



S P R I N G / S U M M E R 2 0 1 1

# Mid America Dharma News



## *Opening the Heart*

*By Sharon Salzberg*

Rachel, who is one of my meditation students, surprised me with her enthusiastic greeting. "I've fallen in love with my dry cleaner!" she said. I'd last seen her six months earlier at a retreat I'd taught on the power of lovingkindness, or *metta*, a Buddhist term for boundless friendship toward oneself and others. Noticing how puzzled I looked at her sudden confession, she laughed. "No, I haven't fallen in love with him romantically. My dry cleaner was the person I chose to focus on at the lovingkindness retreat." I had instructed the participants to focus on someone they didn't have strong feelings about, someone they normally might hardly notice, and to direct wishes for well-being toward that person. "Now every day when I meditate, I hold this man in my heart and consciously wish him well," Rachel said. "I find that I'm eager to go into the store to see him. I really care about him."

*(continued on page 5)*

*Photo courtesy of FreeDigitalPhotos.net*

## **The Last Stronghold of Self-View**

*by Gloria Taraniya Ambrosia*

I find Buddhist practitioners to be quite good at establishing skillful intentions. We endeavor to keep the precepts, to rise up to the demands of daily practice, and to diminish sense desires. And this can be inspiring to witness. Our resolve is undeniable.

Still, the thing I hear most often as a Dhamma teacher is how frustrating it can be trying to stay on course once we establish our intentions. We are constantly faced with patterns and habits that run contrary to our aspirations.

Certainly, we may have some degree of success following through on skillful intentions. ... But it seems no matter how hard we try, we often fall short of the mark in one way or another. It can be frustrating trying to control the thing directing the action, that is, our intention.

Fortunately, the Buddha offers help in this regard. In his teaching on intention, he points to a very subtle urge felt at the beginning of action.

*(Continued on page 2)*

## The Last Stronghold of Self-View

*Continued from page 1*

The Buddha tells us that intention is active not only in the things we do and say, but also in what we think. It is the force that drives action through body, speech and mind. It's like the rudder of a ship. It even directs our attention, determining what we attend to.

According to Buddhist teachings, intention is very subtle and almost entirely unconscious. It is present in every moment of our experience. Nothing happens without this volitional activity. It can be an unskillful intention/volition (greed, hatred, and delusion) or one of the three skillful intentions (renunciation/non-attachment, kindness, and harmlessness). The quality of intention in each moment determines our state of mind and heart—whether we feel uplifted and light or heavy and dark, whether we live in a heavenly state or a hell realm. Seen this way, one can see how intention is directly linked with what we experience in each moment.

Not only does intention affect our experience in the present, it also has much to do with how our future unfolds. There are results or outcomes of what we choose or intend. ... Our current actions and choices condition future experience and future choices. It is not that we are bound to that pattern, but we have set a course that is highly conditioned. There is always the possibility to change direction if we relax and pay attention, but that's a big IF! You may have noticed that mindfulness and concentration can be hard won. They can be difficult to establish and difficult to sustain, especially when we are caught in one of our grooves.

Given all of this, the teaching on intention gets our attention!

We might say, well it's easy: All I have to do is really, really focus, and really, really try hard, and really, really stay on course. All I have to do is get in one of those skillful grooves and avoid the unskillful ones. And clearly, that is what right effort is all about. But you may have noticed that it does not always play out that way. One can see

where the frustration comes in.

What makes matters worse is that, when we seem to lose sight of our intention (as we inevitably do), too often we tighten the screws and beat up on ourselves. "What's wrong with me?" "Why can't I stay on track?"

Well, there is nothing wrong with us. It is just that we do not understand intention and how it operates. We do not understand that self is not the driving mechanism for change in our lives. Intention is. And intention is not driven by self.

Here is what the Buddha encourages us to see for ourselves: intention is not under the control of self. We do not have the control we think we have. This can be a hard one to get, because we all have this feeling there is somebody in here running the show—"I put on my shoes." "I brush my teeth." "I lift up my cup and bring it to my mouth." There's a little person sitting at the control panel, managing things. That's me. It is simplistic, but I think we all have a sense that there is somebody sitting inside our heads driving this machine. But the Buddha's teaching states that it is simply not that way. And he encourages us to see this for ourselves. It is not good enough to accept it as a teaching, as an idea. One has to see it directly.

One of the best ways to see this is to turn to the teaching of the five aggregates. ... The Buddha tells us that, while these 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. This has certainly been true for me. We might see that form, sensation, perception and even types of consciousness (eye-consciousness, etc.) are not self, but intention/volition seems like "me." In fact, I call "intention" the last stronghold of self-view.

