



Mid America Dharma News

Offering Insight Meditation to the Heartland

Awakening Joy: Buddhism's Not Such a Raw Deal *by James Baraz*

In June 2015, renowned teacher James Baraz leads a 3-day non-residential retreat in St. Louis, MO. The following excerpt is from a previous article by James in Tricycle Magazine.

Despite images of the smiling Buddha, the practice and teachings of Buddhism have had a reputation of being more somber than joyful. With so much emphasis on “suffering and the end of suffering,” there’s not much air time for happiness and joy. Some practitioners may even think that expressing those qualities is un-Buddhist.

I went through a period of time in my own practice for several years, [when] the truth of suffering became my primary guide. “Real” practice meant committing to “getting off the wheel,” freeing myself of lifetimes of suffering as I wandered through endless cycles of death and rebirth. The “end of suffering” got entangled in my mind with the “end of living,” which meant tempering aliveness and enthusiasm and fun. Practice became a serious endeavor.

Playing the guitar and singing had been a joyful pursuit for me since the days of the Beatles. Now I rarely did either, and when I did I noticed an underlying sense of guilt. How could I be a serious practitioner and spend my time just having fun? My poor family had to deal with my somber persona as I suppressed my natural inclination to celebrate life. I carried this same tendency into my work as a dharma teacher, a slight wariness creeping into my

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We offer 2 ways to register for our retreats—online or by mail:

Online

- ♦ Visit midamericadharmadharma.org
- ♦ Click the link *Mid America Dharma Retreats*
- ♦ Register for your preferred retreat by clicking *On-line Registration*

By Mail

- ♦ Complete and mail-in the registration form on page 11



We post up-to-date info on our Facebook page. Comment or message us anytime – we love to hear from you!

[Continued from page 1, Awakening Joy, James Baraz]

attitude toward those aspects of life that were fun and attractive, that might entice one to remain “on the wheel.” This focus on suffering actually had a numbing effect. Shutting down my vitality left me feeling rather disconnected from myself and others, and less able to respond compassionately to the suffering of those closest to me.

Through the struggle and crisis of those years, I learned something important: lack of aliveness and joy is not a sign of awakening. In fact, it is just the opposite. As one of the seven factors of enlightenment, joy is not only a fruit of awakening but also a prerequisite. Joy creates a spaciousness in the mind that allows us to hold the suffering we experience inside us and around us without becoming overwhelmed, collapsing into helplessness or despair. It brings inspiration and vitality, dispelling confusion and fear while connecting us with life. Profound understanding of suffering does not preclude awakening to joy.

We know what it’s like to get trapped in dark, constricting states of mind—and how useless it is, in terms of awakening, to dwell there. That is what the Buddha taught: we don’t need to stay stuck in greed, hatred, and delusion. Life can be lighter, more workable, even when it’s challenging. This lightening up, which I see as an aspect of joy, is the fruit of insight into *anatta*, the selfless nature of reality, and *anicca*, the truth of impermanence. When we are not attached to who we think we are, life can move through us. We release our futile attempts to control circumstances.

Joy has many different flavors and is not something we have to manufacture. It is already in us when we come into the world, as we can see in the natural delight of a healthy baby. We need only release the layers of contraction and fear that keep us from it.

Methods for opening the mind to joy and happiness are found throughout the Buddha’s teachings. One sure way is through skillful practice of meditation. Through seeing clearly, we can free the mind of grasping, aversion, and ignorance, allowing our natural joy to manifest.

But formal meditation is not the only way to tap into joy. The teachings say that when we cultivate wholesome mind-states—generosity, love, compassion, happiness for others—we experience

“... joy is not only a fruit of awakening but also a prerequisite.”

pamojja, translated as “gladness” or “delight.” As I climbed out of my “dark night,” I was delighted to discover that those positive feelings—joy, delight, happiness, gladness—rather than being impediments on the

path, actually facilitate awakening. They are part of our tool kit for keeping the heart open. Gladness and delight do not merely balance out negative tendencies, they heal the aversive mind.

Whether we are paying careful attention to wholesome states when they arise, reflecting on gratitude, or feeling the delight of living with integrity, we can access joy by shifting our awareness to what uplifts the heart. The Buddha spoke of this as “inclining the mind” toward the wholesome. This doesn’t mean disregarding suffering or overlooking happiness and joy. With so much fear and sadness in the world, it is healthy to let our hearts delight in the blessings of life. In waking up, it’s important to remember that in addition to the ten thousand sorrows there are also ten thousand joys. ❖

James Baraz is a founding member of Spirit Rock Meditation Center in the San Francisco Bay Area. His popular Awakening Joy course was featured in Oprah’s O Magazine and published as a book in 2012.

