

"WE ARE HERE TOGETHER" EXPANDING THE CIRCLE, CONVERGING THE PATHS

By Sid Kemp

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On a rainy, gray weekend last fall, sixty-five people gathered to share with three teachers of the Native American and Buddhist traditions. Twylah Nitsch (an Elder and Teacher in the Wolf Clan of the Seneca Nation) told us that gray is the color of friendship, and her people looked forward to gray days as a chance to stay inside and share, and a chance to do all the wonderful things that they couldn't do on sunny days. The conference at the Providence Zen Center drew together on the themes of gratitude, spiritual bounty, and compassion.

More than three paths converged at this conference. Twylah offered Seneca teachings; Master Dharma Teacher Bobbie Rhodes offered the Kwan Um Zen teachings of Korean Zen Master Seung Sahn; and Dhyani Ywahoo brought the teachings of both the Cherokee Indian People and the Vajrayana (Tibetan) Buddhist tradition. Dhyani is the Lineage Holder of the Ywahoo teachings of the Cherokee People. She invited us to celebrate our own traditions as well: "Each of us came from a particular family and family religion, and this weekend, we will realize that the roots of our family of origin, the roots of the life that we live, all of these roots grow to one tree, the tree of life which we all share. The three of us hope that this weekend each of you will be inspired to remember the wisdom of your family, and that you may cultivate the inner wisdom of your heart."

Twylah, a tiny woman whose hair was a silver halo above her scarlet cape, sat between Dhyani and Bobbie. Dhyani looked too young to be a grandmother, yet ancient wisdom was clearly present in the statuesque visage that surmounted her maroon wool poncho. Bobbie looked more austere in her long gray robes, but her personal warmth and natural compassion came through when she listened and spoke.

The variety of people who joined the circle enriched the conference for all of us. I was fascinated to find that a number of people came purely on an intuitive hunch. Others came because of an interest in Native American traditions or a desire to meet female spiritual teachers. Also, those of us who had been students in one or more of the schools the teachers represented had a wonderful chance to share with experienced students from other traditions. This became an opportunity to examine our doubts, reinforce our strengths, and compare our perspectives. Both Bobbie and Dhyani frequently reminded us that they, as well as we, were beginners. Our circle was equal in all directions, with each of us bringing our special gifts to its center.

The conference was a tapestry woven of threads that were the individual paths of all the participants. All of the traditions that the teachers represented spoke of the spiritual path as including both the healing of oneself, and the healing of one's relations with family, friends, and the world. Also, as a group, we were very conscious of our special qualities. We participants, descendants of recent arrivals to the American continent, had come to learn from the traditions of those who were here before us, in marked contrast to the hostility and oppression that marks the history and present-day relations between our peoples.

Both men and women gathered to listen to female teachers at a conference focused on the traditionally feminine quality of compassion, represented by the usually female Bodhisattva Kwan Yin (Kwanseum Bosal in Korean). In addition to our special historical qualities, we also brought the personal struggles that each of us has in our spiritual seeking. These historical and personal issues guided the second day of the conference, during which the teachers responded to questions.

Saturday morning, each of the teachers gave an introductory talk on the philosophy and practice of her own spiritual tradition. These talks showed the wonderful diversity of spiritual traditions, and the variety of practices available to a seeker looking for the way to his or her own heart. The diversity was positive in that it offered the participants a wide variety of practices and approaches to follow; and we were encour-

aged to trust our own intuition in choosing among them. It also created some difficulties for those for whom everything was new. Talks and chants and visualization practices followed one another rapidly, leaving some people confused. However, I felt a lightness and clarity present throughout the conference which allowed such doubts to be brought forth and clarified.

Dhyani began: "Wisdom is an energy that exists within each of us. Very often one may think that wisdom is far away, or that it is something that you need to attain. In the Cherokee tradition, everything is well. You are wise--the wisdom is within you. It is only some confusion of your thought and action that gives you the idea that something is not well."

"How can you come again to the remembrance that all things are well? First, by just looking at the nature of your mind. You sit, or you walk, whatever you do is an opportunity to see yourself as you are. When you see thoughts of anger arising, when you see thoughts of jealousy, fear or confusion arising, you say, 'Ah, this thought arises. Is it me?' Not really. It is but a thought, it is appearance that arises out of the emptiness, out of the circle of your experience. So each one of you has the seeds of wisdom within. Each one of us has the fire of mother-father burning brightly within us."