Adapted from an article on the BCBS website:  
<http://www.dharma.org/bcbs/Pages/documents/TheLastStrongholdofSelfbyGloriaTaraniyaAmbrosia.pdf>

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*Gloria Taraniya Ambrosia will be leading a residential retreat for MAD in St. Louis, July 8-11. See pp. 3-4 for details.*

## Mid America Dharma Retreats

### Sharon Salzberg

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Sharon Salzberg is a co-founder of Insight Meditation Society (IMS) and the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies. She has practiced Buddhist meditation since 1971 and has been teaching worldwide since 1974. She is an IMS guiding teacher and author of *Faith, Lovingkindness, and Real Happiness*.

**June 25-26, 2011 (*non-residential*)**

Unity Village (KC area), MO

Fee range: \$75-\$110 (includes two lunches), Registration is open; closes June 12

### Gloria Taraniya Ambrosia

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Gloria Taraniya Ambrosia has been a Dhamma teacher since 1990. She is a student of the western forest sangha, the disciples of Ajahn Sumedho and Ajahn Chah, and is a Lay Buddhist Minister in association with Abhayagiri Buddhist Monastery in California. She served as resident teacher of the Insight Meditation Society (IMS) in Barre, Massachusetts from 1996 through 1999 and is on the core faculty at Barre Center for Buddhist Studies.

**July 8-11, 2011 (*residential*)**

Mercy Center, St. Louis, MO

Fee range: \$385-\$580. Registration is open; closes June 23.

### Philip Jones

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Philip Jones has practiced meditation since 1987 and has been teaching insight meditation since 1996. His primary teacher was Matthew Flickstein, although he also studied with teachers from the Insight Meditation Society and Spirit Rock Meditation Center as well as with Bhante Gunaratana. In addition to being trained to teach by Matthew, Philip completed Spirit Rock Meditation Center's first Community Dharma Leader Program. Phil serves on the board of directors of Mid America Dharma.

**Sept. 17-18, 2011 (*non-residential*)**

Mercy Center, St. Louis, MO

Fee range: \$60-\$90. Registration opens June 9; closes Sept. 13.

### Mary Grace Orr

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Mary Grace Orr has practiced Vipassana since 1983. Prior to that she followed western contemplative practices and worked as a therapist from 1977 to 1995. She was trained to teach by Jack Kornfield, and now teaches classes and retreats in Santa Cruz and throughout the United States. She has been the Guiding Teacher of Vipassana Santa Cruz since 1989

**Oct. 13-16, 2011 (*residential*)**

Lake Doniphan Center, Excelsior Springs (Kansas City area), MO

Fee range: Double Room: \$290-\$435; Single Room: \$380-\$570

Registration opens July 13; closes Sept. 28.



# Opening the Heart

*Continued from page 1*

Rachel hadn't deepened her relationship with this man because she owed him something, or felt obliged by a favor he'd done. She didn't know the particulars of his life, his challenges or his sorrows. Rachel came to care genuinely for the dry cleaner simply because she'd begun including him in the attentiveness of her heart. By doing so, she awakened to the humanity of someone who'd barely registered before.

The practice of lovingkindness meditation brings to life our innate capacity for connecting to ourselves and others. The lovingkindness we cultivate breaks through the habit of indifference or judgment that keeps us feeling separate from others. A capacity for friendship and kindness exists within each of us,

without exception. No matter what pain we might have gone through in our lives, that capacity is never destroyed. It may be - and often is - obscured, but it's there.

The key to uncovering this potential is paying attention in a positive way. So often we don't have the time or the patience to take an interest in people; instead we look around them or right through them. Being attentive to someone opens the door to discovering who she or he actually is.

Like Rachel, we find that the people we relate to at work, at school, while doing errands no longer seem so much like strangers. Something happens to our world, and we don't feel so alone. . . . The care and kinship Rachel felt toward her dry cleaner, we feel toward everyone. As the Japanese poet Issa said, "Under the cherry blossoms' shade, there are no strangers."

Adapted from an article at <http://www.sharonsalzberg.com/archive/article/141>

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*Sharon Salzberg will be leading a non-residential retreat for Mid American Dharma in the Kansas City area, June 25-26. See pp. 3-4 for details.*



## 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 Upcoming Retreats

June 25 -26, 2011 ..... Sharon Salzberg, Non-residential, Kansas City, MO  
July 8 -11, 2011 ..... Gloria Taraniya Ambrosia, Residential, St. Louis, MO  
September 9-11, 2011 ..... Philip Jones, Non-residential, St. Louis, MO  
October 13-16, 2011 ..... Mary Grace Orr, Residential, Kansas City/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)

## Mid America Dharma

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