

Forum: Theravada Practice Off the Cushion

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For anyone dedicated to a spiritual path, the most recurring concern is how to keep one's daily activities in line with one's highest aspirations. Special religious activities may punctuate the calendar to give energy to this daily quest, but the basic issues of any spiritual life are shaped by the need to ensure that the particulars of one's day-to-day decisions don't run counter to one's larger vision of a life well-lived.

Ironically, as Buddhism arrives in the West, the most common venues at which non-Buddhists are introduced to Buddhist practice—meditation retreats, mass teachings, mass consecrations—tend to float in a middle ground, divorced from the two poles of this day-to-day concern. On the one hand, these venues are designed, sometimes deliberately, to be as far removed from normal daily life as possible. On the other, the question of highest aspirations is bracketed: the practices are presented as applicable to one's life regardless of what one's highest aspirations might be; the Buddhist goal of awakening is denoted in generic terms compatible with any vision of a fulfilling life.

For people new to Buddhism, this non-doctrinaire stance presents an attractive alternative to Western monotheism. They find it refreshing to be taught an effective method for spiritual growth that can be applied to a goal of their own choosing without being threatened with eternal damnation for using their powers of choice.

Over time, however, people who have adopted Buddhist practices have discovered that retreats and mass events don't provide the support they need in applying those practices to their day-to-day concerns. In Asia, and particularly in the Theravada countries, this support is supplied by monasteries, which—unlike their Western counterparts—are open to lay people at all times to provide the fellowship of like-minded people, sanctuary from the turmoil of work and family life, and advice on day-to-day matters from those who have given their lives to the study and practice of the Buddha's teachings. Because Buddhist monasteries in the West that provide these opportunities are few and far between, Western Buddhist practitioners have developed structures of their own design to provide the sanctuary, fellowship and advice they need to keep focused on their highest aspirations and to connect those aspirations with their day-to-day practice.

Some of the most distinctively Western efforts in this direction are found in the Mahasi vipassana movement. This may be because, of all the Buddhist practice movements that have come West, the Mahasi movement is the most divorced from institutional supervision from Asia. Its retreat centers are the most secular; its method has been interpreted in terms of the most diverse variety of worldviews, ranging from humanistic psychology to the Advaita Vedanta; many of its second generation of teachers do not even identify themselves as Buddhist, much less Theravadin. In fact, if it doesn't develop communities outside the retreat setting, vipassana—both in its Mahasi and Goenka varieties—is in danger of becoming the next yoga; a technique stripped of its original purpose and context.

Thus the Mahasi vipassana teachers who have addressed issues of community building face a blank slate, although their movement's eclectic context presents them with special questions: How can a sense of common purpose be defined in a way that is both inclusive and specific enough to achieve a true sense of shared values? How is the moral and religious training of children to be integrated in a community centered on meditation? Beyond their training in leading retreats, what further training do vipassana teachers need to become skillful counselors on issues of day-to-day life? To what extent should traditional Buddhist values define the way they run their communities, and to what extent should Western values prevail?

Because these and other questions of community building will eventually face all Buddhist communities as they mature in the West, the following round-table discussion among vipassana teachers is presented as part of an ongoing discussion that will probably occupy dedicated Western Buddhists for a long time to come.

—Thanissaro Bhikkhu

Buddhadharma: Today, we're talking about how practitioners in your tradition extend practice into daily life. Daily life presumably means something different than it may have meant to the forebears of Theravada. The Asian tradition of Theravada is largely understood as a monastic tradition, is it not?

Marcia Rose: Yes and no. There is a large monastic population in Southeast Asia, and in Sri Lanka to some degree, but the lay populations in those countries are Buddhist. They are Theravada Buddhists and they live their daily life as Theravada Buddhists in various ways. They may or may not have a personal meditation practice or they may practice certain aspects of meditation, but they are definitely leading a Buddhist life.

