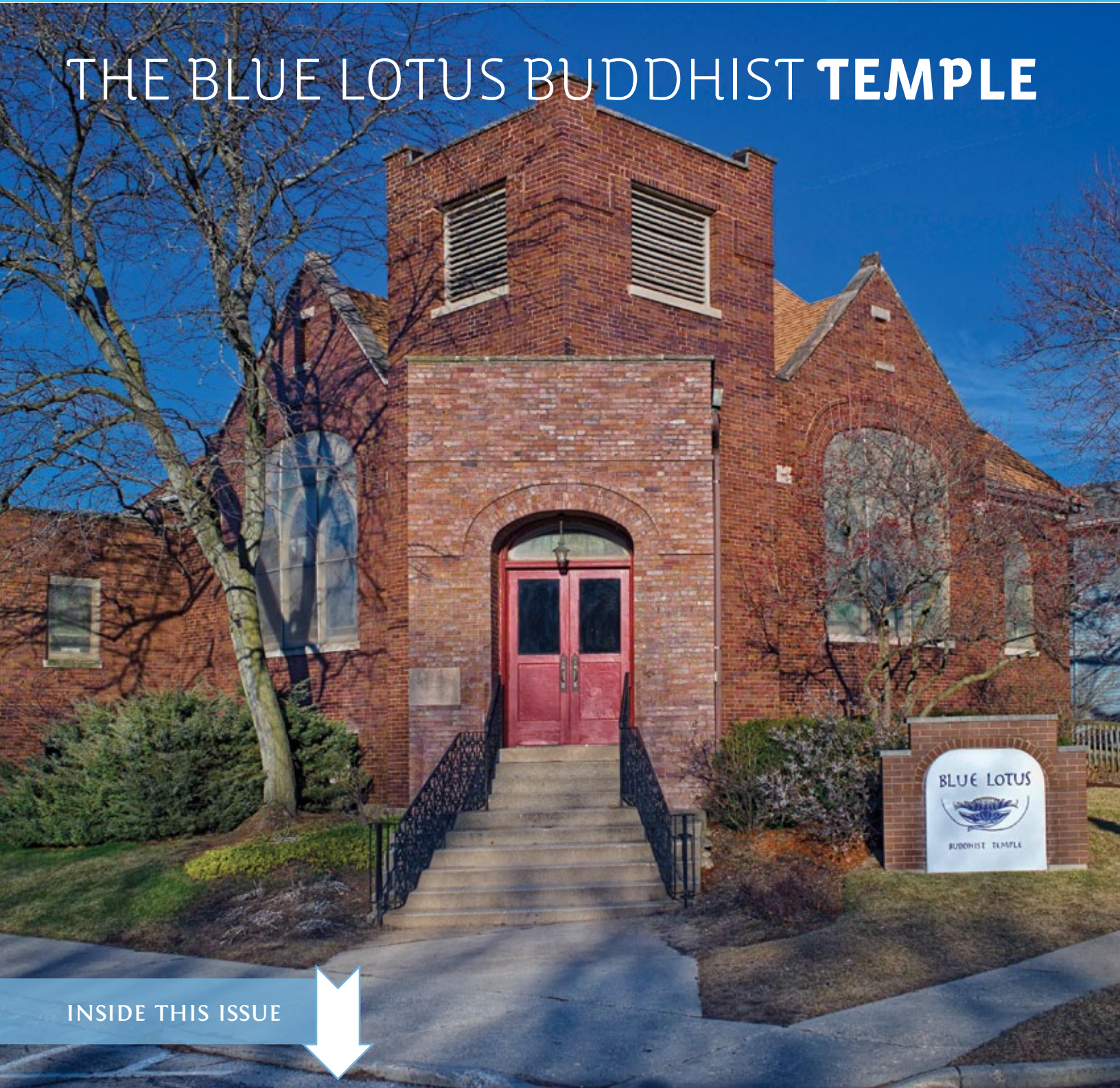


Three Jewels

QUARTERLY: JAN—APR 2012
WWW.BLUELOTUSTEMPLE.ORG

THE NEWSLETTER OF BLUE LOTUS BUDDHIST TEMPLE

THE BLUE LOTUS BUDDHIST **TEMPLE**



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Three Jewels

JAN-APR 2012

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Heads are spinning with all the activity at the new temple, including new classes, discussion groups and practice times, not to mention new opportunities to share and help turn the building into a true Blue Lotus home. Of course, this new phase of our temple brings new challenges and responsibilities as well. A lot is being asked of all of our community—and it is exciting to see people bringing so much energy and generosity to the projects and dreams we share. It was this editor’s challenge just to squeeze in many of the activities of the last quarter, and many more were left on the editing floor. There have been gong baths, chanting classes, sutta studies, book discussions, workshops, yoga sessions, dismantling, reassembling, rearranging, revamping, rehashing and renovating going on at Blue Lotus, and it just can’t all fit.

What I am learning, again and again, in the midst of all the “hustle and bustle” with the new temple, is that my personal practice is the most important contribution I can make. If I am not grounded and mindful and practicing loving kindness towards myself, how can I help anyone else, and how can I help maintain a sense of calm abiding in the midst of all the flurry of activity? Sometimes I do better than other times, but I am certainly being given plenty of lessons every day.

Enjoy this record of our adventures together. Be grateful to everyone and to every experience, and may you be filled with peace.

—Bhikkhuni Vimala

MESSAGE FROM BHANTE SUJATHA AND THE BLUE LOTUS MONASTICS

Dhamma Friends,
Blue Lotus Buddhist Temple enters 2012 on a high note! We finally have our own temple in Woodstock, Illinois, and a residence next door for the monks. The recent purchase of the former Unitarian Universalist Congregational Church and its adjacent rectory was the culmination of a three-year search for a suitable location for a permanent temple. We took ownership of the building a few days before the 10th anniversary of Blue Lotus. Thanks to your generosity and the support of other regular meditation attendees and Sangha members, Blue Lotus was able to take this momentous step forward.

As you might imagine, owning our temple also means we have increased financial responsibilities. Though monthly contributions have increased in the past year, we must grow our regular contributions to meet our new commitments. We are promoting increased sponsorship of Blue Lotus Temple through a pledge drive and asking that everyone participate.

What exactly does making a pledge mean? It simply means

you commit to a certain monthly donation to the temple. It is not a binding contract and you may change your monthly contribution at anytime. You don’t have to be a temple member, either. Many who regularly attend meditation sessions are not Buddhists. You come because you enjoy the personal benefits loving-kindness and mindfulness meditation provide. We welcome you at the temple and we ask for your support as well.

