

ARCATA ZEN GROUP NEWSLETTER

October, 1997

UPCOMING SESSHINS

NOVEMBER RETREAT

There will be a retreat with Maylie Scott from 7 PM Monday Nov. 17 through Saturday Nov. 22 at Lloyd Fulton's home on West End road. Daily sitting will be from 6:30 AM to 9 PM. Maylie will give a talk each day at approximately 10:50 AM. On Saturday, the retreat will end at 5 PM, followed by clean-up and a pot-luck at 6 PM. The main course for the pot-luck will be prepared by those attending the retreat. Sangha members who have been unable to participate in the sesshin are welcome to the potluck - please bring a side dish or something to drink.

On Sunday Nov. 23, the group will meet as usual at the Aikido Center at 8:10 AM. Maylie will give a talk at approximately 9 AM.

This is our longest sesshin of the year. Please consider coming for as much time as you can. In sitting together for an extended period, the group is benefited and the individual is supported in turn. Long retreats offer the opportunity to learn our forms together and to have a strong sangha experience.

A schedule is enclosed to help you plan when you can participate. The daily retreat schedule has now been standardized and will apply to all local retreats. Save the enclosed schedule for ensuing sesshins.

Meals will be orioki style; bring three nesting bowls, chopsticks, spoon, towel, and napkin. Please fill out and return the reservation form to help us estimate the quantity of food needed for each meal. The retreat and meals will be in silence. Both orioki and sitting instruction will be available.

The cost of the sesshin is \$10 a day and, as always, scholarships are available. For more information call Pete or Monique.

Investors Meeting:

The property investors will meet together at 4 PM Saturday Nov. 22 before the close of the retreat.

DECEMBER RETREAT

There will be a one day sit Dec. 13, from 9 AM to 4:30 PM at Gael Hodgkins' house. Bring a zafu and a sack lunch. If you plan to attend, please call Gael.

LETTERS

NOTE FROM MAYLIE

Dear AZG,

I really missed not being part of the September program! All your good faces - an outdoor sesshim. Oh dear! Many thanks for your many expressions of concern that kept me connected anyway.

Great satisfaction arises as I see the AZG strengthening; keeping up the sesshin schedule in my absence, adding a sitting day on the month I don't come up, the creation of the practice committee, Sangha Day, newsletter vitality, continued willingness to slog through all the issues of property acquisition. May such vigorous sangha life continue.

I look forward to our five day November retreat. I hope that as many people as possible can stretch to commit to all of the days and that everyone can attend at least part of the schedule. The concentration that builds in longer sittings is a significant practice experience. Try it and see.

Warm wishes,
Maylie

NOTES ON THE SEPTEMBER SESSHIN

Mark P.

Our September sesshin was held at East Fork Campground near Willow Creek. Gordy secured campsite number eight, under a grove of alders on the east fork of Willow Creek.

I started sitting on Thursday morning after breakfast and sat through the first period on Saturday morning. After

the first half-day, body sensations became my primary focus. Knees started to give out by mid-afternoon on Thursday, so I was grateful to be dinner cook, getting a break from sitting for the last two periods before dinner. Still, by evening, because of knee pain I switched to a camp seat similar to the one Monique and others have used. I had hopes for a comfortable alternative sitting posture in the camp seat, but found after a period or so that I was getting mid-back pain. I kept looking for a posture that would relieve the pressure but couldn't quite find it.

The next day was similar to the first. I sat seiza until my knees gave out and then switched to the camp chair. This gave me a two day opportunity to study the landscape of pain and to see how I relate to it. Shades of sesshin past and the rediscovery that for a few periods, when the knees start to get uncomfortable, the pain really helps focus attention: sitting very still and breathing into the area of pain, relaxing into the tendency to tighten up as waves of pain arise. In this mode there is some focused and still zazen.

Eventually the next level of discomfort is attained, where the tendency to tighten becomes unavoidable and paroxysms of intense radiating pain arise. This is the stage where zazen becomes an endurance contest and the grand prize is passing out or screaming involuntarily. As I understand it, these outcomes are to be avoided. So I switched to the seat.

All in all this dance with discomfort is tolerable even though one may feel rather worn down after a day of this sort of zazen. Still the spirit of compassion along with the feeling that it can't get much worse may arise and a sort of good-humored stoicism sometimes prevails.

