

# Open Way News & Views

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*Dharma Practice in the Tradition of Ven. Thich Nhat Hanh & the Order of Interbeing*



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## IN THIS ISSUE:

### CONNECTIONS

*In 2021, not only did we endure a second year of the global COVID-19 pandemic, we as individuals and a sangha found ways to deepen our practice and our relationships. Being physically separated has made us even more aware of our need for connection.*

*Contributors offer their experiences with and reflections on finding and creating connection. With 2022 well under way, we look forward to connecting again physically as well as digitally.*



*“I may be  
found in  
your  
way of  
breathing  
&  
walking.”*

*The Venerable Thich Nhat Hanh,  
October 11, 1926 - January 22, 2022*

*We aspire to manifest the Continuation of  
our beloved teacher and founder of the  
International Plum Village Community of Engaged Buddhism.*

Bryson Connolly

### **Liberation from Isolation**

“The virtuous man must have neighbors,” said Confucius. And the Buddha corrected his cousin Ananda, telling him that spiritual friendship was indeed the entire path. Sometimes it seems as if we can measure the depth of our practice by the depth of our friendships. The boundaries that we subconsciously use to keep others out also work to trap us. Of course we want to be free—free to come and go and let others come and go, and to be free from our own self-delusion.

In prison, people so often avoid religious activities or people in general in order to avoid bad company. This would be wonderful if such isolationists were dripping in blissfulness, but this sort of isolation I observed mostly comes with bitterness, with occasional sarcastic laughter at best. For this reason, going on with the view of others

being precious and dear is far healthier and much more fun.

Isolation could be easy to justify, since the Buddha remarked on how painful it can be to keep bad company; that it would be better to go on alone, like the elephant into the elephant forest. This is tough, since I've also heard an excellent priest once declare that there is only one thing we can do alone, and that's to go to hell.

I can testify that not everyone in prison is bad company, and even if they were, we can gain a lot by being in their presence. There was once a famous Tibetan monk who kept a certain obnoxious and profane cook with him, and took him all the way from Lhasa, Tibet, to India. The other monks all begged him to get rid of this companion, but the senior monk insisted he keep this one in order to practice patience. How would he practice otherwise, since all the other monks were much too pleasant and respectful?

So much can be gained from deep listening, making yourself available to the universe, and seeing the Buddha nature in each other. Even mundane conversations can be filled with profound and subtle experience. You can do a period of sitting meditation. You can also do a period of offering oneself to others with speech, presence, or listening. It doesn't have to be all day, since we only have a limited amount of energy. By opening oneself up in this way, spiritual friendships will be made, and magical things will happen.

Sandi Simons

### **Grandma, Do You See the Palm Trees?**

*(Originally published in News & Views 2013 and the Mindfulness Bell Spring/Summer 2014. Reprinted by permission.)*

I watched out the window of the shuttle all the way from the San Diego airport to Deer Park

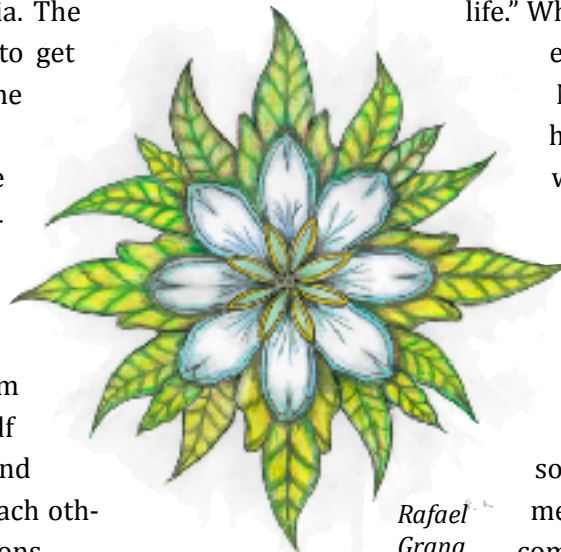
Monastery. I had never been to California before and wanted to take in all the sights. There were so many buildings and highways, but what struck me most were the palm trees. They were taller than a lot of buildings and I could easily see them on the skylines above the city. With their straight trunks and spray of fronds on the top, they reminded me of natural fireworks.

Seeing these trees sparked a memory in me from long ago: I was sitting with my grandmother, Irene, in her living room. We must have been watching a TV show with a setting far from Montana, where we lived, because she said, "I wish I could have seen a palm tree in real life." When this memory came up, many emotions did as well.

