



UU Sangha

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Mindfulness: Wat Life

By Rev. Douglas Kraft

Bonnng ... Bonnnng ... Bonnnng. Bong. Bong. Bong, bong, bong, bongbongbong. As the cadence of the gong picks up, several dozen dogs near and far join in with yips, barks and outright howls. My eyes open. "Ah. It must be 4:00 am."

I'm lying on my side, looking across a dark floor. In the dim light from the windows I can make out cement walls.

My ribs feel bruised. They are an inch from the parquet floor. A cotton blanket and thin foam pad serve as a mattress.

I roll slowly onto my back. As the pressure and numbness come off my ribs, the pain grows intense. Then it fades.

I stare at the ceiling fan. This is a luxurious kuti (meditation hut) compared to the thatched hut I had been in a month earlier. It is twelve feet square, with a fan, screens on the windows and a sort of bathroom in the corner with a hose for a cold shower.

I close my eyes. I am in no hurry to get up.

By 4:30 I am up and dressed in my novice white pants and shirt. After turning the fan off I hear chanting in the distance. There is an outdoor screened area on the opposite side of the meditation hall from my kuti, about 75 yards away. The monks have started their morning chants.

I wander out of my kuti, around the backside of the meditation hall and sit on the back steps. There are monk's rooms upstairs above the meditation hall. A monk with a tattooed shoulder descends past me. "You can join us," he says pointing to the rows of monks fifteen yards away. "Or, if you like, you can meditate upstairs. It's okay," he reassures me.

"Khòwp khun, kháp," I say to him in Thai: "Thank you kindly." But I remain where I am. I don't intend to stay long.

By 4:45 I am back in my kuti. I know the exact configuration of zaphu and pillows that is most comfortable. I sit up straight with legs folded and hands on a small pillow on my lap. Then I relax.

I notice my abdomen rise and fall with the breath. I widen my attention to take in my whole body sitting there. Then I narrow my focus to a specific spot on my body: a so-called "touching point." In the last five weeks I've learned all 28 touching points.

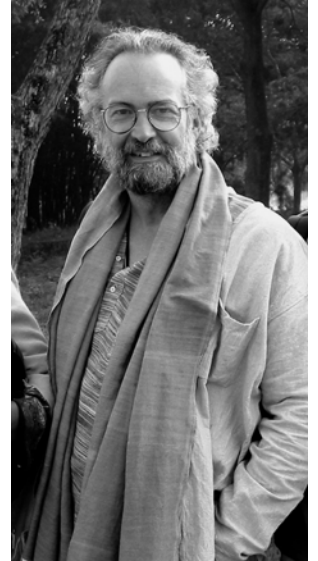
With each shift of attention, I use a soft mental label: "rising" and "falling" for the breath, "sitting" for the whole body sitting and "touching" for each touching point. The labels help focus the mind and keep me honest and objective. "Rising, falling, sitting, touching, rising, falling, sitting, touching."

A dog barks. Like a rubber ball on an elastic band, my attention is yanked off the breath and lands on the sharp sound. I stay with it. "Hearing. Hearing. Hearing." I know this dog. He hangs out about 50 feet from my kuti. He believes his job is to watch for terrorists. The dog is very suspicious, so there are lots barks.

I'm tempted to picture the dog, think about what he is doing, etc. But these are just mental constructs – thoughts. What I directly know is hearing. So I label the actual experience. "Hearing, hearing, hearing."

At the same time I notice a feeling. I don't like the dog barking and grabbing my attention. I label, "disliking, disliking."

The dog stops barking. But my aversion hangs



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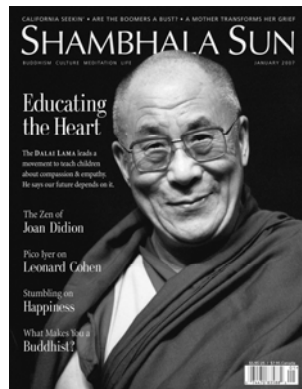
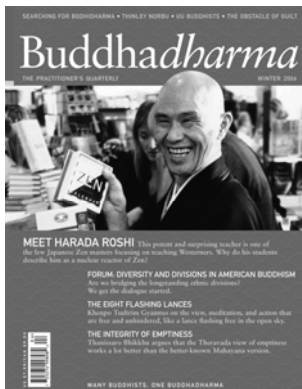
Editorial Insights

This is the last issue of *UU Sangha* to appear before the 2007 UUBF Convocation in Garrison New York. For all the benefit we gain from this newsletter and journal, there can be no substitute for the experience of UU Buddhists from all over North America and perhaps other parts of the world meeting face-to-face. If you are new to UUBF, take a look at the Fall 2005 issue (Vol. 9, No. 1) of *UU Sangha* featuring the speakers and activities for the 2005 Convocation. Also, everyone should be sure to read Sam Trumbore's call to the 2007 Convocation in the current issue. If you have not yet registered, there is still time! Also, share this information and the registration form within your UUBF chapter and UU congregational networks to assure widespread awareness of this important event.

