

sangha news

The Practice of Taking Refuge

By Pamela Weiss

THE practice of taking refuge is found within all schools of Buddhism. It is a beautiful movement of heart and mind, of opening and orienting toward what is most essential. Classically it is taught that we take refuge in the Three Treasures: Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. Buddha represents the potential for awakening inherent in each of us; Dharma is the truth of how things are, which is the source of awakening; and Sangha is the community of people dedicated to walking the path of awakening.

It is easy to confuse the process of taking refuge with our worldly mind and activity. But taking refuge is not something we can get or accomplish. And it is not a safe haven “out there” somewhere. The word *refuge* comes from the Latin re- + *fugere*, which means to “flee back,” or return. So ultimately, taking refuge means to return again and again to what’s happening right now.

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This is the fundamental practice of awakening: returning to now, again and again, from our habitual excursions—into the future (planning, strategizing, worrying) or the past (rehashing, remembering, wishing we could undo or redo).

In English, the word *refuge* has the connotation of turning in, or finding a place to retreat from the intensity and activity of the world. But in Japanese, the word for refuge is *kie*, which includes a sense of return but also the spirit of wholehearted engagement—the opposite of retreat or turning away. In Japanese, “I take refuge in Buddha” is “*Namu kie but-su*,” which is often translated as “I wholeheartedly throw myself into the house of Buddha.” This translation beautifully expresses the essence of taking refuge: returning to and throwing ourselves into the here and now.

The word *refuge* is also connected to the word *refugee*. When we take refuge, we are willing to become homeless, to give up our familiar ground and settle, instead, with groundlessness. Groundlessness does not mean there is no ground. There is ground, it’s just not solid! Settling into groundlessness means finding our footing in the shifting sands of life. It means letting go of whatever it is that we think will make us happy, whether it’s a new car or job or mate. It’s coming to see that while any of these things may be pleasant and even enjoyable, grasping onto them will never bring us the happiness or security we seek. In fact, the Buddha taught that grasping itself is the source of suffering.

There is a wonderful Zen koan, or teaching story, that illuminates the essence of what it means to take refuge. It goes like this:

The Buddha was walking with the congregation. He stopped and pointed to the ground and said,



“This is a good place to build a sanctuary.”

Indra, King of the Gods, took a blade of grass, stuck it in the ground, and said, “The sanctuary is built.”

The Buddha, out strolling with his friends and disciples, stops and gives a teaching about how to find refuge, or sanctuary. Essentially he is saying that when we stop, feel our feet on the earth, and pay attention, we can discover a sense of sanctuary, or peace, regardless of the particulars of the situation. Whatever is happening is “a good place” to build a sanctuary.

Then Indra, who represents the kingly or queenly godlike wisdom in each of us, responds. Using what is at hand, he reminds us that each moment we pause to smell the roses or enjoy the grass—or answer the phone, or sit in traffic, or respond to email—is an opportunity to return home to ourselves.

As our practice deepens, we begin to see that there are blades of grass everywhere. Every moment is fresh and new. Some moments we like, some we dislike, and many we simply ignore or tune out. But like Indra, we can become more and more skillful in using whatever is present to discover that regardless of our preferences, the refuge we seek is always here, now. Really, where else could it be?

[Read our profile of Pamela on page 6.](#)

sangha
news

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SFI to Honor Sangha Volunteers December 9

By Geoff McNally

SF Insight's first-ever Volunteer Appreciation Ceremony will be held on Sunday, December 9, replacing the sangha's regular Sunday night meditation and dharma talk.

The event, scheduled for 7 to 9:30 p.m., will honor the many sangha members, past and present, who have contributed their time and energy to helping the group run more efficiently and develop a sense of community. Everyone is invited to this festive



evening of appreciation and celebration, which will include a brief period of meditation practice, a short dharma talk, tea and desserts, and a ceremony to honor the volunteers.

Volunteers include, but are not limited to, those who help out at the weekly sittings; coordinators of sangha functions such as publicity, potluck dinners, and kalyana mitta groups; *Sangha News* staff; members of the Steering Committee; and participants in SFI service projects.

To help SFI identify everyone deserving of recognition, all sangha members who have volunteered their services are being asked to list their contributions on a short form that can be found near the dana basket on Sunday nights or downloaded from www.sfinsight.org.