Gil Fronsdal: I've practiced in Asia and I would say it's quite impressive to be in a country where both the laity and the monastics practice Buddhism. They may have different ways of practicing at different phases of their lives, but nevertheless practice is a central thread.

Buddhadharma: How is lay practice understood in the West, then?

Gil Fronsdal: I understand Theravada spirituality very broadly. It's a very rich and profound spiritual path with many elements. Meditation and mindfulness are key elements, but I think they get overemphasized at times. I like to think of the path as creating a pyramid, and if your pyramid is upside down, it gets wobbly. It's very important, especially in a community meditation center like ours, to help people create a strong foundation for their practice, so they can go very deep. Part of that foundation is the practice of generosity and the practice of ethics - the practice of the paramis. We put a fair amount of emphasis on these foundational aspects; they are intertwined with the mindfulness practice and supported by it.

Marcia Rose: The Theravada vipassana tradition has come to the West with very little cultural overlay from the countries of its origin in Southeast Asia and Sri Lanka, yet it has kept a deep, integral and pure connection to the roots of the dharma and to the Buddhist teachings. Because it has so little cultural overlay, it lends itself easily to being integrated into one's daily life here. Someone can easily adopt a lifelong practice in this tradition and bring the teachings and practices directly into their lives without having to overcome cultural barriers.

Michael Liebenson Grady: The Theravada tradition in North America takes many forms that emphasize different aspects of the teaching. In our center in Cambridge, we strongly encourage yogis to practice wholeheartedly in whatever conditions or situations they find themselves in. That means being mindful, bringing fresh attention to whatever you encounter, wherever you are. This principle is at the core of our teachings at the center. We balance formal practice and daily life. We preserve the methods and forms that have proven useful for 2,500 years, and we bring them to bear on the lives people are living today.

Gil Fronsdal: The people who come to our center are people living urban lives, and they're looking for how they can bring Buddhist practice into all aspects of their lives. Meditation and mindfulness are elements of that, but we teach here that there is much more to a Buddhist spiritual life or Theravada practice than mindfulness alone. Mindfulness is the foundation that supports the other practices members of our community might be doing.

Marcia Rose: At our centers we are always encouraging people who are ready and interested to take the foundation of their practice of buddhadharma – mindfulness into their daily life. Their life is their practice, and it happens on and off the cushion. Of course, people are able to accomplish that to varying degrees.

Michael Liebenson Grady: I would say that we send another very strong message at our center: we have created a space to support contemplative practice. Even though we talk a lot about practice in daily life, we

stress heavily how important it is to keep the basic practices of sitting and walking going.

Silent practice is essential. It's a worthy aspiration to be mindful and wise and compassionate in your daily life, but without a formal practice it's very hard to genuinely do so.

Buddhadharma: What do you mean by contemplative practice, as distinct from simply being mindful?

Michael Liebenson Grady: Contemplative practice is practice that occurs in silence. In the Theravada tradition, the forms tend to be simple and the methods are straightforward. Meditation practice in daily life is obviously more complex. It might entail wise speech or noticing whether you're being wise or compassionate in relationships. Those are all practice situations, but the conditions are different. One of the paramount functions of our center is to preserve a silent space for people to practice while encouraging people to bring the practice into their daily lives.

Marcia Rose: I would dare say that without a silent practice, bringing practice into daily life is a fantasy.

Michael Liebenson Grady: Precisely.

Marcia Rose: With mindfulness as a base, there are other practices within the Theravada tradition that we do in silence in an intensive retreat setting, where one can go very deep and where a lot of purification and unwinding can take place. These can be transferred directly into our daily life. A good example is the brahmaviharas: metta, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity. But without the ground of silent practice, it's a myth that we can really deeply practice our daily life as our practice.

Buddhadharma: Can you say more about the paramis and other practices that extend mindfulness into everyday life?

