

**T**n the language of Sanskrit they're called *preta*, or hungry ghosts. Loathsome to contemplate, the hungry ghosts' scrawny elongated necks, enormous swollen bellies, and withered phantom limbs represent insatiable emotional and spiritual appetite. Their tuberous throats make swallowing nearly impossible. Their bilious stomachs can't digest what does get through. Unrelieved, their terrible hunger and thirst only intensifies the hungry ghosts' longing for gratification.

The Buddhist tradition relates a story about the hungry ghosts, banqueting in hell and heaven. Arrayed around tables lavish with delicacies, the hungry ghosts have only impossibly long-handled spoons with which to eat. In hell, the ghosts' suffering endures as each luckless one tries to feed itself with the awkward utensil that cannot reach its mouth. In heaven, the ghosts feed each other with the long spoons, and all are nourished.

Buddhism began about twenty-five hundred years ago in a southern region of present-day Nepal. Siddhartha Gautama, the pampered prince of the local Shaka clan, left

the palace one day and witnessed for the first time a sick man, an old man, and a corpse. Stunned and moved, the prince abandoned his privileged life. He studied with renowned gurus for years but remained spiritually dissatisfied. Wandering through the countryside, one day the former prince approached a fig tree. Seated for some days in meditation beneath the tree, Siddhartha realized what would become the essential Buddhist doctrine of human suffering, *dukkha*, rooted in unrealistic attachment to fundamentally impermanent ideals, objects, and beings. Thus enlightened, Siddhartha became the Buddha.

Over several more centuries Buddhism migrated throughout southeast Asia and traveled northward into Tibet, China, Japan, and Korea. With each of these adoptions, Buddhist spiritual philosophy and practice morphed to accommodate itself to the existing culture of its new home. From these local differences emerged the varied Buddhist traditions, akin to Christian denominations, that practitioners observe today.

A few Americans had begun to appreciate Buddhism as far back as the early eighteen hundreds. Then, the

New England Transcendentalists Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau credited Buddhist thought in their own writing on philosophy and religion. Americans' sustained interest in Buddhism took widespread hold after the 1893 World Parliament of Religions in Chicago, where charismatic holy men from the East stole the show.

Today most non-Asian American Buddhists practice in the Zen and Tibetan, and Vipassana schools.

Although Japanese Zen Buddhist teachers had first colonized the United States decades earlier, the nineteen-fifties Beat writers Gary Snyder, Allen Ginsberg, and Jack Kerouac made Zen cool. Tibetan Buddhism came later to America. The Chinese military occupied Tibet in 1950, instituting a regime of political and religious oppression that forced Tibet's significant Buddhist leaders into foreign exile. One of them, Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, migrated first to England and then, in the nineteen-seventies, to the United States. Here he established a number of local meditation centers informed by Tibetan Buddhist practice, first called Dharmadhatu, now officially known as Shambhala. The Dalai Lama, the exiled spiritual and temporal leader

# *The Politics of Practice*

## Engaged Buddhists Do the Right Thing

by Dayna Finet  
Photography by Barton Wilder Custom Images

of the Tibetan people, accepted the Nobel Prize for Peace in 1989. Subsequently, his prolific writing and speaking has enlarged Buddhism's American appeal.

Vipassana, also commonly called Insight Meditation, derives from the Theravada Buddhist tradition practiced in Southeast Asia. Vipassana practice took root in the United States during the nineteen-seventies. It has since grown more widespread here with the establishment of several prominent American insight meditation centers and through the published work of Vipassana teachers like Sharon Salzberg and Jack Kornfield.

Adaptable as always, Buddhism here has acquired some distinctive features grounded in American cultural experience. Characteristically pragmatic, American Buddhism is friendly not only to monastics, but equally (if not more so) to lay practitioners with real-world work and family obligations. Along with men, women populate the hierarchy of American Buddhism to an extent unprecedented anywhere else. And primarily (though not only) from Americans has emerged the way of socially "engaged" Buddhist political activism.

### *Paméla Overeynder*

*I became active in the Nuclear Freeze Movement in the early nineteen-eighties. Until then I had talked about social problems, but I remember feeling overwhelmed, not knowing where to begin or even if anything I did would help. At the time I lived in Boston where there was a very vital anti-nuclear movement. So I found a group and got active.*

*In the late nineteen-eighties I became a paid activist for the Foundation for a Compassionate Society here in Austin. We worked on a variety of issues, including nuclear testing, the environment, women's health, and human rights. As I began to work within the larger peace movement in Austin, I observed that peace activists, myself included, carried a lot of distress and anger and we weren't always very skillful in working for the causes we cared about. We weren't very skillful in working with each other and questions of racism and sexism came up from time to time. I also wondered how effective we really were.*