“Kinda Like a Prom”: SFI Gives Another Day to SF’s Homeless

By Gayle Markow and Rachel Markowitz

On Wednesday, August 29, eight SFI sangha members participated in the city's bimonthly Project Homeless Connect (PHC) at Bill Graham Civic Auditorium. It was SFI's seventh time participating in the event, which every other month offers dozens of free services and resources to the homeless while providing volunteers a well-organized venue in which they can respond to the individual needs of the people within this group.

A total of more than 1,250 volunteers working at various stations—such as medical, employment, food, foot massage, wheelchair repair, and veterinary services—attended to over 2,300 homeless participants.

As always, this was a great opportunity for sangha members to practice mindfulness and

compassion out in the world, as well as do some very practical service work. Doing this work as a group also creates a stronger sense of community within our sangha, especially during the meditation and check-in that we conduct in a room at the library across the street at the end of the day.

Sangha member John Elford helped staff the behavioral health services station. “The first man I interviewed was suffering from alcohol intoxication and spoke only Spanish,” John said. “I guided him to the Spanish-speaking counselor and in five minutes we got him in a cab and gave the driver the address of the medical detox clinic.

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Sangha cyclists and volunteers travel from Spirit Rock to Abhayagiri (137 miles) during the sixth annual Buddhist Bicycle Pilgrimage Sept. 29-30.

TRANSFORMING DUKKHA THROUGH NONVIOLENT COMMUNICATION

BY ALI MILLER



If you want to understand the Buddha’s First Noble Truth, which states that “there is suffering (*dukkha*),” you don’t have to look very far. If you are alive and relating with others, you know the truth of *dukkha*: others don’t always act as we want them to, and when we’re attached to the outcome, we suffer.

A couple of years ago, I came across Nonviolent Communication (NVC), a “language of life” developed by Dr. Marshall Rosenberg, and I have found it to be an extremely useful complement to my mindfulness practice, particularly in dealing with interpersonal suffering.

I attended an Intro to NVC class at the New York Insight Meditation Center, hoping to learn something valuable and meet nice, like-minded friends. While I was moved deeply by the teachings of NVC, the “meet nice, like-minded friends” goal didn’t work out so well. Not even five minutes into the class, the woman sitting next to me became my newest enemy.

I was playing with a pen, unconsciously making a clicking sound that was apparently disturbing this woman. She leaned over to me and rudely demanded that I stop making such an annoying sound.

If you were watching me, you would have seen me put the pen down and continue listening to the teacher. What you wouldn’t have seen was the inner turmoil this interaction triggered: a barrage of unpleasant emotions, harsh self-judgments, self-righteous criticism of my classmate, and loads of views and opinions. Caught in a tennis match between blame and shame, I hardly talked to anyone the whole rest of the day. So much for making new friends.

I’ve since deepened my understanding of the tools NVC offers for relating more kindly toward myself and others. The NVC model guides my attention away from judgments and interpretations, which tend to lead to disconnection and violence, and toward feelings and needs, which are universal and therefore connect me to all of humanity.

This is a profoundly transformative shift of consciousness, especially when I am experiencing internal and external conflict. Instead of focusing on how wrong or right I am, NVC encourages me to focus on what needs are alive in me, and what needs might be alive in the other person. It puts an end to the shame/blame, right/wrong game.

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Now, with a greater understanding of NVC, I can look back at that experience in New York with new eyes and a more open heart. Using the NVC model, which focuses on observations, feelings, needs, and requests, I can relate more empathically to my suffering self.

First, I can distinguish between my observation (the woman asked me to stop making a noise) and my interpretation about what happened (she rudely demanded that I stop making such an annoying sound). Then, I can get in touch with the feelings that got triggered (shame, anger, and sadness) because my needs (for acceptance and connection) weren't being met. Finally, I can make a request to myself or someone else (such as, for starters, would I be willing to offer some lovingkindness to the part of me that felt ashamed?).

It seems that when I bring awareness to the needs that are alive in me, especially in difficult interactions, the more accepting I am of myself, the more connected I feel to others, and the less I suffer.

If you would like to learn more about NVC, I have found www.cnvc.org to be a very helpful resource.

KM Groups Welcome New Members

Kalyana mitta (“spiritual friends”) groups are a great way to connect with other sangha members as well as deepen your practice, focus on a particular aspect of Buddhism, and blur that line between your practice and your everyday life.