Memories of my grandmother: her laughter, her slow shuffling walk, the never-empty pitcher of orange Kool-Aid, the bottomless candy drawer kept always within a child's reach, her patience, and her ability to forgive. When I went to the University of Montana in Missoula, I lived with her. It helped me save money and gave her some company, since my grandfather had passed away shortly before that. After

I moved away in 2000, I regretted that I hadn't spent more time with her and done more for her. There always seemed to be something more important to do. I felt ashamed that I put my needs first and was frustrated and impatient with her so many times.

In 2002, while living in Glasgow, Montana, I was alerted that she might not live much longer so I drove down to Missoula to spend time with her. I wanted to apologize to her, but it never seemed like the time was right. Two weeks later, I was back home and had a feeling I should call her. We spoke on the phone for some time, but then visitors came to her room and our conversation was cut short.



Rafael Grana

Again, I didn't tell her my regrets. That night she passed away.

I felt then that there would be no way I could resolve these feelings, that I would just need to "get over it." But the feelings persisted and surfaced whenever I thought of her. I broke one of her mixing bowls some years after she passed, and cried for hours. Pat, my husband, couldn't understand what was wrong, and I couldn't tell him because I didn't understand either.

I carried these regrets and feelings until 2007, when I started sitting with Open Way Sangha in Missoula and learned of Thay's teachings. I began to understand these emotions, or internal knots, and how to slowly loosen them through mindfulness, loving kindness, and the teachings on inter-being. The knots grew weaker as I practiced but I could still feel them when I thought of her.

The sight of palm trees brought all these memories to mind along with sadness that she was never able to see these wondrous plants. As I walked up the hill in Deer Park past the meditation hall, I slowed to a stop where the road branches off to the dining area. A group of palm trees grew there and as I walked up to them, a smile started at my mouth and traveled up to my eyes, which, like my grandmother's, are brown. She was the only grandparent with brown eyes, and she passed them on to my dad and he on to me. The sadness and old regrets fell away with the wisdom of inter-being, the knowledge that I am a continuation of my ancestors and that at this very moment my grandmother was seeing the palm trees too. I felt her presence and that of my other ancestors throughout the retreat and during the ordination ceremony. I knew they were all present in me.

The knots of regret and sadness haven't resurfaced since I returned from Deer Park. That is one gift of many that this practice has given me. It has given back to me the sweet memories of my grandmother.

Nick Warner

## **Tao & Zen**

*It is a great spirit that draws all beings back to where they began. This source of light is seen in many of the world's religions and spiritualities. There is a deep longing in the heart to find something greater, be something better, and extinguish our fears. This poem explains my connection to the Sangha as well as the great Tao.*

Peace finds itself as meditation commences  
The world hears a slight vibration  
When the night comes early  
and things grow dim  
The joy of the Tao will enter  
bringing warmth to the soul  
It is in its nature to be mother  
Its nature to be God  
The pureland is living amid heaven  
The environment speaks back and we listen  
There among the mountains we see it  
dark but beautiful, wonderful beyond compare  
It is the dharma door that connects all others  
Stillness abounds in the Sangha  
Sleeping I see the light surround me  
Deep in my soul is this connection to all

Peggy Mallette

## **Connecting with the Five Remembrances**

*(Adapted from a practice talk given at Open Way in January on the theme of responding to challenges.)*

My life is pretty settled right now, so what is my current challenge? Hmmm, it's right in front of me but it's hard to see.

I have been struggling to accept the changes as I see my husband dealing with long haul COVID fatigue. It's time for me to look at reality: we are aging. It's time to face my resistance and avoidance. I no longer have a distant future to anticipate like younger folks.

But then as I think about it, aging is a process we all experience from birth onward. Even infants and toddlers are experiencing aging. The discoveries they make as they age like walking and eating solid food are more exciting than the discoveries

that I am likely to experience like hip replacement and dentures!

Young parents are adjusting and adapting to their own aging, their parents aging, and their children aging all at the same time. Our challenges change with various life phases and events and sometimes we are more aware of it and struggle with it more than other times, but our lifetimes have no re-wind—it's onward for everyone.

I was whining to a sangha friend about being 76 and she suggested to me that I work with the Five Remembrances. I have always resisted even reading them. They seem so depressing to me. I know I'm going to die, you don't have to remind me! However, I kept being drawn back to them as if my intuition was telling me that there was something I needed to learn here.

*1. I am of the nature to age. There is no way to escape aging.*

*2. I am of the nature to experience sickness. There is no way to escape sickness.*

*3. I am of the nature to die. There is no way to escape death.*

*4. All that is dear to me and everyone I love are of the nature to change. There is no way to escape being separated from them.*

*5. I inherit my actions of body, speech & mind. My actions are my continuation.*

When I was studying to join the Order of Interbeing, my mentor suggested that I re-write the Five Remembrances to help bring them alive in my daily life. I had to explore what each of the remembrances meant and how it related to how I am living my life. I re-wrote them in the form of guidelines that I could act on, similar to the Five Mindfulness Trainings.

