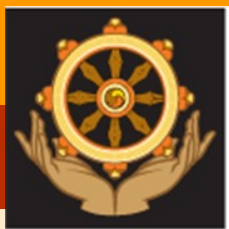


Dharma Teacher Order Newsletter

Dear Readers,

Our DTO Newsletter has been dormant for too long. This time around, we are soliciting original creative writing pieces of a spiritual nature that have sprung from the spiritual richness that lies within each of you. It will be wonderful to see in print what lies in the recesses of your heart and mind that you took the time to express in writing. Think about the ways in which Buddhism has changed you. How enriching it will be for all of us to know how a Buddhist teaching may have manifested in your life. Is there a story you might share? Please consider sharing with your fellow DTO members and friends. We want to learn from each other and be enriched by each other's thoughts and actions. With Metta and Gratitude,

Janet Reale



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VOLUME 9 EDITION 1

I Have Arrived.... Essay by Fernando Camacho

On a hot August 2005 morning, I started to drive to Boston, Massachusetts, to attend my first Buddhist retreat. There was much apprehension and doubt in my mind as I had never been to a Buddhist retreat before and I was not a Buddhist. But, somehow, there still was an overpowering stronger yearning and attraction to find out more about all of those concepts and ideas that the Dalai Lama and Thich Nhat Hanh had been teaching me through their many books. I had read that Thich Nhat Hanh was going to be at Stonehill College near Boston and I quickly registered not knowing at all what to expect and also realizing that I would not know anyone there.

Many questions arose as I drove up: What do they do at a Buddhist retreat? I had been raised as a Catholic Christian and had only been to some short retreats as a teenager. Am I getting involved in a cult? I had read many stories about religious groups holding practices or retreats as a way to gather more members. Am I going to feel lonely? This was going to be a silent retreat surrounded by strangers for five days! In spite of all of these questions, I still decided to make the three hour drive from New York to Boston.

When I arrived at the college, it felt, at first, like if I was attending a regular conference. There were long lines for checking in, groups of people who knew each other, as well as many others who were walking around not knowing what to do, like me. However, there was something weird. From time to time, a bell rang and everyone stopped whatever they were doing and stood silently for a few seconds. I thought that was odd but it felt peaceful.

Finally, I was able to find the location of my dorm room which was to be shared with two other retreatants. After unpacking, I decided to walk around and found my way to the main meditation hall which was in a gymnasium. There were a few people milling around, some of them leaving their cushions to save their space for the times of meditation. What struck me in amazement was a big banner in the front of the large room which read "I HAVE ARRIVED". I began to question what this could mean. It appeared that this was a very pompous statement to be made by the religious leader of this retreat. What was so special about his arrival to Boston? Is this the right place for me? There was no one that I felt comfortable enough to discuss this with. I felt very much out of place. I decided then to go to dinner and postpone any decision about leaving at that time.

(Continued on page 2)

This newsletter owes much to the excellent teamwork of Sylvia Nguyen and Konrad Sheehan who worked with exemplary dedication to solicit entries, to Fernando Camacho for his encouragement, and to Craig Hannah for always being on tap with his expertise. My deepest thanks, Janet Reale

“I Have Arrived” by Fernando Camacho Continued from page 1

There was a scheduled welcome reception gathering that evening and I anxiously decided to attend. The room was crowded and one could sense the excitement in the room as we waited for Thich Nhat Hanh. My apprehension began to melt away when I heard Thich Nhat Hanh speak in his soft, gentle, loving inclusive way. Perhaps, this retreat was not going to be so bad after all.

Then, the monastics began to sing the Namo-Valo-Kitesh-Varaya chant and my heart was opened by each verse. Tears filled my eyes and I began to feel this inner change that was hard to comprehend.

As the days of the retreat went by, I began to feel more at ease, more at home, more like I belonged. I no longer felt lonely. I did not make any friends at the retreat and had very few conversations with others but yet that did not matter. It felt spiritually nourishing to be there.

After much consideration, I decided to take the Three Refuges and the Five Mindfulness Trainings at the end of the retreat. I had begun to feel like I was a Buddhist.

Gradually, I began to understand the meaning of the banner “I HAVE ARRIVED”. Thich Nhat Hanh and many others had arrived at the present moment when coming to the retreat. In the meantime, it took me many days to realize that I also had arrived. Caught up with my fears, suspicions, worries and perceptions, I was not able to appreciate the simple, but yet deep, wisdom of being present. Ever since then, I have continued to try to arrive every day of my life. That retreat had changed my life. All I had to do was just arrive!



DTO Silent Retreat - August 2023

Summer in New York. Good time for our DTO summer silent retreat from August 3-6, 2023.

Everything green and blooming, birds singing along, majestic Hudson River with its many signs of impermanence, nice cool gentle breeze blowing into the lookout cliff - ideal conditions to meditate.

