



DHARMA TEACHER ORDER

Vol. 3

Issue 3

April 2017

Pearland, Texas Sangha's "Trees" by Cathy Hill

The Pearland Sangha is wrapping up the school year. Our last DTO class will be on March 25. Now that our Saturdays will be free again, we will resume our summer Saturday morning Meditations in the Park. Beginning in May, we will meet bright and early at a local park every Saturday for an hour of sitting/walking meditation/discussion. We tried this out last year, and found that it was very refreshing to practice together in this way in a natural setting.



Members of our Sangha continue to visit inmates in the Luther Unit in Navasota, Texas once a month. The Luther Sangha is growing rapidly. In recent months, the attendance at Sunday services/retreats has grown to 35-50 men, and nearly every month some men take refuge. Last month, 13 men took refuge. The group was so large that Thay said he felt like he was looking out at a whole forest, so he decided to give them dharma names of trees! It is such a wonderful experience to see the prisoners growing in the Dharma individually and as a Sangha.

Editor's Note: Thank you to Minh Khong (Jon) of the Texas Sangha for the following video clip which he took at the Annual DTO Retreat. He graciously shared it with us so that everyone would have the opportunity to see it. (Right click and then click "open hyperlink").

<http://www.greener-power.com/minhkhong/Retreat2017Video/>

Look for retreat photos throughout this newsletter.

Maeve Eng-Wong of New York Sangha Teaches “First Sunday” School

It is with deep gratitude that I share with you my experience teaching Buddhism to children. In January of 2014, my sister practitioner and Buddhist Priest, Sherry Horowitz, and I decided to create a program that would offer children and families a place to explore Buddhist practice and concepts like generosity, gratitude, kindness, interdependence, equanimity, and compassion. Once the class began, it became clear that the children were teaching us as much as we were teaching them! This has become an endeavor that has proved to be far more enriching personally than my initial expectations.

The class, known as First Sunday School, is offered by donation on the First Sunday of every month at SkyBaby Yoga in Cold Spring, NY. Each class starts with all the children and their parents finding a comfortable spot on the floor to sit. Thanks to SkyBaby Yoga’s owner, Melia Marzollo, who lets us use the space at no charge, the children have a wonderful selection of meditation cushions, blankets and bolsters. Some of the children create campsites and elaborate nests! Once everyone is settled in, we share a morning practice that is similar to the devotional practices taught to us by our teacher, Thay. The bell is used to mark transitions and to guide the children through practice. The practice instructions are color coded to help the children follow along even when they can’t read. We start with the Incense Offering (blue), move to the Three Refuges (purple), and then complete the process by reciting the Five Precepts (green). The children have their very own yellow practice folders. We, of course, modified the readings to accommodate the sensibilities of children. For example, the Five Precepts recited by the children are: 1. Act with loving-kindness; 2. Be open-hearted and generous.; 3. Practice stillness, simplicity and contentment.; 4. Speak with truth, clarity and peace.; 5. Live mindfully. The precepts are adapted to provide positive actions and introductory concepts rather than in terms that ask them to abstain from certain activities or behaviors. The children take turns reading and now really run this portion of the class.

In preparation for morning meditation, we practice many breathing exercises together. We open our arms like a balloon during an in breath and then shrink into a little ball during an out breath. We hold up our fists and breath in and out as we raise one finger at a time and then do it again as we bring one finger down at a time. We hold a sitting yoga position and breathe in that position in and out three consecutive times. The children often come up with their own variations. We then spend a few moments in silence, practicing meditation together. It can be a very powerful experience and it has taken a long time for the children to feel safe and secure enough to sit in stillness together. After our meditation time, the children are asked to give an internal weather forecast. This allows the kids to begin to become more aware of their internal emotional states from moment to moment. The responses range from a calm and sunny report to an avalanche of snow to a wind storm. Their weather reports can be very creative!

We use the yoga to prepare the students to sit for the lesson. The lessons are centered on a children’s book. I have been amazed at how many wonderful, contemporary children’s books there are that speak to the core messages of the Dharma in one way or another. Some of the books we have used include: *Anh’s Anger* and *Steps and Stones* by Gail Silver, *Charlotte and the Quiet Place* by Deborah Sosin, *My Mouth is a Volcano* by Julia Cook, *Visiting Feelings* by Lauren Rubenstein, *Each Kindness* by Jacqueline Woodson, *Material World* by Peter Menzel, *Last Stop on Market Street* by Matt De La Pena, *The Invisible Boy* by Patrice Barton, *What Do You Do with a Problem* and *What Do You Do with an Idea* by Kobi Yamada and Mae Besom. I could go on and on, but I think you get the idea. Dharma is life and life is so profoundly reflected in children’s books. Finding the Dharma message in a good book has become somewhat of a passion. People are always sending good reads to me and I would love any suggestions you might have.