*Personally I was struggling with how to integrate my deepening spiritual path with the activism. I felt like two different persons—one who worked for social change and the other who did spiritual practices. I was getting increasingly uncomfortable with that divide when I was introduced to the work of Vietnamese monk and peace activist Thich Nhat Hahn. His first book published in the United States, *Being Peace*, planted the seeds in a whole generation of western Buddhist practitioners that spiritual practice is the base of all social action.*

*Immediately, I began to do regular sitting and walking meditation. I began to see myself more clearly. I could see how anxious and angry and judgmental I was. I could observe how attached I was to my own views and how little attention I had for anyone else. I wasn't able to listen deeply to others. I had some very interesting and ineffective patterns for coping with the world and working for peace. I wanted to work for peace but I wasn't peaceful inside and so I wasn't really available to the world around*

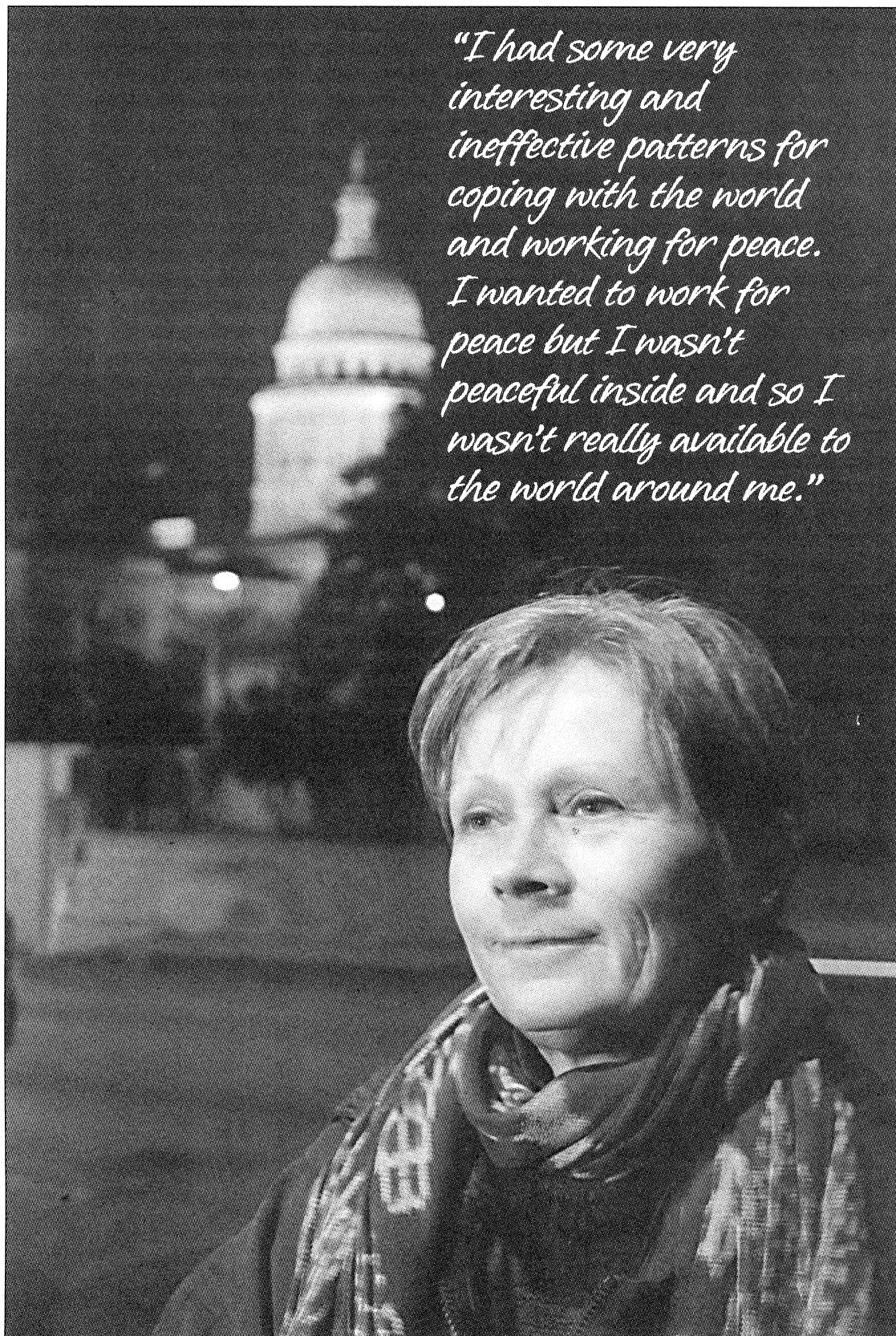
*peace, making peace and practicing peace." He didn't write: "being urgent, touching anger, making war and then suddenly practicing peace." Sometimes the war is inside us, sometimes we get confused and think another peacemaker is the enemy, and almost always we think the enemy is a person or group of persons and not the ideology or action which is the true target.*