*1. Accepting the natural and inevitable progression of my body aging, I vow to care for it lovingly in all its stages.*

*2. Accepting the natural and inevitable vulnerability of my body to illness, I vow to care for it lovingly in all its infirmities.*

*3. Accepting the natural and inevitable reality of death, I vow to practice mindfulness in order to be better prepared for this transition and transformation.*

*4. Accepting that my body, my circumstances, the people I love, the people I know or don't know, all aspects of nature, the objects I possess, the state of the world, are all of the nature to change, I vow to kindly and firmly encourage myself to adjust to loss and change.*

*5. Accepting that my actions of body, speech, and mind are my legacy and that they influence my life and others, I vow to cultivate awareness of this responsibility.*

After spending two months really working on the practice of being present in my body during my meditations, I re-engaged the Five Remembrances. I discovered that my understanding of them was changing. Instead of calling them the Five Remembrances, I started calling them my Five Truths. They are true, undeniable, and relentlessly present in my daily life. And surprisingly they are not depressing, they just *are*.

This is just the ways things are. I can see them as depressing; I can resist; I can apply my oppositional personality to them; I can deny. But those are all a waste of the precious time I have remaining in my life. Instead I can look at these five truths as *freeing*. All the things I do to resist are unnecessary. What good does it do to scream at a storm overhead? What good does it do to shake a fist at the sky when it gets dark at 6 p.m. instead of 9? It's a waste of energy. Some things just *are*, and I can just put on a rain coat or turn on a light.

By accepting these truths, I can free up all of that resistance energy and apply it to being present and being flexible with what is happening right now. I'm coming to accept these truths not as

defeat or resignation, but rather as awareness that informs me. Life is not a fight; it is an adventure within these boundaries. Clear boundaries are helpful. My attitude toward them has changed from seeing them as admonitions to appreciating them as supports.

So my challenge in aging is to break the clinging to how I want things to be. Instead I want to ride the wave of present moments left in my life until it crashes on the beach and I roll out of this life covered in sand, laughing.

Steve Allison-Bunnell

### **Don't Let the Dharma Door Hit You On the Way Out**

Strangely, desire for certainty  
Makes a stranger of safety.

Curiously, fear of not knowing  
Drives away curiosity.

Unfailingly, mapping the future  
Only predicts failure.

With Practice,  
My new friend, uncertainty,

Introduces me to safety.  
With Practice,  
In the space cleared of fear,  
Curiosity blooms.

With Practice,  
I am here as when arrives;  
I am here as then flows by;  
I am here as now unfolds.

Bob Algier

### **Deer Park Journal**

The monastic community is an immersion into the true essence of sangha. Family, friends, harmony, courtesy, compassion, and a genuine interest in each other combined with a jovial, youthful energy offers a feeling of kids camp with good manners as a primary intention. Each day seems full and complete without ever feeling stressed for

time. The isolated valley hosting the monastery offers the conditions for a general mindful pace. Never hurried, it is priceless to fully engage in the moment and share it with each other in every activity.

In the morning, the fog ebbs and thickens, becoming gentle, misty drizzle across the steep valley. The aroma fills me with the memory of coming home to the Bay Area in December. It is the smell of the salty fog and the fragrance of the joyous plants arising in an interconnected bouquet. A soft coolness accompanies a midmorning advance of even thicker fog. I see nothing past the copper roof of the meditation hall. Wisps of still-thicker fog billow in bruised shadows through the valley. The distant melody of the soft chimes above the stupa high on the hill offers an audible accompaniment to the mystique. Sound seems both softened and clearer. The orchestrated din of insects just seems a little quieted, yet more crisp. The birds, though, seem to have a special lingo when grounded by the blinding fog. Their melody has taken on inquisitive chirps like echo pings veiled in the eerie shroud. This transition to a foggy jungle is certainly nothing new, and life flows with fascinating harmony.



*Claire Emery*

## Order of Interbeing Core Community Member Ordination

Steve Allison-Bunnell & Peggy Mallette

The Tiep Hien Order of Interbeing is the multi-fold sangha founded by Thich Nhat Hahn in Vietnam in the 1960s. “Multi-fold” includes both monastics and lay people of all genders. “Tiep Hien” in Vietnamese means “to continue to receive and connect” as we “are in touch with the present moment and realize, manifest, and make the Dharma suitable for our current conditions.” It sums up the practice of engaged Buddhism in the Plum Village tradition: to be in the world and transform its suffering, fully participating in life through service.