There were seven of us who were blessed to be able to join together for these peaceful rewarding days enjoying the beautiful silence that melded us into a quiet unity. The seven of us in the adjoining picture (from left to right): Teo Castellanos, Fernando Camacho, Julie Verrone, Maeve Eng-Wong, Ellyn Valera-Burstein, Inez Barlatier and Sally Smith. Teo and Inez are from the Miami Sangha while the other five are from the New York Sangha.

The Fruits of Practice

By Pháp Lan

*Your disciple for many lifetimes, many kalpas,
has been caught in the obstacles of
karma, craving, anger, arrogance, ignorance, confusion, errors,
and today, thanks to knowing the Buddha,
has recognized her mistakes and sincerely begins anew.*

—excerpt from a chant in the Plum Village tradition

Some people have trouble apologizing to others. That has never been an issue for me. In fact, I sometimes apologize too much. But what I didn't understand until recently is that there has always been a hidden agenda attached to my otherwise sincere apologies.

For example, I might apologize and then try to justify myself. Or I might apologize to make myself feel better. There are even times I have apologized just to get the other person to stop talking so I could escape from the uncomfortable situation. That's not a true apology. That's all about me, me, me. After years of practice, this suddenly became clear to me a couple of weeks ago.

I was in the midst of a very uncomfortable interaction which was born out of a number of misunderstandings. As the situation became more tense, I suddenly realized that it did not matter who was "right" and who was "wrong." What mattered was not what the other person may or may not have said and done. What mattered was that I had caused harm to another person. I had hurt another person with my unskillful speech. And at that moment, without any effort on my part, all of the feelings of hurt, resentment, irritation, and arrogance just vanished. And I was able to express my unconditional sorrow at having been the cause of that harm and hurt. Just like that.

So that's what it feels like to really let go. No struggle. No effort. Everything just falls away. True freedom.

I know this may not happen again right away, but I have confidence that, with practice, it will happen again. The fruits of practice are sweet.

The Heart Nebula

Richard Downey explained this art technique and his inspiration for this powerful painting: Most artists will tell you that the material is what allows them to express themselves. The oil stick allows a very meditative experience to my art. You can expressively put a color on, it dries quickly, you can put the next color on, - though you never really cover up the layers underneath completely. At times it can feel very much out of control.

The inspiration behind this painting was three things. First, everything is connected. One color is flowing through, to, or over, another. The next is, nothing is under control. Things are going in every direction. Which brings me to the third thing:
Relax and be kind.



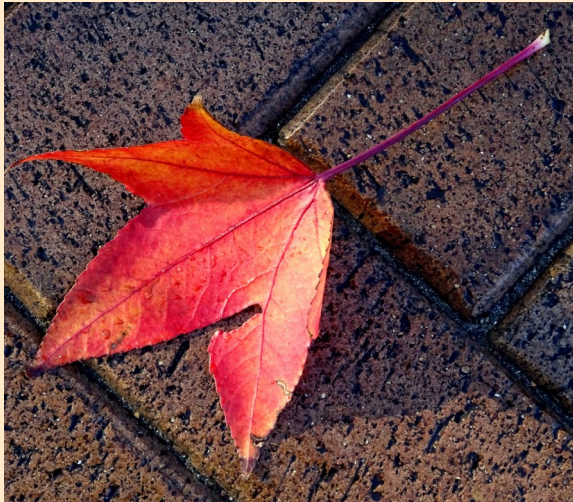
Continuation

By Pháp Lan

I remember the first time I came across Thich Nhat Hanh’s contemplation of an autumn leaf. I was mesmerized by it. These lines in particular moved me, and I have read them many times over the years.

... So please continue to look back and you will see that you have always been here. Let us look together and penetrate into the life of a leaf, so we may be one with the leaf. Let us penetrate and be one with the cloud or with the wave, to realize our own nature as water and be free from our fear. If we look very deeply, we will transcend birth and death.

Tomorrow, I will continue to be. But you will have to be very attentive to see me. I will be a flower, or a leaf. I will be in these forms and I will say hello to you. If you are attentive enough, you will recognize me, and you may greet me. I will be very happy.



I thought I understood these beautiful words, but now I know that my understanding was superficial. And then, Joey died.

I was Joey’s elementary school teacher for three years and I grew very close to him and his family. Fast forward twenty years to the Covid pandemic. Joey became very ill with Covid, and after a few weeks in the ICU, just when he seemed to be improving, he suddenly passed away. Joey’s mom called me that morning to share the sad news. We cried together for some time.

After that, I sat alone on my back patio, grieving the loss of Joey. And then suddenly I remembered the autumn leaf. I looked up at the great live oak and saw the leaves shimmering and smiling at me. It’s Joey, I thought.

