



F A L L 2 0 1 2 – W I N T E R 2 0 1 3

# Mid America Dharma News

## Dana, Sila and Bhavana: a Gradual Path of Awakening – Bridget Rolens and Jon Yaffe

What follower of the Buddha hasn't longed for "sudden enlightenment?" Who hasn't wished to be awakened by an all-illuminating flash of wisdom, to see all defilements fall away and experience complete cessation of suffering?

Many of the Buddha's discourses are directed at monastics, who renounce conventional life and totally devote themselves to mental training. Such commitment is admirable, but very difficult to make for persons with responsibilities as a householder: earning a livelihood, providing necessities of life for oneself and one's dependents, and fulfilling the obligations of living in society.

We lay-followers of the Buddha may find this discouraging. But the Buddha knew well the challenges of the householder life and offered us an alternate path, a path of gradual awakening. This uses the stuff of daily life as a basis for practice, and also leads to the end of suffering. The path of gradual awakening rests on the pillars of Dana (Generosity), Sila (Ethical Conduct) and Bhavana (Mental Training). Working with these three expands our understanding of Dharma Practice beyond meditation only, creating opportunities in our daily life to transform suffering into liberation.

It is said that the Buddha initiated lay followers to the dharma path by instructing them in the practice of generosity. Insight meditation teacher Gloria Ambrosia wrote that "One of the senior monks in the Ajahn Chah lineage said that the Buddha talked about dana first, because if someone didn't understand the value of basic generosity they weren't even teachable. If we don't have a sense of its significance, and don't

*Dana continued page 2*

## Three Characteristics of Existence Robert Brumet

The term Insight Meditation is translated from the Pali word vipassana which generally means "attaining clear insight into the nature of reality." From this deep insight one can become liberated from the delusions that entangle us in the world of the conditioned mind and give birth to the experience of suffering.

What is it that we will see as "we see clearly into the nature of reality?" The answer cannot be put directly into words because words cannot convey the profundity or the ephemeral nature of the experience itself. It would be somewhat like trying to describe the taste of a strawberry to a person who has never tasted one. You have to taste it yourself to truly understand.

According to the Buddha's teaching, this liberating insight awakens one to a deep understanding of the three characteristics of conditioned existence which are *dukkha*, *anicca*, and *anatta*. These are Pali words which are often translated into the English words: suffering, impermanence, and no-self. It can take a while to unpack the meaning of these words because there is no simple correspondence between Pali and English, and because these ideas may seem strange, to our materialistic and pleasure-oriented culture.

To begin with, the term conditioned existence generally refers to the world of time, space, and form. It is the world in which everything that exists is contingent upon certain conditions for its existence. It is the world with which we are most familiar, and some people believe that it is the only world that exists.

*Dukkha*, which is often translated as suffering, refers to the inherently unsatisfying nature of conditioned existence. In this context, it points to the truth that

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*Dana continued*

have some degree of maturity in our experience of it, then other forms of practice won't even get off the ground. There has to be a malleability of heart, a softness, a diminished self-absorption, before the engines can even get started! And this softness is developed largely through our increasingly mature direct experience of dana."

The Buddha's teaching of lay followers also focused on the path factors of Right Speech, Right Action and Right Livelihood. The mind's stability is greatly affected by our behavior "off the cushion." It is common for memory of past acts of unethical behavior to arise in the mind and disrupt deep states of meditation. Cultivating morality protects one from such mental agitation.

Most discussions around "dharma practice" center on the frequency and quality of our meditation practice. We may value times of retreat as a way of deepening our meditation practice. We may lament the fact that so much of time and energy are taken up with the responsibilities of job, family, and social connections – not to mention keeping the body fed, clothed, sheltered and healthy. We feel these consume the personal resources we'd prefer to devote to practice.

If we limit our understanding of our practice to formal meditation, we miss countless opportunities during the day to embody the path in our thoughts, words and deeds. From the time we awake to when we fall asleep, each act of generosity helps weaken our habits of attachment. Daily renewal of commitment to the ethical code of the Five Precepts helps eliminate shame, remorse and regret from the mind, and supports the stability and calm necessary for insight.