Gil Fronsdal: There are ten paramis in the Theravada tradition: generosity, ethics, renunciation, wisdom, energy, patience, truthfulness, resolve, loving-kindness, and equanimity. They don't appear very much in the Pali canon, but they are prominent in the Buddhavamsa, the story of the Buddha's previous lives. There were also many teachers in the ancient world who wrote beautifully about the paramis. One of the best sources is ***A Treatise On the Paramis***, by Achariya Dhammapala. It's technical in places but very inspiring and profound. The paramis became more and more important in the evolution of Theravada Buddhism. They're not so much connected to the early tradition as they are to the mature Theravada as it developed in Sri Lanka, Thailand and Burma. The paramis are not mentioned in many of the popular books on Theravada Buddhism, but if you go to these countries, you will find that they're deeply integrated into how people understand their Buddhist practice. People refer often to the paramis and the importance of developing them.

Marcia Rose: The paramis are the practice of life; they apply to the situations we encounter every day. If we take the dharma into our lives, the paramis become the practice of our lives unfolding.

Michael Liebenson Grady: They're aspects of insight practice, I would say, and not separate from it.

Marcia Rose: The paramis, the precepts, the brahmaviharas and other such foundational elements are meant not simply to be thought of in an intellectual way, but actually brought into daily life. We just did a series of classes covering all of the paramis over many weeks. We did one each week and people took them home and spent the week looking at their life in relationship to generosity, renunciation or whichever parami we might be focusing on. In every single realm of our life, the paramis show up in the mirror of our relationships.

Gil Fronsdal: One thing I find beautiful about the paramis, as I do with the eightfold path and other aspects of the path as described in the early tradition, is that the foundation has to do with our relationship to other people our interrelational world. You can practice generosity to yourself, but mostly it's something that one practices in relation to others. Ethics and precepts are also practiced mostly in relation to other people. The foundation of the path is establishing healthy relationships with the people around us - dharma relationships. Such relationships inform the deep contemplative practice that we do in a more solitary way. We're not just doing our practice for ourselves. We're also doing it in a field of other people.

Michael Liebenson Grady: At Cambridge Insight Meditation Center, we offer weekly practice groups with themes that are relevant to people's lives, such as taking fear up as an awareness practice, learning to let it go. Obviously fear arises on the cushion, but fear arises acutely in relationships with others. What we are trying to do in working with fear as a theme is, first, to be more mindful when fear is arising, and then to employ the different methods in shamatha and vipassana practice that help us to let go.

For instance, if you were in a meeting and someone intimidated you and made you fearful, you could nurture a calming practice - like working with the breath or being aware of touch points in the body - as a way of settling the energy. You could also do metta practice toward yourself or toward the person you're afraid of. You could employ various calming practices to settle the mind, and then you could use investigative practices-the same ones you would use on the cushion-to observe the nature of fear. You could be mindful of how fear expresses itself in the body, notice the different sensations that arise, and notice their impermanent nature. That leads to the insight that fear is an energy that arises in certain situations beyond our control, expresses itself in certain ways and passes away. That is its nature. That is the basic methodology we use in vipassana, but you're taking that off the cushion and bringing it into a situation where you're actually experiencing fear on the spot.

At that point, you can remember the usefulness of paying attention to the body when you're experiencing a strong emotion. Doing that gives you a chance to absorb it, see it, and develop more equanimity. You might also remember the value of applying metta in such a situation. When you can apply the methods you've been learning and practicing to real-life situations, you develop strong faith in yourself: confidence in yourself and confidence in the practice. In general, that's what we're trying to do.

Gil Fronsdal: For me, one of the most useful practices is mindfulness of speech, paying attention to what we're doing when we speak. There's also an ethical aspect to paying attention to speech. It helps us learn how not to cause harm and to take care of our relationships in a healthier way.

When we bring mindfulness to speech, what we speak tends to become a window into what makes us tick, our deep motivation. Often, we don't see our own motivation so clearly. By paying attention to why we say what we're going to say, a phenomenal amount of self-understanding and self-purification can come about. I put a lot of emphasis on paying attention to what goes on when we speak and when we listen.

