

## An account of the "Engaging American Buddhism" retreat and experiment for artists with Thich Nhat Hanh at the Ojai Foundation May 1-12

(The following account is drawn from a retreat journal kept by Ellen Sidor, one of more than 60 artists participating in an unusual and historic 10-day retreat last May at the Ojai Foundation, high up in the foothills above Santa Barbara in southern California. Special thanks go to Thay (Vietnamese Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh) and his senior assistant Sister Phuong, the Ojai Foundation staff and founder Joan Halifax (a long-time student of Zen Master Seung Sahn), and Marlow Hotchkiss and Cynthia Jurs, coordinators of the retreat. The basic concept for the retreat flowed forth from Thay's idea of artists as "lineage holders" for the culture and that Buddhism can most fully take root in American culture with the active participation of artists who are practicing. The three basic elements to be joined were a firm understanding of the Dharma, meditation practice, and artists in their art process.

The song/poem by Deena Metzger and Betsy Rose is used with permission. Many of the quotes used in the journal cannot be attributed; those that can are so noted.

Participants lived in tents and a few guest yurts scattered about the Ojai property. The daily schedule included an early morning meditation, breakfast, samu (work period in which people could choose the area they wanted to work in), a 45-minute walking meditation, Dharma talk by Thay, then lunch. After lunch there was free time for studio work or gatherings, a tea ceremony (for the first three days) in which much group sharing was done, another sitting period, then supper. In the evening the time was spent in a big gathering, either sharing a common project like gatha writing or watching live or slide presentations of each other's art, and a closing sitting.

As the retreat got underway it rapidly became apparent that there were many agendas being worked on, probably too many. To list just a few: working on Thay's agenda of creating forms for American Buddhism, slowing down and being on retreat (in the case of some artists, their first experience), exploring feminist forms within Buddhism, the 12-step program and its relationship to Buddhism, networking with other artists, working on one's own project(s), and last but not least, trying to stay with the schedule. For most of the first week, Thay insisted that we keep silence at meals, which created an interesting tension as ideas, networking and mirth bubbled increasingly forth. An everpresent sound was the mindfulness bell, rung throughout the day sometimes as often as every 15 minutes, to remind us to stop what we were doing, breathe and smile.

On the final day, we offered a public performance to share the experiment with several hundred invited guests and dignitaries. The following two days, for those who could stay, were for rest and evaluation of the retreat. Unfortunately there is not enough space in this publication to give more than a brief taste of the retreat. A fuller, richer account of it, including contributions from the many notable artists present and their follow-up discussions, will be published hopefully sometime next year. To add your name to a list to receive information, please write to: Lightworks, Route 7, Box 123C, Old Santa Fe Trail, Santa Fe, NM 87505.

In the spirit of continuing the experiment begun at Ojai, the Providence Zen Center in Cumberland, RI, is planning a 10-day artists retreat in early July 1988, with a relaxed schedule and non-hierarchical structures. Please write to the Director, Providence Zen Center, 528 Pound Road, Cumberland, RI 02864 if you wish to receive information about this retreat.

Five dozen artists, mountains, sun, children, yurts, colorful food, two old dogs, wheelbarrows, and stones everywhere. "The valley of the moon"—stark mountain range, boulder-strewn. Hummingbirds, sage growing everywhere. Joan (Halifax) said last night that there is something irrepressible, something untamable here, something....wild? Last night like a burst of cheering from an athletic field, coyotes in full melodic cry, voices strangely like children.

Sitting under the teaching tree today—hungry, sleepy, listening to Thay talk about mindfulness in such simple terms: how to really eat a tangerine! Being here and not losing the present moment in pursuit of the future. Learning to breathe mindfully, learning to smile.

Standing in line (actually, a polite mob) last night to sign the meal "rota"—feeling irritated, rushed, wanting to return to my tent, get away, whatever—so typical of "not here" mind. Wanting to leave the



energy field and yet drawn to it. Such a funny idea, really, getting a bunch of artists together to meditate and turning them loose on this land! It feels good! Usually it's "not touching"—here it's "touch, please." Shape, flow, listen to the land.

A group of us are working on a power spot that has been neglected—has a Celtic maze and fantastic lookout. The idea is to make it welcoming, nurturing, inviting. Lots of energy in that spot. I walked it yesterday and was entranced by the possibilities.

