

# Open Way News & Views



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*Dharma Practice in the Tradition of  
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## Understanding & Love

Steve Allison-Bunnell

### **New Look for News & Views**

I am pleased to receive the role of News & Views editor from Alison Matthews and Kathryn Maslanka. I look forward to carrying on Alison's focus on reflecting on our practice. Kathryn's approach to desktop publishing was clean and straightforward. Although this issue looks considerably different, I hope it will be a worthy successor. Thank you both for everything you contributed to give us Open Way's newsletter!

I value your feedback on this issue. For future issues, I invite your contributions of poetry, reflections on your practice and retreat experiences, and reports of Sangha events and activities. Please send your comments and articles to [newsletter@openway.org](mailto:newsletter@openway.org).

### **OPENWAY.ORG Gets a Facelift**

Andy Laken had not been in Montana for more than a couple of months before he accepted the task of bringing Open Way's web site ([www.openway.org](http://www.openway.org)) into the 21st century. Using his considerable professional skills, and with the kind help of previous webmaster Steven Chord, Andy has created a new site based on a free content management platform called Drupal. In plain language, this not only brings the site up to date visually, but it also allows the site to be updated with new content much more easily without having to know how to code web pages. We are particularly looking forward to keeping Open Way's online calendar more current. Stay tuned for more online resources, including back issues of the newsletter, practice-leading guides, and retreat registration forms. Please send Andy your feedback to [webmaster@openway.org](mailto:webmaster@openway.org). Thanks, Andy!



## VIEW FROM THE INSIDE

There is suffering  
 And there is sitting with suffering.  
 Mindfulness of practice is just that.  
 Fifty-one days in this indifferent enclosure...my  
 monk's cave...  
 Practicing...breathing...reciting  
 Because this is what I know to do...  
 Because this is what I trust.  
 Because this is where I go for Refuge.  
 My meditations fall upon the sweet face of Thay.  
 A.J. Sitting in the Early Morning.  
 Ellen by the creek with canine companion  
 Ellen sitting across from me.  
 Lee Heuermann's voice serenading my breath.  
 Peggy's twinkling fingers.  
 Your Lovely Lights Continue to Glow & Grow in  
 My Heart.

*Living Heart of the Source / Chile*

## Fall Retreat Mindfulness Trainings Panel

*Each retreat, a retreatant who has previously received the Five Mindfulness Trainings shares a personal experience about one of the Trainings. This sharing brings the trainings alive and emphasizes that using the trainings as a guide in our own practice and living is sometimes a struggle, often a challenge, and always an opportunity for insight. This fall, Steve Allison-Bunnell, Zan Murray, Rowan Conrad, Ann Wilsnack, and Susan Kronenberger courageously shared their personal journeys with the Mindfulness Trainings.*

Steve Allison-Bunnell

### Respect for Life

Sitting down by the deck, trying to compose my thoughts, I looked down on the ground and saw the dead body of a mouse at my feet. It was an unavoidable reminder of death and imperma-

nence. And even though it had probably died naturally, I was moved with compassion, as it brought home to me that we are constantly surrounded by both life and death.

When I chose to receive the five trainings last year, I thought long and hard about whether I should. This first one is a hard one for me. I felt that a major part of really living this Mindfulness Training is not eating other animals – to be a vegetarian. That certainly is a deep part of the tradition. Because I'm not a vegetarian, I worried that it was hard for me to honor the intent of the training. But I felt that there were some deeper aspects of it that I wanted to engage. So I felt moved to receive the trainings, and I did.

The words of the training talk about cultivating compassion for life and avoiding killing and not supporting killing. I could boil it down this way and be done: If you invert what it says, it really means simply, "Treat all beings mindfully." Because

isn't that the opposite of killing in anger or thoughtlessness?

Even though it's simple to say that, it's useful to amplify the idea a bit more. When I became a father, I had what was for me a very strange experience. I had considered myself to be something of a pacifist for much of my life, having been raised on the ideals and commitment to non-violence of the civil rights and peace movements. So it was very surprising, almost shocking, when my son was born seven and a half years ago to experience a literal surge of male, full-on caveman, testosterone-fueled aggression! I literally grew more hair on my chest and became much more macho and protective of my family. Nobody was going to hurt them in any way. I found myself getting pretty wound up about little things that I perceived to be threats to my wife and son.

I never did anything physically violent to anyone, but it was pretty funny because I had a whole series of reactions that I wasn't expecting to have come as part of the package of fatherhood.

Since then, contemplating this Mindfulness Training, what I realize is how close to the surface anger and aggression and violence can be, even when we think we're doing the loving and right thing for our loved ones.

Because I'm not a serial killer, it's easy to check off the part about not killing other people. That's not too hard not to do these days. But that's where I feel like there are much more subtle things in the way that I am speaking or behaving where the aggression is there nonetheless. Nothing good comes of that. Anger and aggression are these reactive things – the opposite of mindfulness.

Sometimes these are very minor, such as small arguments with my strong-willed son or being too quick to express my own frustration with him over petty, mundane things when I am tired or out of patience. If I come out and assert my authority, I get a lot of push-back and argument. This training has spoken to me about that. Compassion for the needs of all beings means caring about why they

truly are, and helping them become whatever they can be in their great unfolding, whatever that is, instead of trying to control or mold every situation or outcome. It is ultimately a practice of humility.

