

Dharma Teacher Order Newsletter

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DHARMA TEACHER ORDER

The Evolution of the DTO By Fernando Camacho

The Dharma Teacher Order was started at the turn of the 21st century by Venerable Thich Tri Hoang (Thay) to teach the Dharma to Westerners and, for those interested, to train them to become Dharma teachers. He used for the classes many of the same books as he had to study in his training as a monk. The course developed as an intensive in-depth learning experience, having to read many texts for a period of three years. There was a strong component of practice to complement the book learning, becoming acquainted with meditation, chanting and ceremonies. Students who satisfactorily finished the three year course would receive a Certificate of Buddhist Studies. Over the years, most students who reached this stage also yearned to learn to teach the Dharma and, therefore, remained 1-2 more years with the intent to be ordained as a Dharma teacher. Many students have become Dharma teachers over the years.

After about 10 years of classes, Thay decided to provide the opportunity for Dharma teachers to become lay Buddhist priests. So in 2011, the first DTO lay Buddhist priests were ordained. After 5 years of being ordained as lay Buddhist priests, they would be able to officiate the Three Refuges and Five Precepts ceremonies.

The major thrust and mission of the DTO centered around the classes: The Dharma Study Class (first 3 years) and the Dharma Training Class (the years to become a Dharma teacher). The DTO classes, which were based in New York only, spread to Miami, Connecticut, Houston and most recently Virginia Beach. Each location was considered a separate sangha within the DTO.

It became obvious over the years, that it was hard to keep to the planned schedule, review all of the assigned books, as well as develop our Buddhist practices within the framework of the 3 years of the Dharma Study Class. Also, there was a cost factor, as some students could not afford to purchase all of the books. Students were becoming frustrated as they could not keep up with the pace of the course. Therefore, the Dharma Study Class was lengthened to 4 years, also in this way allowing more time to spend on each book. We also began to define in more detail the skills, expectations and dedication that were needed in order to become a Dharma teacher. We realized that becoming a Dharma teacher is a lifelong commitment and decided that the duration of the Dharma Training Class would be different depending on the student. The decision when the student would be ready to become a Dharma teacher would be made by each sangha and Thay.

Other problems have surfaced recently: 1) Most students who stick it out for 4 years in the Dharma Study Class are interested in becoming Dharma teachers and, therefore, continue on to the Dharma Training Class. Many other students drop out because of the number of books that we have to read, the time commitment of 4 years or, mostly, the lack of interest in becoming a Dharma teacher. These students have a keen interest in the Dharma but realize that this class is too involved and too advanced for them. In other words, the Dharma Study Class has become a class for "seminarians,"

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The Evolution of the DTO, continued

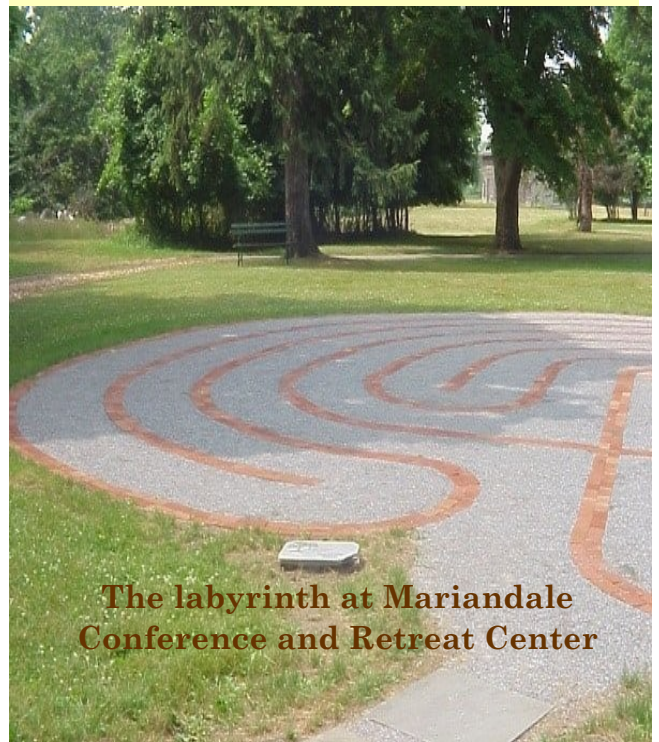
those who have already decided to dedicate their life to the Dharma. This is an important role of this class, but, it misses teaching many others who would benefit from becoming acquainted to the Buddha's teachings. 2) Most students who become Dharma teachers, lose their spiritual connection to the DTO. This could be because there is no other option in the DTO structure but the two previously mentioned classes. We have not provided enough opportunities for our Dharma teachers to remain vibrant in the DTO. We need to find ways to enhance our spiritual connection with all of our Dharma teachers within the context of Thay's mission: to make the Dharma accessible to the West so that we can help in relieving the suffering here. It is true that many of us are involved in various such endeavors, for example, Adrienne and Richard Baksa's efforts with the Prison Correspondence Course, as well as many of the DTO attempts to provide interfaith dialogues. We need to provide other opportunities for our Dharma teachers to remain involved and continue to view the DTO as one of their spiritual anchors. We need to take better care of our Dharma teachers.