**Tea Ceremony, Saturday afternoon...** "Tangerine peels, empty tea cups, I litter their presence."

**Walking meditation:** "Let your feet make a peace treaty with the floor—first step, contact; second step, treaty." (Thay)

Watching two rabbits frolicking and foot-fighting—a prelude to ? Just coming out of afternoon sitting, people half-way up the hillside, watching, chuckling—innocent, free. In the afternoon sun, rabbits near the edges of the meadow, grazing, alert but not afraid of us. Even the dogs ignore them...Sense of spaciousness, 15 minutes before dinner bell, eternity—bird-song, crickets, mountain sound. A flute playing up the hill, truck going by. How ordinary, how miraculous that time has slowed so.

**Saturday evening...**recapping the day. Relax the quality of striving, of overcoming, breathe and smile (Thay)...Beginning to compose "the American gatha"—taking from Vietnamese and translated into English, then used as a basis for brainstorming.

Resistance to smiling practice: let it roll. Softening of the mouth = softening of the heart. "People who have to smile on their jobs, actually live longer." "Forty-eight hours after he died, Gregory Bateson smiled. If he could do it under those circumstances, I guess I can try."

**Walking meditation instruction, Sunday a.m....**"Be like an astronaut who knows this is his last few hours, stranded on the

## "MAY OUR BODIES BECOME A

moon—so thoughts are very simple: heaven is to walk on the earth, home, just taking simple steps, happiness." (Thay)

Sitting under the medicine tree, 50 quiet folks. Bee hum. Waiting, not waiting, readiness, not even readiness. Just being there. No thought of enlightenment or teaching, no teacher, no student. Thay comes slowly. Goes down to the Dharma yurt to get a cushion. Prep. is slow—everything moves slowly here, but no one seems uptight about it. Sense of having "enough" time is delightful. It feels very old, very ordinary. A man in robes sitting under a tree. Simple, everyday. Serene. From Thay's Dharma talk:

Sitting like this is an opportunity to be happy. If you cannot be happy now, then when? Happiness is made from awareness.

"Solitude—dwelling in the present moment and not worrying about us being attached to past or future. Solitude is the base for contact with others. Solitude means getting in touch with yourself. Many of us are afraid of being alone—so often we do not have the courage to turn off a boring TV program.

"The awareness of suffering is a very important part of growing up as a human being. But some kinds of suffering are useless—we make them up. First recognize them, by breathing. Life is both dreadful and wonderful. Suffering is not enough—you will wither like a flower without water. You must also emphasize and open yourself to the wonderful.

On "heroic sitting"—"In many Zen Centers we do violence to ourselves. When we force something like that, it will bounce back. Our body has a habit of recuperating. We need to learn the non-violent way of sitting."

**Sunday evening presentations:** "Our art is our practice, our art is how we transform our suffering." (Joan Halifax)....The meeting of the Buddha and the Goddess—theme? Koan? Try to imagine what that meeting would be like. (Anna Douglas)....The Three Fates, updated: the creator, the preserver, the transformer.

**Third day.** Fasting still, feels good, light, tight, full of electrons. At samu this a.m., four of us are digging a terrace below the power spot. Hot work—full sun, great view, cutting into old sod to create a path for walking and meditation. It took a while for the four of us to get into a team effort, but once we did, a rhythm established itself. Much water needed! The little park seems to invite our energy.

Walking meditation instruction: breathe like a thread through sheets of paper. Each step a page, the breath holding them together. (Thay)

Walking on the same trail, yet it is never the same. Today hot, breezy, a burst of gratitude for the little winds that come through the woods. Using Thay's walking meditation gatha all the way (When I walk, my mind goes in a million directions; now I walk in peace. With each step I create a warm breeze, with each step a lotus blooms), managed to cut down a lot of extraneous thinking. Just being here is enough, complete. The picture: Thay walking ahead of us with his Vietnamese hat and brown robes—learning so much from how he walks—the long line of us strung out behind him like beads on a string—breath is the thread, each step is a bead. So simple that we usually miss it. Day after day we are asleep!

### "The Dharma is not something readymade, like Campbell soup."

This is really a remarkable coming-together. All sorts of mirth bubbles up like a river running through each of us—just the simple joy of being here, being who we are. Thay puts us the tasks: to create gathas, songs, a way of American Buddhism that is our way, suited to our language. Last night as Joan presented the plan for the evening, there was a surge of excitement, real enthusiasm. This is what we have been made for, summoned to, as "the language hold-

ers of the culture." Time after time as people got up and went to the center and either spoke or sang or whatever, I felt chills of resonance and often came to tears.