This article was adapted from Tricycle Magazine and is available in full at www.tricycle.com/dharmatalk/lighten.

Overcoming Doubt Through Direct Experience *by Shaila Catherine*

In the Middle Length Discourses, there is a parable of a person born blind who could not see dark or light forms, colored forms, or the stars, sun, or moon, and so he says: “I do not know these. I do not see these. Therefore, these do not exist.”

This blind person denies what is outside his particular experience. This tendency—to doubt what has not yet been experienced—is relatively common in the Western Dhamma scene. For instance, I have heard people discount the potential for the stability of *jhāna*—maintaining that it is impossible to master such stable states of concentration in today's world. I have also heard people express doubt in the possibility of liberation from greed, hatred, and ignorance. Some people, though interested in the Dhamma, have come to think full awakening itself is nearly impossible in today's world.

But just because we have reviewed our circle of friends and found it devoid of enlightened beings doesn't mean we should give up hope that awakening can happen to people like us.

Discovering for Ourselves

The Buddha frequently emphasized the importance of direct knowledge. For instance, he observed that when the seven factors of enlightenment have been “developed and cultivated, they lead to direct knowledge, to enlightenment, to *Nibbāna*.”

The Buddha also criticized members of other sects for holding views based merely on logic, oral tradition, faith in the teacher or tradition, or reflective acceptance of a view.

But how should we relate to the idea of direct, personal knowledge if we are at a stage on our path where we don't possess that knowledge and haven't had the experience? How can we remain open to the highest possibility of awakening, while maintaining a

balanced, critical, and intelligent perspective about the goals that we seek, and the timeline we set for accomplishments?

Direct Experience and Buddhist Teachings

Over time, many of us will have profound personal transformations and deep insights through practice. Some of them may map neatly onto traditional descriptions that we read about in the suttas or hear in Dhamma talks. We might name them as insight knowledges, awakening experiences, or experiences of emptiness.

The maps we find in the suttas can help us determine if we are on course, checking that our experiences are serving our purpose. Some people fall in love with these maps, and that is understandable as maps in general can be rewarding to use—even entertaining. When you are driving a new route, do you ever feel the pleasure of finding where you are on the map?

If we become overly attached to maps, however, we limit our ability to connect with the tangible world around us. As Polish-American scholar Alfred Korzybski said: “The map is not the territory.”

If we are unwary, spiritual maps can have drawbacks and even feed the construction of self. We must be careful when we use maps like the four *jhānas*, the four stages of awakening, or the 16 insight knowledges.

The point of these teachings is to not help the ego attain something. And at a certain point, it is necessary to stop evaluating where you are in the practice and free the mind from the duality of success and failure. Your self worth does not depend upon where you place yourself on an abstract spiritual map. In fact, anytime your self-worth is in question, watch out! Self-grasping is nearby.

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[Continued from page 3, Overcoming Doubt, Shaila Catherine]

We must work with conceit whether we succeed or fail at establishing concentration. We must unravel this tendency to be proud of our attainments or discouraged by our lack of them. Attachment to either accomplishment or disappointment will reinforce self constructs, and prevent release.

In a way we must not care where we are on the map while at the same time totally caring about where we are ultimately heading. We shouldn't settle for anything less than full awakening. As the Buddha exhorts regarding any given level of our attainment: Do not stop short with that!

Direct Experience and the Path of Practice

While the direction from teachers and from spiritual maps can be helpful, we need the courage to walk the path for ourselves. We might make mistakes. We might struggle with difficult mental states. And we might misperceive or misinterpret our experience.

But we learn a lot by walking the path diligently and by letting go of our concepts of what we think is possible. We must be wise, and gradually develop our virtues, clarity, strength, wisdom, and equanimity. Full commitment does not require force or expectation.

Right effort means being as willing to back off as to dive in. I encourage students who are on the brink of radically new perspectives in their samādhi or insight to let it evolve slowly. For instance, I sometimes suggest that they enter into the unfamiliar depth of samādhi for just a brief moment, and then emerge to check out the quality of the mind. Investigate this unfamiliar state several times before letting the mind launch into jhanic absorption. When students take a little time to develop gradually and intelligently, they quickly confirm for themselves that the states of concentration and insight are entirely wholesome.

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Practicing wisely, we develop the skill to move the mind intentionally. We must have the skills to enter and exit any state or perception without fear of being consumed by it, sucked into the energy, or stuck there. Eventually we develop mastery of the mind in concentration, and liberating insight into the emptiness of all things.