In this issue Doug Kraft continues with a series of articles drawn from his sabbatical experiences in India and Thailand. "Mindfulness: Wat Life" is the first of two articles about meditating in Thailand. The second featured article, "When Grief Comes: An Embodied UU Buddhist Response", is contributed by Laura Milner, a professor of writing and linguistics at Georgia Southern University. She writes about recent losses of loved ones in her life and explores a UU Buddhist framework for being open to the transformative potential of grief. Alan Brush, Circulation Director for *Shambhala Sun* and *Buddhadharma* introduces our readers to these publications in his piece "Where Do You Go From Here?" The *UU Sangha* seeks to include many voices and the editor's mailbox is always open at egsmb@yahoo.com. You may also wish to call me on my cell phone at 706-231-2759.

Gerald Bennett, Editor

Subscription Offer to UUBF Members on Page 10



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around. I'm tempted to push the uncomfortable feeling aside and go back to the breath. But the meditation instructions are to stay with a phenomenon until it fades or a significant amount of time has gone by. So I stay with it. "Disliking. Aversion. Disliking."

In a few minutes the disliking fades. I look for it, but it is gone. So I go back to "rising, falling, sitting, touching."

The dog barks again. "Hearing. Disliking. Disliking."

This time the aversion fades more quickly. Short barking spells recur again and again. I just notice hearing and disliking as they arise.

In about ten minutes, the hearing continues to arise, but the disliking doesn't come up anymore. In about half an hour, even the hearing fades into the background. The barking is just part of the sounds of life around me: birds, crickets, barking, rustling wind. It no longer pulls my attention away from the breathing. Rising, falling, sitting, touching are stronger than the sounds.

The dog is no longer disturbing. We call this "serenity." I can notice the bark with greater clarity and precision than when I was averse to it. But it doesn't perturb me. I'm a bit more serene.

Rising, falling, sitting, touching. Rising, falling, sitting, touching.

A thought flickers through my mind. It is 5:30 in the morning. Thailand is 15 hours ahead of California. Back home it is yesterday afternoon at 2:30. Erika, my wife, is at work dealing with her programs and organizational changes.

I am no longer labeling "rising, falling, sitting, touching." I am not even aware of my breathing or my body. I'm just thinking about Erika.

The meditation instructions are not to suppress or ignore anything, but, so much as possible, be mindful of whatever is going on. What is going on now is I am sitting in a kuti in a wat in Chom Tong in northern Thailand thinking about my wife. The content of my thoughts is not important. We love our thoughts and their content. But from the perspective of spiritual training, the fact that I am thinking is more important than what I am thinking about. So I label the process: "Thinking, thinking, thinking." This loosens the grip of the thoughts so I notice them more

clearly: thinking, thinking.

Usually, it only takes a few labels before the thoughts dissolve on their own. The thinking just stops, often in mid-sentence. But this morning, the thinking fades slowly and reluctantly. There is more going on than just an idle thought. I'm missing Erika. I feel lonely. So I label: "Missing her. Lonely. Lonely."

The temptation is to think about the feelings. But thoughts can go on forever. And what is driving my consciousness isn't a thought. It is a feeling. I've learned a trick in relating to feelings. They have body sensations with them. So I scan my body. I notice heaviness in my chest and fuzziness in my head. I label these: "Heavy heart. Fuzzy. Heavy heart." These feelings are uncomfortable. I don't like them. So I label that as well. "Heavy heart. Disliking. Lonely. Disliking."

The sensations are actually quite manageable. My heart softens and expands. The disliking fades. A quiet aching remains for a while. "Aching. Poignancy. Aching."

Bonng ... Bonng ... Bonng. Bong. Bong. Bong, bong, bong, bongbongbong. It is 6:00 AM: time for breakfast.

Not all sittings go this smoothly. Sometimes I get lost in thoughts or explanations for a long time. Sometimes my body aches too much to sit still. But generally, the sittings in the cool of the morning are easier.

Breakfast

I weave through the rows of kutis to the kitchen and dining area. Wat Phra Chom Tong has over 200 kutis. They also have dorm-like rooms for children and high school kids.

