

The Autumn Retreat, 2014

By Laurie Ottens

Our core group welcomed a new member this year, Patti Brady; we met from Nov. 13th -16. This is our twelfth retreat, and this year's was hosted by RM Seikai, with help from RM Phoebe. Meeting together every November has become a central part of our practice, and we all truly look forward to it every year. An additional bonus for those of us carpooling from the East Bay (Albany) was to begin and end the retreat with dear friends both going to and returning from the temple. It is always a gift to have time together as we return to our homes and our responsibilities.

As a background to how the yearly November retreats got started, we all are indebted to RM Teigan Stevens. In 2003 he kindly offered the first retreat as a way to support each other as we train during the aging process. Although he no longer attends the retreats, we are all grateful for the many years he skillfully led us.

This year our "theme book" was "*There is More to Dying Than Death*", by Lama Shenpen Hookham, a British female teacher in the Tibetan tradition. As noted above, our ongoing, underlying theme has been how to continue our practice as we age and deal with various life changes and physical constraints; facing our own deaths is an integral part of this evolving process.

Our retreats always include a well-blended mixture of meditation, ceremonial, topic discussions, working meditation periods, and walking meditations around the temple property. This year we added brief meditations prior to each discussion session, as well as the recitation of the Surangama Sutra. We also were fortunate enough to see pictures from RM Seikai's pilgrimage to India last year, along with hearing his heartfelt commentary.

Personally, I found this year's book to be a true treasure, leading to many self and group reflections about the death process, as well as how to prepare for death. We focused on four of the chapters in the book, and we started each discussion by addressing leading questions written ahead of time by RM Seikai. This helped provide a starting framework for the discussions, which then naturally flowed organically to ideas and questions offered by the group.

One of the main themes I picked up from this book was the author's encouraging her readers to have confidence and joy both in living and in facing death. Right alongside this theme was her gentle admonition to put forth steadfast effort while simultaneously resting in the natural self-confidence and joy that arises with daily practice.

The second main theme that struck me was her repeated (because we may not hear it the first, or even second, time) embracing of where you are right now, leading up to and including the time of your death. For me, it was wonderfully reassuring to really feel comfortable with accepting this very life, this very moment. This holds true even if you or a loved one going through the dying process is "not doing a very good job", in your opinion. Several of us voiced concerns about possibly losing control, losing one's calm center, and just botching the process altogether. One response to those concerns was to realize that there is no real way to muck it up, and to just let the waves keep right on rolling. This in no way implies any sense of complacency regarding our efforts, however; we just need to continue doing our best, each gentle step of the way.

I think I speak for the entire group in expressing our sincere gratitude to both RM Seikai and RM Phoebe for having the retreat each year, and for sharing with us their wealth of experience and their examples of how to train in this world of samsara. Thank you both for your many kindnesses and warm welcome!

13 people attended this year's Autumn Retreat. There was a very cohesive feeling amongst the retreatants, and these are some of the reactions which Judy Brown, the group coordinator, forwarded on to us:

- The schedule was nice...people liked the pace...liked ending after breakfast on Sunday to allow travel time.
- A positive reaction to *There's More to Dying than Death* and the ideas and changes reading it engendered.
- People really liked RM Seikai's use of questions to stimulate thought and discussion. And people liked the discussion periods, found them really helpful.
- Starting the discussion periods with a short silent meditation time was much appreciated; as well some suggested short meditation times to transition from more of the activities—before work, for example. The silence at the end of meals before the closing verse was mentioned.
- People enjoyed seeing and hearing about the pilgrimage to the sacred places of the Buddha. AND seeing the clear night sky!
- A very positive reaction to the Tara Brach book, *Radical Acceptance*, as the reading for next year. Many thanks were expressed to RM Phoebe and RM Seikai for their work, and for having us.

