

THE DHARMA TEACHER ORDER NEWSLETTER

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I Don't Know?

by Konrad Sheehan



I once started writing a book entitled: “I don’t know?” And the first sentence was... I walk out the door... Do I go left? Do I go right? I don’t know?

I read this sentence to my wife, and she said... Honey, we live on a cul-de-sac. This is true; but even if I walk around the cul-de-sac, there are an infinite amount of possibilities that could occur along the way. I may meet a neighbor, stop, and talk for a while. I may see someone walking their dog, and begin petting it. I may even see the Mail Delivery person or the Gardner, and run back home to get him or her a Gatorade to offer a bit of reprieve from the summer heat.

I do this even when visiting Manhattan or any other City. I usually establish a single point of destination for the day; for example: Central Park or the Museum of Modern Art. I walk out of the hotel door... I look left, then right, and go where my heart takes me. I make my merry way, but I may not get there.

I remember once in 1980, I employed this technique. At the time, I was studying “Script Interpretation” with Stella Adler on the East Side of Manhattan. After class, I opened the theatre door, looked left, then right, and found myself heading South down Lexington Avenue. My point of destination was Grand Central Station. While passing the backside of the Waldorf Astoria, I noticed many Police and men dressed in suits which I later found out were Secret Service detail. They were there to protect both Presidents Carter and Reagan who were attending the same event at different times during the evening. I started speaking with a photographer about the event and he said: “Hey, why don’t you come with me, I’ll show you the press room.” We probably walked past more than 200 Secret Service detail to a back elevator in the hotel, and went up to the Press Room floor. The doors opened to a cacophony of reporters. President Reagan just finished speaking to the reporters, and they were waiting for President Carter to arrive. Approximately fifteen minutes in, I noticed

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I Don't Know, continued:

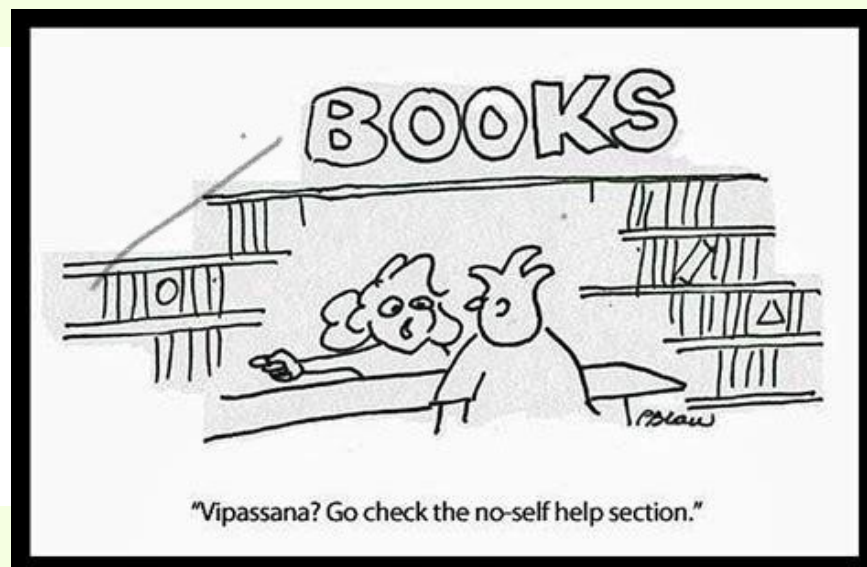
a cassette on the floor. I walked over, picked it up, and asked the gentleman closest to it if it was his. He said: "No." So, without hesitation, I walked up the mic where Reagan just finished speaking, and said..."Excuse me, did..." That's as far as I got before the Secret Service converged upon and surrounded me. One of them asked me what I was doing there. I guess they noticed that I didn't have press credentials dangling from a lanyard. I simply told them that I was an actor, and was curious about what was going on there. They immediately escorted me off the stage, and began asking me questions while walking. I guess they believed me. It was the 80's. They walked me down these very ornately carpeted stairs, opened the brass doors, and I was once again on my way to Grand Central. They even let me keep the program for the evening's event.