The kitchen has two serving areas: one vegetarian, the other not. The Thai make no distinction as to what kind of food is appropriate for different times of day. The morning meal is usually rice or noodles in a broth with tropical vegetables. Bowls are set out. The serving size is ample for the average Thai. But for a *farang* – a Westerner – with a body twice that of the average Thai, the serving is a bit meager.

I bring my bowl next door to a screened dining area. This morning, judging by the discrete logos on their white shirts, there are at least three groups of bleary-eyed teenagers from different high schools. They've come to spend a week in

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meditation training as part of their education. There are also several families including kids, adolescents, parents and grandparents who have come to “meditation camp” for a few days holiday. And there are nuns and other solo meditators like myself. The monks have a separate dining area.

As I sit down a group of eight seven-year-old kids gather round another table. They wear shorts and T-shirts with comic book heroes. These “monklets” (as I think of them) are in training. In a few days they will be bald and robed. They are very sincere and at the same time still very much kids. A nun starts a blessing which they pick up: “*Pañisankha yoniso pindapatam patisevami ...*” It asks that food be used to sustain the body and mindfulness and not to feed bad habits. Most people recite the blessing quietly before eating in silence.

After breakfast, I wash my bowl and silverware in the back with soap and cold water. I rinse it in sinks filled with cold water and set them in a rack to dry. The US Health Department would shut this place down in an instant. But this is Southeast Asia, not America.

Late Morning

After breakfast I go back to my kuti, brush my teeth, take my vitamins and supplements, straighten things up, sweep out the kuti. It barely needs straightening and sweeping. But there is very little entertainment here, so I am quite thorough. People in the kutis around me spend a half hour sweeping the leaves around their kuti. This seems excessive to me. But I understand the drive to find something to do.

By 7:00 AM there is nothing left to do but meditate. I am supposed to alternate between an hour of sitting meditation and an hour of walking meditation. I stand with my back against one wall: “Standing, standing, standing.” I lift my heel and label “heel lifting,” lift the foot, “lifting” and continue with “moving,” “lowering,” “touching,” “pressing.” Then the other foot: “heel lifting, lifting, moving, lowering, touching, pressing.”

In the walking meditation, my attention stays on the foot. If thoughts or feeling arise, I note them briefly and go back to the feet. The walking emphasizes samadhi or concentration: keeping the mind focused on a single object. Sitting meditation emphasizes mindfulness: being aware of whatever arises without holding to a single object.

I have a timer that lets me know when an hour has passed. Thus I alternate between walking and sitting meditation until the gong rings at 11:00 AM. Time for lunch.

Lunch

Lunch is more elaborate. Food is set out in large pans. We serve ourselves as much as we want.

I’m not fond of spicy food. Thais are very fond of spicy food. I can’t tell if a food is spicy or not until I get to the dining area and try it. So I take more food than I need, knowing I won’t eat all of the spicy dishes.

Afternoon

Afternoons are a challenge: sometimes a dread. No food is served between noon and dawn the next morning. There is no meal to break up the afternoon. And while mornings are cool to mild, the afternoons can reach 90° in my kuti with humidity around 90%. I bought a second fan in the hardware store across the street from the Wat so I can sit and walk in front of two fans. Still, in the heat, my mind can go to mush. In the afternoon I’m more likely to use labels like “drowsy,” “fuzzy headed,” “hot,” “uncomfortable.” As days went by, these feelings became less distracting. Like the dog barking, I could notice them but not be thrown off as much.

All that I experience is not uncomfortable or neutral. Far from it. There are times I smile uncontrollably. There are long stretches of delight, joy, happiness or deep, deep stillness. I cry a lot in short spurts. Sometimes out of sadness. Sometimes out of joy. But most often out of release that feels sad and joyful, both and neither.

My teacher says the amount of joy I experience is unusual, a sign of having done a lot of good things in the past: a karmic return. These waves of energy are a good thing. They can be healing. But they can also be a problem if I get attached. So he encourages me to stay very mindful of any liking I have.

Noting “delight,” “joy,” “happiness” causes them to grow stronger. Relaxing into them causes a shift toward deep, serene stillness. But, if I notice how much I like them and label “liking,” “liking,” “liking,” they fade within a few minutes.

All things pass inevitably. The challenge is to not hold onto the positive or push away the uncomfortable. This allows for an even deeper source of happiness to emerge: a source that is not dependent on particular feelings or body states. This is a source that can be present when we feel either joy or agony.