After our story time, we have a craft that reinforces the lesson discussed. Examples of the crafts we completed include: creating a mindfulness jar to reinforce a lesson on being still and quiet; a pinecone bird feeder to reinforce a lesson about our need to be kind to everyone, including the earth and non-human creatures; creating a cooling jar made of tiny objects placed in rice to use as a tool to cool down when emotions get too hot or intense; and painting kind and compassionate messages on rocks to leave around for people to discover. I have enjoyed finding crafts to match the Dharma concepts introduced. Learning through artistic expression seems to really help the children integrate the class theme.

I have learned a great deal through the development and evolution of this class. I originally thought older children would be more interested, but it really speaks most profoundly to children from kindergarten to the fourth grade. I thought that parents would drop their kids off, but found that the whole family almost always stays and participates fully. Having raised three incredibly active little boys myself, I was hoping to develop a class that would accommodate all kinds of energy levels. Although I love to have all kinds of energy levels present, I no longer gear the class in that direction. I have found a way to be calm and present and as a result of this change the class has either self-selected families who resonate with that calm or the calm container I am providing helps to make more active children calmer, I am not sure. I continue to learn and deepen my understanding of practicing the Dharma through the lessons I learn from the children and their families. Sometimes I have huge classes and sometimes the classes are very small. The ability to adapt is necessary! A core group of approximately 8 to 10 children has developed over the years. The commitment of the core group has been wonderful as it allows for the progression of understanding. A drop-in format keeps the class fairly superficial. Accommodating a few drop-ins with a core group seems to be most ideal for all participants.

The class ends with the children lying on the floor quietly with family members and listening to a short Dharma intention or guided meditation. Everyone gets a small stuffed animal known as a breathing buddy. The breathing buddies include items like stuffed whales or frogs or even pint-sized Yodas. The children (and their parents) love choosing one each class and carefully placing it on their bellies while their breath gives the buddy a ride. Once the last bell is rung, the children are offered fruit and something sweet in honor of Thay. He once said that becoming a monk was appealing because of a childhood memory of a sweet treat offered to him by a monk when he was a young boy. The sweetness was forever connected to the Dharma. I hope the same is true for the children in this class. It is clear that their sweetness keeps me more deeply connected to the Dharma. One last thing, we often recite a prayer that was written by the class in our first year. I'd like to share it with you because it profoundly illustrates what we knew as children to be necessary and sometimes forget as adults. I am often brought to tears when it is read.



First Sunday School Prayer for Compassion

- May all people not suffer.
- May all people feel loved.
- May everyone have enough food and water.
- May everyone have access to an education.
- May all people have enough money.
- May everyone have a place to live.
- May we care for the environment
- May there be more creativity.
- May we be more kind and generous.
- May we not hurt each other.
- May we all feel more connected.
- May there be no violence.
- May we all be safe from harm.
- May we all have good health.
- May we all feel grateful for what we have.
- May we all have more self-love.
- May there be peace in the world

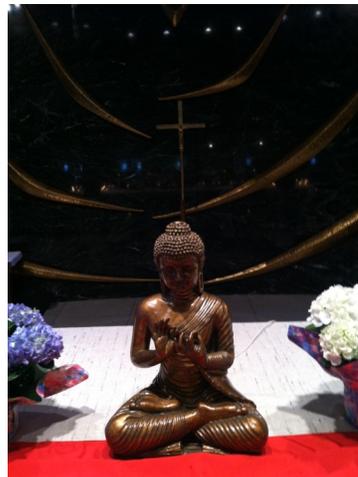
Susette Cuoso Reporting from the Miami, Florida Sangha

As Brother Noble Silence asked me to write about the sangha, I started to think about my own contribution to my sangha, and to be totally honest, I haven't been actively participating as much as I think that I should be. This made me feel guilty and seriously doubt my ability to write about this topic. Since I divorced less than 2 years ago, I've found myself working 3 jobs and doing a lot more things to fulfill my responsibilities and transition into a new life that I now get to build from scratch. I realize that I've been working on myself because I haven't had that much to give to others. So I started to read up on the relationship between the self and the sangha and I found this by Thich Nhat Hahn:

Is the Sangha Outside of Us?