Blue Lotus offers retreats, blessing ceremonies, weddings, school programs, sutta studies, Buddha Kids and Buddha Youth, and guided meditation sessions. We hope everyone will be as generous as possible and help us maintain the valuable services we offer to the community.

We are grateful for your past kindness and generosity, and hope we can continue working together to ensure the ongoing benefits and blessings of Blue Lotus Temple.

May you be well, happy, and peaceful,
—Bhante Sujatha and the Blue Lotus Temple monastics

Have a reaction to something you read in this issue? Have a question, comment, or concern? Send your letters to vimalajf@gmail.com to be printed in the next issue.

PLEASE NOTE When submitting pictures, be sure to send the biggest versions you have. Images off the internet will print fuzzy. Look at the file size on your computer. If the picture file is under 1MB in size it probably isn’t suitable for the newsletter!



Our New Temple

On December 30, 2011, Blue Lotus Buddhist Temple officially took ownership of the Unitarian Universalist Congregational Church of Woodstock, along with the house on the adjacent property. To say this was a truly momentous and exhilarating day would be a huge understatement.

As most of you know, Blue Lotus Temple was founded by Bhante Sujatha in January of 2002. Since that time, we have been guests of the UUC, who have allowed us the use of their facilities. A permanent temple of our own is indeed a wonderful ten-year anniversary present for Bhante Sujatha and the entire Temple staff.

The new temple building will be undergoing many yet-to-be-finalized renovations, and we will have a formal dedication on Vesakha Day, May 26, 2012. The house next to the temple is currently being remodeled and will become the new monks' residence in March.

The list of people who have made the purchase of our new temple possible is quite long. Certainly the sangha members, regular meditation attendees, and the many friends of Blue Lotus Temple who have given generously to the temple over the years deserve to be recognized. Their contributions have made, and hopefully will continue to make, a significant impact on the viability of our organization.

Guy Spinelli, Board Vice-President and head of the Building Committee, deserves special recognition for the tremendous effort he has put forth in handling all of the financial and local government regulatory requirements dealing with the temple purchase. Guy has spent countless hours making sure everything was taken care of and we owe him our sincerest thanks. Special thanks are also due our attorney, Craig Krandel,

for the services he rendered in helping us with the legal aspects of our purchase.

We are embarking on an exciting journey. The new temple will allow us to do many things we could not do in the past. Our commitment to the spiritual needs of our sangha, special programs, and community service will be greatly enhanced. Let us celebrate what we have achieved, consider what we hope to accomplish, and be mindful of the new responsibilities we have undertaken. The ongoing success of Blue Lotus Temple depends on all of us. Let us work together to make it happen. ♥

—Glen Ebey

Signing Ceremony for our New Home



On December 29, 2011, Blue Lotus board members, church officials, and attorneys meet for the official closing on the purchase of the Unitarian Universalist Church of Woodstock (UUCW). At the table (from the left) are Craig Krandel, BL attorney; Glen Ebey, BL president, Nancy Schwab, BL secretary, Bhante Sanyatha, Guy Spinelli, BL vice-president; Kathy Lacy, president, UUCW board; Bill Reddy, BL board treasurer; Marilyn Dunn and Randall Rapp, UUCW attorneys.



Reminding everyone not to take events too seriously, David Spinelli, grandson of Board Vice-President Guy Spinelli, takes a little snooze in the midst of the occasion.



Our new temple in Woodstock sports a stunning new sign created and constructed by James Kondrat. The blue house on the adjoining lot to the right (the long-ago former parsonage) was included in the purchase, and it will become the monks' residence.

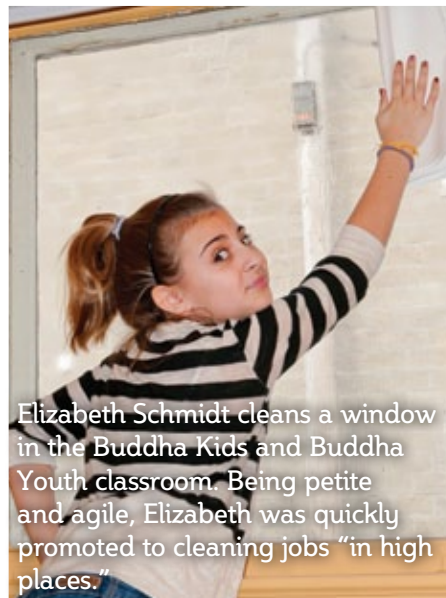
New Temple Cleaning Day



After cleaning day, Blue Lotus monks, Bhante Samitta (from left), Bhante Sumana, and Bhante Sanyatha, stand around the stunning new sign made by James Kondrat



Debbie Ballard uses elbow grease to shine all of the doors and woodwork in the new temple. She was one of many who stayed after meditation on this first day of ownership to clean and spruce up the space.



Elizabeth Schmidt cleans a window in the Buddha Kids and Buddha Youth classroom. Being petite and agile, Elizabeth was quickly promoted to cleaning jobs "in high places."



Board treasurer, Bill Reddy, begins painting the office a light shade of blue. Bhante Sanyatha, the new facilities director, picked his favorite color for the space that will be his "control central."

2011 Financial Report Wrap-Up

Bank Balance as of 12/31/2011: \$80,827.06*

INCOME

Total Revenue: \$26,278.43

Pledges: \$9,025.00

Regular Donations: \$19,163.69

TREASURER'S NOTE



We have recently started renovations of the former parsonage next door to the temple to create a residence for the monks. This work should be finished by the beginning of March, and our monks will be moving there from Crystal Lake. This building was included in our purchase of the church building.

We are very fortunate to have received donations specifically for the construction work needed at the new residence. Those generous donations will just about cover the entire residence remodeling. Those donations are reflected in our bank balance as of 12/31/11, because the final bills have not been paid out (as of February, 2012) for the construction in progress.

As everyone knows, we had a number of expenses for last year and we will have even more expenses coming up this year to maintain the building and increased activities. All pledges and donations are greatly appreciated, as we are all part of this new path taken by the Blue Lotus Temple. I will continue to give you financial information for the temple in the upcoming year, and look forward to sharing this new experience with all of you

—Bill Reddy

**The financial statement does not reflect any costs or expenses that the monks incur to sustain themselves, e.g., food, rent, clothing, sundries, gas, insurance, telephone, cable, etc.*

The Monastics do not receive any compensation from your generous donations to the Blue Lotus Temple.

If you wish to help support our monks, please write "Monk Expenses" in the note portion of your check.

Thank you for your generosity.

Blessing Ceremony for 2012

Following the December 3rd ordination ceremony of Bhante Sandeepa, the monastic gathering joined with the Blue Lotus lay community for the annual blessing ceremony. The monastics chanted the Ratana Sutta (Jewel Discourse) and the Karaniyametta Sutta (Meditation on Loving Kindness). The chanting helps cultivate compassionate and benevolent thoughts for the upcoming year.