Nor is the practice of mindfulness limited to formal meditation. All of life can be the object of our mindfulness. In each moment we can recognize and release conditions that lead to suffering. The Buddha taught that before, during and after each action - mental, verbal and physical - we can ask ourselves, "Is this action a wholesome action, rooted in a wholesome mental state, leading to pleasant consequences for myself and other? Or is this action an unwholesome action, rooted in an unwholesome mental state, leading to painful consequences for myself or another?"

Of course, taking time for retreat practice is also a skillful means for transforming the mind from suffering to liberation. Retreats provide an ideal environment for cultivating Samadhi – the factors of the Noble Eight-fold Path concerned with mental training. Retreats let us set aside our householder responsibilities for awhile, to devote all our energy to training the mind in right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. Setting aside time for intensive meditation can re-energize our commitment to living the path of liberation.

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nothing in this realm of existence is permanently satisfying. The world of time, space and form can give us pleasure, and it may satisfy us momentarily, but it cannot provide permanent satisfaction. We can find no basis for lasting happiness in this realm alone; this world of conditioned existence is inherently unsatisfying, in and of itself. We can find happiness while we are in the world, but we cannot find it from the world.

*Anicca*, or impermanence, is sometimes stated as "the inherently changing nature of all things." But this definition does not go quite far enough. Impermanence implies not only that reality consists of things that are always changing; but it means that change itself is the essential nature of conditioned existence. In other words, the universe is not a big machine which is constantly changing; the universe is more like a symphony, which is nothing but a stream of ever changing vibrations emerging and disappearing into a background of silence. Reality then, is a verb, not a noun.

Attachment is the futile attempt to possess the ever-changing notes of the universal symphony. Attachment causes suffering because there is truly nothing we can hold on to. Resisting change is like trying to freeze sound waves; it cannot be done. Our futile attempts to possess or resist this ever-present flow will cause suffering.

*Anatta* is usually translated into the term no-self, which is an idea that may seem very strange in a culture which is dedicated to preserving and adorning our individuality, and the "rights" attached to that perceived individuality. But if we frame this within the context of *anicca*, which tell us that nothing is permanent, we see that *anatta* can mean "no permanent self." Self is also a verb, rather than a noun; an activity, rather than a thing.

Another perspective on *anatta* is that it can mean "no separate self." In other words, self is seen as part of the phenomenon of conditioned existence, all of which is interconnected and contingent upon certain conditions for its existence. Just as *anicca* tells us that there is "no such thing as a thing," *anatta* tells us that there is no reality to separateness; everything is interconnected and interwoven.

This discussion provides a brief overview of the three characteristics of existence from a Theravada Buddhist perspective, and as such it may be helpful to our understanding of the dharma; but like the menu in a restaurant, it is not an end in itself, it is intended to point to the real thing; which in this case, is the experience of vipassana itself. I invite you to taste it for yourself!

## Mid America Dharma Retreats

### Robert Brumet

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Robert Brumet has practiced Insight Meditation since 1988. He leads a local sangha and since 1995 has conducted meditation retreats throughout North America. In January 2000 he graduated from the Community Dharma Leader training program sponsored by Spirit Rock Meditation Center. Robert is one of the founding members of Mid-America Dharma. Brumet is an ordained Unity minister and is the author of three books on spiritual development. He teaches at Unity Institute and Seminary near Lee's Summit MO.

Dec 29, 2012 – Jan 1, 2013 (residential)

Marillac Center, Leavenworth KS

Fee range: \$330-\$500 Registration is open NOW and closes Dec 15

### Bridget Rolens and Jon Yaffe

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#### **Bridget Rolens & Jon Yaffe**

**Bridget Rolens** has practiced Insight Meditation since 1997. Recognized by the Spirit Rock Teachers Council as a Community Dharma Leader, she co-leads the St. Louis Insight Meditation Group. As Vice-president of MAD, she has been instrumental in bringing nationally-known teachers to the Midwest and has managed numerous retreats. In 2007 she completed Matthew Flickstein's *Teaching as a Form of Practice* program. She is also program facilitator for Masterpeace Studio's Mind-Body Stress Reduction (MBSR) program in Crestwood, MO.

