

June 2010

SHINGI

Newsletter of the Tendai Buddhist Institute



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Our friends, the tree and barn swallows, robins, herons, ducks, geese, bats, so many critters, have returned again this year. One generation to the next, it is a rebirth between generational lifetimes. We have grounds with no pesticides, an ample supply of clean water, and air with less pollution than

June Events Calendar



Weekly Meditation Services (WMS) are on Wednesday evenings. They begin at 6pm with a discussion or talk (see below for this month's discussion topics). At about 7pm there is a meditation service followed at 8pm by a potluck supper. All of Wednesday evening's events are open to the public. There is no fee, and reservations are not required.

June Wednesday Meditations and Discussions

2nd Women Disciples of Shakyamuni Buddha - The Great Disciples of the historic Buddha, such as Shariputra, Mahakassapa, and Ananda are often discussed in relation to specific incidents or sutra. No less notable, but much less discussed, are the women in the early sangha. We will examine the lives and stories of several remarkable women, such as Mallika, Patacara, and Badda Kundalakesa, whose roles in the Buddha's life and teaching are often overlooked.

9th Sangha Defined and Expanded - The three treasures are the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. In the west we have emphasized the Buddha from various perspectives, and we reflect on the Dharma as teachings. Sangha is a profound element often misunderstood and not fully observed. We will examine the definitions and explore how it has been expanded in the current era.

16th Chapter 6, "No Self: Personal Continuity, and Dependent Arising." - From *Foundations of Buddhism* by Rupert Gethin (1998 - Oxford University Press). Please read this chapter for discussion on Wednesday. This is an ongoing series of monthly classes on essential Buddhism.

nearby urban and suburban areas. We are blessed by the sentient beings that surround us, both the migratory forms and those who stay with us year round.

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23rd "Gautama vs. the Buddha: If you're looking for relief from suffering, . . . you won't find it in some mythical figure named the Buddha but in the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama - an ordinary person like us, who became one of the world's most gifted spiritual teachers." We will discuss this article in the Winter 2009 of Issue of *Buddhadharma: The Practitioners Quarterly*. The article can be found online at:

<http://www.thebuddhadharma.com/issues/2009/winter/gautama.php>

30th Buddhist Concentric Traditions - Buddhist philosophy, teachings, and practices did not evolve in isolation. They represent a vibrant interchange of cultures and complimentary traditions.

This evening we will be probing the development of Buddhist teachings and practices through one of these transactions.

Please note - due to the gyo schedule (see below) we will not have potluck dinner on June 9th and 16th.

Events

5th Morning Service and Sutra Class, 8:30 - 10:30 AM - We continue investigating the Sutra of Brahma's Net. This work has had a profound influence on East Asian Buddhist thought and practice. The ramifications of that effect influence the ways we look at and practice Buddhism in the west. This week we will examine the second half of the Introduction, pages 21 - 39 of *The Very Mahayana Buddhist Ethics: Introduction and Translation of the Fan-wang-ching*, by Shigeru Osuka. We will make these books available to those attending the class for a small donation.

6th - 20th Tendai-shu New York Betsuin Doshu / Soryo gyo. - Doshu are temple assistants and Soryo are priests or monks. A gyo is a period of spiritual practices and training. Each year for several weeks, the Betsuin is transformed into a monastery. This year we will have 15 people staying at the Betsuin. Arising at 3:30 AM we start with cold-water purification; throughout the day there are classes, practices, and ceremonies. We have people attending from Colorado; Ohio; California; Albany, NY; New York City; Washington, DC; the Adirondacks; Ottawa, Canada; and four people from Denmark. The gyo ensures that we have properly educated, qualified and experienced Tendai leaders now and in the future.

7th - 19th Morning Meditation - Join the Tendai-shu New York Betsuin gyo participants every morning from 7 - 8 AM. This will consist of two periods of Shikan meditation - a great way to start the day, and a very nice way to get into a regular practice.

20th Mahasangha Sunday - 10 AM - 1 PM A Sunday gathering filled with discussion, meditation service, and community. There will be Doshu Tokudo on this day. Please bring potluck lunch and celebrate with all the gyo participants who are finishing their training this year.

