

# Mindful Warriors

Edited from an article by ARLINE KLATTE in American TRENDS magazine

*More and more American Buddhists are using Zen principles to fight for the environment, civil rights and social change*

They gather in a semicircle in front of a small shrine of flowers and candles dedicated to Buddha. John Daido Looi, the abbot at Zen Mountain Monastery, lights another stick of incense and instructs the group of about 15 people to chant. After a few minutes Looi gathers up his black robe to leave the room, then says in his gruff voice, almost as an afterthought, "Let's do that chant every morning until the DEC lets up".

Things are not as tranquil as they seem here. in the Catskill Mountains. Two years ago, the monastery bought 35 acres of wetlands with plans to establish a sanctuary. Ideally, it would protect the land and the creatures that live there from developers and would serve as an outdoor classroom where students of Zen could learn about nature. But the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) threatened to condemn the land if the state was not granted full access for "flood control purposes". When members of the monastery learned that this access could involve clear-cutting the trees, dredging the river, and storing heavy equipment on the fragile land, they decided to fight.

Looi, along with almost 100 Buddhism students, spent a year writing letters and organising hearings, eventually investing nearly \$60,000 worth of money and donated lawyers' time to sue and, recently, to settle with the DEC. The result: the state cannot use the land in any manner that might be harmful - no dredging, clear-cutting, or storing of equipment.

Wait a minute - isn't Buddhism about centering oneself, remaining calm in the face of adversity, letting go of attachments to the problems of the world, which are all illusions anyway? Yes and no. The activism of Looi and the members of Zen Mountain Monastery is an example of a growing trend among Zen Buddhists in the United States who are using the precepts of the 2,500-year-old religion to enact social change. American Buddhists are working to save the woods in their communities and rain forests in other countries, fighting for the rights of women and homosexuals, becoming actively involved with homelessness in cities, even bringing Zen to prisons.

Pulitzer Prize-winning poet and environmentalist Gary Snyder says that Zen didn't really exist in America when he started practising it during his Beat days in the 1950's. But as Zen caught on, there were people who had a social conscience and political concern as well as those who felt that Buddhism was apolitical.

"Zen has never been a philosophy of quietism; it has always been active....it's a question of Buddhist ethics. One of the precepts of Buddhism is 'Do not take life'. To be an environmentalist is to actively not take life." To Snyder, the difference between Judaeo-Christian religion and Buddhism is that in Buddhism "Do not kill" means "Take care of all beings".

Sixteen years ago, concerned Buddhists like Snyder founded the Buddhist Peace Fellowship to expose the need for activism in the Buddhist community. Today there are 26 chapters with 2,600 members throughout the United States.

Margaret Howe, president of the Fellowship, joined the group eight years ago. "I was involved in nuclear-power demonstrations and social politics, and there were a lot of people doing great things, but doing them with so much anger," she says. "They didn't have the spirit of love and connection that I was learning about in Buddhism." When she heard about the Fellowship, she felt as though "her two worlds had come together.

According to Howe, being a Buddhist does not mean you have to suppress your humanity: "Of course you still feel anger and outrage. I was arrested demonstrating, and I felt very Buddhist doing that. You can create peace in that situation." "...We also talked to other demonstrators about non-violence and tried to get people to sing instead of yell. Even if just for a few minutes, it became a more peaceful atmosphere."

Howe points out that in the 30 years Buddhism has been popular in this country, the religion has changed drastically, and that Buddhism has a history of adapting itself to each culture in which it has blossomed. "It's getting more complex and dealing with issues that Americans face."

But maybe Buddhism isn't supposed to get more complex. Are Americans using parts of it to serve their own needs, reinterpreting it to suit their fast-paced schedules? Ryo Imamura, professor of psychology and East/West studies at Evergreen State College, served as president of the Buddhist Peace Fellowship in the mid-1980's. A Japanese American born in an internment camp during World War II, Imamura comes from a long line of Jodo Shinshu priests. He is concerned that Americans, in their eagerness to adopt Buddhism, are changing it too quickly. "In America, we have so many choices, we become drunk with them," Imamura says. In a culture that is used to instant gratification and fast results, he believes that Buddhism suffers. "We want to run out and save the world, but we don't have a deep enough understanding. It's just not realistic." I

In his view, you must respect and eventually pay back the culture and traditions that have reared you. "If you don't go back with what you've learned and enrich where you come from," he says, "you're being destructive to yourself and others."

For Laura Mills, going back to the Catholic Church with the awareness she learned studying Zen was not an option. Because of her homosexuality, the religion she had been raised in had already rejected her. Last year, she and other Buddhist activists marched in New York City's Gay Pride parade carrying a banner that announced "Zen Queers". "We marched in the parade to publicly admit that our sexuality and religion are inseparable." Two years ago, Mills' brother died of AIDS, and his death strengthened her commitment to activism. "AIDS has forced activism to be a part of our public life and made sexuality a political thing." She says that Zen activism is springing up around AIDS because, like the practice, the disease is a life-and-death issue. "My questions about 'What is life?' and 'What is death?' are what led me to Zen," she says.

Similar questions led Eddie (Mutai) Pachecho to Zen. Eleven years ago he sent John Daido Looi a letter asking for Zen training at Greenhaven Maximum Security Prison. At first the prison administrators were reluctant to let Looi come in to teach. "They think it's a cult," Looi says, chuckling. Looi took the prison administrators to court and won. He has since

helped establish meditation groups in ten prisons. He is also the only Buddhist teacher on the advisory board of prison chaplains for the state of New York. Loori is proud that none of those Buddhists paroled have gone back to prison. For his part, Pachecho believes that Zen meditation changed his life. "I can focus more and use my head more," he says.

With all the activity at Zen Mountain Monastery, Loori has yet another goal: to create a retirement home and hospice that would involve the teachings of the Buddha. He became aware of the problems with American retirement homes when he watched his mother age. "The kind of care that's available in this country is very limited and based on immature thoughts of life and death." He laughs when he explains where his idea for the retirement community came from: "I'm the oldest member of the sangha." In the meantime, Loori, members of Zen Mountain Monastery, and many other American Buddhists continue their meditation practice. But after they twist out of lotus position and open their eyes, they see a lot of work to be done.

*Copy from Indra's Network, Journal of the UK Network of Engaged Buddhist.*

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