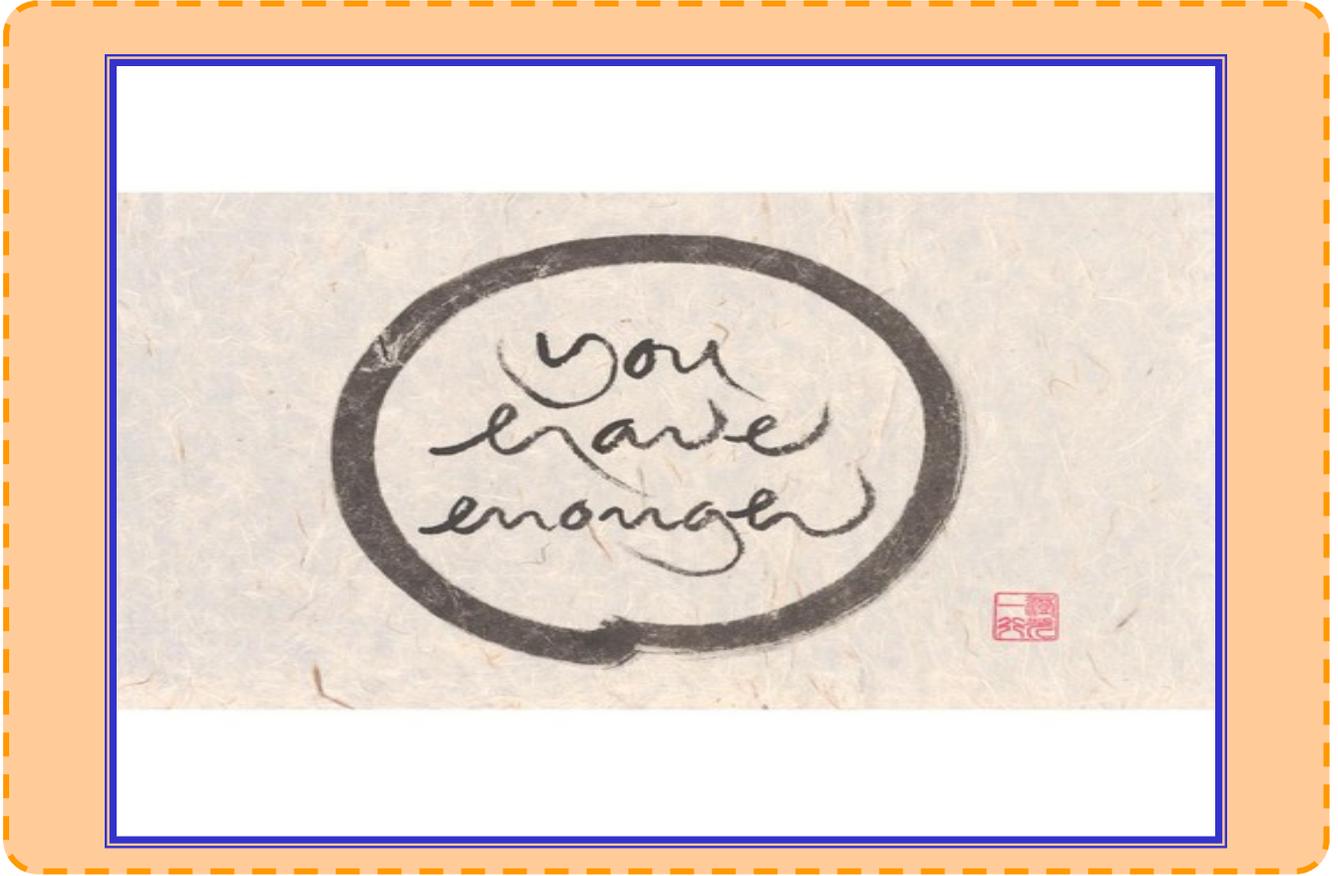
## News from the Connecticut Sangha by Richard Zippoli, Jr.

### Connecticut Dharma Training Course

A Dharma Teacher Training Course was initiated in Connecticut this fall for several practitioners who had previously completed the Dharma Study Class program. The training course, *In the Service of Teaching: Deepening Our Understanding of Dharma Practice*, meets monthly at the Holy Family Retreat Center in West Hartford. The course involves a systematic exploration of selected topics, allowing participants to deepen their practice and enhance their teaching abilities. Emphasis is given to potential challenges and obstacles that practitioners may encounter, as well as the ability of teachers or spiritual friends to skillfully support dharma practice. During small group dialogues, participants reflect on and share their own practice experiences, and then discuss potential strategies for guiding and supporting other practitioners. The following topics are being explored in the course:

October 2015	<i>Shamatha and Vipassana with emphasis on the Five Hindrances</i>
November 2015	<i>The Four Brahma Viharas with emphasis on the Near Enemies</i>
December 2015	<i>Bringing Ritual to Life</i>
January 2016	<i>Spiritual Bypassing and Spiritual Materialism</i>
February 2016	<i>The Five Wonderful Precepts and Buddhist Ethics</i>
March 2016	<i>Looking Deeply and Listening Deeply</i>
April 2016	<i>Building Harmonious Sanghas</i>

Current participants include Robin Ryan (Hyang Yeon Sunim), Deborah MacDonald, and Bobbie Martin. Robin, Deborah, and Bobbie also lead the Connecticut Dharma Study Class meetings. Over the past few weeks, Sondra Kaighen (of the Houston sangha) and Teo Castellanos (of the Miami sangha) have also joined the Dharma Training Course. The training course is being facilitated by Richard Zipoli, an ordained Dharma Teacher who has studied and practiced with Ven. Thích Trí Hoàng for more than twenty years.



*A Thich Nhat Hanh Calligraphy*