Evening

Between 5:00 and 6:00 PM I go to “report” my meditation experience of the last 24 hours to Achan

Tong. He is in his 80s. He is northern Thailand's most venerated meditation master. People come from long distances to meet him. He doesn't speak English and usually is not available to foreigners. However, I trained for three weeks with another monk who then brought me to Achan Tong and does the translation.

The interview is formal with kneeling, bowing, careful politeness and deference. And in the midst of this formality, he might pick his ears or take a cell phone call. Sometimes I wait as long as two hours to get in to see him as *farang* – Westerners – are always last.

At first I found this disconcerting. He was my only support and guidance. In desperation, I pressed him, even if I broke the social formulas. He was unflappable and never offended. In fact, when I push him, he becomes sweet and deeply penetrating. By the time I left I saw why he is so venerated.

After reporting he adjusts my meditation instructions. I leave.

Now, it is cool enough to take a cold shower, do laundry if need be, etc. And then I settle in for a few hours of meditation before going to bed between 9:30 and 11:00 depending on my level of energy and back pain.

A few hours later at 4:00 AM, the gong sounds and the daily cycle starts again. I spent seven weeks in this kind of schedule.

Liking and Disliking

There is probably nothing inside us that causes more upset, more disruption of clarity, more derailing of wellbeing, more spiritual dis-ease and more suffering than liking and disliking. Grasping, wanting, holding, yearning, pushing away, aversion, rejecting ... liking and disliking in any variation are inherently uncomfortable.

And if we try to ignore them, they implant deep inside us and grow like weeds. They grow into mental habits and recurring thoughts. They grow into agitation, stress and fatigue. They sprout behaviors and addictions. And collectively, we end up stomping around the globe trashing the environment, starting wars and exploiting people when we know better.

If our liking and disliking could be uprooted we'd live more harmoniously with other people and the environment. Our lives would become serene and joyful. Our mood would be equanimous. Our hearts would be luminous. In fact, the technical definition of nirvana is the absence of clinging, that is, the absence of liking and disliking. If we could get rid of them, we'd be in heaven.

But good luck. We can't control them. We have a little control over how we act, but no control over the

states themselves. They arise on their own. The dog barks and aversion just appears. I think about my family far away and loneliness and disliking come up. A wave of joy spreads through me and I love it. We can't control this any more than we can control the weather.

We'd like to. We have lists of what is politically correct and incorrect to think and feel.

However, ultimately we are not in control. A car swerves in from of us: anger and aversion emerge. We see a fruit tart: hunger springs forth. Attempting to control our liking and disliking is itself a form of liking and disliking. It strengthens them.

So, what can we do?

The way to uproot liking and disliking is to cultivate mindfulness of the states themselves. As you attend to the actual experience, it tends to change or fade all by itself.

For example, someone lets the door slam in your face. Intense disliking emerges in you. You didn't create the disliking. You don't control it. It just comes up. But, if you notice, "Ah, yes, upset. Disliking. Aversion. Ah so. I recognize these," and stay with the actual experience, it passes. It arises on its own. If you don't hold it or push it away, it fades on its own sooner or later. Conversely, if you hold it, push it away or try to ignore it, it turns into a healthy weed sprouting thoughts, feelings, behaviors and sometimes addictions.

But please don't take my word for it. Don't even take your own word for it. Try it out. Cultivate mindfulness and see. Cultivate awareness of holding and pushing away as they arise. Don't worry about the object of wanting or aversion: the guy who slammed the door in your face, the fruit tart on the table, the attractive person in the next row. Just notice the feeling itself. Scan your body to see what sensations you find.

Really stay with it as long as it lasts. Hold it in your heart. Be patient and attentive. See what you discover.

We'll pick up from this point in the next article.

Heart

When meditation masters from Southeast Asia are invited to America to teach, they are blown away by the amount of self-criticism and self-hatred in Americans. So bring a lot of heart to your awareness. Try not to be critical or judgmental of your experience. If you are not observing yourself with the eyes of kindness, you are not truly mindful because kindness is essential to mindfulness. As one meditation teacher, Joseph Goldstein put it, "Be gentle with yourself. You are the truth unfolding."

When Grief Comes

An Embodied, UU Buddhist Response

By Dr. Laura Milner

*“when death comes
like an iceberg between the shoulder blades,
I want to step through the door full of curiosity, wondering,
what is it going to be like, that cottage of darkness?”*

Mary Oliver, *When Death Comes*

A Zen teacher once told me that his 40-year meditation practice prepares him for hard times, gives him something to do when massive trouble comes. “It hasn’t come yet,” he said, “but when my mother dies, for instance, I’ll take my body to the cushion. And I’ll sit.”

