



Insight Meditation Society

Sangha News - March 2011

Awareness Pure and Simple

From Bob Agolia, Executive Director: Senior IMS teacher Steve Armstrong will be teaching at our Retreat Center next month, April 8-17, together with guiding teacher Carol Wilson. The theme of their insight meditation retreat is [Awareness: Pure and Simple](#).



I was intrigued by this subject, since awareness is a term that's often used in meditation. I wanted to understand how we can relax and widen our attention, so that whatever is happening in each moment can be spontaneously known. Also, at what points in our practice do techniques support the deepening of awareness, and when might it be more helpful to let them go? Steve addresses these questions in this [interview](#).

A Solid Foundation

Also from Bob: I often hear from retreatants and teachers alike these days that IMS is feeling good and looking beautiful. We're grateful for such positive feedback and I'm delighted to share some important indicators from 2010 that validate how healthy and vibrant the organization truly is.

Last year, we experienced one of the highest occupancy levels in recent times at both the Retreat Center and the Forest Refuge - we averaged 90% of available capacity. In addition, we were able to offer financial assistance to almost a third of our retreatants, thanks to contributions from many in our sangha. The generosity of our community was further reflected in two other areas: donations exceeded our expectations across almost all giving categories and dedicated volunteers offered approximately 4,000 hours of service.

Finally, IMS operated within approved budget resources while continuing to make improvements to our operations, facilities and grounds. We are grateful to all who choose to attend retreats, teach, donate, volunteer and serve on staff. It takes a quite a sangha to support a meditation center and to make it a true spiritual refuge. IMS begins 2011, our 36th year, on solid footing!



A blast from the past - revered Burmese meditation master Mahasi Sayadaw visited IMS in 1979. He is shown here, in the center of the back row, during a ceremony in the meditation hall to authorize Sharon Salzberg, Joseph Goldstein, Jack Kornfield and Jacqueline Mandell-Schwartz as teachers. Also present was Anagarika Munindra (center, in white), an early teacher of our founders Joseph and Sharon.

Dharma Updates

A Dharma Life: Honoring Ruth Denison - This year's Labor Day Weekend will be beloved elder Ruth Denison's last scheduled retreat at IMS. We plan to honor her life of service to the teachings and to celebrate her 89th birthday.

Enrollment in Ruth's weekend course is limited to her experienced students - anyone who has already sat at least one of her retreats and who appreciates her unique teaching style is welcome to register. For more information and to sign up for "*A Dharma Life: The Extraordinary is Always Arising*" visit our website [here](#).

Toward the end of the retreat we will present Ruth with loving and appreciative messages. If you have such a message and cannot attend, please email it before August 31 to registration@dharma.org.

We are profoundly grateful to Ruth for all her contributions to the dharma, both here at IMS over the last 35 years, and around the world for even longer.

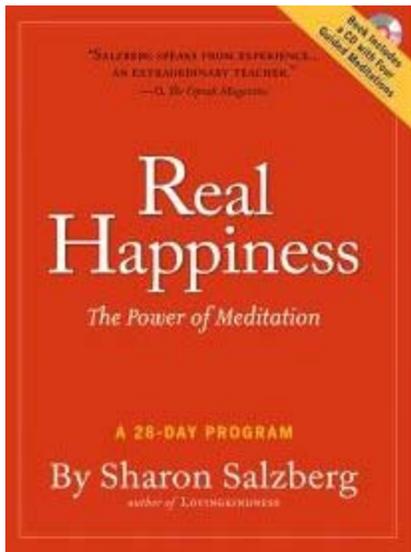


Just before leaving IMS last September, Ruth led Executive Director Bob Agoglia and Registrar Christine Marshall in an impromptu dharma song.

Discovering Real Happiness - "If you can breathe, you can meditate." So Sharon Salzberg confidently states in [Real Happiness - The Power of Meditation](#). This latest publication from her empowers us to trust ourselves and the process of turning our attention inwards. For those seeking a sense of well-being and a more peaceful heart and mind, this book will take you on an inner journey to discover the nature of true happiness. And it just might transform your life in the most unexpected ways!