SF Insight is home to several KM groups, three of which are currently accepting new members: two book groups and an “adventurous elders” group. If you're interested in joining one of these groups—or starting a new one—please contact me. I can help you with the logistics of starting up a group and recruiting members. I can also direct you to other KM resources. Email me at kminfo@sfinsight.org. —*Ed Ritger, KM Coordinator*

Certain Sounds

Like bells breaking silence,
somehow salvaged from the ruins of
Love and Happily Ever After,
certain sounds—

Abide

Endure

Gratitude

Wonder

—arise from the dense
deafening noise
of news about nothing,

knock breath off-kilter,
shake the shrouded heart,
land in that unmapped spot
where tears are born.

ANITA KLINE

Poetry Circle Seeks Participants

Sangha members interested in sharing their poetry with dharma friends are invited to join SFI's new poetry group. The group plans to meet once a month—perhaps at the church before the Sunday sit, perhaps at people's homes—to read their own work or favorite poems. For more info, email joeshakarchi@hotmail.com.

Pamela Weiss: Personal, Poetic & Practical

BY GEOFF McNALLY



As the leader of SF Insight's new Wednesday night sitting group, Pamela Weiss draws on 20 years of practice in several Buddhist traditions, as well as 12 years as a student in the Diamond Approach.

In her former life as a Zen practitioner, Pamela lived and trained for five years at San Francisco Zen Center—first as a monk at Tassajara Zen Mountain Center and later as a resident at Green Gulch Farm. She's currently in the middle of an intensive four-year teacher-training program with Jack Kornfield at Spirit Rock Meditation Center. Pamela is also the founder of an executive coaching and leadership development firm called An Appropriate Response through which she leads mindfulness classes and coaches corporate executives in how to bring the teachings of wisdom and compassion into the world of work.

All of these experiences have influenced both the content and the style of her teachings. "When I plan my dharma talks, I look at what's touched me personally, as opposed to what information I want to convey," she explained. "My goal is to present the teachings in a way that's warm, passionate, personal, and poetic, but also practical. My aim is to bring the teachings alive, to make them meaningful and applicable to people's everyday lives."

My aim is to bring the teachings alive, to make them meaningful and applicable to people's everyday lives.

The Wednesday night sitting group is smaller and more intimate than SF Insight's long-established Sunday night group led by Eugene Cash, Pamela's husband. Pamela leads the group in a partially guided meditation, followed by a short tea break, dharma talk, and question-and-answer period. To help build a sense of sangha and foster a personal connection among group members, Pamela asks everyone to say their names and to chant together before the dharma talk.

"Part of what I'm trying to do is create an environment that's safe and open, allowing people to feel free to touch what's most important to them," she said. "People are hungry for community, a place to be with others of shared intention. That's one of the important roles that sitting groups can play in people's lives."

Another of her goals is to build a sangha that's diverse in all aspects—race, ethnicity, gender, age, sexual orientation, and income level. "It's very important to me that this sitting group be open to everyone," Pamela said.

In her dharma talks, Pamela explores aspects of Buddhist teachings that are relevant to today's world. Her talks reflect a blend of traditional Theravada and Zen

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teachings that have been inspiring to her own personal practice.

Chief among these teachings is the bodhisattva archetype. “A bodhisattva is a person devoted to alleviating suffering—our own, others’, and the world’s,” Pamela explained. “I find this image tremendously inspiring. A bodhisattva understands the truth of our deep connectedness—that none of us can wake up and be free until we all wake up and are free, that we are in it together. For me, walking the path means cultivating the bodhisattva spirit, maturing my ability to respond with skill and kindness to the nitty-gritty of everyday life.”

Describing her own path, Pamela said, “I first got involved in meditation when I was in my twenties. For me, the main doorway to Buddhism was suffering. I’ve been a diabetic since I was ten years old. Being diagnosed with diabetes put me face-to-face with old age, sickness, and death at a very young age, and living with a chronic illness serves as a continual reminder of our shared human limits in the form of impermanence and mortality. The teachings and practices of Buddhism have helped me so much to make sense of suffering and to engage in practices that really help. As a result, I’m very moved to help others find skillful ways of dealing with the suffering in their own lives.

“But Buddhism is not just about suffering. It’s also about freedom. My wish as a teacher is to illuminate the freedom in each of us that is always right here, right now. This is the real gift and promise of Buddhist practice. As the poet Rumi writes: ‘The clear bead at the center



changes everything. / There are no edges to my loving now.’ When we wake up to the freedom at the very center of our own being, we can’t help but meet our life appropriately—with wisdom, kindness, and love.”