The Dharma Teacher Order has to do better. It has to expand their teaching not only in the current classes for "seminarians" but also for those who just want to learn some of the Dharma to either strengthen their spiritual path or to learn other tools such as meditation that can help alleviate their suffering. We need to visit prisons, teach meditation at work, pursue interfaith dialogues, teach basic introductory Buddhist courses for those who are only ready to taste the Dharma. We need to do these activities as a group, the DTO. We need to learn from each other and support each other. Our on-line Correspondence Course will be an opportunity to teach the Dharma to those who do not have a deep knowledge of the Dharma

The DTO is impermanent. It is our flower, kindly gifted to us by Thay. We need to enhance the conditions that allow this flower to grow. In order to grow and to evolve, we need to change our emphasis. We need to continue to train Dharma teachers but, more importantly, we need to make the Dharma more available in each of our communities to those who just think they need just a casual encounter with the Buddha's teachings. We also need to involve our Dharma teachers and let them know that the DTO can still remain one of their spiritual home bases.

Let's talk more about this at our April retreat.

With much Metta,
Your brother in the Dharma, Fernando



**The labyrinth at Mariandale
Conference and Retreat Center**

News from the Connecticut Sangha Submitted by Richard Zipoli, Jr.

Members of the Connecticut sangha used a wide range of methods and formats during recent teaching activities. Several of their resourceful activities are described in the following paragraphs.

Janet Crocker presented an overview of the first half of *Learning True Love*, an autobiographical account of Sister Chân Không's life of socially engaged Buddhist practice. Toward the end of her presentation, Janet shared a YouTube video featuring Chân Không. Sister Chân Không's peaceful and compassionate demeanor served as an inspiring capstone to Janet's synopsis of the book.

Nancy Smeeth, Bobbie Martin, and Ted Rasmussen each summarized portions of Thich Nhat Hanh's *Understanding Our Minds: 50 Verses on Buddhist Psychology*. Nancy focused on selected sections of the readings, adding insightful comments, and inviting other class members to share their perspectives. Bobbie creatively used props, including bubbles and collections of incense sticks, to help demonstrate some of Buddhist psychology's key insights into the nature of consciousness. Ted developed an activity during which we wrote and then compared our responses to a several pictures. The activity effectively illustrated how previous conditioning affects individual perceptions and judgments.

Richard Downey and Craig Hannah provided an overview of the *Avatamsaka Sutra*, a Mahayana discourse whose central teaching is the interdependence and interpenetration of all phenomena. Richard, who has a background in art, guided us through an activity that culminated in a colorful montage made from our individual - but interrelated - designs. Craig gave an overview of Cheng Chien's book, *Manifestation of the Tathagata*, which focuses on an influential chapter of the Avatamsaka Sutra. He developed a set of informative PowerPoint slides and a meticulous outline, and extended these materials with spontaneous remarks based on his careful study of the text and commentary.

Suffice it to note that it continues to be a pleasure studying together and learning from one another in our Connecticut sangha. Many of our members will be participating in the April retreat, and we look forward to seeing friends from sister DTO sanghas.



NY DTO Teaching Classes in Cold Spring

Submitted by Maeve Eng-Wong

How do you become comfortable teaching the Dharma? This has been a question we have fielded from students for years and one we have pondered ourselves in the NY Sangha. If you like to read, study and practice, the Dharma Study Class is perfect for you and it certainly has been perfect for me. I love to read the masters and contemplate the Dharma. I love to go on retreat and hear talks and I love to sit in silence. I live my daily life doing my best to adhere to the guidance offered by the Dharma and there is not a day that goes by that I am not grateful to have found Buddhism and the DTO as it was created by Thay....What I haven't loved is the expectation that I teach the Dharma.

A few of the NY Sangha teachers have been offering classes at Mariandale Retreat Center. We started this endeavor by offering the formal class and then, by adjusting to the needs of the students who were taking the classes, we decided to offer a few shorter, topic-oriented classes and take a break from the formal class. We have been enjoying the topic oriented classes tremendously. We were hesitant to move out of the comfort of the class as we knew it, but having done it, it seems we are better for it. We were ready for a change and it appears that teaching outside of the parameters of the class has allowed us to hone a more intimate relationship to the contents of the teachings. We are learning how to offer the Dharma in a way that feels meaningful and authentic to us.

Fernando and I started a class together in Cold Spring, NY, using the book, *Tree of Enlightenment* by Peter Della Santina as a guide. The students that have been coming to the class are not necessarily interested in becoming Buddhist, but they are very interested in learning about Buddhism and discovering how their own spiritual practice and Buddhism overlap. It has been moving to witness how Buddhism lends itself to seekers from all traditions.

It was a surprise to us how this class has re-ignited our interest in the formal class books and, quite frankly, ignited our desire to teach. The students that have been finding us are spiritually mature. They are open to the teachings and engage wholeheartedly in lively discussions. The class has a reciprocal nature. We offer to them what we have learned over the years and they offer to us what they have learned over the years and somehow, we all leave enriched. We are not the holders of the knowledge, we are the holders of the space where Dharma is shared. This feels right to us.