"What is the significance of this mother-father, this father-mother imagery that is within each of us? This enables us to live. How could we live if it were not for our parents? And in an esoteric way, the fire of Mother and Father, they are two channels alongside the central channel of our spine. The wise practitioner who begins to recognize the clarity of mind has enabled those two fires of Mother/Father energy to arise and blend in a harmonious blissful dance in the heart. Heaven and Earth, they meet within our heart."

She went on to tell us that the wisdom fire ever burns within each one of us. Arising in the spine are the three elder fires. The first is will, will to be, clear intention that brings us forth. The second is "love, compassion, the cohesive energy that enables human beings to live and coexist together. Without love, without caretaking one another and the Earth and all the creatures who share this time with us, then our life feels empty." The third Elder Fire within us "is the wisdom that brings things to succeeding. It is the ability to bring a dream to fruition for the benefit of your family, your clan, your nation, and all beings."

In the Cherokee tradition, spiritual practice and living in correct relationship with people and the world are one. "The wise practitioner considers that each moment we are creating a new day. We can look at the past and we can see the patterns that may have caused harm, and we can transform that energy."

"How do you transform the energy of hurt and pain? First you forgive yourself and others for what might have been, could have been, should have been. When you cultivate the mind of altruism, the mind of caretaking, there arises within your heart an energy to accomplish. Sometimes you may feel lethargy, uncertain of how to move in the world. Sometimes you may feel confusion. Well, what can you be sure of? You inhale. You exhale. The sun rises and it sets. Always we can look to the natural world to remind us of the cycle of things, because we, too, are moving in cycles of relationship. Each one of us is related one to the other. We live in cycles. How we speak of one another, this returns to us."

Dhyani continued by introducing the idea of a "negativity fast," a time of cleansing one's thoughts by thinking and speaking of positive steps in process and nothing negative about oneself or others. She spoke of how inner practices purify the mind, and combine with the outer practice of being a caretaker or bodhisattva to bring spiritual clarity and compassion for the benefit of all beings. Finally, she introduced ritual as a means for both inner practice and communal sharing, and discussed how all traditions

have rituals with fire, (such as the family fireplace) and rituals of chanting or prayer.

Twylah spoke to us of "The Path of Peace," a Seneca perspective that allows us to remember the meaning and direction of our lives. Most important for me was the reminder that even our doubts and problems come from our own center, and come with solutions. "When we entered this earth walk, this life, we came with certain gifts. First of all, we decided that we wanted to come to this beautiful place to have earth experiences. Next we came in on a special ray light. Before we entered this earth walk, we had chosen our parents, a place to grow, and lessons that would help us to become a whole entity. With our purpose in mind, we knew that within ourselves, right in the vibrational core, which is the solar plexus, there were questions, and also there were answers to those questions. And we started on our mission from the time we breathed our first breath. From this time, life became a wonderful adventure. And as we walked upon this earth, we saw lessons all around us. Lessons in our home, lessons in nature, voices, all things that became part of the interest within us."

"Then a vision appeared. At first this vision was not very clear, but as time went on, it began to have parts that made it whole, parts that could make it walk, parts that could make it talk, parts that helped us to listen, and parts to help us grow. We realized that we would have to walk our talk and live our vision. How do we do this? We would seek answers that related to our vision. There are four important questions:

"Our anger does not protect us, it only hurts us and can eventually make us sick."

—Dhyani

Who am I? Where did I come from? Why am I here? And, what does the future have in store for me? Additional questions would appear from time to time. The lessons of truth became part of a formal circle. We realized that when we came into this earthwalk, we entered a sacred space. And that we honored this sacred space. And that we were responsible for this sacred space. Within this sacred space were the truths that stated: Learn the truth, honor the truth, accept and practice the truth. See the truth. Hear the truth. Speak the truth. Next, love the truth. Serve in truth. Live in truth. Work in truth, walk in truth, and be grateful for the truth.

"We were walking on the pathway of peace, which had seven stepping-stones. And each stepping-stone had seven sides. And the sides of each stone were sound, sight, scent, taste, touch, emotion, and awareness. The first stepping stone is faith, and its color is red. We had faith, when we came into this earth walk, that the blood within our bodies would not spill. When we look at the blood, it's red. So we think, and we believe, and want this blood, this red, strong fluid, to be within us. And we know that this body is going to contain it. So that feeling of faith is within."