Pamela’s sitting group meets from 7 to 9 every Wednesday evening in the Fireside Room of the UU Church. Her talks can be downloaded at www.sfinsight.org. For more info on Pamela’s coaching and leadership development work, visit her website, www.appropriateresponse.com.

For the Benefit of All Beings

BY ETHAN DAVIDSON



I recently learned that my lifespan is likely to be much shorter than I thought.

I'm 44 and have had hepatitis C since I was 18. Hep C is a disease of the liver caused by the hepatitis C virus (HCV). Despite my symptoms, which include a rash on my face, minor joint pains, and an increasing need to take a nap in the afternoon, I have lived an active life—traveling, swimming in the bay, and, for the last six years, going on meditation retreats. I have known for over a decade that I have HCV, but I've seen no reason to undertake the harsh, unpleasant, and dangerous treatment for it, which has only a 50 percent chance of success.

But a year ago I saw a new liver specialist. After extensive testing, he told me that my liver is greatly damaged. Treatment is, therefore, more dangerous and less likely to succeed than before. But if I do not eradicate, or at least significantly reduce, the HCV, I will need a liver transplant, probably within five years.

At this point, there are many things that could go wrong. The treatment could make my liver deteriorate more quickly. I might not be able to get a new liver soon enough. And if the virus survives, it will infect the new liver and reproduce more quickly than before, and another transplant may

be necessary. There are many ways that death could come sooner rather than later.

After learning the news, I increased my meditation practice. Then I got sciatica, which caused considerable pain in my back, knee, and leg.

Unable to sit much, I began attending classes at a local Tibetan Buddhist temple. There I learned of a certain kind of bodhisattva who deliberately takes on the suffering of others. When he suffers, he thinks, "Good, this is what is supposed to happen. My practice must be working."

Reflecting on this, I thought, it would make me feel better to adopt such an attitude. But how can I believe that what I am going through will reduce anybody else's suffering? Then I remembered that the place I will receive treatment is a research hospital and that I signed a form saying that when they draw my blood, they can take extra to use it for research. This

made me see that my suffering can, indeed, help others—the many millions of people who have hep C or will get it in the future.

I decided to take my bodhisattva practice a step further. I had a document drawn up saying that after my death, my useful organs should be used for transplants and the rest of my body donated to science, for HCV research.

This has already reduced the suffering of one being: myself.



By Sima Schoen

I've been a hermit for much of my life, having grown up in a family where people either didn't connect or they connected in devastatingly harmful ways. It was by encasing myself inside my thoughts and shutting down my heart that I safely got through my childhood. My thoughts were my reality. My heart was a tiny seed waiting for the opportunity to make the transition to life, but it was deeply buried.

Enter the dog—Josie. She is my service dog. I have her because of clinical depression and post-traumatic stress disorder, but her true role in my life has been to bring me to the dharma. Not just on Sunday evenings but in every moment of life.

Josie is sweet, quiet, protective; she is also stubborn and a being in her own right. Every time I want to walk one way, she wants to walk another. I want to walk quickly, she



Sima's service dog, Josie, is a frequent Sunday night attendee.

refuses to speed up. I fume, I dictate, and she walks slowly, smelling every tree, bush, and mailbox that we pass on the way to my office.

Josie teaches. I learn. I practice patience and nonattachment to direction, pace, and to which one of us “wins.” She barks at large mushrooms in the park and bags of garbage on the curb, things she can't identify. She investigates, cautiously, but with curiosity. I, “knowing” what these things are, am not curious about them. I just

want to calm her down and get on with our walk. Which one of us is “practicing” the dharma?

But I'm learning. I take her to the beach because she loves it and I feel joy at her excitement; I'm learning *mudita* [sympathetic joy]. I leave for work earlier so I don't have to bark at her to hurry up; I'm learning generosity and equanimity. My heart glows with love for her; I am learning to live with an open heart. I bring her to sangha on Sundays and watch how her quiet, sweet presence brings joy to others and helps me overcome my shyness in talking to people; I'm learning gratitude, connection, and service.

HOMELESS, *continued from page 3*

“As I was helping a woman find the legal services section, I was tired so I sat down with her as she waited to be seen,” John continued. “She looked around the large auditorium with people moving around from place to place and said, ‘It's kinda like a prom!’ I agreed that it was like a big dance, an open floor



filled with people looking to match up with a partner.” Only in this case the “partner” was services, and many “matches” were made.