"We say, 'take refuge in sangha,' but sangha is made of individual practitioners. So you have to take care of yourself. Otherwise you don't have much to contribute to the community because you do not have enough calm, peace, solidity, and freedom in your heart. That is why in order to build a community, you have to build yourself at the same time. The community is in you and you are in the community. You interpenetrate each other. That is why I emphasize sangha-building. That doesn't mean that you neglect your own practice. It is by taking good care of your breath, of your body, of your feelings, that you can build a good community."

Editor's Note: Wherever there is space on a page, I will fill it with photos from the Annual Retreat.



Connecticut Sangha Has a New Home and New Students by Bobbie Martin

As another year of DTO classes in Connecticut nears its end, we have much to be grateful for.

The new group of students that joined the Connecticut Sangha in the fall have enthusiastically returned class after class, offering presentations and engaging whole-heartedly in discussion. Whether a first year student or having attended for multiple years, everyone enjoyed the insights, energy, and continuity of working and practicing together. Our new home at the Unitarian Universalist Church on Fern Street in West Hartford turned out to be well suited to our needs, as well as those of many other groups.

As a result the DTO presentations were often accompanied by live background music from piano, violins, cellos, or chorus, depending on which lessons and rehearsals were scheduled for any given Saturday. A new wall-mounted flat screen gave us the option to get technical with our presentations, should a presenter choose to offer that kind of visual support.

Richard Zipoli offered several classes after class to bring into focus issues that might arise while serving as a teacher.



The group that remained for these discussions swelled to a majority of the morning attendees, as the situations that were discussed and shared were applicable to all, for they aimed at raising our awareness, recognizing and accepting what is, and easing the suffering of self and others.

During the transition from the morning class to the afternoon class, the group satisfied their physical hunger by enjoying a couple of fundraiser lunches. In so doing we were able to raise donations for Buddhist Global Relief.

The CT DTO is planning to meet for monthly half-days of mindfulness during the summer months. On August 11, 2017, we are planning to have Mark Unno, an ordained priest in the Shin Buddhist tradition and an associate professor of Buddhism at the University of Oregon, come speak to us. We hope to invite other Sanghas in the area once the location and time has been finalized. Please contact Deborah McDonald if you would like more information about this event.



Introduction to the Virginia Sangha by Dave Edmonds and Jeffrey G. Butts, Jr.

The Dharma Teacher Order class at Dong Hung Temple in Virginia Beach started forming this year in October. At the temple we have an active and ongoing English language Sangha. Our primary monastic advisor is Dharma Master Thich Chuc Thanh. Several of us have been interested for a long time in advancing our study and practice, with the possibility of eventually becoming lay Dharma Teachers at some point. Knowing this, Thay Thanh contacted Bhikku Thich Tri Hoang and asked him to visit us to talk about starting a Dharma class.

We are so fortunate to already have a strong base that we were able to have our formational meetings during the next couple weeks and our first class about a month after Thay Hoang's visit. After only a couple of weeks of getting things internally organized (getting interest from within our existing Temple's sangha, selecting a coordinator, choosing our first class's presenter, etc.), we held our first class on Sunday 6 November, with an instruction from the beginnings of *Old Path White Clouds*. Since we started a little late in the year we are still working our way through the Year One material, while the other DTO groups are finishing up their studies for the year.

Since our first day, the classes have been gaining popularity among our Temple's sangha and attendance increases each class. We have very eager, passionate, and creative students who introduce contemplative wisdom and experiential group activities linked directly to the dharma teachings. The students within the Virginia Beach DTO class come from a vast range of backgrounds in dharma practice experience, world travels, age, occupation, etc. Participating in this class brings us all closer to a real 'American Buddhism' that applies the Dharma to modern everyday life, and this is represented in the wide range of life experiences that our participants bring to classes.

It has been very exciting so far and the classes have for the most part run very smoothly. We have settled on using chairs in a circle, with no tables in between, so that we can have more direct contact with each other. We start with a chanting and meditation period then move into the book presentation part of the class. After a break we do a period of walking meditation followed by more discussion.

As we continue to grow in experience and in number, we are watering the seeds of wisdom and compassion through study, practice and teaching. We thank you for all of your support and years of hard work and diligence in establishing the Dharma Teacher Order and inviting us to help strengthen the mission of the DTO of spreading the Dharma. May our mission and activities prosper and increase.



More Photos from the Annual DTO Retreat April 7-9, 2017 at Mariandale, Ossining, NY



Lots of photos this year! Many thanks to all DTO members and friends who contributed photos of the retreat.



The Editor