All of this happened because..."I don't know?" or "Don't know" mind. "I don't know?" or "Don't know" mind is an integral practice in Zen. It is also known as "beginner's mind." "Don't know" mind is a meditation practice in Korean Zen, as well as some other schools of Buddhism. It is a state of mind that is fresh and new in every moment, and contains the potential for everything..." One way to do this practice, according to teacher, writer and Spiritual Director Robert Brumet, is to "...first acknowledge any plans that you may make, make them, and then let go and live fully in the present moment." In some spiritual practices, "Don't know" mind is used as a vehicle for awakening. So, the next time you walk out the door, perhaps you can look left, then right and go on your merry way...

Sister Chuyen Nghiem writes in her poem from Clarity Hamlet at Deer Park Monastery...

*No one can be certain what lies ahead
on the road of a hundred years.
Find peace as easeful as breathing,
step forward with lightness.
The Buddha resides within you.
Compassion is like holy scripture –
not just a wish, but an ever-present truth.*

A lovely sample of Konrad's "sense of humor":



End-of-the-Academic-Year Retreat

Our remaining retreat for the year comes up in April. Unlike the silent retreat, this one will not be small and will not be silent. It will also be held at the Mariandale Retreat & Conference Center.

The dates for it are Friday April 26 - Sunday April 28, 2024

For now, mark your calendars.

More information will be coming soon!

FROM MUD TO LOTUS - THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE DHARMA TEACHER ORDER - IMPERMANENCE AND LETTING GO - 2009-2013

It was so hard to believe how far we had come by 2011. The Dharma Teacher Order in the prior five years had nourished and developed a Buddhist study class which had grown from an original group of about 12 -15 students up to 43. We were based primarily at Chuang Yen Monastery in Kent, New York and heavily depended on the monastery for a class site as well as for a place to hold our retreats and ceremonies. In turn for this kindness, we agreed to provide services to the monastery; for example, whenever possible, volunteering to be tour guides, help in the kitchen, give Sunday dharma talks, help with the mailing out of Buddhist books. Besides our New York group, one of our students, Jorge Gonzalez (Noble Silence), was building a sangha in Miami, Florida. These were our only two DTO sites in 2009.

But things were not all going very smoothly. The monastery leadership was uncomfortable to have a group of lay people teaching the dharma without being monastics. The situation began to unravel further when Thich Tri Hoang (our Thay) decided to move from Boston to Houston in 2009. A new abbot had been appointed at Chuang Yen who did not like the fact that a Buddhist class was being held at the monastery without a monastic presence.

There were also problems developing within the class which were of a more urgent nature. As we had a fairly large group, the class had been divided into two groups: the dharma training class, which was made up of nine students that had completed three years of study and were interested in becoming dharma teachers; and the dharma study class comprised of new students and those who had been in the group for less than three years. I was a student in the dharma training class. When Thay left, he asked three already ordained dharma teachers to provide the leadership for the classes. This task turned out to be a very large difficult responsibility. Without Thay's leadership and presence, many students became dissatisfied and left, others stayed but became very disruptive in the dharma study class. This turmoil at the dharma study class was hard to handle for the teachers. Two of the dharma teachers eventually left and one stayed but was not able to control the class. By January 2010, the class was truly falling apart and the students at the study class approached those in the training class for help. We, then, reached out to Thay and on February 20, 2010, the nine of us, who were not ordained teachers yet, took over responsibility for the two classes and attempted to provide guidance. I was asked, by the nine training class students, to become the coordinator of this transition and process.

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(continuation from MUD TO LOTUS - THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE DHARMA
TEACHER ORDER - IMPERMANENCE AND LETTING GO - 2009-2013) by Fernando Camacho

Somehow, we survived this turbulent course of events. Eight of the nine dharma training class students were ordained as teachers in April 2010, providing, therefore, the manpower needed to furnish the supervision necessary for the students. We had 43 students involved in the classes for 2010-2011.