SFI's next volunteer day, the last of the year, is Wednesday, December 5. Everyone is invited to participate for either a half day or a whole day. For more info, email gaylemarkow@sbcglobal.net.

August PHC volunteers Gayle Markow, John Elford, Marita Steffe, Geoff McNally, and Chanda Williams. Not shown: Heidi Cunningham, Alex Grobman, and Michael Katz.

Every Sunday Evening

- 6:30–7 Social time
- 7–7:45 Silent meditation
- 7:45–7:55 Tea break
- 7:55–8:55 Announcements, dharma talk, and discussion

Special Event: Volunteer Appreciation Celebration Sunday, Dec. 9, 7 to 9:30 p.m.

Teacher: Eugene Cash

Eugene's Absences and Visiting Teachers

- Oct. 7: Greg Kramer on Insight Dialogue
- Oct. 14: Wes Nisker, Spirit Rock teacher
- Oct. 21: Richard Shankman,
East Bay sangha
- Nov. 18: Eugene with Kittisaro
and Thanissara

Every Wednesday Evening

- 7–7:40 Partially guided silent meditation
- 7:40–7:50 Tea break
- 7:50–8 Announcements and chanting
- 8–8:55 Dharma talk and discussion

Teacher: Pamela Weiss

Saturday Daylong Retreats

These daylongs will take place at the UU Church from 9:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. Bring your lunch. Each daylong has a registration fee of \$10; teaching by dana. If possible, please pre-register: make check payable to SFI (noting the name of the retreat) and send to SFI, P.O. Box 475536, SF, CA 94147-5536. You can also register at the door.

Beginning Orientation

Second Sunday of the month, 6 p.m. A brief introduction to vipassana meditation and our sangha, led by a senior student.

Vegetarian Potluck

First Sunday of the month, 5:30 p.m. Socialize informally with your dharma friends. Home-made and store-bought dishes welcome.

Chi Gung

All Sundays except first, 6:15 to 6:45 p.m. Pre-sit gentle movement practice to stimulate energy flow. No experience required.

Sitting Pretty



Our thanks to JENNIFER SCAFF KING, who led the effort to replace those ancient metal chairs with some cushiony new ones. Jennifer researched many chair manufacturers, obtaining sample seats that sangha members offered feedback on. SFI bought 100 chairs, and the UU Church was so inspired by our generosity that they ordered another 100, which lowered the unit cost and saved on shipping.

Oct. 13: Vipassana Daylong: “The Four Foundations of Mindfulness” with Pamela Weiss and Will Kabat-Zinn

Nov. 3: Vipassana Daylong: “The Liberating Power of Awareness” with Mark Coleman

Dec. 8: “Adoring the Dharma: Devotion and Passion in Buddhist Practice” with Sean Feit

For details on the daylongs, visit www.sfinsight.org.

Also on the Menu: Sandwich Retreat

Join us for this weeklong retreat uniquely designed for urban dwellers. Titled “Wings of Awakening,” the retreat will focus on the five spiritual faculties necessary for awakening: trust, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom. Sessions will be taught by Eugene Cash, Kittisaro, and Thanissara at the UU Church. For more info, visit www.sfinsight.org.

Saturday, Nov. 17, 9:30 a.m. to 5 p.m.

Sunday, Nov. 18, 7 to 9 p.m.

Monday, Nov. 19, 7 to 9 p.m.

Wednesday, Nov. 21, 7 to 9 p.m.

Saturday, Nov. 24, 9:30 a.m. to 5 p.m.

Retreat Schedule for Eugene Cash

The following retreats will take place at Spirit Rock Meditation Center. For details, visit www.spiritrock.org.