When progress is won on the path, it can sometimes feed the ego. Overzealous arrogance or sheer impatience might cause some people to think that their level of skill is higher, and the nature of their experiences are more sublime, than in fact they are.

The Buddha strictly prohibited monastics from declaring their attainments. It was a serious offense that would end one's monastic life. The Buddhist tradition teaches meditators to go through a process of reviewing the attainment, stabilizing the realization, learning to abide in voidness at will, and then continually reviewing the mind for defilements.

While we should not brashly and prematurely declare our attainments, we should dream big about what is possible on the path. I am inspired by teachings where the Buddha encouraged his disciples to not stop short of the goal of full awakening. He urged his followers to abandon each successive attainment and surmount every wholesome state achieved. I take this call for diligent practice to heart. ❖

Shaila Catherine is the founder of Bodhi Courses, an online Dhamma classroom (bodhicourses.org), and Insight Meditation South Bay in California (imsb.org). She has been practicing meditation since 1980 and teaching internationally since 1996.

She authored Focused and Fearless: A Meditator's Guide to States of Deep Joy, Calm, and Clarity and Wisdom Wide and Deep: A Practical Handbook for Mastering Jhāna and Vipassanā to help make this traditional approach to samadhi and vipassana accessible to western practitioners.

Householder Retreat in October *by Robert Brumet*

This October, Mid America Dharma is pleased to once again offer a Householder Retreat. Taught by Robert Brumet, it is designed for people who want to do intensive meditation practice but cannot attend residential retreats.

It starts with an all-day retreat Sunday, similar to a residential retreat. Retreatants then meet on Tuesday and Thursday evenings for meditation practice, dharma talks and discussion. The week concludes with an all-day retreat on Saturday.

After doing sitting, walking and eating meditating for a whole day, retreatants go home and challenge themselves to bring meditative awareness to interactions with family, friends, co-workers, strangers and difficult persons. In addition to deepening practice, the goal for the Householder Retreat is to support continuity of mindfulness in ordinary daily life. ❖

Learn the details of this unique retreat on page 9.

Cultivating Insight in the Everyday *by Robert Brumet*

In early Buddhist history the practice of meditation was confined largely to monastics. Laypersons in the surrounding farms were preoccupied making a subsistence living and not able to spend much time in formal meditation. The Pali suttas referred to these persons as householders. Their dharma practice consisted of contributing food and other items to monks and nuns who depended upon them for their livelihood.

Today in the West most of us who attend Buddhist meditation retreats are laypersons rather than monastics. In that sense almost every Insight Meditation retreat could be called a “householder retreat;” however, we tend to use that term to designate a retreat that focuses on helping the participants practice the dharma in their everyday life.

For this reason a Householder Retreat is usually scheduled for relatively short segments of time spread over one or two weeks. Formal retreat periods tend to focus on how one can engage the practice in his or her everyday life at home or at work. Participants are often given assignments in the form of specific practices to apply throughout the day. The retreat also includes a review of how one has or has not been able to maintain a daily practice between formal sessions.

The true value of the dharma lies in our ability to apply it in our everyday life. If we limit our practice to the formal retreats or only to sitting meditation then the benefits of our practice will be limited.

Many lament that during a retreat their practice is “as sharp as a razor,” but a short time after retreat it becomes “duller than a table knife.” We need support for integrating the practice into our everyday life. A Householder Retreat is designed to keep our practice razor sharp throughout each moment of the day. ❖

Robert Brumet teaches the Householder Retreat this October. See page 9 for details.

Mid America Dharma Retreats

Gloria Taraniya Ambrosia ❖ *May 7–10, 2015*

Pallottine Renewal Center, St. Louis, MO – Residential

Fee Range: \$315–\$475

Registration opens February 7, 2015



Gloria Taraniya Ambrosia teaches within the Thai Forest Tradition, specifically the disciples of 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 in Barre, Massachusetts from 1996 through 1999. Taraniya serves as a Core Faculty member at the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies where she does most of her teaching. She has been a Dhamma teacher since 1990.