Then the yellow hibiscus, in full bloom, caught my eye. Joey! Everywhere I looked, I saw Joey. The blue sky, vast and clear, the white clouds drifting by, the golden orb of the sun. All Joey. I felt his presence everywhere, all around me. “Hi, Joey!,” I called to the oak tree. “Hi Joey” to the flowers. “Hi Joey,” to the sky and the clouds. “Hi, Joey” to the morning sun. And I was happy. And the shimmering leaves and the yellow flowers were happy. And the blue sky and the white clouds were happy. Joey was not gone at all, and for the first time I knew this at a very deep level, and it was pure joy.

.... If we look very deeply, we will transcend birth and death.

Tomorrow, I will continue to be. But you will have to be very attentive to see me. I will be a flower, or a leaf. I will be in these forms and I will say hello to you. If you are attentive enough, you will recognize me, and you may greet me. I will be very happy.

The Dharma is deep and lovely.

**Author's Note: Lessons in Buddhism abound.
They are all around us and in us as well...**

Kintsugi by Janet Reale

December 15, 2022

It was in my Japanese Culture Course where I first encountered the word “kintsugi” which I found to be mysterious yet vaguely familiar and strangely enticing with only a sketchy knowledge of its definition. Later, I became intrigued by its noble definition and its connection with Mahayana Buddhism which includes the Vietnamese Zen that we practice. In Japan, kintsugi is the art of repairing pottery cracks with gold or silver which adds not only to the value of the object but to its essence. It is considered that if an object is damaged and repaired, it adds to the history and value of the object and is cause for celebration.



I believe that “kintsugi” can likewise apply to us; we can also be kintsugi. We bear sadness and grief in our shattered selves and fill in the cracks somehow, not with gold or silver but with our own essence, our own uniqueness, our integrity, our expanded comprehension and compassion. In the case of my nephew, Joel, and myself, we also do it with our writing, our depth in words. Sometimes Shakespeare’s quote, “Give sorrow words, the grief that does not speak whispers to the o’ver-wrought heart and bids it break” does not always outwardly manifest in our own interpretation but it is always underneath. For me, it is not hidden and maybe others can also discern it. Sometimes, it is barely covered with only a thin veneer and, other times, it bursts through with no disguise, no embellishment, no grandiosity in words, just the grief that must be spoken. Either way suffices as a catharsis.

There is a sense of release, of sharing what needs to be shared, a shout to the reader that to know us even a little maybe is to know our lost ones, know why we cannot live with superficialities as the focus of our lives, to understand the call of Buddhism, realize that our inner being calls out with intensity which is almost a ferocity of purpose even though we know that such intensity is not what some people look for in us and it may even distance some people. It must be spoken at times so that our lost ones can again live through us, through our efforts at writing. It cannot bring them back physically but they are there in our writing and we know they are present.

The Heart Opens with Compassion by Giac Vien



In August, we were invited to gather at Linh Quang Temple in Lincoln, Nebraska, in honor of their 30th anniversary. It was a beautiful and busy time of gratitude, celebration, and dedication, including the grand opening of a new Quan Am garden on the temple grounds. Preparation for that grand opening included several practices and rituals, including a special time of meditation, followed by prostrations, on Saturday morning.

We began that day in darkness, walking mindfully to the foot of the Quan Am statue. As we sat in meditation, the birds burst into song, the sun began to rise, and a monastic offered the Great Bell Chant:

“The universal Dharma Door is already open.
The sound of the Rising Tide is heard clearly. ...
One single drop of this compassionate water
Is enough to bring back the refreshing spring.”

For many of us, this summer has been relentlessly and dangerously hot. The image of this compassionate water, bringing relief from heat, thirst, and drought, is a powerful symbol of finding an end to suffering. When that suffering is especially relentless, it is easy to believe it will never end. This is part of the beauty and importance of the single drop. Just when we think that nothing can ever change, that our suffering is forever and our practice is somehow fruitless, a single drop of compassion wakes us up, reminding us that all conditioned phenomena are impermanent - even our suffering. With that reminder, wisdom and compassion bubble up like a refreshing spring. The heart-mind is free, no longer held captive by the illusion of permanence.

We did not sit for long in the darkness. The sun rose in the sky, and barking dogs replaced singing birds. The cool morning air became hot. But remembering that all dharmas are inconstant and subject to change, I felt gratitude for the sun. My preference for the cool air could not have stopped the sun from rising, and it would have robbed me of the sunlight’s gift: as the brightness increased, I could see the image of Quan Am more clearly. Bringing my meditation to a focus on the Bodhisattva of Compassion, my mind returned to a mindfulness verse I wrote last year, while sitting beneath the same statue at our temple in Missouri:

The heart-mind,
rising with the eyes,
beholds the Bodhisattva
and opens with compassion.