There are a lot of good hearts here, friendships already underway, a sense of incredible leisure to explore whatever is emerging. People's personalities are beginning to emerge, especially through the works that were shared last night. The wonderful silliness of play without alcohol or party food or even music—how amazing!

**Tea ceremony, Monday ....**Marlow taking the offering to the Buddha—walking slowly, mindfully, shyly, a lot like Jesse did (his 10-year old son) the last two days. See-

#### SILENCE

Silence  
Pours into me  
Like a cataract of wine  
Reddening the sea  
And I'm drowning  
In a drunken melody  
Which is still  
Which is still

And if I do not speak, I will die  
And if I speak, this silence  
Which has become my breath  
Will disappear

Silence  
Breaks over me  
Like an avalanche of snow  
Burying the trees  
And I'm dreaming  
Of a frozen melody  
Which is white  
Which is white

And if I do not speak, I will die  
And if I speak, this silence  
Which has become my breath  
Will disappear

This wine of silence, it is so sweet  
I fear that it has no end

And if I do not speak, I will die  
And if I speak, this silence  
Which has become my breath  
Will disappear

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Betsy Rose

ing the child in the adult, the adult in the child.... "Thank you to this very special tree for giving us shade, that's been sitting here much longer than we have." (Mayumi Oda) Sister Phuong suggested that she paint it sometime... The architect of the reflecting pool who lived under this tree for six weeks, said to Joan that this would be very important some day...Geomancers said this tree is a vortex of energy on this ridge. "A man who planted trees and grew happiness"—book recommended by Mayumi.

The foundations of this experiment (as given to Joan by Thay) are three, like a tripod: the teachings, the organization of the community, and the financial structure. Dharma is a growing reality. As the Buddha taught and met many more people, his teaching became multi-faceted.... More

than 40 schools of Buddhism after the first 100 years since his nirvana. Therefore, more Dharma doors should be open. The Dharma is not something ready-made, like Campbell soup. We must deeply understand the culture. What are the problems of this society?

The birth of art forms is very necessary for the practice of the Dharma. We must be brave enough to see what goes along with the Dharma. Community life should be

## PRAYER-STICK FOR THE WORLD''

simple. Simple life is the only way out of our present problems. "You must deeply understand your society, as well as the precepts of Buddhism." (Thay)

**Monday evening discussion.** ...Invitation to the bell is still the best part so far. ...Big discussion about people resisting the agenda and people not feeling that, but being excited about the context. Discussion about project vs. process. Feeling of being invited—to not do anything in particular.

The anarchism of artists—not willing to be led. Struggling to integrate the profoundness of the Dharma and the Dharma of art. Feeling of resistance to being violated, programmed.

Creating who I am, discovering who we are is Buddhism. Mayumi: conference feels a little bit confined, a little too "sweet." Kaz Tanahashi: very excited about being here and being at a turning point in Buddhism. Very grateful to Thay. Did Jesus call himself a Christian? Do we really want to limit this wonderful vessel by giving it a name? Feeling excited by the challenge of the vision Thay offered.

Others: these feelings are a response to Thay's invitation. Concern about wanting to heal the world and working on it by healing oneself—looking at one's dark side and trying to "be peace." Pleased at Thay's recognition of artists as those who carry the images of the culture. Exciting to be invited to work together. Want opportunities to share feelings together: your releasing of your anguish heals me. Is that the feminine side of Buddhism manifesting right here and now? Always before a hierarchy, a patriarch and a pyramid.

Thay: "Buddhism is the vision of togetherness. Like inviting a friend to a meal. Invite him inside, take his coat, let him get used to the house, serve him some tea, let a cosy feeling develop. The silence is particularly important."



**Tuesday a.m. after walking meditation** ...again hot. Now many people walking barefoot. Symptoms are beginning to appear: poison oak, blisters, fatigue, tears, one small freak-out. People are settling in without the sense of masks and poses so evident in the first days. I think we are beginning to believe we are really here, together, with this unusual and incredible chance to meet each other, work together in a different way perhaps...when most of us are so used to working, producing alone.

"Walking without arriving. That is wonderful. We hardly know how to stop, that is our trouble. If we continue like this, the destruction of our planet is unavoidable. It's like a person on a galloping horse who does not know how to stop or where the horse is going. Our fear makes us continue. The last few days we have been practicing stopping, aimlessness and have begun to be alive. Walking meditation is a wonderful way to learn the art of stopping.