"The next stepping-stone is love. We look at the sun and it's yellow. When the sun is touching our bodies, we feel its warmth, and oh, that's love. It's the most

exquisite feeling to allow that love to flow right through our bodies. Love helps us to look into the eyes, the lights of the sun, to see the love that others have. This helps us to exchange feelings of love."

As we move up the pathway of peace, the third stone is the blue of intuition. It is as blue as the bluest water that we would ever see, and when we drink of it, it satisfies our thirst for the lessons that we want to learn from within.

"Then we move to the next stepping stone on the pathway of peace, and that stone is green. It represents living, and as we embrace that color, we know that we receive fertility and renewal. The trees and the foliage represent that living green, the color of renewal, the color of life's perpetuation."

"Next we look at the fifth stepping-stone on the pathway to peace. We look at our hands, the color is pink. Pink is for creativity. Our hands are the tools we use to create whatever we want in the types of work we do. The five fingers represent: life, unity, equality for eternity. When we extend our hands to reach out, touch in peace."

Then we look to the next stepping-stone on the pathway of peace. It is white, to represent purity. This is the stone of magnetism that attracts when we give away or share, in love. The magnetic feeling keeps us on this earth to walk and to grow in spirit.

"The seventh stepping-stone is purple. We call it the rainbow of peace, because it encompasses all the steps on the pathway of peace. And when we walk under the rainbow of peace, we feel its protection, and we

feel the growth and the homage that we can express. Thus life is wonderful and offers us the gifts of beauty to make us whole."

"Whenever anything happens, we can refer to any one of the truths that appeared on the seven stepping-stones on the pathway of peace. Life becomes abundant. Families become whole, and we feel a connection to the earth as one body, one heart, one mind, and one spirit."

"But there are things that occur that do not fit into this beautiful concept. Sometimes they hurt. Sometimes they make us laugh. Sometimes they make us forget, and sometimes we became angry, frustrated, and finally we realized that these were negative energies. How do we deal with them? Why are they here?"

"These questions and their answers lie within the vibrational core, the center of perfection that lives within us. Without this, we would not be able to grow. Nor would we even be able to exist. This vibrational core connects us to all the other entities! The creature beings, the tree beings, the human beings, the sun, the moon, the sky, the earth--all things in the sky world, all things in the sun world, all things within the moon world and within the earth world are all connected through this vibrational alliance. When we flounder, we can grasp hold of the stepping-stones on the pathway to peace."



Dhyani, Twylah and Bobbie (from left). Photo by Sid Kemp

Bobbie Rhodes gave a talk that was very different from Dhyani's and Twylah's, reflecting some essential differences between Zen and American Indian Spirituality. Zen is not a tribal religion, but a Buddhist practice traditionally occurring primarily in monasteries. As such, Zen does not have the kind of overarching cosmology or world view that guides the Seneca and Cherokee traditions. Such metaphysical systems do exist in Buddhism, but Zen does not find its core in a system of thought.

Rather, the essence of Zen lies in a moment-to-moment practice of bringing oneself and one's history to the present moment and present situation. Because of this, Bobbie Rhodes gave a talk more from her personal history than from a vision of life similar to Dhyani's or Twylah's. She said that she felt Zen practice was very helpful in giving her a way to see past her own biases (and our culture's prejudices), so that she, and perhaps others of us, can learn to listen to the wisdom of the first human visitors to the Americas, the Indian peoples.

"About 15 years ago I was sitting under a tree and a friend handed me a beginner's manual on Zen Buddhism. I had never heard anything about it before. I started to read, and on the very first page it talked about what the Buddha taught. It was a very simple little book. It said the Buddha taught that within each thing was Buddha nature - 'Everything, everyone, has it.' I remember reading that sentence and a flood of gratitude welled up in me. I felt five hundred pounds lighter. I'd been wanting to hear that all my life, and I never had. It was just the right timing, just the right book. Then I started to read more books about Buddhism and tried practicing meditation.

"About three years ago I met Dhyani and Twylah. I was invited to teach at Dhyani's school in Vermont. I was pleased to go, but had no idea what Native American teaching was. We were all sitting in a line, Twylah and Dhyani and me and two other women teachers. When Twylah started speaking, I remember looking at her and thinking, 'How does she know that?'