It did for me, especially as I contemplated the fact that my sesshin would be over on Saturday morning. Thanks to Gordy and Michael for an excruciatingly well-planned sesshin.

Michael Dow

So it took us two days to haul our stuff out to East Fork campground: three carloads full of assorted "essentials," things "required" to keep this body's desires sated and just this side of titillated--tarps, boxes full of pots, bowls, plates, towels, silverware, and 5 coolers full of enough food (mostly chard) to feed as many as twenty unexpected guests (just to be on the safe side). Out motto: if you meet the buddha on the road, by all means don't kill him: beg him to come eat (and sit). For all our furies of preparation and exhortation though, Wednesday night found only three of us (Gordy, Gaia and myself) sitting just past dark in a little clearing surrounded by alders on the east fork of the Trinity River. Well, four if you count the dark Asian guy with the big ears and the candle in front of him who throughout the whole event seemed to never depart for even a moment from a posture that somehow managed both deep repose and intense and intense vigilance (not to mention that his shirt remained unbuttoned all the way to his navel, regardless of weather). He was one last minute addition to our entourage, one seemingly non-essential luxury item whose function was only later tangible, if not easily articulated: not to satisfy any particular desire but to sit at the source where they all arise--continually. He didn't eat much either, far as I could tell.

And so we sat, and as time went on more bodies manifested, stayed a while, sat, walked, chanted and ate before vanishing again. Our circle and our minds, our breath and our meals grew and shrank accordingly. We knew most of their names or soon learned to recognize their faces, their movements and postures, the attitudes of mind carried in their bodies. Though we didn't speak much, we got to know each other better, or perhaps realized how much we didn't know those we thought we did. Mosquitoes and other unnameable insects touched us in places and in ways and with a ferocity and frequency that few lovers would dare. Oh, the anger, the offense, the self-righteous indignation! (The best attitude in which to perceive the knot of self, says Kalu Rinpoche!) "Can I tolerate this too?" I asked myself. And even beyond that: "Can I offer this body, this blood with wishes for the complete enlightenment of even such beings as these?" Oh, wonderful elation of self-sacrifice, joy of bodhicitta! "Whose body did you think this was, anyway?" came the tart, high-pitched drone of a reply; and right, too.

So, the dirt got on our zafus, the leaves blew into our laps and the wind blew our candle. We cleaned our cushions, brushed off our clothes and endlessly relit candles, while endlessly offering incense whose scent was soon lost to the fall air. But after three days time, somehow the creek, that sneak, had gotten inside our very bodies and was coursing through our veins, rounding out the rough hewn boulder (BIG HEAVY THOUGHTS) that fill our heads, flowing over and around and through them all, including that biggest and heaviest of the bunch: NO THINKING! Did we get enlightened you're asking? Were there openings of transcendent insight? Or was it just a waste of time? It would be easy here to spew the one about "we're already enlightened," but that's too pat: is that a concept or is that experienced? There is a zen saying: "The way is clear and simple. Strive hard!" Home a week now from sesshin, my zafu grows dusty. It's about time to go in for another round I think: until it really is seamless.

Gordy Anderson

Waiting until the last minute - pressing the deadline. A few thoughts.

Many issues came up for me. Choosing where to go was difficult. Listening for the right place to call out - hearing many questions of too long a hike, maybe not exquisite enough, would more people be involved with easier access? The decision was made bringing more clarity. But the desire for possibly more participation, caused an unsureness of quantities needed for food and other things. Trying to keep things open doesn't facilitate anything.

All Michael's work, especially all the typing and recipe and menu decisions made it all happen. It was wonderful working with him and his intention and solidness.

Erin's spontaneously playful spirit was refreshing as well as the fine results of her creative touch with the menus.

Sitting was physically difficult for me. I've often heard the stories of excruciating pain - this time I experienced it. My legs and knees consistently gave me a point of present awareness. The first day was as if it were three.

Gaia & Mark's committed presence helped me. And I was very much supported by several members of the sangha joining us on Saturday. Maylie has spoken of this often yet it was solidly felt by me that afternoon.