Everyone who has taken refuge in the Three Jewels and received the Five Mindfulness Trainings is part of this order. There is a “Core Community” of the Order of Interbeing consisting of people who have prepared for ordination and formally received the Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings. Ordination into this core community offers an opportunity to join others around the world in a commitment to supporting lay and monastic sanghas and to cultivating the practice of mindfulness.

In April of 2021, four Montana OI Aspirants were ordained online by Plum Village: Open Way members Peggy Mallette and Steve Allison-Bunnell, Laura Csaplar from Open Sky, and Michelle Potts of Flowing Mountains. Be Here Now member Mike Dunn also ordained at Deer Park with the Dharma name True Friend On the Path.



Laura Csaplar, True Spring Remembrance  
Dear Sangha,  
Breathing in, Breathing out  
Riding the waves of breath and practice, inward  
and outward.

When I first read of Thay and the Order of Interbeing members practice and work during the Vietnam war, I was so deeply moved. Practicing so as not to miss a breath as they walked among the bombings, delivering to the countryside calm, food, and schools rebuilt and rebuilt again. And I also read of Thay taking a year to practice inward after this experience and his inability to save a boat full of refugees.

The COVID online Plum Village ordination almost a year ago gave the gift of ordaining with people from all around the globe, experiencing Thay's practice encircling and holding the earth. Through this year of challenges, the connection brings me solidity and the feeling of open expansiveness.

I breathe in and practice in solitude, around my family, and with Open Sky Sangha. I breathe out and bring our practice outward, engaging with whatever the waves of life bring my way—recently showing up with sangha members to calmly support our local library against banning of books for LGBTQ youth; holding a subgroup of sangha supporting each other in environmental work; each day listening across our divide to the individual sitting in front of me; when able, showing up for our prison sangha members; and now, sitting with how to help in a world returning to war. Breathing in and breathing, as Thay's practice grows around our earth.

Steve Allison-Bunnell



Steve Allison-Bunnell, True Spring Branch

The bell sounded, the chanting began, and the monks and nuns of Plum Village transmitted the Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings to almost a thousand of us Order of Interbeing Core Community Aspirants. They, we, and many more well-wishers, manifested sangha energy that deeply touched me. No I wasn't in Plum Village or any North American monastery, and yes I was on Zoom a year into the global pandemic. But I was home—home with myself, home with the shared forms we have practiced so diligently in the Buddhist hinterlands of Montana, and home in the stream of spiritual teachers embodied by Thay.

Two years ago, when my generous mentor Greg Gallo sent me a checklist titled "Assessing Ripeness for Ordination," I definitely still felt green around the edges. Me, ripe? Even after a year of formal aspirancy, several years as a senior practice leader at Open Way in Missoula, and attending numerous Montana retreats, I was more aware of being at the start of a journey than completing one. But I trusted the discernment of my teachers and the support of my sangha, and I finally felt confident that my motivations to be ordained transcended any ego desire for recognition or status.

That feeling of being home in the practice has only increased since then. It occurred to me recently that in my entire time on the path of the dharma, there has been nothing in the teachings and trainings I have received that I was reluctant to embrace. There has been nothing in the practices I have experienced that has not felt nurturing and healing. When spiritual and religious teachings can so often conflict with our reason and experience, it strikes me as remarkable that I could so readily commit to the Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings with all my heart. Almost a year later, I wouldn't say that commitment is always easy, but it is always right.

Last summer, I was asked to become the primary practice leader for our Bozeman Thich Nhat Hahn Study Group. So I am now quite literally ded-

icated to sangha building, which is a central commitment of OI core community members. I am so grateful for both the opportunity to serve our tradition and our community here, and for the joyful support of my Montana sangha brothers and sisters. And with Thay's passing, this work is a beautifully clear reminder that I am tangibly part of his continuation.



Peggy Mallette, True Spring Music

Occasionally over my 30 years of participation at Open Way Sangha I have been asked why I wasn't an OI member, a member of this core community of the Order of Interbeing, and I did not really have an answer.

For a number of years I felt resistance that I could not explain. Early on I was skeptical about yet drawn toward this practice of sitting and staring at a wall and this thing called a sangha. Due to some early experiences around betrayal, I was more comfortable being on the edges of settings that might involve getting close to others or being vulnerable. Over the years of showing up at sangha, attending Thich Nhat Hahn retreats, and eventually becoming an organizer of Montana retreats, the defenses I had spent years constructing and maintaining softened. At a retreat two years ago I retired those defenses and felt them transform instead into supports for my love of sangha and mindfulness practice.