Thus it's very important for me to remind myself on a daily if not hourly basis that it's not all about me having my way. And that's how I try to honor the core value of nonviolence of the first Mindfulness Training.

Rowan Conrad

### **Generosity**

*Aware of the suffering caused by exploitation, social injustice, . . . I am committed to work for the well-being [of all]. . . prevent others from profiting from . . . suffering.* The beauty of the Mindfulness Trainings is that as simple as they appear, they are infinitely informative. As internal and external conditions change, they shine with a new and helpful illumination.

As we sat on retreat we were briefly apart from the furor of election season. Our society's external conditions were and are dominated by rather spectacular collective failures. During the election season both presidential candidates regularly alluded to, and promised to "change," these conditions. All of our Mindfulness Trainings call us to engaged action both within ourselves and in our outer actions in the world. As Thay says, "To say 'engaged Buddhism' is redundant. If it isn't engaged, it isn't Buddhism." When your heart of compassion is open, you cannot merely gaze at the suffering around you. Compassionate action will arise.

And as citizens of a representative democracy, we are intimately and personally responsible for what government at all levels is doing. Where this is not in accord with the deepest wisdom of our hearts, action should spring forth naturally from our beings. While the sangha should never become a political instrument or support a particular party, our deeply cherished values will naturally call us to be personally involved as citizens in the

decision making process of our society. And elections are the basis from which all other decision-making in our society arises. This particular version of “transformation at the base” requires our engaged practice.

We can be proud that Stan Voreyer, the most unlikely of political figures, being one who deeply values quiet home life, decided to run for the Legislature. He didn't decide to run with any gaining idea. He knew his district would not elect his particular world-view. But he found the unchallenged incumbent's harsh, inhumane rigidities to be views that he just could not allow to stand unchallenged in the public arena. He ran to do a little public education. And he did touch some hearts and minds, as in losing he did better in the vote count than any past challenger.

Many of you were also actively involved as citizens this election season. Our Mindfulness Trainings, and indeed the whole thrust of our practice, called us to engage with some combination of door knocking, phone calling and money giving. Who one supports, how one supports, only your own heart and mind can tell. Being one who has a strong aversion to “stranger calls,” I am not able, in good conscience, to make phone calls to supplied lists of people I don't know. I can and did, however, wholeheartedly speak with friends and family, write checks, and knock on doors. So today, for me, this particular precept/Mindfulness Training illuminates and inspires the practice of citizenship; namely active engagement in the election process to address social injustice, exploitation, and profiteering “at the base.” This is an important way I am called to be “generous” with my time and material resources.



Zan Murray

## Sexual Responsibility

This is the third time I've spoken on this Mindfulness Training. The first time I spoke of not mixing sex and alcohol or other intoxicants, because it leads to bad decisions. The second time, I spoke of not misusing sexual relations within a committed, long-term relationship, such as using sex as a control on one's partner, as in force or coercion, or withholding sex as a punishment or offering it as a reward.

This time when I reread the Mindfulness Training, I was most impressed with these words: *responsibility, integrity, respect, commitment, and protection*. With an activity as volatile and powerful as sexual relations, these are very important qualities to remember, and it takes the support of one's community to maintain these qualities.

Sex was a great invention of Mother Nature to increase genetic diversity and is a very popular form of reproduction in many species. Most species don't need direction on skillful or unskillful ways of having sex—it takes human beings to really complicate the process. I see sex as life continuing itself. It's this push that Life has to keep going, keep creating, keep becoming. Sexual relations can be a joy of life celebrating.

They also are a prime example of impermanence. Now that I'm in my mid-50s, I see that body parts just don't work the same as they used to. Love and a long-term commitment help maintain an atmosphere where accommodations can be made with laughter and goodwill. In an interview with Maggie Scarf, author of *September Songs*, she spoke of one of the couples in her study of long-term marriages. When asked about sex, one man said, “It depends on what you mean by sex. If you mean intercourse, yes, it's less often. But cuddling, hugging, holding hands are part of it more.”



My 16-year-old niece is now dating, and it appears that there is a lot more pressure to have sex than when I was in high school. I've thought a lot about what advice I could give her, and this is what I think I would say right now: Wait for a sexual partner who you would want to father (or mother) your children, whether you intend to have kids or not. A person you would choose to raise a child with would have those qualities of responsibility, integrity, respect, commitment, and protectiveness that are so important.

My husband has them. I do. And you do too.

Ann Wilsnack

### **Skillful Speech**

My latest religion is doing what I want to do when I feel like it. When I was asked to be on the Mindfulness Panel I stubbornly said the only training I was willing to do was number four. Thanks to another more flexible panelist, I am excited to share my thinking about the power of speech in our communities, but even more, the power of the self-talk that runs around in our heads.

As a co-counseling instructor and practitioner for many years, I learned the value of pure listening—not interrupting the other person's stories with comments from my own life. I learned to be present to another's feelings and words. Meditation has helped me to be present while I listen to others. What a gift to be open and quiet with others instead of thinking about what I am going to say.