Last September, when multiple losses knocked me to my knees, I remembered his words. Five years of scholarly research for my dissertation on grief writing did not seem to help. With each new hit, I stumbled to my black zafu to sit, my fingers falling into universal mudra. I rocked and cried. The only word that came was “no,” which I mumbled and moaned as a mantra for hours. In choosing the cushion and not numbing myself with alcohol or other drugs or burying myself in work, I unknowingly said “yes” to the gifts of awareness that accompany loss.

When deaths come in rapid succession, what to do with the body—our own, still-breathing body—becomes a mystery. Arms and legs hang limp, hands and feet forget their regular routes and get lost, disoriented, in the wake of acute grief. In the midst of my own paralyzing losses, I discovered that the only thing to do is yield. Surrender. Not an easy task for a recovering Baptist who finds “surrender” problematic, theoretically and practically.

Those of us who practice meditation know, intellectually, that suffering and loss are inevitable, that clinging causes pain, that “when it hurts so bad, it’s because I am hanging on so tight” (Chodron, p.80). We know that the nature of life is change, as we see in the passing of each season, but when asked to let go of those we love, we balk. Intellectual knowledge does not equal direct experience, anymore than the finger pointing at the moon: “In the teaching of the Buddha, faith is made of a substance called insight or direct experience,” Thich Nhat Hanh writes in *Going Home: Jesus and Buddha as Brothers*. “Enlightenment, freedom and transformation happen

through direct experience . . . You have gone through your suffering, you have gone through your happiness, you have gone through your direct encounter with what is there, so with that you build your faith. Your faith cannot be taken away by anyone, it can only grow and grow and grow” (p.86).

Faith is something many Buddhists or UU’s are uncomfortable discussing, much less embracing. Yet, spiritual traditions across cultures and centuries view faith as a source of energy that sustains us and gives us strength. Faith, according to Thich Nhat Hanh, evolves from daily life experience and is “the outcome of your life.” He distinguishes between the “blind faith” of someone committed to a set of ideas and dogmas and the “true faith” of someone who cultivates love, peace, and tolerance through meditation and other forms of direct experience: “If we look deeply into the nature of our love, we will also see our faith. When we have faith in us, we are no longer afraid of anything” (p.70).

Though I did not recognize it at first, my nine years of daily sitting practice and eleven years as a UU did, in fact, give me a framework for meeting grief. When I found myself in hell, I was grateful to have a sturdy cushion, a strong sangha, and a fellowship of friends at the local Unitarian Universalist church. When words would not come, I was grateful to have a place to go and light candles for my canine daughters, a ritual of sharing joys and concerns in our small congregation. Where else would churchgoers consider four-leggeds worthy of meditation and memorialization? Where else but with the UU’s, who value the interdependent web of life?

Now, with the poet Mary Oliver, when death comes “I want to step through the door full of curiosity.” As the poet Rumi instructs, our human body is a guest house, and we should welcome all visitors, “even if they’re a crowd of sorrows who violently sweep the house empty of its furniture.” He asks us to “be grateful for whoever comes, because each has been sent as a guide from beyond.” Instead of resisting or running away from grief, why not approach it as an inquisitive, open-hearted child, and see what it has to teach us?

In my period of intense groundlessness, I began to know faith in new ways. While I had embraced the ideas of Oliver and Rumi for years, I had not *experienced* their truth until the ground fell out from under me. The Buddha’s insight under the Bodhi tree resulted from his own experience of groundlessness, according to Tibetan writer Pema Chodron: “Out of this vision of groundlessness comes not resignation but a kind of benevolent acceptance, a profound equanimity that understands and

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accepts the essential instability of all things” (p.122). Chodron reminds us that the key to living fully in the face of everything life brings is “letting there be room for not knowing” (p.8), something most of us do not do easily. Echoing Rumi, Chodron asks us to embrace sorrow and loss with tenderness, for “whatever occurs is neither the beginning nor the end” (p.26), and “practicing loving-kindness toward ourselves seems as good a way as any to start illuminating the darkness of difficult times” (p.31). Such practice helps us understand not only our own pain but the pain of others who are hurting, and as we understand, we begin to transform our sorrows and connect with others in the present moment.

Nothing, not even time, will erase our pain or grief completely. But as Rabbi David Wolpe says in *Making Loss Matter*, “loss is transformative if it is met with faith. Faith is our chance to make sense of loss, to cope with the stone that rolls around in the hollow of our stomach when something we loved, something we thought was forever, is suddenly gone” (p.6). Acknowledging that loss becomes a “constant temptation to despair,” Wolpe sees faith as the “antidote” or “counteragent,” for “we cannot face loss without knowing that we can survive it and make it meaningful” (p.20). In facing my cumulative losses, I rediscovered my faith and the relief of surrendering.