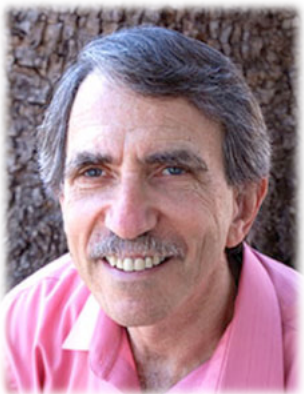
► **LISTEN** to Taraniya's retreat recordings at www.midamericadharmadharma.org/audio.html

James Baraz ❖ *June 12–14, 2015*

Maria Center, St. Louis, MO – Non-residential

Fee Range: \$80–\$120

Registration opens March 12, 2015



James Baraz has been teaching meditation since 1978. He leads retreats, workshops and classes in the U.S. and abroad and is a founding teacher of Spirit Rock Meditation Center in Woodacre, California. James is co-author with Shoshana Alexander of *Awakening Joy*, a new book based on the online course of the same name. The *Awakening Joy* course has had over 12,000 participants and been praised by Oprah Winfrey's *O Magazine* and Bill Gates. In addition, James is on the International Advisory Board of the Buddhist Peace Fellowship. He lives with his wife in the Bay Area, has two sons and three grandchildren.

► **LISTEN** to James' dharma talks at <http://www.dharmaseed.org/teacher/86/>

Mid America Dharma Retreats

Bridget Rolens & Jon Yaffe ❖ Aug 21–23, 2015

Chiara Center, Springfield, IL – Non-residential

Fee Range: \$60–\$90

Registration opens June 21, 2015



Bridget Rolens has practiced Insight Meditation since 1997. Her mentors include Matthew Flickstein, Ginny Morgan and Gloria “Taraniya” Ambrosia. Recognized by the Spirit Rock Teachers Council as a Community Dharma Leader, Bridget shares the Dharma through classes, workshops, and retreats. She also teaches Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction in Missouri and Illinois and is the program facilitator for Masterpeace Studios’ Mind-Body Stress Reduction program in Crestwood, MO.



Jon Yaffe began practicing Insight Meditation in 1999 and has been a co-leader of SLIMG 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 served on the Board of Directors of Mid America Dharma since 2005.

► **LISTEN** to Bridget's & Jon's retreat recordings at www.midamericadharm.org/audio.html

Retreat Basics: The Five Precepts

We ask everyone participating in our retreats to make a commitment to follow the Five Ethical Precepts. These are a foundation for our practice.

The precepts create the community of harmony and safety which is so necessary for our work of turning inward, to explore and train the mind to be happy and free of distress. The self-restraint we show by following the Precepts is essential to settle and focus the mind.

Through this we develop confidence in our worth and ability to do the practice. Following the Precepts bestows a sense of happiness with our own goodness.

- ❖ I undertake the training of refraining from taking the life of any living being.
- ❖ I undertake the training of refraining from taking what has not been given.
- ❖ I undertake the training of refraining from any form of intentional sexual activity.*
- ❖ I undertake the training of refraining from false and harmful speech.
- ❖ I undertake the training of refraining from intoxicating drink and drugs that lead to heedlessness.

* A more general form of this precept is "I undertake the training rule to abstain from sexual misconduct," but at retreat we commit to the fuller version stated above.

Mid America Dharma Retreats

Shaila Catherine & Phil Jones ❖ Sep 5-12, 2015

Sanctuary of Hope, Kansas City, KS – Residential

Fee Range: \$685–\$1,030 (residential) and \$340–\$510 (commuter)

Registration opens June 5, 2015



Shaila Catherine is the founder of Bodhi Courses, an online Dhamma classroom (bodhourses.org), and Insight Meditation South Bay, a Buddhist meditation center in Silicon Valley in California (imsb.org). She has been practicing meditation since 1980, accumulating more than eight years of silent retreat experience, and has taught internationally since 1996. Shaila studied with masters in India, Thailand, and Nepal, and also with the founders of western meditation centers. She completed a one-year intensive meditation retreat with the focus on concentration and jhāna, and authored *Focused and Fearless: A Meditator's Guide to States of Deep Joy, Calm, and Clarity*. Since 2006 Shaila has been practicing under the direction of Venerable Pa-Auk Sayadaw. She authored *Wisdom Wide and Deep: A Practical Handbook for Mastering Jhāna and Vipassanā* to help make this traditional approach to samadhi and vipassana accessible to western practitioners.



Philip Jones has practiced meditation since 1987 and has been teaching Insight Meditation since 1996. He has studied with teachers from Spirit Rock and the Insight Meditation Society and graduated from the first Community Dharma Leader program in 2000. He also studied for a number of years with Matthew Flickstein and more recently has been practicing with teachers from IMS. He has served on the board of directors of Mid America Dharma, the regional retreat organization, since the mid-'90's. Many of his talks and writings can be found at <http://silentmindopenheart.org>.

► **LISTEN** to Shaila's & Phil's retreat recordings at www.midamericadharma.org/audio.html

Save with our Commuter Option

An economical way to attend the September retreat with Shaila and Phil is our commuter option. Commuters arrange their own lodging and breakfasts.