TRADITIONAL BUDDHIST BLESSING PRAYER

For all in whose hearts dwell respect,
who follow the wisdom and compassion of the Way,
May your life prosper in the four Blessings
of old age, beauty, happiness, and strength.

May the rhythm of life pulse peacefully,
That insight and caring come easily.

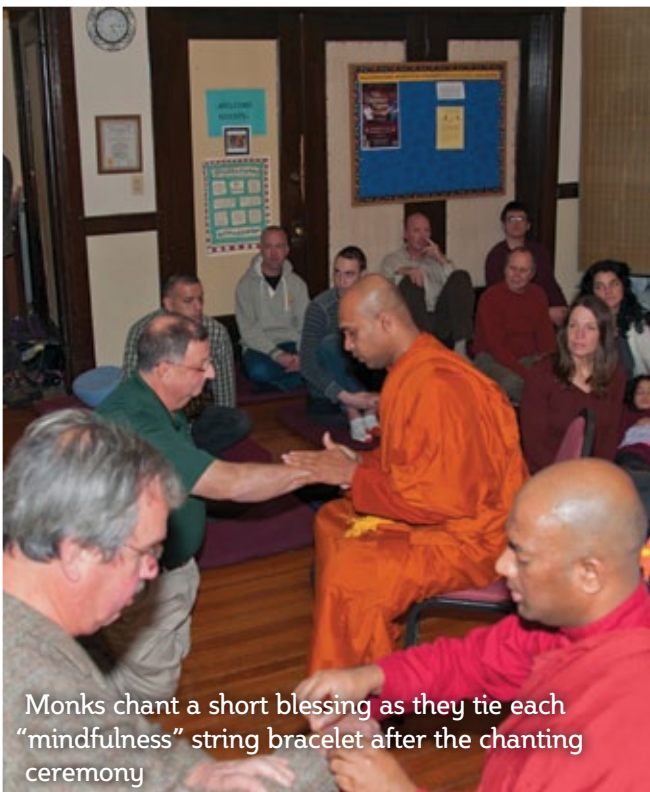
Let fulfillment bring compassion
As loving kindness guides our action
To wellness, love and serenity.



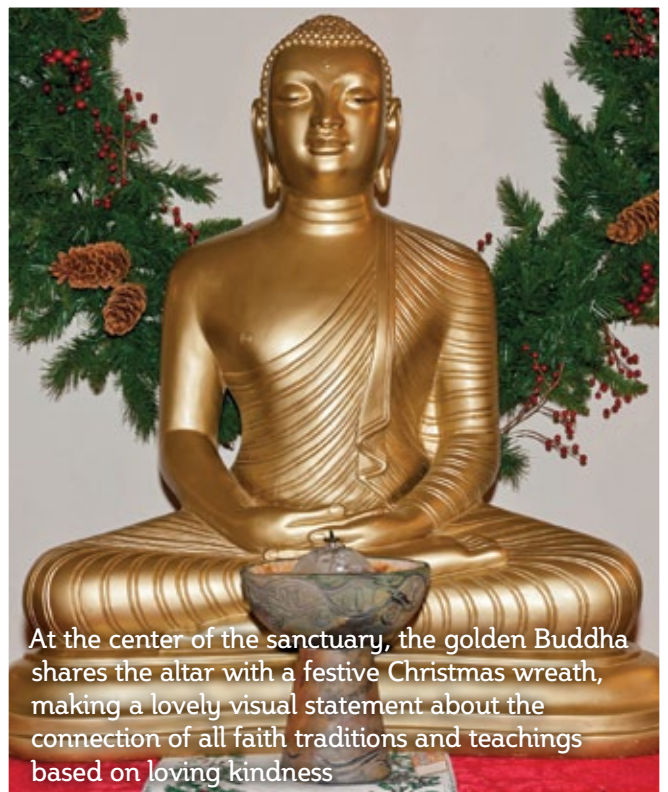
The Blue Lotus community listens to the monastics chanting the traditional lessons to carry in each heart for the new year.



The monastics chant in a traditional, handcrafted gazebo. Small mementos from the lay community sit in the brass bowl during the chanting, to be returned to their owners after the ceremony.



Monks chant a short blessing as they tie each "mindfulness" string bracelet after the chanting ceremony



At the center of the sanctuary, the golden Buddha shares the altar with a festive Christmas wreath, making a lovely visual statement about the connection of all faith traditions and teachings based on loving kindness

THE GOING FORTH OF BHANTE SANDEEPA

NOVICE BUDDHIST MONK ORDINATION CEREMONY DECEMBER 3, 2011



Most Venerable Bhante Muditha presides over the monastic gathering, as Venerable Bhante Sujatha presides over the ordination ceremony, giving the precepts to his student Victor Absil before Victor takes the final steps to become Bhante Sandeepa. Victor's mother, Eileen, watches the proceedings along with her other children.

Venerable Sankicha (standing) & Venerable, Mudithaa along with the entire monastic community present, welcome their newest brother monk, Bhante Sandeepa, as he returns to the sanctuary with a shaved head and wearing the traditional robes, making the final transition from layperson to monastic. Venerable Sankicha is now the training teacher of Bhante Sandeepa at our sister temple, Great Lakes Vihara, in Michigan.





The monastic gathering (pictured) and the entire Blue Lotus community joyfully welcome their newest member, novice monk Sandeepa (center).

Bhante Sandeepa gives a moving and eloquent talk to the community following his ordination ceremony. ❁



Biotin Supplements That Can Save a Life

by: Michael Fronczak

Since joining the charitable organization Jana Sarana in Sri Lanka, Ven. Bhante Sujatha has learned more about its staff and executive committee members. These hard working men and women are committed to public service. In addition to their activities in Jana Sarana, most of the executive committee members have additional philanthropic interests.

Prabha Dharmaratne is one such member. More than a year ago, Prabha became aware of a child living in the town of Kalaniya who had a rare metabolic disorder causing a deficiency in the body's biotin levels. It's extremely rare because intestinal bacteria usually produce biotin in excess of the body's daily requirements.

In this case, the young boy's body can't get biotin from food sources, and supplementation is necessary. The deficiency also prevents the body's cells from using biotin effectively, which can lead to physical impairment. Biotin is necessary for body processes, especially the citric acid, or "Krebs's" cycle. Deficiency can cause hair loss, eye infections, skin

disorders, and neurological disorders.