### *Doing good: Buddhist ethics condensed*

From antiquity the world's religions have shared a preoccupation with moral conduct. In theistic religions, God's given rules define right and wrong with a certainty that promises solace to the faithful while it shackles those who cringe to recall their sin-and-guilt-bound religious upbringing. A God-less yet substantially ethical religion, Buddhism shuns commandments in exchange for five "precepts" handed to his followers by the Buddha (no deity, but rather, and perhaps rarer, a fully enlightened mortal). Whereas commandments mandate and forbid, the precepts model and suggest. Commandments are issued by divine authority. They compel obedience. Precepts reflect human resolve. They avow the intention to choose what seems sensible and right.

Identification with all creatures' self-protective instinct inspires the first precept, *to respect and protect life*. In its simplest form, the precept affirms a commitment to not kill, nor to support killing. The second precept, *to not take what is not given*, involves a promise to not steal or take what belongs to others. Many Buddhists also understand the second precept as a pledge to refuse personal gain from the suffering of living beings. Ages ago the third precept, *to not indulge in lustful misconduct*, represented the intention to resist sexual relations outside marriage. In its more relevant contemporary meaning, the third precept expresses a commitment to respectful sexual behavior involving neither manipulation nor exploitation. The fourth precept, *to practice right speech*, means at its most basic a promise to communicate truthfully. It can also represent a vow to use language with compassion and understanding. Conscious attention and receptivity to the present are the core of Buddhist philosophy and practice. The fifth precept, *to not misuse intoxicants*, expresses the resolve to resist escapism through any kind of overindulgence.

The notion of evil integral to some religions is conceived differently in Buddhism, which regards the harm that people do to themselves and others as unskillful action arising from insufficient wisdom. The dispassionate self-observation of disciplined meditation practice supports imperfect humans as they stride or stumble toward enlightenment. As standards that guide such reflection, the five precepts illuminate the path.



*me. Little by little, I stopped thinking it was my job to save the world. During this time I stopped working as an activist. I knew if I was going to be a peacemaker I had to find peace inside me and that would be the only basis for future work. I began to study Buddhism and discovered that engagement in the world was at the core of practice.*

*I learned from my direct experience that how we work for peace is inseparable from peace itself. Peacemaking has to be a totally consistent endeavor. The means must be in alignment with the ends. As Arnie Kotler wrote in his introduction to *Being Peace*: "being peace, touching*

Buddhist philosophy gives individuals the responsibility for deciding exactly how to observe the precepts in their daily lives. Within each interpretation, though, is embedded an awareness of humans' interdependence with each other and the natural world. As an ethical system, the five precepts encourage people to consider the implications beyond self of every individual choice.

### John Dinsmore

I got into Zen Buddhism for its emphasis on understanding, on getting below preconceptions, and on experiencing life directly. I had already been a meditator for many years and realized how transformational it was, but I wanted to achieve insight into the existential problems of life and death and to live a valuable life. Specifically, I wanted to overcome a limit in my character that kept me from devoting more of myself to making the world better.

I thought of the problem this way: if you find a child stuck in a well, you do what you can to rescue the child. Even if inconvenient, the alternative is unimaginable. This is just

common compassion. Yet how is it that in the face of even greater human need we consistently turn our backs? I'm talk-

*They just sit. Each time the State of Texas conducts another execution, a small group of people from the local Buddhist Peace Fellowship bears witness, seated in silent meditation on the pavement across Lavaca Street from the Governor's Mansion. The death-penalty vigils represent the group's longest ongoing project—not inauspicious weather, not the noxious downtown Austin traffic, not taunting counter-protesters deter the meditators. Their presence dignifies the scene on the street.*

ing about the masses of people who live in poverty unimaginable to those in our

privileged milieu—farmers' children who are stepping on land mines—farm workers who are dying of pesticide poisoning—

those dying in war and in acts of ethnic cleansing—the mentally ill forced into homelessness—people living in "Cancer Alley" along the lower Mississippi River and drinking poisoned water—not to mention those who take their own lives because the world simply has no place for them. What happens to compassion when faced with these problems? Where is my compassion that I can turn my back on them? Why isn't it unthinkable to do so?

My limitation was different from self-centeredness ("I've got it good—why worry about all those other folks?") It was more of a shutting down. I think most of us shut down in one way or another. Somehow when suffering is only a bit removed from us, or when the measure of suffering is great enough for us to have difficulty comprehending it, we no longer understand the imperative to do something. In my limited social activism I immediately came up against a solid wall of anger and frustration. I told myself: "Just do something." After all, the imperative to

do something was clear, and I suppose the compassion was there—the anger and frustration were extra. But somehow I kept running up against that wall. I wanted to find a way to act.