I suddenly found myself with no obstacles and wanting to become an Aspirant to the OI. No one was more surprised than I was. I stepped forward with joy in my heart and have never regretted this path. While the ordination ceremony was a special experience, the highlight for me was sharing the year of training, self exploration, and study with my mentor Zan Murray. Over the year I gradually grew into the person I wanted to be when I finally put on the brown jacket. Not that I was groomed and had become a finished project, but that I was ready to accept the joys and challenges of growing and learning to be present with and for others.

The Ordination Ceremony took place on a Sunday morning that happened to be the third day of an Open Way Sangha spring retreat. Because of COVID there had been no ordinations for a long time at Plum Village monasteries, so it was decided to offer the ceremony online to over 1000 aspirants around the world who had been waiting patiently. It was no less meaningful to me to be bowing in my home instead of the monastery because my Montana sangha was supporting me. My heart sings as I step into a more formal commitment of service to my beloved Montana sanghas.

Michelle Potts, True Spring Pistil

Ordination into the Order of Interbeing is a way for me to actively choose to make joy happen. This community supports a practice that has helped me become more at ease with grief and trauma, and which also points me in the direction of nurturing joy and contentment. The ordination ceremony itself found me full of joyful tears, even (or espe-

cially?) online. As a fellow practitioner liked to say about Sangha, "You get out what you put in." This commitment helps nudge me to put more into our community and my practice. In gratitude to everyone in our community.

## Book Review

Zan Murray

### **At Home in the World: Stories and Essential Teachings from a Monk's Life**

*By Thich Nhat Hanh, Parallax Press, 2016*

What made Thich Nhat Hanh the extraordinary teacher that he was? What experiences shaped his view of the Buddha's teachings and practice? *At Home In the World* gives us a glimpse into Thay's world through a collection of stories and personal memories that reveal the development of our teacher and Plum Village practice into what we see today. Whether you are a new or a long-time practitioner, reading this book offers insights into how and why our practice is both rooted in a long-standing Zen tradition and innovative in its teaching. The stories in this book were adapted from both unpublished talks and previously published works. Some I had heard or read before, some were new to me. The arrangement of the stories brought perspective to the becoming, of Thay, Plum Village, and ourselves as practitioners.

In the Introduction, Thay talks about how difficult it was for him to be exiled from Vietnam. He says, "I had trained for many years in the Buddhist Institute and had been practicing since I was sixteen, but I hadn't yet really found my true home." The book is divided into five sections: Life in Vietnam, War and Exile, The Blossoming of Plum Village, At Home in the World, and I Have Arrived. Each section has between eleven and twenty-three stories, most of which are only one to two pages long. They are mostly chronological, although a few are not. The stories are first-person, and I



Claire Emery



found it very easy and engaging to read just one story in the evening to take into my sleep, or in the morning to take into my day.

In the very first story, Thay tells how when he was four years old, his mother would bring him a cookie when she returned from market. He uses this memory to give a short teaching on eating meditation. This section takes us through his childhood to full ordination and becoming something of a “revolutionary monk” in Saigon, ending in about 1964. The next section returns to 1946, with a story about meeting a French soldier during the French-Indochina War. In this story he says, “This is the nature of war: it turns us into enemies...I have a deep aspiration to prevent war from ever happening again.” His aspiration leads through the rest of the section: his first journeys to the U.S. and meeting Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., his friend Alfred Hassler and the Fellowship of Reconciliation, and working with the refugees known as the “boat people” after the fall of Vietnam. The third section describes the founding of Plum Village. He makes it sound simple, but early conditions were not easy. Still, he finds opportunities to give a teaching wherever he happens to be—for example, taking children to a store to buy nails to make a table.

In the last two sections, we see how Thay opened himself to teaching internationally, embracing a global identity. The third-to-the-last story is called “Finding Home,” and he writes: “Who among us has a true home?...Despite my exile, I don’t suffer, because I have found my true home....My true home is not limited to a particular place or time.” The next-to-the-last story is called “Life Is Our True Home” and he writes, “Your true home is something you have to create for yourself....When we stop trying to find our home outside ourselves – in space, time, culture, territory, nationality, or race – we can find true happiness.” The very last story is called “I Am Not in Here,” about how Thay did not want to have his ashes put in a stupa. It is poignant to read these words now,

since his death. He asks that if a stupa is built for him, it should have three plaques: “I am not in here,” “I am not out there either,” and “I may be found in your way of breathing and walking.”