The grief I experienced last fall was not my first experience of death. I lost my father to Alzheimer’s when I was 29, a childhood friend to AIDS, two to cancer, a beloved student to a car wreck, and a UU friend to emphysema. But 2006 was especially difficult; in January, I’d spent three weeks with my artist friend in her beach house, bearing witness to her last days and walking her to the edge. What a privilege to lie beside her in her final hours, to feel her heartbeat and hear her breath gradually fade to stillness.

Each of these losses was painful, even paralyzing at times. Through meditation, massage, yoga, writing, singing, and telling, I began to integrate them. And then I experienced a triple whammy. Between mid-July and early September, all three of our dog children—white mutt Molly, 14, border collie Sara, 10, and black poodle mix Sheba, 5—died of unrelated causes. They had lived with my partner and me for most of our 20 years together, and our home felt cavernous without them. In the midst of losing them, my partner’s brother died of a heart attack, and her other brother, who has a degenerative disease, moved into our home.

These sudden changes left me ungrounded, numb. Grief accumulates. Each new loss tears open the

old wounds. After the initial wailing, I could not move. I spent days in bed and nights awake. I arranged to take a few days off from school, as I could not work. I could not find a comfortable place to be, a place to put my body and mind. Home and work have anchored me for decades, and suddenly, I was adrift in rough waters with no land in sight. My home had changed irrevocably, and my office felt hollow, meaningless. My students seemed far away. My shoulders and gut ached as though I’d been hit by a truck. I craved solitude. I could not talk or listen to friends or family, could not write. Even with my therapist, I sat speechless.

I needed space. And I found it at the beach. I spent a weekend unplugged; I sat by the ocean through sunrise and sunset, walking, swimming, and journaling. The natural rhythms of tides, sun, and moon restored my sense of balance and brought me back to land. Gradually, I began to FEEL again as the numbness eased off, followed by sadness and a renewed commitment to naming and loving what remains—a crucial move in the process of transforming grief. I’m learning to be okay with not being okay. To accept whatever I can do, even if it’s less than my usual best, at work and at home. To embrace what John Kabat-Zinn calls “the full catastrophe,” the range of human life that incorporates laughter and tears, health and sickness, loving and losing and loving again.

More than anything, these losses ask me to stop and look deeply. No more business as usual. Our time is limited. What are we doing in THIS moment? How are we treating ourselves and others? The poet Rilke said, “You must change your life.” Death demands that we wake up. Pay attention. This is what Daddy, Daryl, Lynn, Ally, Betty-Ware, Kitty, Molly, Sara, Sheba, Rod, and Tom demand: to honor them by living fully, while we still can. To let go, let go, let go.

What complicates any discussion of grief is its unspeakable nature, especially in response to traumatic loss. At a time when we most need to tell, words fail us. Words fall short. Yet, humans are compelled to express what is lost in order to connect with others and discover what remains. Two days after our third dog died, I was unable to call friends with the news but felt moved to express it. In a Sept. 9 email with a subject line of “unspeakable losses,” I outlined what had happened with our dogs and brothers. Here’s an excerpt from that message: “After Sheba died Thursday morning, I spent an hour with her, smelling and touching, memorizing, releas-

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Hitan (Grief)

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ing . . . I then drove to the ocean and swam for two hours in the rain and storm surge, letting big waves knock me around, letting them teach me, kinesthetically, that it's easier to ride the wave, to float with it, to let it carry me, than to struggle or resist. A little salt water in the eyes or nose won't kill us. Scraping the chin on the ocean floor wakes us up to this moment, in all its gray beauty and sorrow." Writing what I could not speak enabled me to break silence and reach out to friends and family who could help me hold the multiple hurts.

The stages of dying identified by Elisabeth Kubler-Ross—denial, anger, inner bargaining, depression, and acceptance—resemble those found among people grieving: "shock, numbness, and denial . . . followed by a period of pining, in which the reality of the loss is faced, involving a range of emotions, including anger and despair. Eventual recovery involves acceptance and adjustment" (Seale, p. 105). Kubler-Ross sees grief as a natural emotion like fear or jealousy, an emotion that "allows people to come to grips with the thousand little deaths that we experience" throughout our lives (p.47). We suffer such deaths daily because life is impermanent and because sickness, old age, and death are inevitable, and with them comes grief, a pervasive but often invisible presence in our lives.