Michael Liebenson Grady: Taking speech up as a practice is one of the precepts as far as I am concerned, as well as a mindfulness practice. To be in any relationship, you need to look at your speech.

Marcia Rose: It might be worth adding that the teaching of anatta, no self, can be quite liberating and powerful off the cushion. It's a misunderstanding that this fundamental teaching can only come to be understood during formal practice. We can always be mindful of ways that we create, or re-create, a separate self. We can look at how we compare ourselves with others, whether we are the best or the worst or not good enough and so forth. We can really begin to notice that "selfing" taking place in our daily life. We can notice how we exaggerate our speech and how we make our self up in the way we speak. We tell tales, exaggerating in either direction what we've done, what we've said, who we think we are, who we think we aren't.

The bottom line, picking up on what Gil was saying, is looking at our motivation for speaking, and for acting in general. We can look at whether in a relationship we are creating another self, or not. We can see whether we are connecting directly or reacting to life by having to make our self again. Here in Taos, we are doing a nonresidential weekend retreat on that subject alone, because people wanted to take a deeper look at the process of creating the self in a more concentrated setting. Then they can take what they learn into their lives.

Buddhadharma: As teachers, are you responding more to technical questions about meditation or to questions people have about bringing their practice to daily life?

Michael Liebenson Grady: We get quite a lot of both. People have a lot of questions about method, but if you develop a relationship with somebody over the long term, or you see them outside of the retreat context, or you're talking about particular questions or themes in a practice group, definitely you get into what's going on in their life and how to apply the Buddhist teachings to that.

Buddhadharma: Can you say something about the precepts as a way of taking dharma off the cushion?

Michael Liebenson Grady: The precepts are crucial in the Theravada tradition. How one holds them varies from teacher to teacher, but holding them is the foundation of the practice and it is also an awareness practice. Laypeople are encouraged to follow the five basic precepts, and we offer them formally in a small ceremony twice a year for the community. We talk a lot about why we think it's important to follow them and take them up as a practice.

The idea is not to hold the precepts as commandments but rather to treat them as guidelines.

The core principle of the precepts is the practice of non-harm, which is based on the recognition that we're all interconnected, that we need to see all beings in a more unified field. Ethics provide a very wise guide for living in relationship with others. Whether it's refraining from harming somebody, practicing generosity and kindness, not taking things that don't belong to you, or exercising wise action in sexual relationships, whatever the precept, it is a guide for how to relate to others.

Buddhadharma: How is that different from the commandment approach?

Michael Liebenson Grady: Everybody needs to cultivate their own relationship to the precepts. It's important not to see them as something imposed on you. A good example might be not taking intoxicants. Some people define that as never having a glass of wine at a meal, and other people would say it's fine to have a glass of wine. What we say is, "Don't take things that cloud your mind." If drinking a glass of wine clouds your mind, affects your behavior or affects your thoughts, then consider restraining that impulse. But you take it as a practice - you use the precepts as a framework for evaluating the consequences of what you're doing in your life.

Sometimes our own wisdom, our own mindfulness practices are limited, and the precepts give additional support and guidance. If you're moving into a relationship, for instance, and you're getting close to having a sexual relationship with somebody, the precepts ask you to step back and take a look and see if it's a wise thing. Are you just pursuing your self-interest? If you're pursuing your self-interest at the cost of somebody else's well-being, that's not a good thing. That would not be living that particular precept. It's a process of investigation, using wisdom and compassion. Mindfulness is involved in all the precept practices, which ask us to recognize that if we engage in harmful activities it inhibits liberation and causes suffering.

Marcia Rose: When we use the precepts to take an investigatory approach to our life, we discover that harm goes in both directions. It's never just harming the other person and it's never just harming oneself. Using the precepts as practice requires one to be very honest, and it develops a lot of humility. With humility and honesty comes learning. It's about learning, not about obeying a commandment.