*Rafael  
Grana*

## Retreat Reflections

Peggy Mallette, Spring Retreat Coordinator

### **Spring 2022 Retreat Cultivating a Truly Peaceful Heart April 29 - May 1**

Please don't let two years of Zoom fatigue keep you from joining our Open Way Spring Retreat. Due to the uncertainty of COVID conditions, the decision was made by our state Care Taking Council to present the spring retreat online. (The Council is still exploring how to offer our fall retreat in person.) With so little opportunity for our community to gather and nourish each other, each person present magnifies the benefits of our mindfulness practice for ourselves and our world. So please bear with it and join us.

Our retreat teacher will be Michael Ciborski, a former monk at Plum Village, who has established the Morning Sun Mindfulness Community in New Hampshire. He has been our regular teacher annu-



ally for many years and is insightful, wise, and able to translate the Buddha’s teachings in a way that we can relate to and apply to our daily lives 2000 years later.

The theme for the retreat will be “Cultivating a Truly Peaceful Heart.” Michael writes the following about this topic:

*Sometimes it seems that agitation, anxiety, frustration and anger are right there under the surface, and with the slightest pressure we might just pop! Our relationships, our work, the situation around us in society are all burdens weighing upon us and we don’t know how much more we can take! We have grown disconnected from ourselves, from each other, from the wellspring of life itself. Yet this moment of life has so many wonders to offer and this retreat is an invitation to discover them...The Truly Peaceful Heart is not a place in us without fear or pain, but rather a capacity we learn to grow inside ourselves that embraces both the suffering and the happiness. A capacity that over time can even do this with some measure of ease.*

The retreat will begin on Friday evening and run through mid-Sunday afternoon with meditation periods, Dharma talks, and dharma sharing online and space offline for meals and relaxing. Outdoor walking meditation will be offered in person on Saturday afternoon in Missoula, Helena and Kalispell. The Open Way Mindfulness Center in

Missoula will be open for people to attend the retreat together in person.

I encourage you to add April 29-May 1 to your calendar. The Open Way Retreats page ([openway.org/retreats](http://openway.org/retreats)) has registration details and you can join the retreat announcement email list.

Zan Murray

### **Spring 2021 Zoom Retreat Haiku**

#### **Afternoon Before**

One last hike before  
Spring retreat begins – but oh!  
I’m already here.

#### **First Night**

Dharma Teacher’s zeal  
to grow our capacity  
is quite infectious!

#### **Morning Practice**

Deepened connection  
when hearing sangha voices  
added to the screen.

#### **First Day Dharma Talk**

Nourish and protect  
our peaceful love reservoir;  
all life is precious.

#### **Last Day Dharma Talk (Quanyin Sangha)**

I hold us all in  
my two arms, and all those arms  
are holding me too.

Zan Murray

## **Retreats Are Really Advances**

“No matter where you go, there you are.” I love that phrase, which I first heard in the movie *Buckaroo Banzai*. As it happens during the COVID pandemic, even when you don’t go anywhere, there you are. So, as Mary Oliver asks in her poem, *The Summer Day*, “what is it you plan to do / with your one wild and precious life?”

Our last in-person retreat was Fall 2019, but since then the Montana Open Way Sanghas have continued to offer two retreats on Zoom each year with nationally-known teachers. The first one (in 2020) was a bit of a scramble, as we were already in planning stages when everything shut down. Luckily, Michael Ciborski was the guiding teacher, and he had the advantage of being familiar with our sanghas and the people in them. And we had the advantage of an established relationship with the guiding teacher, collectively and personally. In 2022 Michael will continue, on Zoom, to offer us a chance to be present to ourselves and our practice in a concentrated way.

This piece originally was meant to review last spring’s retreat, but if you want to know what Michael (or Barbara Newell, in the fall retreats) said, you can use the Media tab on the Open Way website. The Dharma talks are well crafted, exposing us to Buddhist teachings we might not explore on our own and pointing us in directions to explore in our own lives. But being on retreat, as those who have gone know, is much more than Dharma talks. It is the entirety of the experience that helps us touch our inner being in a loving way and open ourselves to our lives.

When we had in-person retreats, “getting away from it all” was a literal act. The container of concentrated practice was lovingly crafted by sangha friends, and the presence of the teacher(s) and senior practitioners was an inspiring model of awakened life. In Zen, we learn much by observation. Nothing really can replace the warmth of sitting next to each other in the zendo, in the dining room,

in our shared rooms. We all look forward to the time we can be together in-person again, for several days of practice in a beautiful location, and that time may be coming soon. But until then...