The treatment prescribed by doctors for this boy is 30 mg of biotin supplement ingested daily, taken for the rest of his life. Fortunately, biotin is available as a nutritional supplement and relatively easy to acquire. His family, however, survives on a very limited income, and keeping up with the cost of the supplement is a great hardship for them.

This past August, Bhante Sujatha met the family and child, and presented them with a one-month supply of the supplement. The following month, a member of Blue Lotus Buddhist Temple provided a one-year supply of biotin procured in the United States and delivered to the family by Michael Fronczak. The family was overwhelmed by this act of generosity.

In time, the boy's supplement supply will run out, and we hope other generous donors will come forth to help us continue providing it for him. If you would like to learn more or contribute to this or similar causes, please visit www.bluelotustemple.org or www.sanathasuwaya.org.



It only costs \$85 to supply this young boy with a year's supply of Biotin, and that includes shipping the supplement to Sri Lanka. Please consider donating any amount to keep him healthy and happy. You can be the difference in the lives of this boy and his grateful family.

A Home Built with Love: The Danturay House Project Is Completed!



Danturay is a very old rural village in Sri Lanka's Central Province. It is one of the poorest areas in a very poor country. High in the mountains of Danturay, Bhante Sujatha and Michael Franczak, co-founders of Sanatha Suwaya in Sri Lanka, were introduced in July to the family who would become the recipients of a new home to be provided through the coordinated and international efforts of Sanatha Suwaya partnering with Blue Lotus Temple.

And on January 16, 2012, the Sirisena family moved into their new home, newly furnished and blessed, built with the help of their friends, neighbors and relatives; the coordination efforts of Bhante and Michael; and the generous construction donation of the Schmidt family. David and Lydia made the donation on behalf of their own children. The two families are now

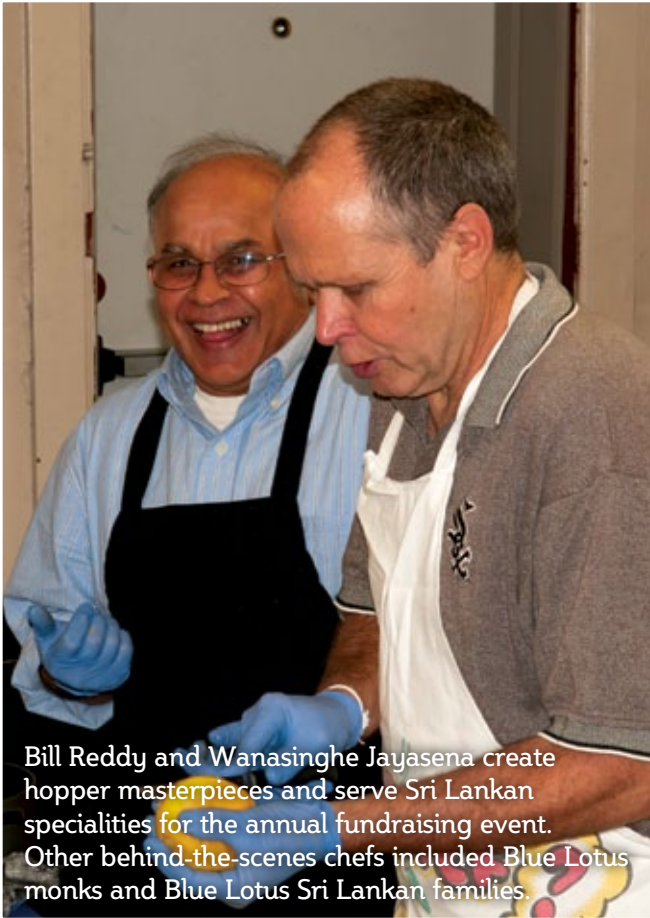
joined in a special bond of compassion and loving kindness.

The Sirisena family lived in a small mud and bamboo house. The other family in their little compound had a home made of cinder block and plaster. Mr. Sirisena has been unable to work much over the last few years due to a seizure disorder that is undiagnosed. He and his wife had three sons when Bhante and Michael first met them, ages 14, 12, and 9. At the ceremony to bless their new home in January, Mrs. Sirisena held the youngest member of the family, their newly arrived son, healthy and strong.

Mother and baby had only been back home from the hospital a week. The boy was born seven-weeks prematurely. He was delivered at the Peradineya General Hospital and spent the beginning of his life in the incubator donated in 2011 by Blue Lotus Temple members.

The new home not only offers the family shelter and some comfort in their difficult lives, but also will remind them of the many people who truly care and offer up the best wishes for them. As we celebrate with the Sirisena family, it is important to remember that this is just one family out of so many still in need in this world, so if you would like to help Sanatha Suwaya continue in their efforts to promote loving-kindness and joyous victory, please visit: www.sanathasuwaya.org or www.bluelotustemple.org or Facebook (Blue Lotus Temple, Sanatha Suwaya) for projects underway. The construction cost of this home was \$5,000 and there were additional gifts that helped with furniture and school supplies and food stocks. Target your efforts towards generosity and you will always be well, happy and peaceful. ♡

Breakfast in Sri Lanka Annual Fundraising Event



Bill Reddy and Wanasinghe Jayasena create hopper masterpieces and serve Sri Lankan specialities for the annual fundraising event. Other behind-the-scenes chefs included Blue Lotus monks and Blue Lotus Sri Lankan families.



Volunteer sous chefs Kate Knudsen, Glen Ebey, Wanasinghe Jayasena and Bill Reddy get busy in the kitchen prepping for the fresh-food, made-to-order buffet being served in the main dining area.



Blue Lotus members Danuta Schuessler and Lydia Schmidt enjoy an opportunity to chat and eat delicious Sri Lankan foods.



Board member Julie Gibson and Blue Lotus volunteer-extraordinaire Jim Kail enjoy their spicy meals.



9th ANNUAL TASTE OF SRI LANKA AUCTION ITEMS

DEAR FRIENDS OF THE BLUE LOTUS BUDDHIST TEMPLE

Our 9th annual *Taste of Sri Lanka* dinner will be held on Saturday, March 31, 2012 at our new temple in Woodstock, IL. As you may know, we are now the owners of the former Universal Unitarian Church, the same building where we have been meeting for over nine years. It is a dream that has manifested through the hard work and generosity of many people.

The Taste of Sri Lanka is our most important fundraiser of the year, and this year is very special and dear to us, as it is also the 10th anniversary of Bhante Sujatha's work in creating and nurturing Blue Lotus Temple. We have reached a milestone and are now preparing for the new adventures and challenges ahead of us.

One reason the Taste of Sri Lanka is such a successful fundraiser is the added excitement of the auction and raffle following the exquisite exotic meal, replete with live entertainment. All of the items are donated by temple members, their friends, and other friends of Blue Lotus.