Not gossiping and not sharing information I do not know to be true has made me less gabby than I used to be. One tool I use when I hear a piece of gossip is to ask the person I have heard something about if what I heard is true—assuring them that I have not shared the gossip with others. I think people appreciate that I am checking out the truth of something I have heard, but I fear that they have been hurt by hearing the rumor.

At work, a co worker accused me of purposefully shoving her. I was “written up” for this infraction—an infraction I

## **NOTHING MUCH**

We did nothing much for 3 days,  
sitting silently among friends,  
a gentle teacher,  
some Buddhist statues,  
and flowers.

The pond beside us echoed  
through second story windows  
the songs of dawns and dusks.

Bells occasionally sounded.

Each day,

with Sun as high as autumn allows,  
we walked paths around the pond,  
beneath pines,

steps silent as sitting,

pine, bird, and water song.

We ate in silence too,

open to hearing

the messages of meals.

We did nothing much for 3 days,

and as we prepared to leave

we broke our silence to share

how fine it had been,

to do so much of nothing.

*Jonathan Matthews  
November 25, 2008*

was not aware of doing. Because I was upset, I did tell one co-worker about the injustice, seeking her compassion and support, which she gave me. In general, however, I avoided telling co-workers about the incident. I felt happy and proud not to complain about it. I was aware the negative talk would make me look bad as well as hurting the accuser. Over time, I became friendly with her.

What made me eager to talk about this training is my realization that I tell myself untruths all the time. The bumper sticker, “Don’t believe everything you think,” sums it up. Yesterday, one of the women at this retreat seemed to be avoiding me and not returning my smiles. My mind kept making up stories about it. “She’s mad at me for not coming to sangha this summer. I might have irritated her.” Luckily, I had some fresh tools—I held myself in the pain of the felt rejection, and I reminded myself that the chances were she wasn’t mad at me. I kept going back to what what I may have done wrong and/or what was wrong with her, and I kept coming back and holding myself and remembering that I was making the whole thing up.

My mother was a critical perfectionist, so I’ve been sensitive to the moods of women and mentally chewed on stories about what I might have done wrong my whole life. I’ve wondered and worried about my possible mistakes when woman friends are aloof or self absorbed. I eroded deep grooves of negative thinking in my brain. I tell others, “It’s never about you,” but learning that truth for myself is vital. This retreat has given me tools to re-dig the garden of my mind.

A lot of my mind chatter has been about the future. A few years ago I realized that fantasizing about the future is a waste of time. My plans never work out in the details I think about. In the big picture they do—I invite friends for dinner, I make the menu I’d planned, but the conversations or the specific flow—*never*. Sometimes I pre-pave an event by praying; for instance, “May everyone have a good time. May we all be comfortable together.” I’ve learned to leave the details to the future.

This week I understood that all the insecurities I play in my head, all my negative thoughts about myself, are lies, untruths that I propagate and nurture with my time and energy. I am delighted to have new tools to catch my mind when it’s up to its ego related chatter. I believe that as we let go of our negative self talk we will inspire in ourselves self confidence, joy and hope. Our positive mental habits will leak out and bless others as well as.

Because it’s working so well for me, I’d like to leave you with a positive thinking tool that I learned from Jerry and Esther Hicks from their book, *Ask and It Is Given*. When I want something in my life, a way to invite it in is to say, “Wouldn’t it be nice (or fun, or delightful, or swell) if...? This gentle introduction to my desires softens my resistance to getting what I want. I used “Wouldn’t it be fun if my husband and I were best friends and we laughed when our negative patterns came up?” I thought and said it several times and we are much closer than we were even a week ago. Our patterns do come up, and we don’t always laugh, but we are enjoying the movement toward marital bliss. Because life is change, I notice that I’m either improving or not, so guiding my future with positive wishes keeps me headed in the direction I want to go. I continue to offer my desires (not very Buddhist of me, I know, but real) to the universe by saying, “Wouldn’t it be lovely if...? Try it!” Wouldn’t it be useful if we were all enlightened most of the time?

Susan Kronenberger

### **Mindful Consumption**

When asked to be on the panel to share thoughts on the Mindfulness Trainings, I was given a choice and I selected the fifth one, which addresses cultivating good physical and mental health through mindful consumption. I chose this training because the practice of it has helped me to experience more health and vitality and to have a more peaceful relationship with food and eating. As a child, I took in many messages about food,

some “good,” and others not so helpful for preserving well-being and joy in my body. Instead of being fearful or worried about what I eat, I am now more likely to be present in gratitude and awe. Several things are helpful to me in keeping my attention on mindful consumption and growing in awareness of what this could mean for my life. Before eating, I say the Gatha, “In this food I see the presence of the entire universe supporting my existence.”

This practice is especially powerful in generating gratitude and a deeper experience of interdependence or inter-being. When at am home and eating alone, I also try to say and reflect on the five contemplations. Lately I am finding the last one - “I accept this food to realize the path of understanding and love” especially moving. Just think, the simple act of eating mindfully in gratitude is helping us “realize the path of understanding and love.” We all eat several times every day and those times are all opportunities to slow down and be present with our lives as they are. Finally, I am very grateful for the monthly practice of reciting and reflecting on the Mindfulness Trainings with the Sangha. Even when things feel hard, this practice grounds me and helps me to grow in spite of myself.