Buddhist author Stephen Levine has been working with bereft and dying people for decades. In *Unattended Sorrow*, Levine says unresolved grief "inhibits intuition" as we trust ourselves less and "cannot 'feel' the world around us as we once did" (p.4). Sometimes it lies dormant like a low-grade fever, and other times it spikes into overwhelming emotions or leads to addictions and self-destructive behaviors. Grief, he says, "weakens the body and compartmentalizes the mind . . . disturbs sleep and infects our dreams; unable to find our way 'home' all night, we feel lost all day . . . caught in cycles of self-condemnation, our sorrow saps our energy with fantasies and reveries" (p.4). When we lose a loved one suddenly or prematurely, unprocessed sorrow settles in the stomach, shoulders, and chest. Crying, singing, writing, and talking enable us to discharge our grief, which lessens its grip on us and opens the door for reconnecting with the living.

Levine documents two forms of grief, acute and chronic, and describes how we embody them differently. Acute grief accompanies an immediate loss or inconceivable tragedy: "It can feel like a stab-

bing sensation in the body and mind. It slams shut the heart and . . . leaves very little space for anything but the sorrow, anger, fear, and doubt that attend to it. Acute grief is a thunderstorm, a monsoonal down-pour, a sudden flood that submerges almost everything in its path" (p.11). Acute grief may trigger repeated images of previous losses, inundating the survivor with "all the unfinished business of life" (p.12), feelings of abandonment and lost love.

Chronic grief accumulates over a lifetime and becomes what Levine calls the "persistent ache in the heart—the phantom pain at the irreducible absence of a loved one or of ourselves . . . the slowly receding waters and the damage revealed when the tsunami of acute grief subsides. It is the reservoirs caught in the depressions left by one unintegrated loss after another." Chronic grief falls into two categories: the unresolved grief from earlier major loss, and the inherent grief resulting from unsatisfied desire, unfulfilled ambitions and lost loves, "a subtle nausea that undulates just beneath our ordinary, well-composed exterior." We suffer, Levine says, from the "traumas long sequestered in our flesh and bones" as the "hurt burrows into the tissues of our body," turning grief into physical ailments. If we can "touch our pain with mercy, even with forgiveness," we can begin to transform it and find balance again (p.13).

Even as we notice the declining capacities of our minds and bodies, most humans have an ongoing, internal defense against disorder and decay. Remembering that we could die at any moment should enhance our awareness of the needs of others and make us more compassionate, knowing our lives are finite.

Most people don't know what to say or do when someone dies. Many simply say: "Time heals." What time actually does is let us practice living with loss, living without that which we thought we had to have to survive. In my experience and research, I find that there ARE some things we can do when seized up with grief. It helps to move our bodies—to dance, swim, walk, exercise—and to express ourselves in healthy ways, through art, music, storytelling, poetry, or other forms. It helps to practice surrender rather than resistance, as we're all headed in the same direction, ultimately. It helps to listen to our bodies and respond accordingly: to rest more than usual, to retreat into solitude for awhile, or to find a friend or group who can bear witness to our

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sorrow. It helps to remember that nothing is permanent, that our highs and lows and in-betweens will pass and morph into something else, soon. And it helps to continue contact with caring friends, long after the diagnosis, divorce, illness, layoff, or burial. What does NOT help is being told to get over it, to shape up, to move on. What does NOT work is to anesthetize ourselves with alcohol and other drugs, as grief needs our attention.

When grief hits home, home must change to absorb and recreate it. Writing and telling help us remember what scientists and Buddhist writers have long known: that matter is neither created nor destroyed, only transformed. Our lost loved ones only change forms, and so must we.

Writing offers bereft people a path back to the community through what sociologist Clive Seale calls “resurrective practices” or “micro-rituals:” talking, listening, and writing in ways that restore the survivor’s sense of security and hope. Seale places “narrative reconstruction” of the self and/or the deceased into the larger scheme of social life in which everyday talk becomes a healing ritual. Anthropologically speaking, participating in such rituals—whether conversations with counselors, support groups, classmates, or colleagues, letters to the deceased, or funeral laments—affirms the survivor’s membership in the community. Through writing and telling, many survivors “seek to preserve social membership in the face of the fall from culture caused by death” (p.33), a fall that occurs when death comes suddenly, unexpectedly, or under controversial circumstances. As Susan Griffin suggests in her cultural autobiography, *A Chorus of Stones*, “words, gestures, the small rituals of daily life . . . connect us to others, both the living and the dead” (p.77). Whether these gestures happen in our sanghas, our UU congregations, extended families, or our neighborhoods, such connections shore us up and help us grow our faith.