We are looking for items that are valued at \$15 or above. They can be handcrafted, one of a kind pieces; they can be antique or new or somewhere in-between; they may be coupons for services you can offer; they might be artistic, fun, practical, or all three! It's always delightful to see how imaginative and creative the donations can be.

If you would like to donate an item or items, please contact the Blue Lotus Temple office at: office@bluelotustemple.org, or call the office at (815) 337-7378. For more information about the event, visit bluelotustemple.org.

Thank you for your generous support of Blue Lotus Temple. May you be well, happy, and peaceful.

With all love,
Bhante Sanyatha
Blue Lotus Facilities Director

WE ARE LOOKING FOR ITEMS THAT ARE VALUED AT \$15 OR ABOVE. They can be handcrafted, one of a kind pieces; they can be antique or new or somewhere in-between; they may be coupons for services you can offer; they might be artistic, fun, practical, or all three!

BUDDHA KIDS AND BUDDHA YOUTH

Start the New Year with New Energy



Candy Cotsiomitis, teacher of Buddha Youth, is enjoying a moment with one of her students, Elizabeth Schmidt.

Inspired by the new year and the new temple, the youth education program is brimming with energy and ideas for children and teens. With additional room created when the Sunday School moved out, the teachers have designed a comfortable and spacious classroom to be enjoyed by our children. The education staff is headed by Bhante Samita, with parent volunteers Kristen Carpenter and Kristen Spina Foote teaching Buddha Kids and Candy Costimitis leading the Buddha Youth.

All classes are held at 10 a.m. during Saturday meditation practice. Buddha Kids meets on the first and third Saturday, for children 4–8 years old. Families can choose one Saturday a month when signing up for the class. Buddha Youth meets on the second Saturday of each month, for ages 9–13. All are welcome, but it is important to sign up for a class beforehand so teachers can be prepared with materials for everyone. Also, parents must be attending meditation on the day of class!

A copy of the lesson plans for both groups is available in the temple office, and Buddha Kids teachers always send materials home with the students so parents can share the lessons. There are no set fees for classes, but donations are always welcome to help pay for the materials and supplies for class activities and projects. ❁



Kristen Carpenter teaches Buddha Kids and developed the original curriculum for the younger group.



Kristen Spina Foote is another Buddha Kids teacher.

To sign up for Buddha Kids (ages 4-8), email Kristen Carpenter: spercle73@hotmail.com.
 To sign up for Buddha Youth (ages 9-13), email Candy Cotsiomitis: candycots@sbcglobal.net

Meeting a Buddhist Monk for the First Time: Reflections from a Harper College student after meeting Bhante

by Diana Carvajai

Meeting a Buddhist monk seemed like a strange idea to me. But when I met Bhante Sujatha, I realized that it wasn't so bad after all. I learned many good things from him when he visited our class, things everyone can relate to and use in their lives.

He started his presentation sharing how he came to be a monk. I found it very interesting that he knew what he wanted to be at a young age. That showed me he was driven from the beginning. He is a living example of what people mean when they say you can be anything you want to be as long as you work hard at it.

Through his own life story, he motivated us that nothing is impossible. All we have to do is work hard and have our minds focused. Once you have that, nothing can get in your way. Bhante shared with-us that he had been a monk

for 31 years. Through all those years he has come across a lot of interesting and different people, but he always delivered the same message.

That message is to have self-love. He shared with us that you cannot have love for others if you do not have any for yourself. I do believe this. Self-love is a strong feeling that can keep us going and help build our self-confidence and self-esteem. One thing he said that I really appreciated was that we cannot change the world nor have world peace if we do not love ourselves. This intrigued me, because once I thought about it, I could see it is a true statement. Do not expect to change others if you are not at ease with yourself.

When it was time to meditate, I was excited to experience it. I had never meditated with a monk before, so it was definitely interesting, and felt relaxing

and good. Bhante shared with us how in our American culture we take meditation differently than in a Buddhist culture. To them it is very important and something to be practiced by everyone everyday. Here people only use it when they are stressed or tired. Bhante taught us to say "I am happy, I am love, I am peace" while meditating. This has to be repeated over and over until you strongly believe it. He said that once meditation is well practiced, good things will begin happening to us.

Bhante Sujatha opened up to us and shared his stories. It was a great experience for me. His advice and encouragement were very good and useful for my life. Advice is often the best thing you can give a person, and when it comes from someone like Bhante Sujatha, whose life is about helping people, it is even more worthwhile. ♥



Image courtesy of Harper College Google+ page.

Three Weeks on Board with Bhante

by Rev. Claire Goodman

When I arrived on *The MV Explorer* (our ship) for a three-week adventure through the Caribbean and the Amazon, I had extremely mixed feelings about the whole thing. I'd been working 16-hour days to get my life and business in order so I could be away, and I was conflicted about leaving my family over the holidays. So my first few days were filled with waves of homesickness, and I felt quite emotional and somewhat disconnected.

Every evening a little newsletter delivered to our rooms told us the activities for the next day. There was so much. Everything from lectures, art, and writing to Scrabble, Portuguese, and dance lessons. There were options to fill every minute of the day if you wanted to! But my eye was immediately drawn to: 8:15–9:15: *Meditation with Bhante Sujatha*. My heart beat faster. Could there really be a meditation teacher on board? Hallelujah, I couldn't wait!

That same evening at dinner I noticed a small bald man with dark skin in ochre robes and I thought, "Oh, my, could our meditation teacher be a Buddhist monk?!? Even better!" And sure enough, when I arrived in the lounge that first morning, there he was. Bhante!

There were perhaps 20 passengers who'd come to see what this was about, and my guess is that about 25 percent of the people there had some experience with meditation. Most were simply curious and, like all of us, looking for the possibility of more peace and happiness in life.

Bhante introduced himself with wonderful stories of his life: how his parents were not thrilled with his determination to become a monk and how challenging it was coming to the West for the first time many years ago. His stories led into the first lesson of mindfulness, so very gently and lovingly. Bhante's "suggestions" that we turn within for our answers and treat those we encounter with the utmost kindness, love

and compassion, while living each moment to the fullest, were repeated themes. It was ancient wisdom for modern life! Lessons I have heard many times in many ways, but Bhante's unique delivery, sweet sense of humor, and kind but firm repetition of these lessons were exactly what I needed. I knew I was in the right place!

Having had the opportunity to sit with several teachers over the years, I find that three gifts I received from Bhante stand out. First, just the fact that he was there on the ship teaching and making himself available to us, if and when we wanted to talk with him, was so sweet. Second, he told us many times that, although sitting for meditation daily was extremely important and we should "make a strong determination" to do so, the true practice was in living and interacting with those around us in a loving and compassionate way, especially those we find "difficult." Bhante's third gift to me was a reminder that when challenging experiences, negative emotions, or any of life's bumps-in-the-road come along, we can stop and look inside for understanding and healing. He reminded me that an attempt to "fix" and control those around us can only take us away from being well, happy and peaceful.