Sharon has been teaching meditation since 1974. These decades of experience allow her to capture the essence of the practice and expertly convey it through down-to-earth writing and illuminating stories. The first two chapters give a clear overview of what meditation is, what it isn't and the benefits we can expect once we begin. She begins, "Straightforward and simple (but not easy), meditation is essentially training our attention so that we can be more aware.... Once we see clearly what's going on in the moment, we can then choose whether and how to act on what we're seeing."

The heart of the text is then organized into four weekly sections covering concentration, mindfulness of the body, mindfulness of thoughts and feelings, and lovingkindness. The final chapter contains tips on how to keep the practice going. An added bonus is the accompanying audio material with Sharon's reassuring voice leading the listener through four guided meditations.



Meditation in the Media - Various pieces related to Buddhist meditation and its benefits have been featured in the media of late. Jon Kabat-Zinn was interviewed by NPR's Krista Tippett about [the science of mindfulness](#).

Also aired on NPR was [a moving piece](#) from meditator Toni Bernhard, a woman with a debilitating illness whose practice of *mudita* (joy in the happiness of others) has helped her find a "way back to a life of fulfillment and joy." (It was heartwarming to hear the term *mudita* mentioned on mainstream radio!)

Science Daily ran a [report](#) about recent research results showing that mindfulness increases the grey matter in our brain cells.

Finally, Sharon Salzberg has appeared several times recently in the national media. ABC News' [Beliefs program](#) interviewed her, as did PBS's [Religion & Ethics NewsWeekly](#) and the [Los Angeles Times](#). [AARP Magazine](#) also published an article by Sharon on how meditation can build brain function at any age.



News Worth Noting

From Forest Refuge Manager Eric McCord: **Forest Refuge Office Hours Extended** - At the Forest Refuge, we have a steady flow of quiet arrivals and departures each week as personal retreats begin and end on different days. In order to support each arrival, office staff are now on hand weekends and evenings, as needed, to offer a welcoming presence for arriving yogis.

This new arrangement gives us the opportunity to meet and greet, help you settle in, take care of payment balances and questions, review practice guidelines, and handle any last-minute needs. As we all know, it takes a lot to pull everything together to go on retreat, and it feels great to be here for you at this last step - actually getting here!



Eric McCord and Forest Refuge Office Assistant Chris Creelman, ready to welcome arriving yogis.



After a snowy winter, a Forest Refuge Buddha looks out over deep drifts.

Retreat Center Dining Room Renovations Completed! - The generosity of those who responded to our Spring Appeal last year has brought about a transformation of the Retreat Center dining room. The work was carried out over the last few months, as much as possible between retreats, and is now virtually complete. Environmentally-friendly flooring, exposed original brickwork, new wall surfaces, and a relocated beverage station with handsome oak shelving have brought a harmonious and peaceful beauty to this much-loved space.



Newly-revealed brickwork sets off the beverage station at the entrance to the dining hall.



Retreatants now pick up dishes at the start of the serving tables and silverware at the end.

Better Sound - The Retreat Center meditation hall's audio and recording system has been upgraded. There is now clear coverage to every single seat in the hall, including the chairs along the sides and at the back, with no 'dead spots.' The system incorporates a new professional digital sound processor, amplifier and six precisely tuned speakers, allowing voices to come across undistorted and much more true to life.



Better Access - A layer of quarter-cut oak has been added to the plywood ramp in the Retreat Center upper walking room so that it now matches the flooring. Sturdy handrails along the ramp and the adjoining stairs complete the improvements.

Program Highlights

Recent Retreats - At the **Forest Refuge**, Susan O'Brien and Sky Dawson are teaching throughout March.



Susan O'Brien and Sky Dawson.



In the Northeast it was a winter for dramatic icicles, and the Forest Refuge had its share.

Yogis attending the **Retreat Center's** annual *New Year's Retreat* celebrated the turning of the year engaged in meditation practice in the company of spiritual friends.



(L to R) Yanai Postelnik, Catherine McGee, Eugene Cash and Pamela Weiss were the teaching team for the New Year's course.



In February, Gina Sharpe and Pat Coffey led a weekend devoted to finding joy and inner calm in challenging times.



The snow becomes radiant in the sunset's glow as the yogis' practice brings light and warmth to the heart.