It is through stepping out of our comfort zone that Fernando and I are finally beginning to understand what teaching the Dharma really means to us. Teachers I have encountered along the path suggested to me that one should begin to consider teaching the Dharma only after ten years of solid practice and study if the interest is there. It has taken us significantly longer, but somehow the time we have spent practicing and learning together makes this experience even sweeter.

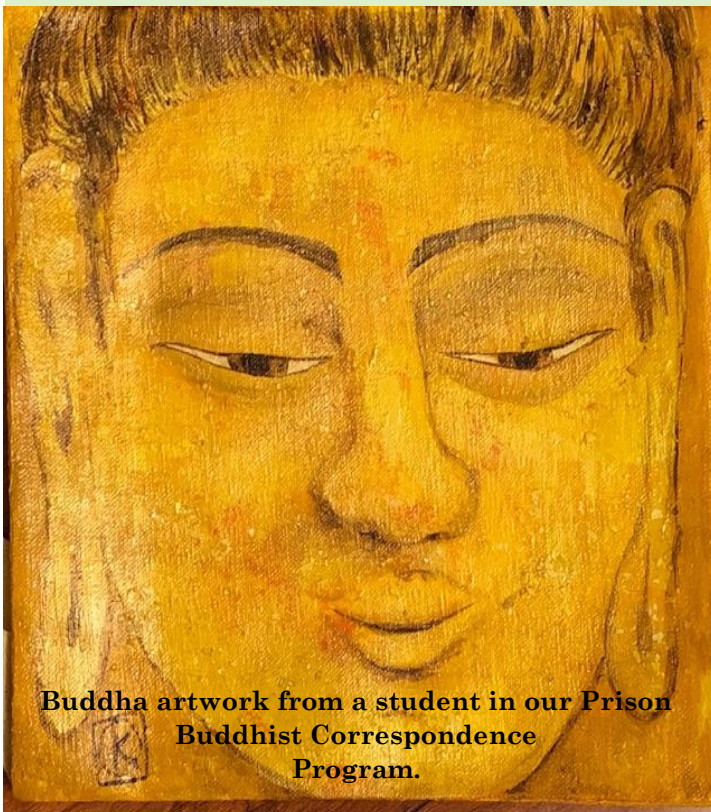
News from the Sangha in Pearland, Texas

Sister Phap Lan (Cathy Hill) Reporting

The Pearland Sangha has had a productive year. Recently, we expanded our prison outreach program to include one more state prison in our area. We are currently visiting each facility once a month.

In November, Sister Cathy took over most of the administrative duties of the Buddhist Correspondence Course. We are so happy that our temple is co-sponsoring this wonderful program along with the Buddhist Association of the United States (BAUS). The program is in need of new mentors. Please contact phaplan@buddhist-correspondence-course.org for more information.

As you know, there has been quite a bit of ongoing construction at our temple. Happily, the bell tower and the new Buddha Hall are complete. We are not yet able to have regular services in the new hall. However, we did have one special service in the new building on February 17, the final day of the Vietnamese New Year celebration. On that day, we had a beautiful dedication ceremony, and in spite of gray skies and a bit of light rain, the day was just perfect.



Buddha artwork from a student in our Prison Buddhist Correspondence Program.

ATTENTION!

Dear Readers,
If you want to see photos of the Dedication Ceremony, click on this link.

https://photos.google.com/share/AF1QipPwcqw7n4zKiRU9zNzKJIH-HMJtIFqfNjCLbWiI1MYVEm_8Yxaw0w9pk0UQfcl0Jw?key=bzc1c3BIZERGRFRqckFmbEVCemMzM3QyQUp6TW9n

In Memoriam Mary Oliver - I know that many of you love Mary Oliver's poetry as much as I do. The depth of her spirituality and her relationship with the natural world is a beautiful teaching for us. Below is a link to a article about her, "Mary Oliver and the Four Noble Truths."



<https://www.thehouseofyoga.com/magazine/mary-oliver-and-four-noble-truths>

The late poet's work inspired a deeper understanding of attention, suffering, interconnectedness, and hope.

In Blackwater Woods Mary Oliver

Look, the trees
Are turning their own bodies
Into pillars
Of light,
Are giving off the rich
Fragrance of cinnamon
And fulfillment.
The long tapers
Of cattails
Are bursting and floating away over
The blue shoulders
Of the ponds,
And every pond,
No matter what its
Name is, is
Nameless now.
Every year
Everything
I have ever learned
In my lifetime
Leads back to this: the fires
And the black river of loss
Whose other side
Is salvation,
Whose meaning
None of us will ever know.
To live in this world
You must be able
To do three things:
To love what is mortal;
To hold it
Against your bones knowing
Your own life depends on it;
And, when the time comes to let it go,
To let it go.

Can you find in Mary Oliver's poem each of the Four Noble Truths?