Our civilization is based on the idea of exploitation for human benefit. Even artists look at things and people with an eye to profit; but if we do that, we cannot really enter into their reality. Pragmatism—the truth is something that pays. Meditation—a way to truth with a 'payment' at the end? How can we bring elements to a civilization that uses everything? A poem, article, painting about stopping, about aimlessness, can we do that?" (Thay)

In artistic consciousness, Thay explained, the storehouse consciousness plays a great role. When he greeted us before meditation this morning, he said he hoped we were not delivering a baby, but that we were pregnant. Each minute is a work of art, so the time when we are **not** working, painting, etc. is also a work of art. A true Buddhist practices joy at the same time as his/her art. The work of art is only a photograph of your being.

**Tuesday evening** ...slide presentation. Six or seven of us showed slides of our work. Fantastic view into the 21st century! Many works of light and Bodhisattva-hood. Clearly a lot of people are moving in the direction of harmony.

**Wednesday a.m. after walking meditation** ...met Grandfather Semu this a.m. (a Chumash Indian medicine man). He spent the night after making visits to prisons in which some of his people are held. He is an Oak Medicine man—beautiful face, calm energy. At the breakfast circle (around the cottonwood tree) he said, "Welcome to my land." There was a general laugh, but how much suffering lies behind that simple statement. I am constantly amazed how people like him, like Thay and Mahaghosana, can walk around in this world with so much joy, having seen so much suffering. Their secret is a profound one.

**Wednesday a.m.** ...Thay's talk on the Heart Sutra... "interbeing"—the cloud and the sheet of paper "interare." Without one, you will not have the other. Also in the blank sheet of paper is the sun and the rain. They also "interare." Also the forest—it takes many trees to produce the Sunday NY Times. You also see the logger and his daily bread, and our minds are there, too. There is nothing that is not already there, coexisting with the sheet of paper. You cannot be yourself alone—you must "interbe." To be means to "interbe."

The sheet of paper is made **only** of non-paper elements; it is full of everything. And yet, it is empty. To be empty, is to be empty of **something**.

Wealth is made of poverty, and poverty is made of wealth. We must understand this. If we do not take care of these things (like Third World suffering), we will not continue in our prosperity. Already the seeds of the Third World suffering are deeply within our society.

**Wednesday night presentations** ...a lot of energy tonight. Announcements: a meeting tomorrow about healing/transformation/service. Walking mandala meeting. Caterpillars are causing rashes. People want to see more of the performances. Also we still haven't "introduced" ourselves. People want to hear more about struggles and process of art, in small groups. Maybe a map of what's going on and where. "Art is really a celebration of our understanding." A women's practice will meet under the

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moon tonight. Marlow suggests that the work period should be a mindfulness practice. Silence and breathing and mindful working. ...A pebble ceremony will be planned.

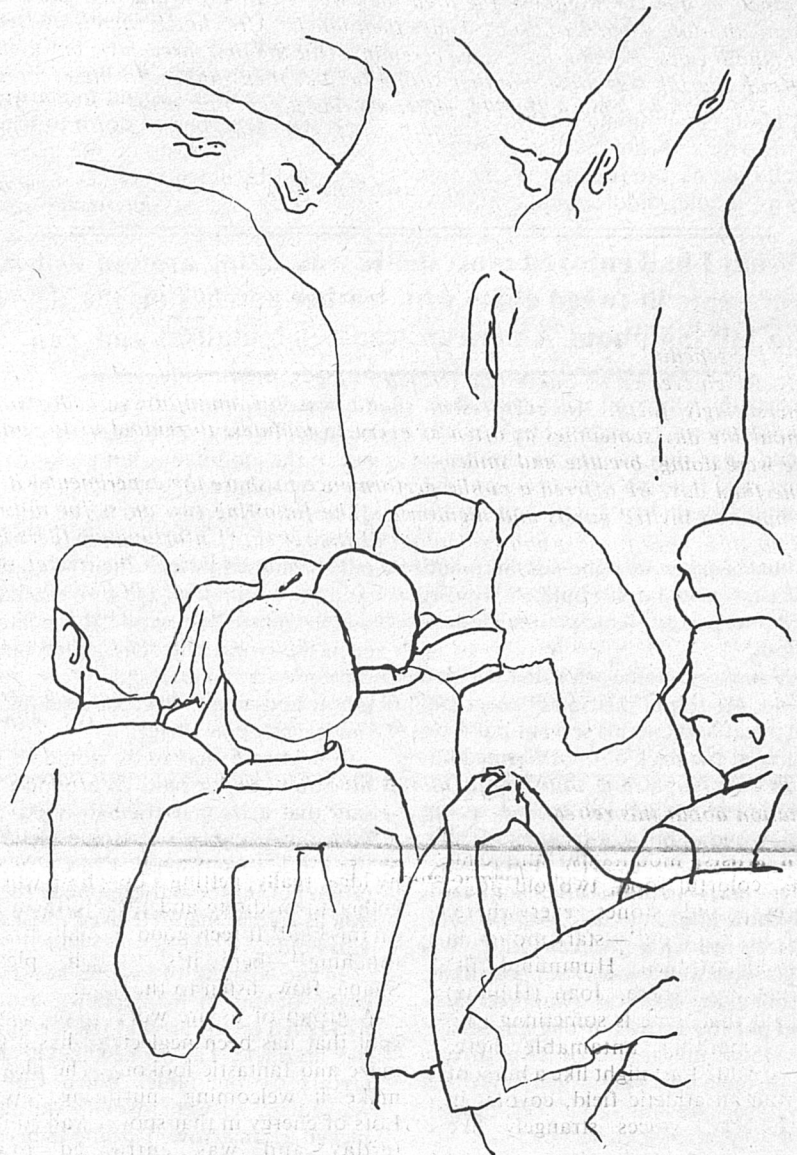
**Thursday a.m.** ...Thay's talk, prefaced by the singing of a chant by Sister Phuong, written by Thay during the worst part of the Vietnam War. A talk about art without using the word "art." Buddhism is a healing power, but if you give it a name, it will have less power. We have to be able to see Buddhism in non-Buddhist elements, otherwise we cannot find it anywhere. Graduating from Buddhism doesn't take 12 years—you can do it right now. ...The vision of inter-being, of non-duality, can be the beginning of a new civilization. But the seeds are already present in this civilization, in our own traditions. The "policy" of interbeing would have saved many lives. Vietnam (war) has not ended, it is present in