## Open Gate News

Keek Mensing

### Open Gate Inspired by Prison Dharma Conference

*Prison Dharma: Mindfulness and Release* was the topic of the workshop attended in November by Rowan Conrad, Rich Austad, and Keek Mensing in Shelton, Washington. Sponsored by the Northwest Dharma Association, about 40 presenters and prison volunteers from Washington, Oregon, and Montana spent the weekend discussing what works best for bringing Dharma into the prisons and what is most helpful when an inmate returns to the outside community.

About eight active Open Gate volunteers take turns going to the Montana State Prison in Deer Lodge each Sunday. Our meditation, sharing of the dharma, and an annual retreat draw roughly 20-30 men from the low-security and high-security parts of the prison. Rowan started this work 12 years ago.

While our volunteers feel pretty comfortable with our offerings inside the prison walls, we are struggling a bit with how best to help the men as they come out. The Washington conference was helpful in that we got to brainstorm, see what others do, and see what has worked and not worked for them.

The most exciting model was presented by Canadian psychologist Andrew McWhinnie, who teaches about Circles of Support and Accountability. With that system the returnee (inmate returning to the community) is befriended by three to six people in the community. These people are not his therapists, spiritual leaders, or social workers; they are his friends. They meet as a group at least once a week to talk. They individually spend time with him during the week to help get him reintegrate into outside life. The volunteers are encouraged to simply be honest with the returnee, helping him to monitor his behavior for signs he may be slipping into old habits. They provide deep lis-

tening, real friendship, and good role modeling. The returnees and volunteers enter CoSA voluntarily, but all sign an agreement to adhere to the rules of the program.

Most exciting is that the CoSA model has lowered the recidivism rate for sexual offenders by 80 percent. Overall recidivism for the general prison population was lowered by 75 percent for those men in a CoSA program. This is one of the most successful programs anywhere. The stated aim of the program is “No More Victims.” The motivation is that by helping a sex offender keep from re-offending, the volunteers are reducing the number of victims of sexual offense.

Other presenters talked about the successful impact of religious programs of all types in the prisons. Research shows that it does not matter what religion is offered. If an inmate attends a religious program he or she has a greater chance of making it on the outside. Rowan spoke about how to best do retreats in prison. Addiction, nonviolent communication, and working with women inmates were topics addressed by other sessions.

Rowan, Rich, and Keek agreed that it was a very worthwhile conference. We hope to bring these ideas to our Open Gate program, working to implement them as best we can. Open Gate works on the outside only with those inmates who have shown a strong and continued interest in and effort to study Buddhism.

If the idea of helping a meditating returnee moving to Missoula from a Montana prison is a volunteer effort you would be interested in, please let Rowan, Rich, or Keek know. The Montana State Prison discourages prison volunteers from having ongoing contact with former inmates once they are in the community. Therefore, in order to have much of an impact on returnees we would have to find a whole different set of volunteers. Having a structured idea of how to work with returnees is a new idea for Open Gate. So we are very just now working to put together the ideas for teams and formalities. Volunteers are needed and welcomed

and earn good Karma! Think about it and let us know if you can help.

*Alva Murdock*

### **Open Gate Volunteer Profile**

Open Gate is a volunteer program that sponsors the Full Circle Sangha in Montana State Prison. The Full Circle Sangha continues to nurture dharma seeds planted a decade ago by inmates who contacted Rowan Conrad, who was already traveling to Washington State to meet with inmates at Airway Heights. Rowan established Open Gate as a separate organization from Open Way, although Open Way supports Open Gate volunteers by helping them with travel expenses. Volunteers from Open Gate take turns traveling to Deer Lodge in order to facilitate the weekly gathering of the Full Circle Sangha.

Nick Tran was born and raised in Missoula. He became attentive to the needs of the inmate sangha after Ven. Wongmo, a Tibetan Nun and long-standing teacher with the Liberation Prison Project, invited him to participate in prison outreach. Nick has an organizational aptitude and sensible nature which cultivates stability and reliability. He is an erudite student of Tibetan Buddhism and continues to receive guidance from Ven. Wongmo. Nick applies his Buddhist understanding to help alleviate stress, eliminate ignorance, and spread the seeds of tolerance. Nick welcomes the unique opportunities that occur in prison and strives to represent himself honestly with an authentic awareness of his own internal system as well as the mechanisms of societal interaction. Nick demonstrates an appreciated sensitivity to diverse value systems and models skills that support quality relationships. He understands that growth is a continual process in everyone and responds to the areas in his life where he has further room to blossom. For the past two years, The Full Circle Sangha has benefited from Nick's devoted practice as well as his comprehensive analysis and reflective feedback.



*Photos & design by Steve Allison-Bunnell*



*Fresh*

*as a*

*Flower*



*Solid*

*as a*

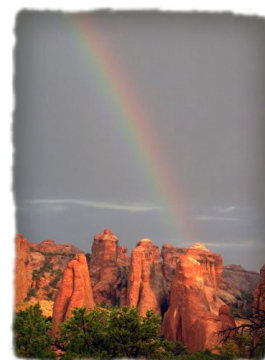
*Mountain*



*Reflecting*

*like*

*Still Water*



*Free*

*as all*

*Space*

#### **Volunteer Profile continued...**

In addition to being a thoughtful Open Gate volunteer, Nick is an outstanding UM pre-med student and works just as hard to help financially support himself and his wife Kate. Additionally, Nick and Kate have been a constructive part of the Osel Shen Phen Ling Buddhist Center in Missoula for several years.