The relentless heat was recently interrupted by rainfall, and Summer will give way to Autumn. But it is not just those conditions around us that are impermanent; we, too, are subject to change. The Buddha’s teachings give us a path by which we learn to practice skillfully, training the heart-mind. It’s easy to forget that this practice is itself a way to skillfully work with impermanence, to transform suffering into wisdom and compassion. Even our forgetfulness can be transformed. On that Saturday, a glance at Quan Am was itself the nectar of compassion, awakening the heart-mind to the possibility of cultivating wisdom and compassion in each unfolding moment, a refreshing spring.

It Was Like Yesterday ...

In honor of my Dad, by Dieu My (Sylvia Nguyen)

It was like yesterday,
 My Dad was stronger and walked faster than me.
 Then impermanence happened,
 Now, I am stronger and walk faster than my Dad.

It was like yesterday,
 My Dad was helping me lift heavy objects.
 Now, his hands are trembling,
 And his strength is weakening.

It was like yesterday,
 My Dad remembered every detail of everything.
 Now, he remembers somethings ... sometimes ...,
 And maybe one day he may not even remember me.

It was like yesterday,
 My Dad was the head of the household,
 Now, he is like a child,
 And has to be taken care of like a newborn.

It was like yesterday,
 My Dad was still able to teach me the facts about life.
 Now, he can only look at me with teary eyes,
 As he can no longer speak.

It was like yesterday,
 My Dad was still my Dad.
 The living Bodhisattva in my house.
 Now, it was just his shadow following me around.

It was like yesterday,
 I was able to see and touch my Dad.
 Now, the house is just full of his memories,
 As death is inevitable.

It was like yesterday.....
 My Dad held me close and kissed my forehead.....
 And was able to tell me he loved me.....
 I loved you too Daddy.....

If you are lucky enough to still have your Dad, love him each and every day, like it was his last. Tell him you love him often. As that could have been... the last time... he was able to hear your voice.....

Photography and Narration by Dieu My (Sylvia Nguyen)

Note from Dieu My: I live in Pearland, which is a small city next to Houston with flat land. I bought that fake bear online to add interest to my pond. When it arrived with the fake fishes, I was amazed how real they all looked. I put the bear at the edge of my pond and was busy trying to see where I might want to move it, then I heard the toad was making sounds. I turned around and actually saw a real toad talking to my fake bear. The toad spent a minute or two talking to the bear pleading for the fishes. When he didn't get a



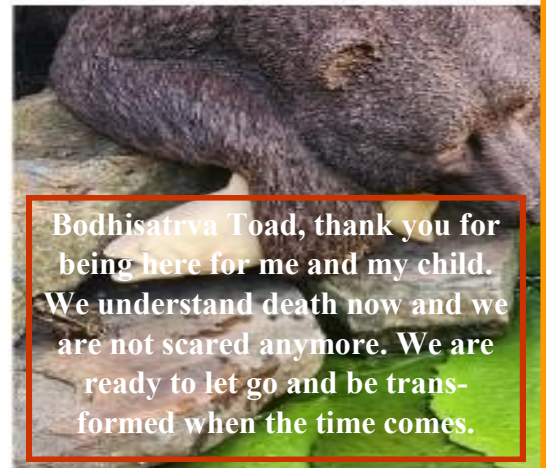
Mr. Bear, please be kind and spare my friends' lives.

response from the bear, he jumped up the ledge and put his hand on the statue fish to comfort it. I was amazed of how kind and compassion the toad was to the fishes. After a while, the toad didn't get a response from Mrs. Fish either so he went his way. The toad acted so much like a human, I was so amazed!!! Everyone who saw the bear thought it was real.

I just happened to be at the right time and place to capture that moment.



Mrs. Fish, I know you are suffering. I am here for you and your daughter.

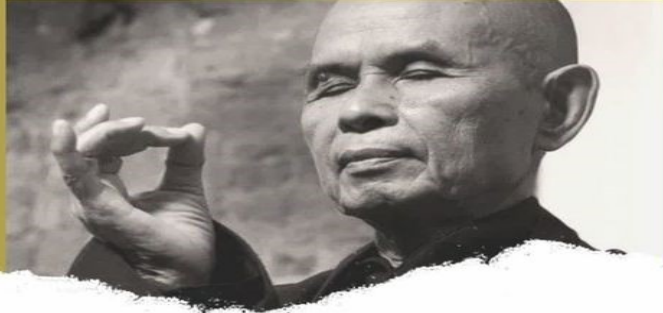


Bodhisattva Toad, thank you for being here for me and my child. We understand death now and we are not scared anymore. We are ready to let go and be transformed when the time comes.



Thank you, Bodhisattva Toad, for teaching me the value of life. I will let these fishes go and eat that yummy waterlily for lunch.

Last Page



Every thought you produce, anything you say, any action you do, it bears your signature.

Thích Nhất Hạnh