Actually, even as I write this, I remember many additional gifts Bhante gave us on the *MV Explorer*. But for me, the most important thing is simply that he was here and I will never forget what he taught me! As the days went by and word traveled around the ship, the morning group grew to 100 and more. It was obvious Bhante was touching many lives in many ways. Our last meditation gathering was bittersweet, but I will always be grateful for the guidance and love I received from him!

Bhante, may you be well, may you be happy, may you be peaceful. Thank you for the blessing of your presence. ❀

Music Review: Imee Ooi's Ratana Sutta

by Tod Nielsen

The *Ratana Sutta* (The Precious Jewels Discourse) has an interesting origin. The (mostly) Buddhist inhabitants of Vesali were suffering from famine and ensuing pestilence. They imagined evil spirits were attacking their town, so they appealed to the Buddha for help. He advised the townspeople to make offerings to the spirits to convert them from oppressors into protectors. The Buddha and a company of monks then toured the city reciting the *Ratana Sutta*. The famine and pestilence subsided.

Included in the *Sutta* are the lines:

“Whatever beings are here assembled—whether terrestrial or celestial—may all these beings be happy...”

“Pay attention all you beings. Show kindness to the humans who...bring you offerings...Guard them diligently.”

The rest of the *Sutta*, which is clearly aimed at the human audience, then goes on to praise the qualities of the Three Jewels. How typical of the Buddha to teach love and compassion—even toward evil spirits!

The other selection on the CD is the *Jayamangala Gatha* (Stanzas of Victory and Blessings). It recounts eight occasions when the Buddha triumphed over adversity.

The musician Imee Ooi has set these two chants to a beautiful and lush orchestration. The liner notes include both the Pali and English renditions, which makes it possible for you to sing along in Pali, if you dare! This is one of my favorites CDs, either to follow along, or simply to listen.

Imee Ooi was born and resides in Malaysia. She has published many chants and mantras set to music, in Pali, Sanskrit, Chinese, and English. Unfortunately, her CDs are difficult to find in the USA. You may be able to get this CD from a seller on Amazon. If you have trouble finding this CD (or any of her other CDs), let this writer know and a copy can be provided. 🌸



RATANA SUTTA & JAYAMANGALA GATHA CD Produced, composed, arranged and sung by Imee Ooi. I.M.M. Musicworks through Wind Records.

Tod Nielsen studied thangka painting under Ang Tsherin Sherpa in San Francisco. Tod lives in Lake Geneva, Wisconsin.

Beaming Metta

by Diana Schuster



Metta, a Pali word, is defined as benevolence toward all beings, without discrimination, that is free of selfish attachment. It is a strong, sincere wish for the happiness of all beings.

For several years now, I have combined mindful breathing with sending loving kindness to all I come into contact with. I call it *Beaming Metta*: “I SEND YOU LOVE. I SEND YOU WELL BEING. I SEND YOU JOY. PEACE.”

Recently, several opportunities to practice Beaming Metta came my way as I faced challenging conditions traveling to Malaga, Spain. Before I even left my home airport, my flight was delayed, making a connection in Paris almost impossible. My thoughts remained steadfast that I would make the flight, even as fellow passengers complained, “I’ll never make my connection.”

When I got off the plane, I kept saying, “I’m coming. I’m coming. Please wait.” With less than one hour, I ran through a massive, unknown airport, went through customs, asked for directions when I felt lost, and went through security, complete with a bag search. The agent said, “Oh, you won’t make it.” My response was, “Thank you. Have a wonderful day.”

I rounded a corner and heard three agents shout, “Malaga??” “YES,” I shouted loudly. “We waited for you,” they said. Checking the time, I noticed that the plane had waited 15 minutes. There hadn’t been any other delay. On the bus to get to the plane, I plopped down, hot, winded, exhausted and triumphant. A lovely, gentle man looked at me and said, “You are here now. All is well.” Yes, indeed.

On my return flight, landing in New York, I thought there was time to relax and ease back into my life. Instead, after arriving at the gate, the final leg of my trip was cancelled. I was directed to the other end of the airport to change airlines, retrieve luggage, drag it through very congested hallways, get a new ticket, go through security, and be at the new gate in one-and-a-half

hours. If I couldn’t make it, I was told, I would lose my seat and have to buy a new ticket. I remained calm, beaming metta to all around me. In each line, I chatted and smiled. Grumpiness around me changed to lighthearted conversation.

I made it to my gate! However, this flight now announced a delay. People began complaining loudly about travelling for 15 hours (me, too) and how angry and tired they were. I aligned myself with a few gentle souls who, like me, were grateful to be almost home. Hours went by. Flights all around us were being cancelled. The crowd grew more restless.

My beaming and positive attitude was now in high gear. I noticed that the grumpy people found other seats and I quietly admitted to myself that, while I’d love to be home, I was enjoying this experience and these people. The gate attendant announced that free food vouchers were available, but only two of us heard her! I was able to find lovely organic salads, wraps and smoothies.

An hour later, this flight was cancelled. The crowd went crazy. I jumped into line to get another flight. People were finger pointing, yelling, almost threatening the ticket agents. “I know they won’t help me,” I heard repeatedly. And that is what they received: lengthy delays, sleeping on the airport floor, dining on peanuts and water.

When my turn came, I looked at the ticket agent and said, “Thank you so much for your help.” He typed in a few codes, leaned over the counter and said, “I have dinner and breakfast vouchers, and I’m putting you up in a Feng Shui resort on Long Island. You have your choice of flights tomorrow morning out of a less congested airport.”

Another airport? How to get there? How to get to the resort? Fear and exhaustion began to arise. He said, “No worries. I will take care of everything and have a car and driver pick you up.”

My driver was Nelson. As in Nelson Mandela, he said with a smile. He initiated conversations about health, mindful eating and the effect of a positive attitude. The resort was glorious and allowed me time to refresh and renew. Nelson jettisoned me to the smaller airport the next day, where an almost empty plane awaited, with more nourishing food. I was home by noon, welcoming my life. ❀

A Desert Oasis: An update from Blue Lotus Las Vegas

by Amber Nancarrow



Greetings from sunny Las Vegas! Our group, Blue Lotus Insight Meditation Center, located in Las Vegas, Nevada, is doing very well and seeing lots of growth and movement. For those who don't know us, we began under the direction of Bhante Sujatha in 2007. Over the past four years, Bhante (along with several other amazing guest teachers) has visited us and held a variety of meditation classes, retreats, Dhamma discussions, and workshops. Our community has been exceptionally receptive to the visits from the monastic community.