A point of etiquette - It is warm weather; many people go barefoot, and/or barefoot with sandals. If you have walked outside with bare feet or bare feet with sandals and then walk into the temple or the house without washing your feet first, it is the same as wearing shoes in the house and temple. This attitude is not unique to the Tendai Buddhist Institute. In cultures that remove shoes before entering sacred places and residences, most notably Buddhist and Muslim, it is a common practice to wash one's bare feet before entering. You will be asked to wash your feet before entering the temple or the house.

Dana (Generosity) - Please commit to on-going support for our Dharma Center. Many people support the Center in different ways, but we are always in need of your financial support for our on-going programs and the maintenance of our buildings and grounds. We do not take a collection during the service, but there is a box for giving in the entryway of the hondo (temple). Giving what you can--every week or every month--helps our sangha remain a vital part of many lives. --Gassho . . . Shoshin

Meanderings (cont.)



Nestled in the Berkshire hills we are surrounded by the magnificence of mountains, and streams, trees and bushes. All around we are touched by and in touch with sentient beings who reside in the Buddha realms with us. This is important. Buddhism as a whole, and Tendai-shu in particular, communicate with the natural world of trees and grasses, small and large animals, streams and hills, seas and deserts. This is not a form of sentimentalism; it is a recognition that there is no distinction of spirit between the corporeal form we take as humans and the trout negotiating a stream's eddy. How can we connect with each other as humans and not extend our gaze to our environment? These surroundings are our aunts and uncles

who give us life by their gift of grains, fruits, and drink. Animals have sacrificed their lives for us, whether as food or in our acquisition of vegetables and grains. How can we fulfill our vows as bodhisattvas without paying homage to our ancestors the rivers and valleys? We should show gratitude for their contributions to our well-being. We should also provide protection and care toward all who have nurtured us.

Often when I perform the salutation to the Buddha's in the Ten Directions, a regular aspect of Tendai worship, the buddhas start as recognizable deities who slowly dissolve into hills, and streams, deer and mice, hawks and clouds. Within my mind I see the cosmos not as disparate elements corresponding to Linnaean categorization, rather I see a swirling sentiency of abiding love and organic form. To me, as a Tendai priest, the true meaning of our ritual is not a formalistic set of hand gestures (mudra) and incantations (mantra). These rituals are a direct connection to the natural world. The mantra are like the wind blowing across the trees, the sound of the swallows as they collect insects for their young; the mudra are the formation of mountains each gesture connected to the miracle of a seed rising into a mighty tree or a fragile flower. Our meditations are a means of making a connection to the consciousness of the cosmos.

We as practitioners of the Buddha Path often become obsessed with our awakening as a kind of mental tune-up. The reality of awakening is much more profound; it is awakening to the Buddhas of the mountains and rivers, birds and snakes that are us. When we hold the heart beat of an ant in our thoughts we hold the magnificence of the cosmos in our daily actions.

Photo credit Onyou Susan Bues

The Third Jewel--Where sangha members share ideas, poetry, and art to enrich everyone's Buddhist practice.

Our Meditation Spaces - A year or two ago, Monshin lead a Wednesday night discussion about creating spaces for meditation in our homes. Everyone shared a little about what his or her space was like, and I found myself wanting to visit each one. How interesting and enriching that would be! It only took me this long to realize that we can, in fact, "visit" each one . . . through the magic of modern photography and the Shingi.

So, please send us a digital picture of the place you meditate in, along with (if you wish) some words taking us around your space. Keep in mind, we are part of Tendai in America--a new and unique emanation of a venerable tradition--so it will make sense if your altar or space doesn't quite "fit" what you believe to be the Japanese model. Gaining a clearer sense of who we are is all the more reason for you to share your space with us!

To get this rolling, I'll start. Though the idea of having my altar in a closet originally seemed sacrilegious to me--or at the very least a seeming indication that my practice is of little importance in my life--the idea came to make more and more sense.

To begin with, it seemed best to have my altar in a space that was entirely my own, but because my home office is small, the altar ended up being in the way, often precariously so. And it was out of synch with the purpose and feeling of the room. So, that's when I turned to the closet.