Nick is a valuable asset to Open Gate. He is grounded in his Buddhist practices and enjoys sharing his experience and knowledge with others. Nick views himself as a “sign post” for anyone curious about a Buddhist way of life.

**Steve Allison-Bunnell**

#### **Children’s Sangha**

Along with welcoming children to regular sangha activities and practice sessions, we have also held a sporadic series of Children’s Sangha evenings organized by Lee Heuermann. We’ve done yoga as an active way to be aware of our bodies, and we drew pictures while listening to music to clear our thoughts. We also have given the kids an opportunity to ring the bells, drunk tea mind-

fully, and shared brief guided relaxation meditations.

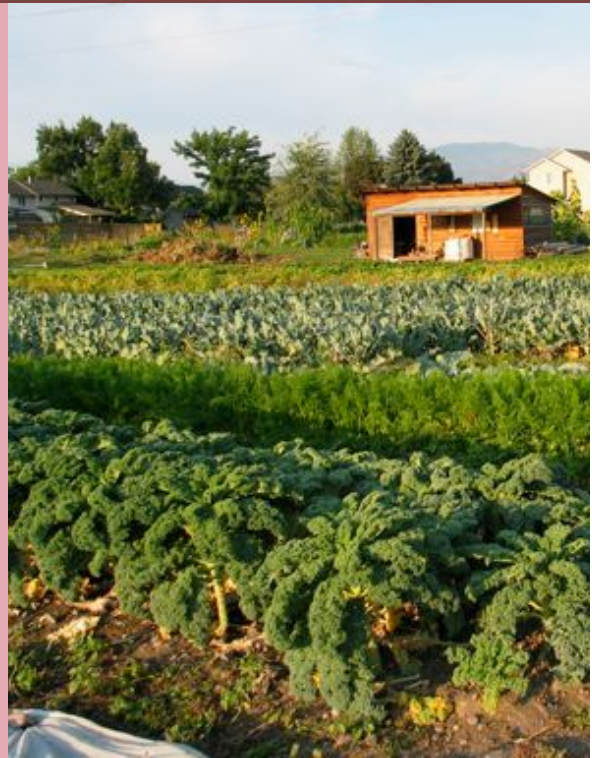
In November, we joined the middle school youth group of the University Congregational Church for a harvest meal eaten in mindfulness. We sat, walked, and ate soup, bread, fruit, and cookies. Everyone from the teens to the preschoolers felt the peacefulness and fellowship of mindful eating so strongly that we kept on eating in silence. The grownups finally had to remember to ring the bell to begin thoughtful conversation! We’re very happy to have our children begin to learn the how-to’s and feel the inner benefits of practice.

In our house, Buddha Breaths have become a nightly fixture of bedtime. I sit with Camas, help him to relax, and then recite the four homecomings (in the graphic above) that Michael Ciborski shared with us at retreat a couple of years ago. It almost always helps Camas leave his busy day behind and let the next day wait for him in the morning. It also gives me the chance to practice being in the present moment with him.

## A CONVERSATION ON MINDFUL EATING

After the mindful eating during Children's Sangha, AJ and I talked about how even though we do not feel overtly judged in our own sangha, we have sometimes felt like closeted meat eaters in the Buddhist community at large. Knowing that Greg Grallo has been a committed vegan for a long time, I asked him to discuss the possibility of "mindful meat," and how what we eat informs our practice, along with how our practice informs what we eat. When Greg and I sat down with Corrie, Jodi (who is the prime force behind our food), and eight-year-old Camas, instead of debating meat-eating or not, we ended up focusing on the larger challenges and dimensions of mindful eating. Here is an edited version of our conversation.

*Steve Allison-Bunnell*



Steve Allison-Bunnell, Greg Grallo, Corrie Schilling, & Jodi & Camas Allison-Bunnell

### Mindful Meat?

#### Steve:

I mentioned on the Mindfulness Training panel that I am not a vegetarian, and that it took me a while to figure out how to engage the First Mindfulness Training, since its focus is on not taking life, and eating meat so obviously takes life. And in fact, what when I chose to receive the Mindfulness Trainings, I had a big question mark about whether I should do so or not.

I felt sincerely moved to make those ideas part of my life, but I wanted to be confident that my effort to honor the Mindfulness Trainings and the intention behind them wasn't just me making up my own little version of "here's everybody's own version of the Mindfulness Trainings and so I'll do whatever I want."

I also find myself thinking like a biologist – "Look, animals eat other animals, so why is that in and of itself so bad?" So I've wanted to articulate the idea that in fact, eating meat mindfully can potentially honor and engage the first training.

#### Greg:

That reminds me of a story Benjamin Franklin tells. Franklin, who was a vegetarian, was on a fishing boat. They cut open a fish and there was another fish inside it. He observed "Look at what *they're* eating." Then his follow-up thought was, "So convenient a thing it is to be a reasonable creature, since it enables one to find or make a reason for everything one has a mind to do." I think it's good to come from that perspective.