The subtleness of the incense would sometimes waft my way. It was a sweet connection, as was the creek's constant sound, the shimmering leaves & dancing shadows, the spinning breezes.

Precepts
suzanne m.

iridescent stillness
breathing
in a fleck of moonlight
on the breaking edge of a wave
in the dark wild depths of stone
breathing
always breathing

SANGHA FRIENDS

We would like to welcome Dawn McGuire, Ed Uyeki, Marilyn Sterling, Erin Kate Anderson, and Quynh Schafer to our sangha. If we omitted new people, please let us know.

Gaia has moved.

Gabe Frayne has moved out of the area and sent us this letter:

Dear Friends,

As you may have heard, this month I am leaving Humboldt County after five years of teaching, writing, wandering, wondering, and sitting zazen amidst the fog and redwoods. This is a transitional time in my life, but on reflection I can't think of any time that wasn't. Can you--in your lives? And though these passages are frequently as enjoyable as a pebble in one's shoe, I'm finding that there is a certain solace in letting life happen.

I first sat zazen with the Arcata Zen Group in the winter of 1993, about six months after I arrived in Humboldt. During this time I was participating in a "meditation circle" that convened at a spacious wooden house in Sunnybrae where visitors were greeted by a sign in the driveway that said, "Welcome to our bubble of light." Once a week a youngish, blue-eyed man with a big smile and a honey-toned guitar would lead us on a spirit walk of singing, drumming, rain stick shaking, tai chi, massage, and--oh, yes--meditation. As a migrant from the eastern shore I found this all a bit dizzying, as if the accumulated wisdom of the world's great civilizations had been blenderized into a nice luscious California smoothie. But the one thing that truly made an impression was the meditation; its simplicity somehow appealed to me. By chance, a passing acquaintance invited me to accompany him to a zen meditation group he knew about (then meeting at the California St. residence), and this soon became perhaps the one and only constant of my years in Humboldt.

Once I'm resettled in Santa Rosa area I hope to connect with the Sonoma Mountain Center, which I understand is considerably more attached to traditional forms than our anarchistic, earthbeat sangha. That doesn't particularly bother me: my practice has not revealed to me my original nature, it has not obviated my delusions, it has not resolved my inner conflicts, it has not induced a spellbinding satori. It has, however, allowed me to see more clearly, and that is definitely something. I have no address yet, but if you'd like to contact me (please do!) John Gary and John Coonen will be apprised of my whereabouts.

With love & gratitude,
Gabe Frayne

ed's note: Gabe sent this in August, but I didn't realize it was to be included in the newsletter. My apologies to both Gabe and the group.

CURRENT AZG DISCUSSIONS

PRACTICE COMMITTEE

September Meeting

This meeting, attended by Gordy, Mark, Nina, and Pete, was held Sept. 7 and covered decision-making process, membership, and property issues.

The group found that staying focused enabled them to either resolve an issue or decide they wouldn't be able to at that time. Going around the room and letting everyone speak, without people responding until everyone had spoken, has also helped the decision-making process.

Consensus was reached regarding the August newsletter definition of membership, and on the proposal to accept this definition at the October meeting.

The property committee looked at the I St. property and needs to make a formal statement about this property to the Practice Committee and sangha. Some issues true for most properties to be considered are: that we need to be up front concerning our intended use with the Planning Dept., that the property needs to have enough rental space to cover loans and expenses, and that the investors must have a meeting to establish their payback needs.

October Meeting

The members present at the October 5th meeting were Gordy, Lynda, Marilyn, Mark, Monique, Paul, Pete, Quynh, and Rose.

We read the comments that Maylie suggested we read at the beginning of each meeting and reserved 5 minutes at the end of the meeting to discuss process. (A copy of the suggestions are available by contacting the practice committee.)

Through consensus, the August newsletter's definition of membership was accepted. Marilyn pointed out that the issue of personal commitment as part of membership is not addressed. Toward that end, Paul volunteered to prepare a draft of a mission statement and bring it back to the committee at the next meeting. We also agreed that initial and annual renewal of membership be done by mail.

Paul & Lynda volunteered to be a committee to prepare a beginner's packet of information to be available at the Zendo for newcomers. They will have their suggestions back to the group before our next meeting.

ed's note: The above are summaries of the minutes of these meetings. Complete minutes are posted on the bulletin board at the Aikido Center.