Fewer people attend our Montana retreats on Zoom. We are all weary of online interactions and some have opted for no interaction at all. During this same time, I’ve seen a marked improvement in the Zoom retreats (both locally and internationally). The retreat organizers take care to schedule sessions, limiting the amount of time on-screen at any given time. (Less time than watching the Super Bowl or back-to-back episodes of a TV show or a movie.) Effort is made to create in-person events such as outdoor walking meditation locally in Missoula, Helena, and Kalispell. Breaks are scheduled to give as much time away from the computer as on it during the day. Yet we still have the feeling of being in community: Dharma discussions mix people from various sanghas so we see and talk with our extended family of practice; the bells and chants are provided for meditation; sutra services are led by many voices.

What a Zoom retreat requires is the willingness to create for ourselves, in our own home, some of the aspects we might take for granted at an in-person retreat: preparing meals; maintaining silence; refraining from radio, TV, and secular reading materials; setting up a separate place to retreat in; and generally being our own support rather than relying on others to maintain the energy of the retreat. It means asking our family members to respect what we are doing, especially if they are not participating. Maybe all that seems too hard, but I have found that making the effort reaffirms that my practice isn’t “out there” at Flathead Lake. It’s right here in my home, right outside my front door. My bedroom (where I set up for retreat) is a sacred space, and retains that glow even when the retreat is over.

The Buddha and his monastic sangha spent all day in practice, yet they also found it beneficial to withdraw from their limited interactions with the

mundane world to rest, quiet, learn, and generally create the conditions for insight to arise. As lay people, we need the support of Days of Mindfulness and multi-day retreats to do the same. Otherwise, even with a daily practice and study we still spend the vast majority of our days in householder duties and the distractions of our time. Creating these opportunities, individually or together, in-person or on Zoom, is an act of generosity to ourselves and to the world, to our “wild and precious life.”

## In Memoriam

Greg Grallo

### Charlotte Kasl • 1939-2021

Charlotte Kasl was a spiritual seeker and found homes in Open Way Sangha, the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Missoula, the Missoula Friends (Quakers), and the University Congregational Church. She always seemed to encourage herself and those around her to look a little more deeply, to be a little more open-hearted, and to see love and connection as the foundation of our experiences.

Many Sangha members met Charlotte as a kind, wise woman who shared deeply her insights and heart. Many may not have been aware of her accomplishments as an author, therapist, and concert pianist, the fact of which delighted her. She had a deep longing to be seen just as she was and loved for herself as a person, not only for her accomplishments.

Many who entered Charlotte’s orbit knew that she loved being with people and at the same time struggled with loneliness. The loneliness was a deep thread through her life and yet she maintained strong connections to the people around her. As she was dying, she remarked on how ordinary the process was for her, and she expressed that at times she was waiting for the transcendence. When Charlotte opened to the experience just as it was, without wanting her dying to be any



*Claire Emery*

different, without adding or subtracting, she found a deep peace.

A Sangha friend who visited her in her final week noticed Charlotte’s peace and commented that seeing her so at ease gave them courage and reassurance for their own dying process. And this profound rest was the balm to Charlotte’s loneliness as well. We all want connection and depth and look for it in others and in our relationships. Charlotte’s discovery of the ordinariness of living and dying and the connection that emerges when we just allow people and the world to be just as it is, is a powerful lesson.

There have been many times these past months since Charlotte’s death that I have wanted to call her and tell her some new insight or to share a poem or story with her. And so I recognize the desire and subsequent grief, and tell her anyway. I imagine her face and the glow of her love and offer that connection she so wanted to her and to everyone else around.

# Sister Sangha News

Steve Allison-Bunnell (2022 Secretary)

## **Open Way, Inc. Montana Maha Sangha**

Our state-wide “maha” or “greater” sangha, Open Way, Inc. continues to offer a legal, financial, and institutional umbrella to the local Plum Village sanghas across Montana. Considerable effort was given to cleaning up financial records. The Maha Sangha’s finances are sound, and further improvements to our accounting systems are in process for 2022.

The Maha Sangha’s primary programming activities are planning and hosting our semi-annual retreats. 2021 saw both the spring and fall retreats held exclusively online. Though attendance was lower than in person, our teachers continued to offer guidance and support along the path of the Dharma, and participants appreciated the opportunity to remain connected. The Maha Sangha did not hold an Order of Interbeing member and aspirant retreat this year.