**Jon Yaffe** has practiced Insight Meditation since 1999 and has been a co-leader of the St. Louis Insight Meditation Group since 2006. A student of Matthew Flickstein, he has completed two of his programs: *Teaching as a Form of Practice* and *The Two Year Training*. He has been on the Board of Directors of MAD since 2005, currently serving as President as well as Registration Coordinator.

March 1 - 3 (non-residential)

Maria Center, St. Louis, MO

Fee range: \$60-\$90, Registration opens Dec. 1, 2012; closes Feb15.

### Gloria Taraniya Ambrosia

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**Gloria Taraniya Ambrosia** is a student of the Western Forest Sangha, the disciples of Ajahn Chah. She is a Lay Buddhist Minister in association with Abhayagiri Buddhist Monastery in CA. She is a Core Faculty member at BCBS and served as IMS Resident Teacher in the late 90s. She has been a Dhamma teacher since 1990.

May 10 – 13, 2013 (residential)

Pallotine Renewal Center, St Louis MO

Fee range: \$315-\$475, registration opens Feb. 10, closes April 26

# Retreat Registration

**INSIGHT MEDITATION:** offers an easily accessible way to free the mind from the distortions of self-centeredness, negativity and confusion. Through concentrated awareness, we see that our experience is a constantly changing process, in which all aspects of life are accepted with increasing balance and equanimity. This insight leads to the possibility of living each moment fully, with compassion and genuine freedom. Insight Meditation requires no belief commitments and is compatible with religious affiliations. Unless specified, no previous meditation experience is required.

**RETREAT FORMAT:** Periods of sitting meditation and/or dharma teachings alternate with walking meditation. Retreats are held in silence, with talking only during specified teaching periods. Beginners should be present from the start of the retreat to receive initial instructions.

Please bring a meditation cushion or bench and a soft floor pad for meditation. Standard chairs are available and may also be used. Wear comfortable, loose fitting clothes. Please do not wear or bring strongly scented lotions, perfumes or incense.

**Residential retreats** begin with check-in at 4 pm on the first day and run through lunch on the last day. Participants are guided through group or private interviews and daily general lectures. Meals are plain vegetarian. A tea table is provided.

**REGISTRATION:** Information about retreat site, starting times, etc., is available online or will be sent after you register.

**FEES:** Retreat costs are listed on the registration form below.

**Sliding Scale:** Each retreat cost is listed as a range. The lowest fee listed is the base cost of providing the retreat for each retreatant. Any amount paid above that will be a tax-deductible contribution used to defray retreat expenses, scholarships and other activities.

**Residential:** a minimum deposit of \$75 must accompany registration; full payment is due at the start of the retreat.  
**Non-residential retreats:** please pay the full fee when you register.

**Registration Opening Dates and Deadlines:** ... are listed on the preceding page. Registrations are not accepted prior to the beginning date for each retreat. Registrations received after the deadline are subject to a \$25 late fee.

**Refunds:** We will refund fees if requested before the deadline.

**Scholarships:** We do not want inability to pay to prevent you from attending, and have established a scholarship fund to provide assistance where needed. Deferred payment is also available. You can read about and apply for assistance when registering via any of our retreat websites or the registrar can mail you written materials. Applications must be received by the Registrar no later than three weeks prior to the retreat

**DANA (or generosity):** Our retreats are led by teachers who freely give the teachings without any payment. All retreat fees go for retreat expenses, such as facility rental and meals. It is central to this tradition that students support teachers through their donations. There is no expected amount, but please give to the extent you are able. Dana is completely voluntary

## Retreat Registration Form

Please register online at [www.midamericadharm.org/retreats](http://www.midamericadharm.org/retreats).

To register via USPS please send this form with a check payable to Mid America Dharma, c/o Jon Yaffe, 3222 Walter Avenue, Maplewood, MO 63143. If registering for multiple retreats, please send a separate copy of this form with payment to the registrar for each retreat. A \$75 deposit is required for all residential retreats. Please register as early as you can, as this greatly helps our planning.