Recently we have had local media attention, with two articles written about the Buddhist community in Las Vegas. One even featured Bhikkhuni Vimala and our group specifically. That was super cool! There is a solid and growing interest in meditation and Buddhist practice here.

We are still working towards our two main goals: saving money for the purchase of a house, and finding a resident monastic to conduct weekly meditation groups and lead other events for our group here in the valley. While we do have a Meet-Up website and a Facebook page, our third goal is to develop an official website for the Blue Lotus Las Vegas group.

Overall, we are continually honored to have Bhante Sujatha and other monks and nuns within his circle of teachers come and share the Dhamma with us. We are grateful for their generosity and willingness to take time from busy schedules to teach and share this noble practice with our community. Many thanks to Bhante Sujatha for his amazing ability to juggle it all! Peace and blessings to our sister groups, and wishing you a wonderful moment! 🌸

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A Merry Mindfulness Retreat to Greet the Holiday Season

by Jennifer Slad



On December 5, I attended Bhante Sujatha's Merry Mindfulness Retreat at Yoga Seva Studio. The idea of spending four hours mindfully preparing for the chaos I tend to create around the holidays had really appealed to me.

There were five of us at the retreat, and we had all practiced meditation at Blue Lotus. Bhante decided to push us a little further. First, he led us in a 50-minute guided meditation. Before we began, he didn't tell us how long the session would last. I noticed myself becoming bored and restless after a while. I didn't have difficulty physically sitting still, but my mind was very busy.

Bhante told us we might experience these feelings, and we should just observe them. This was very helpful to me, and after the session I shared my experience. Bhante described feelings like boredom and restlessness as a "stream." To go with them and act on them is to go downstream, but to stay in place regardless of these feelings and to do nothing is like going upstream for us—it can be very difficult.

I was feeling good, even proud, that I had been able to sit through the 50 minutes and observe my feelings, to just sit when what I wanted was to "do." Then we took a break for cookies and tea, and returned for the next session.

This time, Bhante told us we were on our own. He rang

the bell and that was it. Now I knew I would be sitting for a long time, and that he wouldn't be there to guide me. The restlessness set in much more quickly this time, and was much more intense. I could feel the need to do something in every bit of me. Bhante had talked about using effort and determination when meditating, so I threw in all the effort and determination I had, which only created another struggle. Now it was me versus meditation, and I was going to win.

After 40 or 50 minutes, which I spent recklessly changing positions, opening and closing my eyes, and generally *not* winning, Bhante asked us to stand up slowly and mindfully. How exciting! I finally had something to do! It was an instruction I could follow—and I'm very good at that. We stood for about 10 minutes, then sat to discuss this session.

I told Bhante how frustrated I was, that I put all my effort and determination into the meditation but I just struggled more and more. I compared the meditation to running a long run—when I get to mile 8 of a 10-mile run, sometimes I have to throw myself into it. I have to drudge up all the effort and determination I have just to finish. However, this didn't seem to work at all with my sitting practice. It felt like I was bringing more struggle to it.

Then he explained what the Buddha said about Right Effort and Right Determination, part of the Noble Eightfold Path: that it's not a fight, that we don't add more struggle. I didn't understand what he meant by that, until later when he instructed us in walking meditation.

Bhante told us to walk slowly in a circle, concentrating on only three things: lifting the foot, moving the foot, and

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lowering the foot. That's it. Over and over, we walked in a large slow circle, with Bhante leading. I focused on that. It reminded me of running, and how this is exactly what I do when I am having a difficult time running. I take it one step at a time, not focusing on how many miles I've gone or how many more are left. I only focus on the next step. I gently put my effort and determination into running that next step, then the next one, then the next one, until they all add up to my final goal.

That's when Bhante's talk about Right Effort and Right Determination clicked for me. During the sitting, I was throwing my effort at meditation. There was anger and an *I'll show you* attitude behind it. I was going to get through this no matter what. I was going to win. This only created more of a struggle. But when I can sit back and observe what I am feeling, with no judgment, I am able to make a choice. I can continue running one step at a time and finish the race, and I can continue breathing one breath at a time until the bell rings. Or I can stop, and then what?

When I left the retreat, it was not with the hoped-for peace and serenity I had envisioned. I was a little frustrated with

myself for not being a "better" meditator, a little confused about what I was supposed to learn. Going home, these feelings were with me for a while, until I decided to let them go and focus on the moment. The rest of the day I enjoyed time with my family and being useful to them. I kept myself out of the picture.

It was only when I woke up the next morning that I felt the real benefit of the retreat. It was time spent becoming a better person, with other noble friends on the same path. I had learned about Right Effort and Right Determination and how I can apply them to my practice and my life. I also learned about myself and my mind, and more from the "bad" session than the "good" one. Most of all, I felt reaffirmed in the path I'm traveling.

I've only been attending meditation at Blue Lotus Temple for a short while, but it's become an integral part of my life. Each experience is very fresh and new, and that fills me with gratitude. Thank you, Blue Lotus Temple and Bhante Sujatha, for providing so many opportunities for me to become a better person, and for bringing peace and happiness to so many. 🌸

Jennifer is a former special education teacher who now stays home to manage her home and family. She lives in Huntley with her husband, Aaron, and her sons Logan, 6, and Caden, 3.

Sensory Deprivation

by Jim Kail



Isn't going to the supermarket stressful with all the choices to make? How about watching movies and TV at times when the screen changes every two seconds? E-mails, signs, snail mail, loud rap music, car alarms, strong perfume, texting—ARGH!

I'm talking about sensory overload—too much information in time intervals that are too short. We are bombarded by it in the complex environment that we humans have made for ourselves.

But why do we suffer from it? Science has evidence that our brains are very similar to our ancestors' brains in the Pleistocene era 1-2 million years ago. This is due to the extremely slow pace of evolution. For example, our ancestors craved the small amounts of fat, sugar, and salt sometimes available to them because these foods greatly increased their chances of survival. In our stone-aged designed brains, we've inherited through our genes that same craving, but now these items are plentiful and threaten our health. We fear snakes and spiders but not electrical outlets or autos. Our ancestors lived in relatively calm, natural

surroundings, and their brains and ours are designed for that stone age environment. Our modern environment is vastly different from the Pleistocene era and our brains are just not designed for it. Consequently, we suffer.

To help relieve this suffering, Siddhartha gave us mindful meditation. We slide the sensory-information scale down by sitting still in quiet surroundings for short periods of time.