The problems with the Chuang Yen leadership were not going away and appeared to be simmering, but ready to boil at any time. There were meetings with monastics, with members of the board, but not much progress was being made. The DTO class was, however, going on amazingly well. There were six more students ordained as dharma teachers in April 2011. We started developing other activities such as providing support to the Buddhist Global Relief, more involvement with the Buddhist Correspondence Course for the incarcerated, trying to get involved in providing support to local hospitals, high schools, hospices. We had 30 students in the class for 2011-2012.

Then, unexpectedly, They received a notice from the Chuang Yen abbot dated April 21, 2012 asking to sign an agreement within the next 7 days essentially wanting to take over the class and obligating all DTO students to attend all Chuang Yen programs and activities and to attend weekend volunteering programs. The students would be required to sign attendance sheets and to attend above 75% of activities, otherwise they would be "liable to failure". Essentially this was an eviction notice. They never signed the agreement and despite many attempts to appeal to various members of the Chuang Yen board, including Bhikku Bodhi, no one was able to intervene.

We were all in state of shock. How could a monastery created to be accessible to all be so close minded and mean? Why would they not meet with us? We underestimated their dissatisfaction with our activities and, perhaps, took for granted their kindness. So, now we were left without a place to practice, to meet. We had no money, no resources, no connections. As we were not able to meet at Chuang Yen, we agreed that those members from Connecticut who were making the trip to New York for class, should be having the DTO classes locally. Four members took on the responsibility to create this sangha. Tom Duva took the lead and was joined by Deborah McDonald, Eduardo Barrios and Michael Geres. The Connecticut sangha grew under their leadership.

For those of us in New York, it was a different story. We met for a while at a Quaker meeting house. We traveled to various temples but were not able to find the right fit. We finally settled at Graymoor Monastery, a Franciscan Catholic large institution in Garrison, New York. We were able to rent a room for our Saturday classes and were surprised to be accepted so readily. There we stayed until 2016. It was ironic but insightful that we had to go to a Christian monastery in order to feel welcome.

However, we were sad, depressed about all that happened in 2012. Just when our lotus appeared to be blooming, we were, in our New York sangha, back to new beginnings, trying to get acclimated to a new place. We were not able to publicize our move or our class. It was hard to find our meeting room. We had 21 students in the 2012-2013 DTO dharma study class.

To this day, I find it hard to visit Chuang Yen as it brings back so many memories of struggles, of not being good enough to be accepted at a Buddhist institution.

We knew that Graymoor was not our permanent destination. Where will we wind up in? Will we be able to attract students to a Buddhist class in a Christian monastery in a distant room on the 4th floor of one of the many buildings in the property?

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We were buoyed and encouraged by this quote from venerable Ajahn Chah:

“ If your house is flooded or burnt to the ground, whatever the threat to it, let it concern only the house. If there’s a flood, don’t let it flood your mind. If there’s a fire, don’t let it burn your heart. Let it be merely the house, that which is outside of you, that is flooded or burned. Now is the time to allow your mind to let go of attachments.”

We needed to make the best of our situation.

(Next installment: The Blooming of the Lotus - the DTO from 2013-2023)



“The Lake’s Surface”

“The lake’s surface
sees what it sees...
without discrimination,
no holding-on.

Sometimes it sees a bird
with wing’s moving
up and down;
sometimes
floating by
through the mist
at dawn.

Sometimes it sees
the leaves dancing
in the wind
from the tree
on its shore,
sometimes leaves quiet;
just chill.

Sometimes, it sees
a plane passing overhead
leaving a contrail of smoke.

Most times,
it sees
the clouds
and the sky,
blue and white
‘till night.

The lake’s surface
sees what it sees...
Without judgment,
It sees and lets-go.”

Konxie - 11/22/2023
Inspired by Vietnamese Dhyana Maste Huong Hai

Submitted by Konrad Sheehan