Gil Fronsdal: Perhaps I could say something more about the paramis in this regard. They're very important supports for nourishing one's practice. When people haven't developed the paramis enough, it tends to limit the possibility of going far in meditation. Some people reach a kind of upper limit in how far they can go in meditation. Sometimes they need to leave the retreat, leave the meditation practice for a while, and add parami practice to cultivate certain qualities of character or strength that they can bring back with them to the cushion.

In looking into the paramis it's important to ask what makes the quality a parami. Generosity is a parami instead of just plain old generosity when it's connected to both compassion and liberation.

To me, that is the basic principle of Theravada Buddhism - it supports both our cultivation of compassion and our cultivation of liberation. That relates to the principle Marcia was talking about that when you harm others, you're also harming yourself. There's a very intimate connection between compassion and liberation. It has been important for me to understand these as the fundamental principles that orient and guide us in all the practices we do.

Buddhadharma: In the traditional Theravada countries, the teachers are usually monks, while in the West, Theravada teachers like yourselves are often laypeople. How does that affect what and how you teach, particularly on extending the practice into daily life?

Michael Liebenson Grady: In the West, there are mostly lay teachers teaching lay practitioners. This fact in no way devalues what the monastic tradition has to offer, whether as a form of practice or source of teachings. On the deepest levels, the Buddha's teachings recognize that human beings have more in common than we usually recognize. We are all subject to the conditions of having a body and we are all subject to uncertainty and the laws of impermanence. So whether monastic or lay, we all face many of the same fundamental issues of human life.

But there also can be tremendous value in lay teachers teaching lay students. Lay teachers are subject to, and intimately familiar with, many of the same off-the-cushion challenges and conditions that students are working with, because, as a layperson, you're also working with them in your life. Complex issues such as livelihood, money, sexual relationships, even driving in traffic are shared experiences among lay practitioners. Both teachers and students share this world. As a lay teacher, you want to, and are obligated to, apply the same

dharma principles, methods and practices not only in a contemplative environment but also in the everyday world of daily life.

Marcia Rose: I use a lot of examples from my own life to illustrate the teachings - both from my life of silent practice and my daily life outside of that. Lay teachers come by this experience honestly, so to speak. We are living the life, a life of practice.

Gil Fronsdal: I find that the cutting edge of people's practice is not always on the cushion - it could be in parenting, or at work, or in certain relationships, or in many different areas of their lives. When people come to engage Buddhist practice with their lives, they're often bringing that cutting edge. I see people growing a lot when they begin applying dharma principles of mindfulness and practice in all these areas. The spiritual growth that's available in parenting, for example, is just phenomenal.

Michael Liebenson Grady: Because the monastic situation has been the predominant voice in transmission of the Buddha's teaching, there has been, unfortunately, a devaluing of lay life as practice. The common impression one can receive is that real practice happens on the cushion. Lay teachers, of course, do many retreats and value sitting practice, but it's important to hold practice in a non-fragmented way, in which you see practice on the cushion as absolutely no different from practice wherever you are - in a traffic jam, talking to somebody, being with your family. You may be dealing with a more complex situation, but you're still working with principles and practices that are not in contradiction with contemplative practice and teachings. Lay teachers need to be careful, though, not to swing to the other extreme, which could be devaluing monastic practice or extensive contemplative training

Buddhadharma: The model we have seen in Asia is of a monastic community supported by lay Buddhists. You seem to be developing a different model in the West. How do you fulfill the pastoral role? Are you more like a church?

Michael Liebenson Grady: We have moved in the direction of a conventional church in some ways. Activities do happen at the center other than sitting and walking, and there's definitely a social function that the center provides - a real sense of community. Many people want to have that sense - of connectedness beyond just sitting and walking together.

The guiding teachers are relentlessly dedicated to keeping the space available for silent practice, and that is clearly what the center is primarily there for. But we do meet with people individually. We have a lot of interviews, which could be seen as dharmic counseling, such as might happen in any church. We talk to people about the ups and downs of their lives, and how to apply the practice to that. It's definitely not therapy; it's closer to spiritual counseling and it is a kind of pastoral function.