But what happens if we keep sliding this scale down to a point of zero sensory information over long periods of time? We enter a state called sensory deprivation. This state was studied in earnest by our government at Harvard University during the 1950s due to conditions encountered by astronauts and pilots. A collection of the results can be found in the 1961 book edited by Philip Solomon entitled (surprise!) *Sensory Deprivation*.

One might think that if short periods of low stimulation were beneficial, as our meditation shows, then long periods of no stimulation would be even better. This is

One might think that if short periods of low stimulation were beneficial, as our meditation shows, then long periods of no stimulation would be even better.

not what the studies found. In fact, almost all subjects tested under long periods of sensory deprivation suffered greatly from anxiety, disorientation, hallucinations, and imagined pain. In fact, sensory deprivation can be used as a form of torture. Clearly, just as our brains are not designed for too much information, they are also not designed for no information input.

One study about this aspect caught my attention. Six subjects were placed in separate rooms that were completely dark and soundproof. After a few days, these conditions became intolerable to five of the subjects. They experienced high levels of anxiety measured through skin resistance electrodes. They asked for the experiment to end and were released. A sixth, older gentleman did not. He experienced no anxiety and found the conditions to be relaxing.

The experimenters (all psychiatrists) were surprised. What made him different? They plopped him on a shrink-couch and started to psychoanalyze him. They concluded he had an unusually strong sense of “self” (they called it ego) and “since the ego is aware of itself, the

intact subject experiences a form of internal coherence which reduces his dependence on external stimuli.”

When I read this I thought, “Aha! Self being aware of the self resulting in freedom! Sounds just like our Buddhist practice!” I think this finding may help to explain how our practice works. When we are mindful, our “self” is aware of our “self.” The mind becomes two parts that have been described as the rider on the elephant (Jonathan Haidt’s book, *The Happiness Hypothesis*), or the parent holding the baby (*Thich Nhat Hanh*). The observer part of our minds (rider or parent) supervises our more primitive self (elephant, baby), which is the home of unconscious drives. When this observer/observed relationship is intact and strong, the elephant or baby doesn’t need to rely on the external environment to keep a calm sense of reality. Our meditation practice cultivates this relationship. We practice looking inside rather than outside. It is ironic then that by practicing mindful meditation, we may be strengthening the foundation of our “self” or “ego” rather than approaching a “no self.”

How would monks and nuns

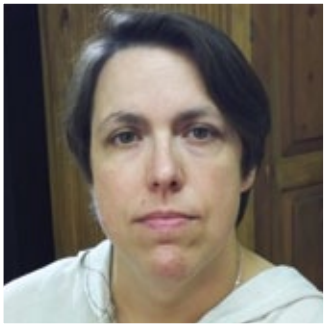
perform in the sensory deprivation experiments? What if we wrapped them up, along with some non-meditators, and kept them in a dark, soundless vat of body-temperature water to see who goes bonkers first? I’m not really suggesting we do this (however interesting it might be), but I would bet that long-term meditators would show results similar to or exceeding those of the sixth gentleman. Monks and nuns are known to stay calm in frantic environments. Why not in equally disturbing but opposite surroundings, where there is no sensory stimuli? Their strong foundation of the “observing self” in relation to the “observed, primitive self” increases their independence.

Finally, I also think those sensory deprivation experiments may shed light on why some people find meditation disturbing—especially intense, long-term meditating on retreats. Without a well formed observer/observed sense of self, isolation may be intolerable. Their brains rely on external stimuli to create and maintain their sense of reality. Like the muscles in our bodies, it is probably best to strengthen the observer/observed relationship gradually. ❁

Jim Kail is a retired chemist who lives in Woodstock with his wife, Linda. He enjoys jogging, biking, playing his keyboard, and trying to understand the mind using both science and Buddhism.

A Dilemma: New Year's Resolutions

by Rose Huegen



Every year we hear about the infamous New Year's resolutions and the inevitable breaking of them. I saw one quote in an email signature that read: If you break them you are weak, and if you make them in the first place, you are a fool. That stuck in my mind and I had to ask myself why we have developed such an uncomfortable relationship with these resolutions.

At the root of the problem is the fact that resolutions are made at the beginning of the year, as if all of the past year had been forgotten, the slate wiped clean. There is a critical flaw in this thinking because we learn from our past and that makes us who we are. While as Buddhists we practice living in the present moment, we also want to be living each moment mindfully. Those mistakes and indulgences in our past were, at one time, our present moment—and we lacked the mindfulness then to deal with the situation that led to our current suffering and the current desire to make resolutions to ease that suffering! What has suddenly changed for us?

The second fallacy of the New Year's resolution can be found in the word itself: "re" "solution." The word implies that it is a second try of something that didn't work in the first place. If you do what you have always done, then you will get what you have always got. This sentiment may be a catch phrase for motivational speakers, but it is also quite true. So, repeating some change to your life that didn't work before stands a good chance of not working again.

Instead, why not throw out those old

resolutions and try new things? Look for inspiration to back up the changes you want to make in your life. Find friends and family who can give you positive support. Make sure those changes are being made for the right reasons. Make sure you approach the change mindfully and with loving kindness towards yourself.

Saying you want to lose weight to fit into a smaller size dress is a material perspective, and, like the dress, that resolution will fade away in a short time. Saying you want to lose weight to improve your health to live a more joyful life affects things in the long term. You have changed your perspective and that has given the change more power to stick around. Throw away that "frame" of self that is limiting you and clouding your mind!

We all get caught up in how we think we should live rather than just living. I hear work colleagues saying, "Yeah, I am going to the gym and work out three times a week and get in shape." These are the same people who may circle the parking lot for ten minutes looking for the closest space to the store, and who get annoyed when they have to shovel snow or rake leaves. Don't we all fall into this category at one point or another? Earlier this year on a nice summer day, one of my co-workers asked if I wanted a ride to the train station, just about a mile from the office. I was enjoying the walk as a way to unwind from the work day and get fresh air and exercise, but someone else saw it as a waste of time. Just a matter of perspective...

The conclusion I've come to is that it's best not to resolve to make changes, but to instead try changing my perspective. 🌸

Rose lives in Crystal Lake, IL, with her boyfriend, Charles, and her dog and cat. Her journey includes being a seeker of knowledge and she could be called an amateur theologian. Outdoor activities, reading, and computers are among her interests. She is an accountant by trade and a student part time, completing her bachelor's degree in accountancy/business management.



ARTIST: TOD NIELSON

“Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara in his four-armed form (Lokeshvara)” My first attempt at a “real” thangka.

Medium: Gouache and watercolors on cold-press paper.

Tod Nielsen studied thangka painting under Ang Tsherin Sherpa in San Francisco. Tod lives in Lake Geneva, Wisconsin.