"I'd been cloistered in this Zen Center for ten years and even though I admired so much what the Buddha said, that everyone 'has it,' within that ten years I thought that *only* Buddha had said it and that you had to be a Buddhist to know it. It didn't make any sense, but my mind had encapsulated this idea about Buddhism. I was genuinely shocked that Twylah knew so much. I almost said, 'How did you know that? How did you figure that out?'

"It was a wonderful thing for one to open up more to the Native American teaching...and recognize it's not a label...it's the nature within all of us." —Bobby

"Then a big question arose, I saw it happen inside myself. I saw the arrogance and the cloistered part of myself, and remembered how much it had nurtured me to have Buddha's teaching that 'everyone has it.' A little light bulb went on and I said to myself, 'Of course Twylah has it.'

"But she's an old lady, you know. I'd been working in nursing homes all of my nursing days, and I'm used to catering to crippled old ladies, people that can't care for themselves. I had a perverted idea about aging. It was a wonderful thing to open up more to Native American teaching and recognize that there's no label of Buddhism, Native American, Hindu or whatever, it's the nature within all of us, whether you call it your center or your God, or whatever you want to call it.

"A very important thing happened for me in that moment of being so impressed with Twylah. Then Dhyani started to talk and that was amazing also. In that moment of seeing my arrogance, I also was seeing how happy I was that they were so strong. So I practiced what we do in the Zen Center, I had a mind that doesn't know.

In other words, I was feeling bad about feeling such arrogant ideas as 'only Buddhists understand all this stuff.' Then I realized that feeling bad is not important, it is actually harmful. So I just recognized that film, that cloud, that was over me and let go of it. "Don't know" means not spending time thinking about "Oh, how stupid I've been," but dropping that curtain and appreciating what's appearing. What's hard for us is running into those curtains or clouds and then feeling ignorant....

"What amazes me over and over again is

how I feel, in a sense, as if I had peaked. It doesn't last long, but I think, 'I've got it, I've learned something new.' I feel AH! and as if I could rest in that space for a second anyway, but then a new lesson appears immediately. I'm beginning to realize that's a gift. But it feels funny to keep stumbling.

"Soen Sa Nim has a phrase he uses all the time: seven times fall down, eight times stand up. I love that. It came from an ancient text, and you feel all your brothers and sisters from countless time have had to fall down, stand up, fall down, stand up. If we can, in the moment of contact of falling - even in that time when it hurts - whether we feel humiliated or whatever, if we can immediately say, 'Ah, there's a lesson,' then I think we don't get so discouraged. Although it's okay to get discouraged, sometimes too....

"What I have been trying to learn is to trust that not-knowing place, and not just to trust it, but to *be* it, and take each moment as it appears. Just be naked with it, be completely what you are. If it's being a little nervous or afraid, well that's that. The sky never rejects anything, the ground never rejects anything, so why should we reject any part of ourselves, or any part of another? A few minutes ago Dhyani said, 'Unless you've walked 10,000 miles in someone's moccasins, how would you ever begin to think you could judge how they're feeling, and what and why they're doing?' The idea of negativity fast was great, and it often has to begin, as Dhyani said, with our own negativity about ourselves. If we can begin to let go of that, we can begin to let go of our negativity about the world....

"We need to realize that all of us have the same thing within us. It doesn't come from a particular teacher or a particular tradition, it comes from opening up to this universe, opening to our energy and wisdom. Unless I had had some guidance and some very clear strong practice that I've committed myself to, I never would have known that. I don't think I would have been able to hear Twylah and Dhyani three years ago, if somehow I hadn't heard that in myself. Finding our gifts, what we have to offer to this world, is something that a lot of people have a hard time doing.

"In the Temple Rules that we read every Monday morning, it says, 'Don't wear other people's coats and shoes.' For several years I heard that and thought it was kind of nit-picking, that we had this rule because at the Providence Zen Center we keep all of our shoes near the door, and if someone

grabs your shoes and uses them, then you're stuck without a pair of shoes. I thought that rule literally meant, don't wear anybody's shoes. Finally it dawned on me that the rule had a deeper meaning than that. Another way of saying it is, 'Believe in yourself. Trust yourself. Find yourself.'