A few community members have been married at the center, but it's not a facility that just anybody would be allowed to use for this purpose. There's way too much silent practice going on for too many community events to happen. Sometimes this can create a bit of tension when members want something more to happen at the center, but our first priority is to maintain contemplative environment.

Gil Fronsdal: If we want to use the Asian Theravada model as a reference for what we do, then I would say we're more like the village temple, and I'm the village priest or monk. We're available to the community; our doors are wide open for anybody to come to our center and people wander in off the street all the time. There are no barriers to anyone coming here. We get a wide range of interests and needs that come to our door.

My sense of our mission is to respond to suffering, to respond to the need that comes through the door. Sometimes it's pastoral; sometimes you're just helping someone to cope or helping someone find a homeless shelter. It might also mean helping someone make arrangements to go to Thailand to be a monk. I don't have any basis by which to turn away from anybody, so I just try to respond to what's needed and what's required for them.

Some people come here for mindfulness practice, mostly so they can cope with their lives better, and I'm quite happy to provide them with basic coping mechanisms. Other people come because they're interested in the potential for liberation. I hope our center is a place that serves those people also. It's kind of tricky to have a center that responds to such a wide range of interests and needs and figure out a way to meet them all.

Michael Liebenson Grady: Where do community events, non-formal meditation events, fit in?

Gil Fronsdal: We have lots of them. A subgroup of our community called the Dharma Friends is the steering committee for putting on events that tend to be more social. They put on dinners and they go to the movies together and go to coffee shops afterwards to talk, or they go for hikes. Having friendships and having a strong sense of community is a very important part of the spiritual life. There are some people who mostly go to those things and don't come to sit much. Some people come to sit but go to those things hardly at all. As long as the sitting practice, what Michael called the contemplative spirit, is understood to be at the heart of what we do, I'm very happy that there's a wide range of activities, and people can connect according to their need.

Marcia Rose: Our situation is similar, but on a much smaller scale, since Taos is a smaller place. The ground of our center is to come for meditation practice. We have discussion a few times a week, a dharma talk once a week, classes and one-day and weekend retreats. Those are the formal components, but there are also many other kinds of that goes along with life, and worked very hard at the center. And their intention was to make their lives their practice.

And of course there's the formal training in meditation retreats that takes place over the course of many years,

Michael Liebenson Grady: Intensive meditation practice is obviously essential in terms of teaching dharma on any level. One also benefits from the shared experience of colleagues. At our center there's about a hundred years of dharma practice - among the three guiding teachers, and we give each other a lot of guidance and support. It would be very hard to teach on your own; having other people helping out is essential to being a good teacher and working with students at a center.

Buddhadharma: Thanissaro Bhikkhu has said that if one is not careful, Buddhist practice - and Theravada Buddhist practice in particular - could become "the next yoga," meaning a technique separated from the larger context that makes it transcendent. To counteract this tendency to live from retreat to retreat but not actually relate to one's life, he suggested that a relationship to community life and ritual may be required. Is community an essential component for a layperson doing intensive practice?

Gil Fronsdal: I would say it's important, but I'm reluctant to say essential. What Thanissaro Bhikkhu is pointing to, I think, is that the vipassana movement is a relatively new spiritual tradition in the West, and we've left behind a lot of the cultural overlays and religious forms that exist in Asia. What is happening is a kind of reinventing of the wheel. Having this wonderfully profound practice of mindfulness at the core, we are now beginning slowly to incorporate more and more elements of the tradition. Centers like the three of ours need to find ways to apply and express the dharma in the wider arena of people's lives than may be possible in retreat itself.

Twenty-five years ago, when the vipassana tradition was young here in America, there was probably an overemphasis on the value and importance of being on retreats. That's pretty much passed, although there are certainly people who are still inclined in that direction. The vipassana community in the West is much more balanced now; the importance of practicing off retreat is emphasized as much as practicing on retreat. Twenty-five years ago there weren't many communities where people could get support from fellow practitioners, and now there are a hundred or more sitting groups around the country. The feeling of community and the connectedness to fellow practitioners is a rich part of what's available now.