To qualify, you must already have attended one or more residential retreats and agree to participate fully.

For more details visit <http://www.retreat1509.homestead.com/>.



Mid America Dharma Retreats

Robert Brumet ❖ *Oct 18, 20, 22 and 24, 2015*

Unity Village near Kansas City, MO – Non-Residential (Oct 18 & 24 day longs; Oct 20 & 22 evenings)

Fee Range: \$60–\$90

Registration opens August 18, 2015



Robert Brumet has practiced Insight Meditation since 1988. He has been leading a local sangha and conducting meditation retreats throughout North America since 1995. In the early 1990s he received vipassana facilitator training from Shinzen Young. 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. He lives in Kansas City and teaches at Unity Institute and Seminary near Lee's Summit MO.

► **LISTEN** to Robert's retreat recordings at www.midamericadharm.org/audio.html

Joe McCormack ❖ *Nov 6–8, 2015*

Columbia College, Columbia, MO – Non-residential

Fee Range: \$60–\$90

Registration opens September 6, 2015



Joe McCormack has practiced insight meditation since 1995. He has been a member of the Show Me Dharma Teachers Council since 2002. Joe leads an insight meditation group in Jefferson City, and has taught insight meditation to prison inmates since 1998. His teachers include Ginny Morgan, Phil Jones, and Matthew Flickstein. In January 2008, he completed the Community Dharma Leader training program through Spirit Rock Meditation Center. In his dharma instruction, Joe draws from traditional Theravada Buddhist teachings, Zen and Dzogchen practice, Advaita teachings, and the Diamond Approach. He is also trained as a psychologist and practices psychotherapy in Jefferson City.

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 under each retreat heading and on the mail-in registration form at the end of this newsletter.

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 specific retreat pages. Registrations are not accepted prior to the beginning date for each retreat. If the registration fee for a residential retreat is not received by the deadline, there is a \$25 late fee.

Refunds: We will refund fees if requested before the deadline. Refunds requested later than this are made at the discretion of Mid-America Dharma's Board of Directors.

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 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.

Mail-in Registration Form

Retreat registration is available online or via mail. To register online, go to www.midamericadharma.org/retreats.

To register by mail, send this form with a check payable to: **Mid America Dharma, c/o John Flaherty, 455 E. 80th Terrace, Kansas City, MO 64131**. 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.

_____ May 7–10, 2015
Gloria Taraniya Ambrosia, Residential
 Pallottine Renewal Center, St. Louis, MO
 Fee range: \$315–\$475

Fee Amount _____

_____ Jun 12–14 2015
James Baraz, Non-Residential
 Maria Center, St. Louis, MO
 Fee range: \$80–\$120

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_____ Nov 6-8, 2015
Joe McCormack, Non-Residential
 Columbia College, Columbia, MO
 Fee range: \$60–\$90

Fee Amount _____

Name: _____

Address: _____

City: _____ State: _____ Zip: _____

Home Phone: _____

E-Mail Address: _____

Required of ALL Retreatants:

Please check the box below to indicate you agree to honor *The Five Precepts* during your retreat. *The Five Precepts* assure everyone has a safe & wholesome retreat experience (see page 7 for details).

Yes, I have read the *Retreat Basics* on page 7 and agree to honor *The Five Precepts* during retreat.

For Residential Retreatants only:

Gender: M F

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 at registrar@midamericadharma.org or (816) 523-5061.

Mid America Dharma

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Mid America Dharma Upcoming Retreats

- May 7-10, 2015* Residential Retreat, **Gloria Taraniya Ambrosia**, Pallottine Renewal Center, St. Louis, MO
- Jun 12-14, 2015*Non-Residential Retreat, **James Baraz**, Maria Center, St. Louis, MO
- Aug 21-23, 2015*Non-Residential Retreat, **Bridget Rolens and Jon Yaffe**, , Chiara Center, Springfield, IL
- Sep 5-12, 2015*Residential Retreat, **Shaila Catherine & Phil Jones**, Sanctuary of Hope, Kansas City, KS
- Oct 18, 20, 22 & 24, 2015*Non-Residential Retreat, **Robert Brumet**, Unity Village near Kansas City, MO
- Nov 6-8, 2015*Non-Residential Retreat, **Joe McCormack**, Columbia College, Columbia, MO
- Dec 30, 2015-Jan 3, 2016* Residential Retreat, **Robert Brumet**, Unity Village near Kansas City, MO

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

www.midamericadharm.org