"The self that you have is so powerful and so able to do anything that you want, that it's unbelievable. All of us have a different capacity, a different timing about how and when we find what we need and want to do. Some of us do several things within our lives and are completely fulfilled by them, and some of us stay with one thing. One of the things I've wanted to do since I was very young was be a nurse....so I went into training and became one.

"Since then I've had a number of different nursing jobs. About 15 years ago something in me said, 'Go to the Jewish Home [for the Aged in Providence]. So I went and the very next day I was hired. I stayed there for ten years just on that one impulse. The lessons I learned there were unbelievable. Then at one point, I said to myself, 'You're tired of the Jewish Home.' That was okay. I didn't feel guilty about it. Something inside me said, 'Go to the Hospice.'...so I went and I've been working there for a year and a half now.

"It was listening to that voice, trusting it, believing in myself and just doing it, going forward. And knowing that 'fall down seven times, eight times stand up' is part of the pattern. This and everything else is part of the breath of life. As Twylah and Dhyani have said, it is finding and trusting that Universal Energy and realizing that we're not encased by this flesh that's keeping us from that, but if we actually begin to

breathe and listen and perceive and ask, as Twylah said, 'Where did I come from? Who am I? Where am I going?' then we are totally capable of understanding those questions.

During the morning talks, the teachers also introduced chanting, visualization, and meditation techniques. At the very beginning, I was lifted into a clear state by Dhyani's talk in which each event, word and mood was part of a beautiful dance. Thus I breathed and felt, for a time, the reality of the Cherokee perspective that everything really is all right. I suspect that some others may have felt difficulty at times, but, for me, even the difficulties were chances to explore and share. A few people came to me when they were uncertain about something (probably because I wore a long gray robe and looked



Twylah Nitsch

official), and the uncertainties they shared became just another chance to grow and learn. I was grateful that this clarity (unusual in my life) came through me to help other people.

During the afternoon, each of the teachers led us in the basic practices of her tradition. Dhyani introduced a system of esoteric chanting and visualization intended to clear the practitioners' energy body of hurts that remain within our memories of traumatic experiences. I found the method very powerful in the group setting, but have found some difficulty in keeping the melody of the chants at home, where I practice alone.

Bobbie introduced us to chanting the name of Kwan Seum Bosal, the Bodhisattva of compassion. This is a very simple chant in which we repeated "Kwan Se Um Bo Sal" in a steady rhythm, accompanied by pounding our fists or percussion instruments. Bobbie told us that groups who practice this chant all day on kido (chanting) retreats build up tremendous "special energy." We looked silly and a little crazy as we snaked around the dharma room and its outside porch, pounding our hands together and chanting. Some people absorbed themselves in the chant, but others seemed a bit confused or put off by chanting words whose meaning they really did not understand.

One woman asked me what Kwanseum Bosal meant, and I explained that it was the Korean name of Kwan Yin, the Bodhisattva of Compassion. She replied that she wished she had known that while she was chanting, because she had always felt very close to Kwan Yin. From her comment, I realized that other people share a discomfort I feel with the Chogye tradition in which the focus is on "before thinking" absorption in the practice, and we don't always know the meaning of what we are saying or doing. Like this woman, I find absorption easier if there is at least a simple meaning to the words that allows my intellect to support the direction of the practice.

Twylah introduced us to more intellectual activities that were part of Seneca "Earth Astrology." She taught us a way of evaluating the colors and gifts special to us from our birth that are with us this lifetime. The method combined an intuitive approach to determine one's own particular colors with a systematic logic that explained the mean-

ing of those colors and the relationships between them. By supertime Saturday, all of us had been introduced to a wider range of practices for the beginner than would have been possible to learn from any one tradition.

I felt like I'd spent all day at both a conference and a meditation retreat. I was excited but too tired to think clearly, so I took a few minutes to hide out by myself and stretch and relax. After a few minutes of calming my mind with the practices that I had just learned, I was ready to go out and share with the others. This swift return to clarity showed me the power of taking responsibility for keeping my own center and using the techniques offered that weekend to bring balance.