#### Steve:

That was why, when I took the Trainings, I didn't want to just find a rationalization, as Franklin pointed out, and call it good. I wanted to feel like I understood the original intent, if there is such a thing, well enough to feel like I was connecting to what that already existed, rather than thinking that the Trainings were going to adapt to me. That concern fueled my feeling that there's this established set of assumptions and expectations around food and vegetarianism in Buddhism as a whole and in our tradition specifically. I want to feel like there's room for there to be multiple paths to awareness of where our food is coming from. I

wanted to think about what else you might account for when your goal is to honor the first and fifth Trainings.

And, of course, I do feel that I have a very strong connection to both the first training as it pertains to respecting life and the fifth training as it describes mindful consumption. How our family eats is in fact based on very deep, carefully considered, exhaustively researched choices about where our food comes from. As a family, we really put our money where our mouths are when it comes to food. Well over half of our food dollars are spent on food grown or processed in the Northwest.

We do all our own preserving the way our grandmothers did. We've been charter members of Garden City Harvest's Community Supported Agriculture program for over ten years. And for the past several years all of our meat, eggs, and butter come from local sources we know treat their animals well in life and in death. But it's all that effort and thought that I've felt some desire to justify somehow. We are trying to be as mindful as possible, to be sure, but we are nonetheless taking those lives to nourish our own.

### **Greg:**

Remember that the Buddha was not a vegetarian, and that vegetarianism is not actually an "original" precept or ancient tradition. For the monastics, there was a strong call to gratefully accept alms, and eat what was in the begging bowl provided no animal was killed specifically to feed them. I still think about that when I go to people's houses or to potlucks and have to decide what to choose from what is offered to me.

Eventually reasons and rationales drop away and it becomes a kind of practice. There are some

Buddhists who believe that it's more ethical to kill the smallest number of organisms. So for them, a cow is more ethical than a chicken to eat.

### **Steve:**

I had no idea that was the case! And that's what I think I've found myself caught up in – what's the calculus that you engage in to make that kind of choice? I like what you said about how choosing what to eat becomes a practice. For us, the practice is one of gratitude and community by connecting with the producers of our food. For example, we eat bison that grazes up around Hot Springs. I was talking to the rancher's wife at the farmer's market, and she said how much they liked raising bison because they really were still wild animals that could take care of themselves. That made me feel a lot better about eating them.

### **Greg:**

The monster that nobody talks about in all this is the factory vegetable farms. They are also quite cruel to the planet and to people.

### **Jodi:**

When I was 14 and did summer farm work, I got a glimpse of what industrial farms mean for the people who work on them. That's a big part of what has shaped my relationship to fruits and vegetables. I'm going to buy them from people who I know are making a decent living, and who are not employing migrants. I remember getting up at four o'clock in the morning to pick a 20 pound lug of cherries and getting paid four dollars when they were going to sell them for \$15 a pound in Japan. And I didn't need to do it to feed myself. I was doing it for pocket money. But I as picking beside kids who were putting food on the table. It's really hard

## **FURTHER READING**

Though not Buddhist in orientation, two books that make a passionate (and delicious) case for the value of local food in general, and describe a respectful approach to raising and eating meat, are Michael Pollan's *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, and Barbara Kingsolver's *Animal Vegetable Miracle*.

work. That awareness of where things are coming from and who's affected is a big part of why we eat the way we do now.

**Greg:**

I became vegan and vegetarian at the same time. I was living in Australia, living in a Kosher Jewish dorm, and one of the cooks was a vegan. Before that I didn't really know what that meant. This guy showed me how to cook vegan food and talked to me a lot about it. For me it started as the ethics of eating animals, and quickly I expanded to the more ecological impact of raising animals in factory farms. I was pretty strict vegan for a while and pretty judgmental toward meat and meat-eaters. But then I went to Korea, and it was almost impossible to keep up the vegan diet there. So I began eating eggs and broth. It's a place where if you order something without meat, they'll bring you fish. But they do have a Buddhist culture, so you can tell them to prepare your food "like a monk eats."

Then when I came back to the States, I was eating vegetarian but not vegan. Here in Montana, I started eating game that people I knew had hunted, because that felt more ecological and the hunters I knew were compassionate people and put a lot of thought into it.

Then a few years ago, I went to the Green Mountain Monastery for three weeks and when I came back, Brandon Kendall gave me a People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals video called "Meet Your Meat." I think I was just too open, and the images were just too disturbing, and I completely switched – "Oh, OK, I guess I'm vegan now." It wasn't a struggle or conscious decision. It just welled up from the unconscious. But from being in Korea and eating what was available, I dropped the

judgment. Friends would say, "You must not like it when I eat meat." And I'd say, "No, it's just not right for me." It's not right or wrong, but my heart was moved in that direction. I sometimes do miss meat or cheese. And I sometimes eat eggs during the summertime from Homestead Organics where we got our CSA share. So it's a non-rational decision. But with it came a lot of groundedness and understanding that what other people do is their choice.

**Jodi:**

So you don't shout out in restaurants, "Must you put cow on my pizza!?" I had a friend who actually did that.