Buddhadharma: Do your centers offer programs for families and children?

Marcia Rose: The Insight Meditation Society in Barre has had a family retreat for many years, one of the first in the Theravada tradition in the West. It has grown tremendously as people have brought more of their life into their practice, and vice versa. There are now many other family-oriented activities at centers around the country. There's been a natural evolution of people bringing their family into the center and the forming of parent groups that discuss the dharma in relationship to family life.

Gil Fronsdal: We offer a family program for children once a month, and a lot of thought goes into it. It's wonderful to have the children in the .meditation hall, sometimes running around, sometimes meditating, sometimes listening to stories or doing activities.

Michael Liebenson Grady: We don't do a lot with children, but for example this Sunday there's a two-hour workshop for ten- to thirteen-year-olds. There is some sitting and walking for short periods but mostly a lot of discussion of principles, such as ethics and what mindfulness means.

Marcia Rose: There is a young adults' retreat at the meditation center in Barre, where they can look at their experiences with their friends and family, their feelings, the sensations in their bodies. Many of us teach meditation to younger children and have them do it for just a few minutes. It's quiet time, time to work with paying attention to sound and breath. Children do that anyway, but we are giving them permission to do so and to bring some attention to their natural experiences. We also do a lot of storytelling and exploration through discussion.

Just as with adults, we are bringing the practice into the whole of their lives - their relationships, their activities, their interests. You need some experience to do that. I'm a mother and was a schoolteacher for many years, so I can relate the dharma to the level of interest of a five-year-old, a fourteen-year-old, or a ten-year-old. When dharma is brought to children, it begins to make a fuller practice life for families.

Many parents have said that after a five-day family retreat they go home and actually sit with their kids. It may only be for three minutes, but they sit with their kids, or they do loving-kindness practices, or discuss certain teachings within the family, such as generosity. Integrating the dharma into their regular lives brings people together.

Michael Liebenson Grady: When you come down to it, all of what we have talked about in terms of family, community and daily life is supported by silent practice. The conditions in silent retreat are rare and precious, and all of us value it and have derived tremendous benefits from practicing in retreat. One of the major fruits to come out of silent practice is deeper samadhi and concentration. Also, there is an emphasis on the continuity of mindfulness. You learn to lead a very simple life, which allows for a lot more space, so you can really pay attention on a moment-to-moment level. Paying attention moment to moment leads to deep insight.

Gil Fronsdal: A lot of spiritual traditions have some way for people to step out of their normal lives. They can get a new perspective on themselves because they're not caught in the middle of their social life and their usual relationships. There are vision quests, spending forty days in the desert, and so forth. In the Theravada tradition, going on retreats offers a very radical stepping outside of our normal life to get an incomparable perspective on what's really most important in our lives. It allows us to look into the core of our lives and the lives we live together. In terms of teaching, it's inconceivable for me to think of someone becoming a teacher or providing pastoral care who hasn't really gone deep into themselves in the retreat environment.

A retreat is a real truth-teller. I can go along thinking that one thing going on in my life is important, and then I'll go on retreat and realize it's actually something else that's important. I can uncover a place of attachment or a place I'm caught or an issue that needs to be looked at. I wouldn't have known that unless I stopped and stepped outside of my life to let what's inside bubble up in an uninterrupted way.

Even just sitting for an hour at home can do that to some degree, but not as deeply.

Marcia Rose: Retreat is the place where the distractions of our life are minimized, where we can be with ourselves and see what is, without our habits of being and doing. The truth can unfold naturally, as Gil said, in a setting where we face our self directly. I can't imagine anybody teaching the dharma in any Buddhist tradition without ongoing periods of silent practice, whether it's one hour a day or five retreats a year. If one is looking for real understanding, silent practice is the ground that supports it.