There were two ceremonies that evening: the regular evening practice of the Kwan Um Zen School and a special fire ceremony from Dhyani's tradition. The evening Zen chanting took on a new sound as two score people tried out the unfamiliar Korean sounds and rhythms. The next day, Bobbie, who has a very musical ear, said that she had gotten caught up in worrying that it sounded awful, but Dhyani and Twylah expressed a feeling that I think was shared by most of the group--that, regardless of our musical talent, the shared energy and willingness to practice to create clear mind created a rich experience for us. Between the ceremonies, I played with a wide-eyed baby, a child of one of the conference participants. His wonder at every sound and motion was a reminder of the state of clear mind that all of the practices have as their purpose.

The Cherokee ceremony was not the huge bonfire I had hoped for because the weather kept us inside. The entire group formed a large circle around a circle of candles in the dharma room and Dhyani introduced a visualization in which we searched our minds for negativity and judgments, and then gave them to the fire to be consumed. We held this in our minds as we chanted and Dhyani and her students led us with drums and rattles. I found it easy to concentrate, and the room itself seemed to grow brighter and more clear. There was a wonderful feeling of purity and richness, a quality that allowed all things to be just as they are. This created a wonderful synergy between Dhyani's teachings and the fire ceremony.

After the formal events, most of us stayed up to get to know each other. There was one lively late-night discussion on the differences among spiritual freedom, political freedom, and freedom of choice. Others spent time together in the hot tub trading foot massages. The day seemed so complete that it was overfilled, yet there was a sense of balance that I believe came from the fact that it had included esoteric rituals, religious ceremonies, lectures, dance, and relaxation.

The second day of the conference was driven by questions that the participants had written down and given to the teachers. Dhyani said that the questions had taught her that the mind of competitiveness, anger and envy was much more pervasive than she had thought, and that she was surprised by the number of people who were afraid to give up their anger because they believed that it protected them. She told us that our anger does not protect us, it only hurts us and can, eventually, make us sick. She suggested that when envy of the qualities or gifts of another person arises in our thinking that we remember that we cannot see any quality in another that is not also present within ourselves. In these ways, she encouraged us to view the world in a way that encourages us to grow, rather than pressures us to compete.

Specific questions ranged from the acceptability of homosexuality to the existence of spirit and animal guides. All of the teachers approached the issue of homosexuality with unusual respect, but each also gave different responses. Bobbie said that in her school, the only important question was one of intent: whatever acts we choose, are we doing them for the benefit of all beings? She also said that there may be issues of energy for homosexual spiritual practitioners because male and female bodies have different kinds of energy, and that one might weaken oneself by exclusive interaction only with one's own sex. Dhyani said that it was most important not to identify yourself with your actions by creat-

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ing a label such as homosexual, but that gay female couples were accepted in Cherokee culture. She added, however, that the tradition was so much centered on child-rearing that many of these women often found a husband to share so that they could become mothers! Twylah discussed homosexuality as a personal issue of health and spirituality, in which cultural condemnation had no place at all.

Bobbie said that one of the most wonderful things that she had gained from Twylah's tradition was the notion of "Band People." These are spirit-friends that we each have to help us by providing us with guidance and inspiration. The intuitions that we have and the events and chance meetings that help us grow can come from the help of these spiritual beings. Bobbie recalled a time in high school when she had felt small and left out and had heard an inner voice encouraging her to get involved in school politics. It had been an important moment in her developing self-confidence, and she wondered if this had been the encouragement of one of her Band People.

Along similar lines, Dhyani suggested that we look to our past to see the Joy Markers in our lives--those things that have helped us survive, for which we feel grateful and good about ourselves.

The teachers did not always agree, and sometimes something that one of them said raised doubts that another was still working on. Bobbie mentioned that Zen practice did not include visualization or dream journeying, and that she had never become comfortable with these techniques for herself. Both Twylah and Dhyani explained visualization as being the same as what we do every day, all the time. "Everything was someone's idea before it became a reality," Twylah told us. Dhyani said, "Did you think about what you wanted your bedroom to look like before you decorated it? That is visualization." Spiritual practice means just taking these everyday mental activities and focusing them for the benefit of all beings, instead of being lost in worry or confusion, or focusing only on ourselves.

Dhyani told a wonderful story about spending years seeking after a spiritual woman who appeared in her visions. The

"As we walked upon this earth, we saw lessons all around us."
—Twylah

visions led her to the Himalayas, where she risked her life on high mountain passes in flood and avalanche. Then a moment came when she asked herself what she was doing all this for. She looked down at herself and saw that her clothes were the clothes of the woman of her vision. She was the spiritual woman in Tibet that she had been seeking. She ended by saying, "That is what your everyday mind becomes--what you are meditating on, what you are contemplating."