**Greg:**

Oh no! Nobody likes that in your face thing. My parents had a hard time understanding it and thought it was a phase. I did a lot of study to make sure I was healthy because I'd seen a lot of vegans who seem completely low energy – they look like you could push them over and that if you bumped into them they would break. I worked pretty hard to be sure I was getting proper nutrition.

**Corrie:**

I became a vegetarian when I was 14. One of my high school English teachers showed us a video on factory farming. That was really a powerful experience for me because I'd always been an animal person. At that point I didn't want to eat meat at all. I grew up in a very steak and potatoes household, so that was challenging for my parents to understand. They thought it was a phase until my younger sister started, and then I was under a lot of pressure to renounce my views. We went back and forth for a couple of years, and at sixteen I was back to being a vegetarian completely.

More recently I went vegan when Greg returned to eating vegan. I wanted to support Greg



and I wanted to distance myself from those industries that engaged in the large-scale production of animal products. I did that for a couple of years, but then I started to develop some health problems, not strictly from not eating meat, but I don't seem to absorb soy and bean proteins well. After a lot of thinking about it, I started eating a steak once a week for the protein and iron. Now that my body has stabilized, I am not in crisis mode anymore, and I try to honor the animals as much as possible while I'm preparing and eating the food. But I have shut that door to thinking about the animal's life too much.

### Steve:

Both Jodi and I were vegetarian at different parts of our lives. Then when she was planning to get pregnant, she wasn't feeling well, and she was told to eat more meat to help regain her energy. And I'd had my share of blood sugar problems when eating vegetarian. So when we started eating more meat for health reasons, we felt like we had to justify that in the face of wider vegetarian ideology as *the way* to eat ecologically.

I remember at fall retreat a couple of years ago, in my dharma discussion group there was a rancher who had taken vows as a Buddhist but had taken over his family's ranch and was running it in a sustainable way. And there was another guy who was a hunter. I was pretty surprised, but also relieved that there seemed to be support for mindful meat-eating.

### Greg:

And that larger ecological dimension is important. Now we're trying to rein in where things are coming from – not any farther away than Washington if we can help it, although a few things still

come from California. We're trying to put a larger perspective on it – not just what you're eating and what it is - but where it comes from and how it's made. Say a bag of jelly beans: the label says it's vegan, but is it something I want to put into my body? Sometimes yes. But just because it's vegan doesn't mean it's good at all, or even food.

### Camas:

I think that when you're eating our local food, it tastes good. What we eat makes us full. Foods like Nutter Butters taste good, but they're just sugar and artificial stuff that's not very healthy. What I think we grow ourselves is nice, like the peas we grew in our garden plot. They are really good because we actually grew them ourselves and planted them and watered them. Now we have one box of peas to eat each month. You think, "Ugh, this is going to take forever" when you're doing it. But then when it's over, it's really rewarding. It's absolutely wonderful because you have it to eat.

### Jodi:

The pea eating schedule reminds me that mindful eating can tip over into obsessive eating. It can become this whole purity thing, especially about what Camas does and doesn't eat. And we can notice too closely what other people do and don't eat. I'm challenged by lunches at school – I don't do lunch duty because I have a hard time not looking at other kid's lunches and thinking, "What are you feeding your kid?!" That can be a hard thing. Nancy Seldin and I have talked about when mindfulness becomes excessive pickiness. That's why every once in a while, we cut loose and eat Cheetos. Of course we rediscover that Cheetos are in fact disgusting, and that it's more the *idea* of Cheetos that is attractive than the Cheetos themselves.

### Greg:

And granted, Thich Naht Hahn is converting the monasteries to vegan at the same time he tells lay people to "cut your meat consumption in half."



He recognizes that we're not monks. I appreciate hearing the different perspectives. Hearing that undercurrent of anxiety is important. The first Mindfulness Training is about non-harming – protect the lives of animals, plants, and minerals. There are a lot of factors that go into it.

Recently I've been very aware of the privilege I have to be vegan. It is absolutely a luxury to be able to buy a bunch of spinach in Montana during the winter. When I go somewhere and choose not to eat a child's birthday cupcake, it's a privilege to make that choice, in the sense that I won't starve if I don't eat it. That's something I've been examining very closely – when does being vegan become dogma, and when does not eating vegan become laziness? For me it is a practice now in looking deeply at where the food has come from. Not just whether it's a plant or an animal, but where it came from and the processes that have gone into making it. Recognizing that something like an orange in Montana is something special and sacred and used to be treated that way.

### Steve:

Experiencing food as something sacred has been an huge part of our journey as well. Every summer when the cantaloupes come in from Dixon, I revel in that once-a-year flavor. And there really is something ritualistic about waiting for them, and then having almost forgotten their taste. Talk about being in the present moment!

I've been very grateful for the opportunity to hear what you have had to share. It seems like we've learned something from each other about how we can look deeply, knowing that each of us

has the intention and aspiration to live mindfully. At the same time, it's clear that we all may ultimately see something different when we look deeply, and that leads us to potentially different choices. That's part of being in community mindfully.

Thank you all.

## MEAL GATHA

This food is the gift of  
the whole universe –  
the earth,  
the sky,  
and much hard work.

May we live in a way that makes  
us worthy to receive it.