\_\_\_\_\_ Dec 29, 2012 – Jan 1, 2013 **Fee Amount** \_\_\_\_\_  
 Robert Brumet, Residential,  
 Marillac Center, Leavenworth, KS  
 Fee range: \$330 - \$500

\_\_\_\_\_ March 1-3, 2013 **Fee Amount** \_\_\_\_\_  
 Bridget Rolens & Jon Yaffe, Non-residential,  
 Maria Center, Saint Louis, MO  
 Fee Range: \$60-\$90

\_\_\_\_\_ May 10 – 13, 2013 **Fee Amount** \_\_\_\_\_  
 Gloria Taraniya Ambrosia, Residential,  
 Pallotne Renewal Center, St Louis  
 Fee Range: \$315-\$475

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

City: \_\_\_\_\_

State: \_\_\_\_\_ Zip: \_\_\_\_\_

Home Phone: \_\_\_\_\_

E-Mail Address: \_\_\_\_\_

For Residential Retreatants only:

Gender:    F    M

Will you arrive after 7pm on the first day?    Y    N

Is this your first insight meditation retreat? Y    N

Do you snore?    Y    N

If you have special needs, please contact the registrar:  
 Jon Yaffe ([gjyaffe@sbcglobal.net](mailto:gjyaffe@sbcglobal.net)) or (314-266-1922)



The Last Stronghold of Self-View  
Gloria Taraniya Ambrosia

Buddhist practitioners are quite good at establishing skillful intention. The Buddha offers us help in working with intention, the subtle urge felt at the beginning of action through body, speech and mind. Intention is like the rudder of a ship. It directs our attention and determines what we attend to.

We ask “What’s wrong with me?” “Why can’t I stay on track?” We do not understand intention and how it operates. The Buddha encourages us to see for ourselves: intention is not under the control of self. There’s no little person at the control panel, managing things. The Buddha tells us that, while the five aggregates: body, feeling, perception, mental formations (which includes states of mind as well as intention) and consciousness constitute our experience, they are not who we are.

Some say it gets harder to experience these five aggregates as not self as we go through them, and that seeing intention as not self may be the hardest. We might see that form, sensation, perception and even types of consciousness are not self, but intention/volition seems like “me”. In fact, I call “intention” the last stronghold of self-view.

Excerpted from an *Insight Journal* Summer 2010 article.



**Annual Board Meeting, Election of Officers**

Mid America Dharma has an annual board meeting every January, this year our meeting is January 12, 2013 at the Show Me Dharma Sangha meeting space, 2011 Chapel Plaza Ct., Columbia MO at 10 am. Please join us as we continue the work of supporting the Dharma in the Midwest.

**NEWSLETTER EDITOR NEEDED**

**Would you like to serve the dharma?  
Do you have skills at formatting newsletters  
or on-line articles?**

Mid America Dharma is seeking someone to spend time twice a year pulling together our newsletter. You ask teachers to present short articles and then collect pictures and bios for the twice a year Mid America Dharma publication. This is our primary means to accomplish our mission of serving the Dharma in the Midwest.

Please contact Marnie Hammer at [marniehammer@att.net](mailto:marniehammer@att.net) or 816-523-5061

**Join Us on Facebook!**

Mid America Dharma has a Facebook page! In an effort to reach more of our Sangha, Mid America Dharma will now be posting retreats and events on Facebook. The page also has a discussion board for issues such as ride sharing and community events. If you have a Facebook account simply type “Mid America Dharma” in your search bar and become a fan of our page. We welcome your comments and questions - feel free to drop us a message now and then!

# Mid America Dharma

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## Mid America Dharma Upcoming Retreats

- Dec 29, 2012 – Jan 1, 2013.....Residential Retreat **Robert Brumet**, Leavenworth, KS
- Mar. 1-3, 2013.....Non-Residential Retreat **Bridget Rolens and Jon Yaffe**, St. Louis, MO
- May 10-13, 2013..... Residential Retreat **Gloria Taraniya**, St Louis, MO
- July 26-28, 2013.....Residential Retreat **Phil Jones**, Leavenworth, KS
- Sept 18-22, 2013.....Residential retreat **Shaila Catherine**, Excelsior Springs, MO

*For the latest information on retreats and a full listing of Midwestern Buddhist groups please visit our website:*

[www.midamericadharm.org](http://www.midamericadharm.org)