Eva Maxwell

## **Open Sky Sangha 2021 in 7 Haiku**

In the pandemic  
walking on carpet or grass  
the Sangha gathers

Homes become sacred  
Sangha practice held within  
safe from viral storm

Flowering crab tree blooms  
reflected in still water  
Sangha walks in peace

Decade of practice  
transmission from Plum Village  
Laura is ordained

Book study binds us  
“Awakening Together”  
chapter by chapter

Ceremonies mark  
equinox, solstice, new year  
ancestors embraced

Friendship is the path  
the whole of the path Thay says  
We listen, we grow

Sue Kronenberger

## **Flowing Mountains Sangha 2021: In the Flow and Mountain Solid**

Here at Flowing Mountains in Helena we continue to aspire to express qualities embodied in our name. A generous and positive *flowing* of practice and goodwill has guided us throughout these pandemic times. About 24 people (six of whom are new to the community in the last few months) are actively participating in and contributing to the wellbeing of our community in a variety of ways. In addition to our Tuesday evening meditation and program, which meets every week on Zoom and two times a month in person, we continue to offer several practice opportunities including: First Friday Half Day of Mindfulness, Sangha Sundays meditation and Dharma sharing, monthly Earth Holder Affinity Group, and Book Study groups.

*Mountain* manifestation is alive in the solidity of our collective practice and care. Book groups have studied *At Home in the World* by Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Chocolate Cake Sutra- Ingredients for a Sweet Life* by Larkin, and *My Grandmother’s Hands* by Resmaa Menakem. As a whole, we read and discussed *The Other Shore* by Thich Nhat Hanh. Last year we nourished our spirits, bodies and the Earth by participating in “Bike Your Park Day” and weeding and cleaning the 6th Ward Garden Park on Earth Day. During the summer we enjoyed outdoor meetings, potluck and walking meditation at

Spring Meadow Lake State Park, city parks, and our own backyards.

And blessedly, Flowing Mountains now has a physical home. We began renting space in August 2021 at the Helena Community Yoga Center in downtown Helena. The new environment is lovely, spacious, and inviting. We look forward to greater use of our new home and concurrently appreciate that through Zoom we can stay connected with members and friends who have moved away and those who are traveling or live in rural areas.



Peggy Mallette

### **Open Way Missoula Sangha 2021: What's New at 702?**

That's 702 Brooks, the address of the Open Way Mindfulness Center in Missoula. That sounds catchier than OWMC. To summarize 2021 for Open Way in Missoula I can use two words: We're Back! Re-opening was a massive undertaking after being closed for almost a year and a half and with COVID still generating variants faster than we could have imagined. Our Care Taking Council decided to purchase whatever was needed to open as safely as possible and to continue the Zoom connection with those trying to stay safe at home or joining us from distant places.

We installed a big screen TV, camera, computer, and sound equipment to facilitate Zoom; we purchased good quality air filter/circulators; we collected all the other items like hand sanitizers, masks and surface cleaners to follow CDC guidelines for spiritual communities; and we set up a system for contact tracing if needed. Thanks to these diligent efforts we have had no COVID exposure issues since we re-opened in July, and our sangha has been able to be joyfully together in person.

I was worried that with all this expense we would have nothing left to make our annual payment for the Center purchase agreement. But

somehow dana flowed in and was sufficient to meet the need! So much gratitude is offered to all who contributed physically, spiritually, financially, and emotionally to our re-opening.

What we've been doing:

- Our Annual Meeting was held in January and it was exciting to hear the enthusiasm and new ideas during our visioning-the-future session.
- The Program Council for Missoula Open Way met monthly and over the past year managed to plan some events despite the COVID restrictions.
- Greg offered an awesome study group on zoom on The Four Establishments of Mindfulness.
- We lead a weekly walk in Rose Park supporting Black Lives Matter for many months.
- The Dharma on Wheelz RV tour of traveling monks from Deer Park visited in September and while serious about the Dharma, we were certainly not solemn. While sitting and learning together was a big part of our day together, the picnic lunch in the park together was a highlight, seeing the monks so vibrant and playful.
- Our Winter Solstice Bringing Back The Light celebration was moved to the week between Christmas and New Year and included a Beginning Anew meditation.
- When Thich Nhat Hahn passed away in February 2022, Montana Dharma teachers Greg and Rowan responded immediately and arranged a beautiful Saturday afternoon gathering. The Sangha gathered in person in Missoula and on Zoom from all around the state to honor our beloved teacher.

Our theme for practice talks this year is "Engaging the practice with difficult challenges in our lives." Practice talks on Tuesday nights have been insightful and inspiring, and we try to carry the theme from the talk through the whole month. The Program Council is operating in survival mode right now with COVID still rampant, and most of our available energy goes to keeping Tuesday

nights healthy and nourishing. We are hoping that in the fall if the pandemic releases its deathly grip, our energy reserves will fill up and we will begin

to offer more in the way of classes/study groups and days of mindfulness at the Center.



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Please visit [www.openway.org](http://www.openway.org) for current schedules, locations, and Zoom links.

*Our website also includes retreat details, audio recordings of talks, previous newsletters, and the ability to make a donation.*