A lively discussion arose from Twylah and Dhyani introducing the notion of spiritual bounty. In their traditions, spirituality is not useful unless it enriches the community. This perspective, which is common in tribal religions, appears to be different from the ascetic turning away from the material world that occurs in monastic traditions such as Zen. Bobbie felt uncertain about the idea of seeking to manifest "what you want" because it reminded her of people who spend time and energy trying to get fancy cars and other possessions. With a laugh, Dhyani replied, "If it is for the good of all, why not?"

There were certain agreements within the group that are unusual in the larger society we also share. The teachers and audience held a focus on feminine spirituality that literally laughed away chauvinist notions. In one question, a Zen teacher from another school was quoted as saying that women were naturally spiritually inferior. After the teachers finished laughing, Bobbie and Dhyani both said that they disregarded the views of such teachers. Twylah spoke at greater length about the problem of society's sexist views, pointing out the crucial distinction between what others think, which ultimately affects only them, and what we think of ourselves, which affects our inner and outer lives.

The view that the recent arrivals to Amer-

ica had practiced genocide against the Native Americans also might have been challenged elsewhere. At this conference, however, it allowed for a beautiful and honest discussion of how Twylah's traditions had helped her survive being raised in foster homes and trained in special state institutional schools. The key, she said, was that her parents told her that she would hear a lot of strange beliefs, but to remember that that is what they said, and not what she said. She was taught that she was responsible for whatever she said or did, but not for the words and actions of others. And her parents reinforced this by asking her to recount what others said, and, separately, what she did about it.

It seemed very easy to get to know people rather intimately during the two days. The dozen or so people I talked with felt very willing to open up their uncertainties and look at themselves and listen. People offered each other a great deal of compassion and respect. For example, several people asked for copies of the tapes from the conference, or for the opportunity to take pictures. When people learned that the teachers' religious values made it impossible to offer these, they all were very understanding of this and comfortably put aside their own desires. I also heard more expressions of gratitude in those two days than I usually hear in a month.

It would be impossible to sum up a central meaning to the conference, but there was some guidance from the teachers that I think shows the quality of that center, that point of convergence which we came to during the two days, and carried outward with us when we left:

Twylah: "Everything that you see people do that you think is wrong will give you a positive direction, because you won't do it. And everything you see that you think is right you will do, because that is also a positive direction."

Dhyani: "Cultivating the mind view of compassion and care, not so much attachment to this or that, that is the way of the wise practitioner."

Bobbie: (Answering the question: "How does one let go of the need to hold on? How does one let go of one's dreams and manifest them? How do you let go and nourish at the same time?") "In the midst of your suffering, look at your situation and say, 'What do I have to contribute to this?' Then your suffering disappears and your dream becomes alive."

What I gained most from the conference was a deep appreciation of the diversity of spiritual paths and of people. It was clear that beginners at the conference were drawn to each of the three teachers, and that some who might have had no interest in two of them found something special in the third. I have found that adding some of Dhyani's esoteric chants has helped balance my energy and supported my Zen practice. Many people found that Twylah's earthy, pragmatic approach to figuring out who they are and making their dreams into realities was a special gift. Several people learned that Zen is more accessible than it often appears; Bobbie reported that two people new to Zen had passed a koan (paradoxical Zen question) that Bobbie had offered the group on Saturday afternoon.

The conference didn't really let up even during the breaks. Most people seemed to find themselves making new friends, and I barely had time to meet everyone I felt drawn to. Near the end of the afternoon, we went outside to end with a ceremony of healing and gratitude underneath an ancient elm tree. We joined in a circle and each offered a word of joy or gratitude or named something in the conference that was special for us.

Even then, we weren't ready to quit. Almost everyone went back into the dharma room to hear more about Twylah's earth-astrology. As people put on their shoes and coats to leave, most of us had a bright, glazed look that I had often seen after conferences and retreats. We had all had nearly too much of something wonderful.

In the last three months, the conference has come to mind as a memory of clarity and light. For me, this is a wonderful gift, because I often feel I have little to look back on that is joyful. The special gifts of the people I shared that weekend with remind me to look ahead with joy and hope. □

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