The next practice committee meeting will be Sunday, November 23, right after morning zazen, at Northcountry Clinic. Items on the agenda at this time are: the calendar for next year, mission statement, beginner's handbook/instruction for newcomers, board members, and decision-making for the board. If you have any comments, suggestions, or opinions please come to this meeting.

There will also be a practice committee meeting on Sunday, December 7.

DHARMA STUDY GROUP

Several AZG members have expressed an interest in forming a Dharma Study Group. This group would meet the last Sunday of every month; the initial meeting will be October 26 at Northcountry Clinic after zazen. Below is a general guidesheet Maylie sent for dharma groups' process and structure which will be used for structuring our study group.

Dharma Groups

Purpose: To promote spiritual friendship - kalyana mitra - among members. To share, each from his/her own perspective, the understanding of the Dharma.

Process: The basis of the group is good process and it is the responsibility of each member to care for it.

Guidelines:

Confidentiality

Equality of participation: Some people talk easily and lengthily, while others are reticent and find talking in a group hard. Nevertheless, the group must strive toward balanced participation. Towards the end, people who have not spoken should be asked for comments; those who have already spoken hold back.

Personal experience-based comments: We learn from one another's experience. "Teaching" should be avoided.

Personal responsibility for group process: If anyone feels persistently irritated, bored, hurt, etc., they should examine the feeling and make a "process comment," using "I" statements ("When such and such happens, I feel . . .").

Attendance commitment: If a member cannot make a meeting, they should call an assigned person. If they decide to leave the group, they should give group feedback about why.

Appointing a Facilitator: This job can be rotated or not. However, there should be time to discuss the role and to give feedback to the person in it. The job involves keeping track of time, keeping the talk close to the agreed-upon topic, and generally watching process (encouraging those who haven't spoken, etc.).

Regular process evaluations: every 5 or 6 meetings and/or briefly at the end of each.

Responses to the raising of personal situations/problems: Care should be taken lest this unduly dominate a group. Life difficulties should be presented in some kind of practice frame. Advice should be very sparsely given. Dharma groups are not support/therapy groups.

Group Structure:

Approximately ten members: If 2 or 3 don't come, there is still a viable group. More makes it difficult to get around to everyone.

(Renewable) Commitment of six months: If a person doesn't feel an affinity for the group after 2 or 3 sessions, they can leave (hopefully giving some feedback).

Initial structure: Some initial structure is advisable, otherwise too much time is spent wondering what to talk about. After the group has coalesced (3 or 4 months), its own structure "happens." An excellent beginning is to spend initial meetings on "Beginner Mind" talks (a couple per meeting). These can be brief with time for questions and discussions of dharma issues raised. Other forms are reading together, talking about a particular topic, etc.

First meeting discussions: Include what each person's goals for the group are, what makes a person feel safe or not in a group, and a review and agreement upon group guidelines.

NEXT NEWSLETTER

The next newsletter deadline is December 20. Mail your comments, letters, articles, announcements, &/or zen poetry and reflections to Suzanne at the above address. Please note on your enclosure that it is for inclusion in the newsletter.

EDITOR'S NOTES

Talk and Meditation Retreat:

HSU and the RRC are cosponsoring a talk and retreat by Ligia Dantes, a "former . . . therapist who has studied with spiritual teachers in the U. S. and abroad." The talk is scheduled for Friday, Oct. 31 at 7 PM in Founder's Hall, Rm 166, and has a \$5 suggested donation. The retreat is Nov. 1, 9 AM to 5 PM at the same location, with suggested donations of \$30 general/ \$15 student. They also suggest bringing a bag lunch and a cushion. The info sent to the newsletter, which includes a background sheet on Ms. Dantes, the flyer for the talk and retreat, and another flyer offering a creativity workshop with Ms. Dantes and Dr. Amit Goswami Oct. 24-26, will be out on the library table at Sunday zazen. For more info, call 839-8946.

Thanks to Monique and Mark for their help in preparing the newsletter. Monday (the 13th) was a most enjoyable day of typing, lunching outside, and visiting with M., M., and Gordy. My thanks to the group for this opportunity to stay connected!