The Radiant Awareness of Being
November 27–December 2, 2007
Eugene Cash, Kittisaro, and Thanissara

New Year’s Vipassana Retreat
December 26, 2007–January 4, 2008
Eugene Cash, Gil Fronsdal, John Travis,
Sharda Rogell, and Janice Clarfield (yoga)

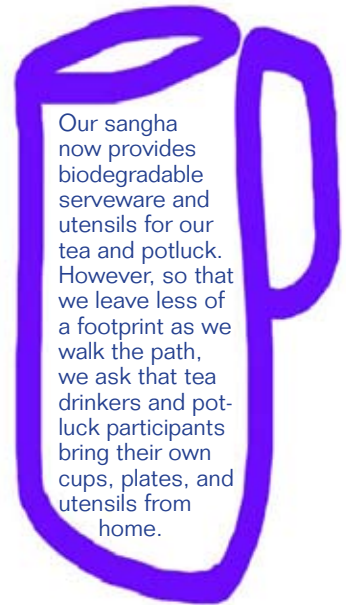
ARTISTS’ STATEMENTS



“As I continue to cultivate an attitude of ‘not knowing,’ life in general and painting in particular have gotten more interesting. I use watercolors, pen and ink, and occasionally gouache and acrylics. My painting is really about the joy of color and line and space and energy. Sometimes it’s purely abstract. Sometimes flowers or creatures appear. You never know. That’s what makes it fun.”—*Gayle Markow*
Gayle’s art appears on pages 2 and 4.



“My paintings explore the connections between the mind, body, and spirit during times of great suffering and illness. Ideas for these paintings have come from many sources: my imagination, my body, meditations, dreams, and, most importantly, the words and support of all those who have helped me along this journey. To see more, please visit my website at www.myhealingart.com.”
—*Cara Statucki*
Cara’s art appears on the cover and page 8.



Our sangha now provides biodegradable serveware and utensils for our tea and potluck. However, so that we leave less of a footprint as we walk the path, we ask that tea drinkers and potluck participants bring their own cups, plates, and utensils from home.

Whatever life brings us is our practice, and we can trust it.—Eugene Cash

SFI AT A GLANCE

San Francisco Insight (SFI) is dedicated to offering the teachings of the Buddha as they develop in the West. Our specific orientation is toward intensive householder (lay) practice. We offer weekly group meditations and dharma talks (lectures), plus classes, meditation retreats, and other events as a community of spirit devoted to the embodiment of awakening in our lives.

OUR WEEKLY MEETINGS

Our sangha meets Sundays and Wednesdays from 7 to 9 p.m. at the First Unitarian Universalist Church, 1187 Franklin (at Geary). We begin with a silent meditation, which is followed by a dharma talk and discussion. To allow us to pay rent to the UU Church, compensate the teacher, and cover other expenses, we ask attendees for a donation of \$10. If you can't give \$10, whatever you give is greatly appreciated. If writing a check, make it out to SFI.

MEDITATION

We practice a style of meditation known as *vipassana*, or insight meditation. Often translated as "mindfulness," *vipassana* implies seeing deeply or clearly, penetrating and illuminating reality. The practice of vipassana or mindfulness offers a way to radically transform our vision, understanding, and engagement of and with our human life.

DANA PRACTICE

Dana means "generosity." The Buddha's teachings are considered priceless but traditionally are given freely in a spirit of generosity. Offering dana (a donation) gives students an opportunity to express their gratitude for the teachings and to cultivate the joy of giving. Most SFI retreats and classes are taught by dana.

KALYANA MITTA GROUPS

Kalyana mitta means "spiritual friends." These small groups (typically 6 to 12 people) meet regularly to study and share experiences in support of each other's practice. Meetings usually include a short meditation and discussion. For more info, contact Ed Ritger at kminfo@sfnisight.org.

OTHER WAYS TO GET INVOLVED

Sangha members often engage in outside activities and service projects. Past activities have included homeless outreach; fundraising projects for an AIDS-related community outreach program founded by Buddhist friends in South Africa; the compilation and sale of a sangha cookbook to fund retreat scholarships; a picnic in Golden Gate Park; and bike rides. To stay abreast of current activities, visit our website or our Yahoo group site.

OUR TEACHERS

EUGENE CASH is the founding teacher of SFI.



He teaches at Spirit Rock Meditation Center and leads intensive meditation retreats internationally. His teaching is influenced by both Burmese and Thai streams of the Theravada tradition as well as Zen and Tibetan Buddhist practice. He is also a teacher of the Diamond Approach®, a school of

spiritual investigation and self-realization developed by A. H. Almaas.

PAMELA WEISS has practiced in the Zen and Theravada traditions since 1987, including several years of monastic training. She teaches mindfulness in corporate settings, has led classes and retreats for the past ten years, and is currently a teacher-in-training with Jack Kornfield at Spirit Rock Meditation Center. Visit her website at www.appropriateresponse.com.



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