May we transform our  
unskillful states of mind,  
and learn to eat in moderation.

May we take only foods that  
nourish us and prevent illness.

We accept this food so that  
we may realize the path  
of understanding and love.

Rowan Conrad

### Director's Report

The secretary maintains a paper file of all Board Minutes at the Center, so anyone who wants to track decisions can enjoy quietly reading that notebook in the reading room. The big board decisions in 2008 were to do seasonal practice themes for the year for the Tuesday evening sittings, and to rotate retreat teachers more widely. Beginning Anew for Spring, Embracing Life for Summer, Celebrating Abundance and Tending the seeds for Fall, and Going Within for Winter were the themes chosen.

Often we use one of Thay's books for a study and practice theme for the year. This was a bit of a departure and put more "demands" on the practice leaders. At this writing we are just finishing fall and heading into winter. Each active Order Member who practices on Tuesday evenings agreed to be overall facilitator for a season. And within that, the practice leaders for each month brought the perspectives of their own practice to the theme. Those participating in the visioning evening this fall reported finding themes and the way practice leaders implemented them to be quite effective for their practice.

The other big decision the board has been wrestling with for some time is the business of re-

treats; consistent teachers vs. rotating teachers. After long deliberation the Board decided that we have sufficient sangha resources to maintain continuity of practice and that our visiting teachers for retreats would rotate more widely. It was painful to abandon the security and inspiration of Eileen Kiera's guaranteed annual visits. Her inspiration and teaching is a big part of the foundation of the sangha. For me, personally, it feels like flying a small plane without a parachute and is an exercise in trusting, as Thay puts it, "the sangha eyes." In the final analysis there are a half-dozen teachers who are the primary inspiration for the practice of various sangha members, and the decision was to afford those sangha members more opportunities to retreat with their sangha and their most heart-connected teacher. It is hoped that Eileen can be part of the rotation. We are grateful that Mountain Lamp is only a long day's drive and we can always access her wisdom there.

A third thing of interest is that Greg and I perceive it is time to rotate our offices. This is primarily because we both have additional external responsibilities in the coming year but also because we just feel it is time for new blood. Thus we are planning to serve the sangha in different ways in the upcoming year. We have long been fixtures as Director and Program Director. Change is (over?) due.

Looking ahead, in the December visioning meeting, the most frequent need expressed was a wish for more mindfulness practice days in Missoula. We have kind of piggybacked on Helena and traveled there for our Mindfulness Days recently. So whoever is in the program planning roles next year, probably we will have more weekend Mindfulness Day opportunities.

Finally, thanks to Andy for our new web site. He, Cynthia, and Greg have been communicating to keep the schedule information there up to date. So if you want to know what's happening when, just go on down to [www.openway.org](http://www.openway.org) for the latest and greatest.

Greg Grallo

### Notes From the Program Director

Dear Friends, this year Open Way has been experimenting with aligning our practice theme with the natural rhythm of the seasons. In the early spring we explored the idea of Beginning Anew, both in terms of our practice as well as our relationships. In the summer we moved into Celebrating Life and Right Action with a specific focus on peace-building. This fall we looked at Celebrating Abundance and Tending the Seeds with selections from the Fifty Verses to guide us. As winter arrives and we slowly mark the return of the light, we are examining Going Inside and Creativity.

Practice Leaders have had loose guidelines to follow and it has been inspiring to see the different flavors that each individual brings to Tuesday night practice. We have had guests from India visit, a guided relaxation, Touching the Earth and, of course, a variety of perspectives guiding us through each theme. It is wonderful to be a part of and to observe each theme as it unfolds as uniquely and richly as the individuals guiding it. Our practice becomes a part of the larger natural cycles that we find ourselves a part of, and, in so doing, we allow our inner world to be a reflection of the outer world and the outer world to enter deeply into our inner world.

On December 31, we entered the New Year with 108 bells and prostrations. It will be wonderful to see what 2009 will bring.





## **OFFICERS**

### **EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR**

Rowan Conrad

### **ELDER**

David Maslanka

### **PROGRAM DIRECTOR**

Greg Grallo

### **TREASURER**

Steve Seninger

### **SECRETARY**

Steve Zellmer

### **NEWSLETTER EDITOR**

Steve Allison-Bunnell

### **WEBMASTER**

Andy Laken

## **About Open Way**

Open Way Sangha formed in Missoula in 1989 to practice mindfulness and meditation in the tradition of Ven. Thich Naht Hahn and the Order of Interbeing. In addition to the Tuesday Open Way Sittings at the Mindfulness Center, Open Way's "relaxed format" sitting group, "Be Here Now" meets on Monday. A sister Open Way Sangha, Flowing Mountains, meets weekly in Helena. These practice groups come together regularly for fall and spring retreats, days of

mindfulness, and other events including discussion groups and seasonal celebrations.

The Center is at 702 Brooks Avenue in Missoula, tucked into the corner of Rose Park. For further information and a full calendar of current events, visit [www.openway.org](http://www.openway.org). To contact the center, call (406) 549-9005 or email [info@openway.org](mailto:info@openway.org).

Send newsletter feedback and submissions to [newsletter@openway.org](mailto:newsletter@openway.org).



## **OPEN WAY MINDFULNESS CENTER**

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