Nicaragua, El Salvador, the Middle East and South Africa.

He suggests a studio time for "peace being" art, with meditation—a poem, flower arrangement, song—a two-hour period to meditate, breathe, smile and produce a brief work of art.

**Thursday night presentations** ...Incredibly moving songs by Betsy Rose, about alcoholism, secrets, silence...and a request from Thay to really address our "commission" about American Buddhism.

**Friday** ...documentary film about Thay in Australia by Gillian Coote, called "The Awakening Bell" ...another documentary film about two elderly Japanese artists witnessing Hiroshima, called "Hellfire."



In the morning Dharma talk, Thay talked about the Tiep Hien Order and its precepts. Said of the retreat, its weakness is that there are no children artists. At the end of the talk he invited some of the new song versions of the gathas, promises (vows) and the Heart Sutra to be sung. One was a very funny version with guitar (rock & roll, country western & folk) sung by Wendy and Stephanie from Green Gulch.

accept any that weren't enlightened. But we all got transmission, he said.

Different feeling today—people more into their trips, less meditative. The end is being felt, that magical sense of so many possibilities has closed down some. I finished my adobe (wall) carving, a lot easier today because Brother John and the crew got a tarp up over the area. Jack was shirtless and doing an Indian chant with a drum the whole time, involving the Celtic maze. Sounded a bit mournful.

Joan mentioned last night about the moratorium coming at Ojai, when everyone is being asked to leave until September. Said all the staff were processing their farewells. For some, it may be permanent. So there is a preoccupied mood about, partly from the artists, dealing with the on-coming end of this experiment. A sense of a special place and time never to be retrieved.

**Sunday a.m.** ...final tea ceremony and presentation of "insight" poems... everyone dressed up again and carried a flower. A heavy mist covers the mountains, no sign of the sun, although damp, it is not cold, just clammy. Moisture on the tents, a faint earthy smell everywhere.

Now we sit in silence as the tea is poured & passed around. A final rest & breathing space before we stop being "guests" & start being "hosts" for the multitude expected to arrive today. Some feelings of resentment/encroachment are appearing—our cosy little community is going to be invaded by those outside. Yet it all fits perfectly. Having received the seed, the torch, it is our obligation to share it, to pass it along, to nurture it. So even before we leave to sort out the tremendous implications & responsibilities of this retreat, we are being asked to share our insights & this nurturing space.

Over the last few days people have mentioned continuity—it seems that breathing & the 15-minute bell (sometimes 30 minute, and at meals sometimes 5!) that recalls us to it have been very significant in reminding us to be mindful. I doubt we would have been able to break our habit of ceaseless preoccupation with past & future, without such tools. Therefore thank you, bell & breath.

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