And if I had thought that creating an altar in a space that was overwhelmingly "office" seemed hard, it quickly became apparent that creating one in the more pigeonholed and smaller space of a closet would be even more difficult. It turned out not to be so. All that I learned as a child creating forts and hiding places from tables and sofa cushions and later as a college student fashioning a livable space in a generic dorm room was still with me.

I had about six square feet of unused space right in the center of the closet, framed by the door--a built in bookcase to the left, a bookshelf and a clothing rod above, and a filing cabinet to the right. Again, I questioned the rightness of putting my altar in such a cramped afterthought of a space, but then I considered the challenge of creating such a space in a Tokyo apartment, and I knew it could be done. To redefine the space, I didn't need to make all the other stuff go away, I just needed to make it invisible.

So, long story short, I purchased some very cheap bamboo blinds, cut them to size, affixed rings at the tops and mounted hooks along one of the bookshelves and along a piece of wood I mounted on the face of the filing cabinet. That gave me two quickly-removable panels. I then mounted a third bamboo panel along the back.

I converted a small bookcase into an altar by affixing a bamboo placemat (would you believe) to the middle shelf thereby making a storage space for incense, an *egoro* (incense burner with a

handle), and other ritual items and texts. I utilized another, this time woven, placemat to serve as a kind of *hanjo* (mat in front of the altar). To light my early morning meditations, I suspended an amber-glassed Turkish candle lamp from the bracket that once held the clothing rod.

Finally, I added a *honzon* (central figure) of the seated Buddha, one that makes me feel a sense of mountain-like quiet rootedness. To his left, I placed Monju whom I chose as my esoteric figure because he represents transcendent wisdom and I feel that his sword could possibly cut through my frequent flagging focus and obscurations. To the right of the *honzon*, I placed a figure of St. Francis of Assisi--which was given to me by my mother--in deference of my Catholic roots, my reverence for the natural world, and for the compassion he communicates. The *bonki* (rice offering bowl) made of moss agate in front of the Buddha is also a gift from my mother. Next to the *hanjo*--upon which rests a *koro* (bowl-shaped incense burner) and an *uchinarashi* or *kin* (small bowl-shaped gong)--is a miniature *kei* (a suspended chime with a striker), which I chose from my grandmother's house as a remembrancer after she passed away.

In true *wabi* spirit, the gathering of these ragtag things in this unlikely place culminated in nothing I would have imagined and more than I could have hoped for. Remember that *wabi* is the aesthetic of rusticity and simplicity, an idea well-stated by the author of the *Zen-cha Roku*: "Always bear in mind that *wabi* involves not regarding incapacities as incapacitating, not feeling that lacking something is deprivation, not thinking that what is not provided is deficiency."

And so in the case of my little altar space, several happy side effects and coincidences have resulted much greater than the sum of the proverbial parts, most notably, that the fragrance and feeling of the altar space is now exactly that of the Jiunzan Tendai-ji ("Compassionate Mountain Cloud Temple"--our temple), that the altar is located in the direction of the Western Paradise, and that it all speaks directly to my heart-mind in a language I can understand.

I've gone into detail here, not in fulfillment of some crazy wish to become a Home and Garden Channel interior designer on a program about renovating Buddhist meditation places (though . . . that *would* be cool), but to pose as food for thought the idea that the things we Western Tendai consider "sacred" or "ritual" or "expedient," and the locations in which we construct our practice spaces, need not be limited by Japanese types or by American notions of the definition of particular spaces. That, like the fruit of a cultivated tree, the fruit of our ancient tradition can be born grafted on a rootstock of our native soil, yielding something right, productive, beautiful.

Please share with the sangha your unique places of meditation.

Call for material: Please [send the Shingi](#) photographs, artwork, poems, book reviews, articles, etc. that you have created that you consider an outgrowth of your Buddhist practice or that you think reflect Buddhist themes, ideas, questions, etc. If submitting an image, you may wish to include a short statement sharing some of your thoughts to accompany it.

Questions? Comments? Suggestions? Contact . . .

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