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Reminders and Opportunities From Sam Trumbore, UUBF President strumbore@uumin.org

Is it time to RENEW your membership? Please check the address label on this issue for your renewal date. The form on the next page is for renewals and new memberships.

Plan to attend the upcoming UUBF Convocation April 13-15, 2007! We have an engaging format that has time for learning, practice, networking, relationship building, inspiration and entertainment. We’ve structured the program to move at a little slower pace than our first Convocation. The addition of another 24 hours makes a big difference. What is new this year is adding Saturday workshops. Right now we are in the planning stages to:

- Have a continuation of Friday’s program with Bernie and Eve
- Invite Tibetan monk Ven. Lobsang Phuntsok (he was with us in 2005) to speak on his engaged Buddhism project
- Invite a speaker on the National Prison Sangha
- Learn about Zen Mountain Monastery environmental work
- Have movement oriented and mandala painting workshops.

If you have ideas for workshops you’d like to see, please let me know. Our goal is to have as many UUBF Practice Groups represented as possible. Please see if you can bring a delegation from your group to our Convocation. Doesn’t matter if people have been practicing for a short or long time, all are welcome. Register Today!

See Registration Form Included in this Issue

Where Do You Go From Here?

By Alan Brush

So you discovered an interest in Buddhism, and you were lucky enough to find the UUBF. Where do you go next? How can you find more about Buddhist practice and views on issues that matter to you?

You might find some answers in the *Shambhala Sun* and in *Buddhadharma: The Practitioner’s Quarterly*, two Buddhist publications that have grown to prominence in

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western Buddhist circles.

Along with many other UU Buddhists, you may have already discovered the popular Shambhala Sun, which has become America’s most widely read Buddhist magazine. Known for artistic beauty as well as editorial excellence, the Shambhala Sun offers a Buddhist perspective on modern life for a wide range of readers – Buddhists, people interested in Buddhism, and people of other faiths.

If you’re among the more committed UU Buddhists, you might be looking for in-depth teachings from a wide range of Buddhist traditions. That’s what you’ll find in *Buddhadharma: The Practitioner’s Quarterly*. It’s designed to help deepen your practice and study, and it offers a way to connect with fellow practitioners. As Editor-in-Chief and long-time practitioner Melvin McLeod affirms, “For my own practice as a Buddhist, it’s the kind of publication I want to read.”

“Many Buddhists, One Buddhadharma” is the ambitious slogan carried on the cover of *Buddhadharma* magazine. It lives up to that promise by offering teachings from a wide variety of traditions — Theravada, Zen, Pure Land, and Vajrayana.

Such a variety of teachings, along with the in-depth book reviews offered in *Buddhadharma*, can help those of us who don’t have time to read stacks of Buddhist textbooks. *Buddhadharma* also provides that hard-to-find opportunity to “Ask the Teachers.” In a regular feature of the magazine, prominent teachers from various Buddhist traditions answer readers’ questions — and they get some tough ones!

Comments from UU Buddhist leaders James Ford and Sam Trumbore are included in a profile of the UUBF carried in the Winter 2006 issue of *Buddhadharma*. It’s part of the magazine’s regular coverage of Buddhist

community news.

The Shambhala Sun magazine presents a wider Buddhist view of life and culture in today’s society. Publisher James Gimian says “You don’t have to be a Buddhist to enjoy reading the Shambhala Sun.” The magazine regularly carries advice from the world’s most respected spiritual teachers, such as the Dalai Lama, Thich Nhat Hanh, Sylvia Boorstein, Jack Kornfield, and Pema Chödrön. But Gimian also points out contributions from best-selling authors like Alice Walker, Julia Cameron, and Natalie Goldberg, along with articles from psychologists like John Welwood, Mark Epstein, and Daniel Goleman. The visual impact of the magazine is also impressive. Examples of art include hand-painted carvings of the Buddha dating back to the Liao dynasty and hanging scrolls illustrating *kanyu*, the Taoist philosophy of external and internal harmony that is the basis of *feng shui*. And then there’s the occasional off-beat surprise, such as the recent article on Rivers Cuomo, lead singer for the rock band Weezer, who talks about the impact of meditation on his music.

You’ll find these magazines in major bookstores and online at www.shambhalasun.com and www.thebuddhadharma.com. Regular one-year subscription prices are \$28 and \$24, but UU Buddhists are offered a first-time subscription for \$10. To get this lower price, go to these internet web pages and enter the code UUB:

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