Future Courses - If you are thinking of sitting at the **Forest Refuge** in the warmer months this year, please be aware that Burmese meditation master Pa Auk Sayadaw will be teaching here July 1 -

October 31. This period is currently full with a long wait list. However, the remaining months of 2011 still have spaces available for personal retreats, especially right now throughout March. Information and applications are available [online](#).

At the Retreat Center, space is still available in some spring courses. Rebecca Bradshaw and Chas DiCapua will teach [The Freedom That Includes Everything](#), April 1-6. 14 CEs are being offered for psychologists and licensed mental health counselors.



In [Awareness Pure and Simple](#), April 8-17, Carol Wilson and Steve Armstrong (*listen to interview above*) will lead yogis in exploring the possibility of seeing deeply habituated patterns with less reactivity and living with a greater sense of well-being.

Richard Shankman and Bob Stahl will teach [Steadying the Mind, Opening to Insight](#), May 13-20. CEs will also be available for this course.

Mark Coleman will lead a weekend course, [The Art and Science of Mindfulness](#), May 20-22.

Sangha Stories

We value your stories highlighting your retreat experience and its positive impact on your life. Please email your contribution to sanghastories@dharma.org.

*From yogi Rebecca Priest of MA: **Blessings and Benefit of a Forest Refuge Retreat*** - This past January I spent eight days at the Forest Refuge. I had sat at the Retreat Center quite a few times, but this was my first experience of personal retreat at IMS. I wondered how it would be to structure my own time.

What I discovered was that by being in a safe and supportive environment, and holding the intention for each moment to be a moment of practice, I was able to allow my practice to unfold in a way that felt both natural and organic, as well as gently disciplined and focused.

At the beginning of my retreat I realized how important it would be to practice *metta* (lovingkindness). I knew from previous experience that this could help to counteract a pattern of harsh self-criticism. Beginning with metta softened my habitual judgments and reactions so that I could explore what was actually happening within my heart and mind. I was able to bring kindness and compassion to the fear, worry and doubt which often arise and go unexamined.

The two Forest Refuge teachers each gave a dharma talk and offered some helpful words at the

morning sitting several times during my stay. Along with their gentle guidance, they kept reminding us to return to the experience of being right here, right now.

Settling into the bodily experience of the present moment has continued to guide my practice since returning home. I am finding it easier to listen with patience when I'm with family and friends. I have also found that I am more aware when anxiety or worry come up, and returning to the body and breath feels more accessible as a skillful means for being with these states. The fruits of this personal retreat are helping to bring a more compassionate, mindful awareness into all the moments of my day, and for this I am profoundly grateful.



Serving at IMS

Working Guest Program - IMS's working guest program is designed for those who would like to volunteer their service and integrate practice with daily life activities, all within our supportive and friendly environment.

Working alongside our staff for approximately 30 hours each week, working guests receive meals, housing and access to the retreat environment and staff community in exchange for their service. Regular interviews with our Resident Teachers are also available and two days off each week are provided.

We are currently recruiting working guests to help care for our grounds and are seeking applicants throughout the late spring and summer months. If you are interested in applying for this program, you must have sat at least one week at IMS and have an established meditation practice. Please see our [website](#) for availability and the application.



Working guest projects may include maintenance of lawns and trails, gardening, tree husbandry and occasional work indoors on general maintenance or housekeeping projects. Experience with landscaping work is preferred but not required.

Young Adult Helpers Needed - IMS is seeking Young Adult Helpers (YAHs) for our Family Retreat, June 30 - July 5. Together with adult group leaders, YAHs help plan activities and supervise younger children.

If you know anyone who will be 14-18 years of age by July 1 this year, has experience with younger children and would like to assist, please encourage them to [apply](#). You can contact Sarah Stroud at volunteer@dharm.org for more information.



A YAH gives tips to young hoopsters. Others help out with projects in the art tent.

Wishing You Well

All of us at IMS wish you and your loved ones peace, good health and happiness in the coming months.



You can find an [archive of Sangha News](#) and links to its audio interviews on our website.



IMS is a spiritual refuge for all who seek freedom of mind and heart. We offer meditation retreats rooted in the Theravada Buddhist teachings of ethics, concentration and wisdom. These practices help develop awareness and compassion in ourselves, giving rise to greater peace and happiness in the world.

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