Since beginning Zen practice only a few years ago I've become much more active and can barely find that wall. I've learned to view the anger and frustration as something else that has nothing to do with getting things done. I've become content with doing little things: helping out at the Zen Center, helping keep the Hill Country Buddhist Peace Fellowship on track, sitting in meditation across from the Governor's Mansion during executions. And I just do them because they feel like the right thing to do. I'm surprised how fluid my engagement has become and intend to build on this and eventually devote most of my time to it as I grow older.

### Engaged Buddhism: Compassion in action

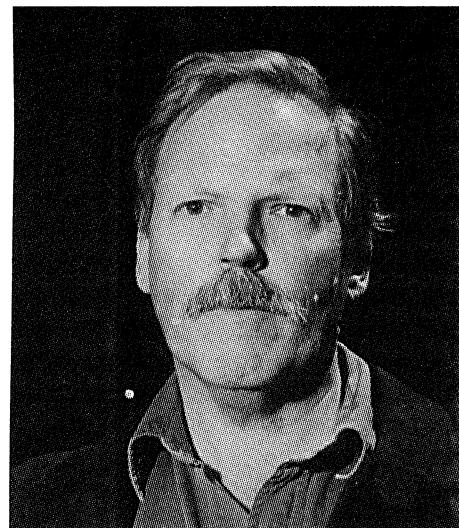
Every religion attracts its share of salvation seekers. Yet models like the American Friends Service Committee and the Catholic Workers represent an overt spirituality of social engagement that also thrives within the major faith traditions. By comparison Buddhism suffers a reputation for apolitical introspection. "The



Buddhists meditate during a death-watch vigil across from the Governor's mansion.

actual achievement of Buddhism has been the development of practical systems of meditation toward the end of liberating a few dedicated individuals from psychological hang-ups and cultural conditionings," wrote Beat poet and Buddhist Gary Snyder.

In his journal of the nineteen-sixties, *Fragrant Palm Leaves*, Thich Nhat Hahn



John Dinsmore

*"Somehow when suffering is only a bit removed from us, or when the measure of suffering is great enough for us to have difficulty comprehending it, we no longer understand the imperative to do something."*

first employed the term "engaged Buddhism" to describe the relief work of his fellow Buddhist monks and nuns in war-ravaged rural Vietnam. "Engaged Buddhism in Vietnam teaches that good works do not need to be reserved for the pagoda, but can be extended to towns and villages," wrote Nhat Hahn. "It does not make sense for students of the Buddha to isolate themselves inside a temple, or they are not his true students. Buddhas are to be found in places of suffering." After his exile in 1966, Thich Nhat Hahn's peace work gained international stature and extended his vision of engaged Buddhism to the West.

Pragmatic Americans have eagerly taken to engaged Buddhism. In the work of its most visible practitioner, Brooklyn-born Zen monk Bernard Tetsugen Glassman, engaged Buddhism here has acquired a uniquely American enterprising quality. Glassman's contribution to engaged Buddhism includes the establishment of Grayston Mandala, a group of for-profit businesses and not-for-profit service agencies that provide housing, child care, training, and jobs to some of Yonkers' poorest neighborhoods. Glassman organizes "street retreats" where participants directly experience homelessness for a week. He has led meditation retreats at the Auschwitz-Birkenau crematorium site. He's a founder of the Zen Peacemaker Order.

Austin's modest community of engaged Buddhists draws in people like Pamela Overeynder and John Dinsmore. Their activism lacks the hysterics often associated with political protest. Its drama rather dwells in silent contrast to the usual shouting and sloganizing that accompany public expression of political belief.

They just sit. Each time the State of Texas conducts another execution, a small group of people from the local Buddhist Peace Fellowship bears witness, seated in silent meditation on the pavement across

Lavaca Street from the Governor's Mansion. The death-penalty vigils represent the group's longest ongoing project—not inauspicious weather, not the noxious downtown Austin traffic, not taunting counter-protesters deter the meditators. Their presence dignifies the scene on the street.

Created in 1998, the Texas Hill Country

Chapter of the Buddhist Peace Fellowship (BPF) meets monthly at the Austin Zen Center. An international network affiliated with the interfaith peace group Fellowship of Reconciliation, BPF links Buddhist teachings of wisdom and compassion with progressive social change. Its work has ranged widely across peace and disarmament, social justice, and environmental issues. The loosely structured local group takes on projects such as the death penalty vigils when someone cares enough about an issue to get started and others join in.

For some months now, Texas Hill Country BPF has been involved with Austin's Adopt-a-

Minefield Campaign. That project will last through this month and probably into March. It aims to raise \$50,000 here to pay for the clearing of minefields in Praca, Bosnia-Herzegovina, so the people of that village can return to their homes. Last December BPF members and others observed the United Nations' Human Rights Day with a walking meditation at the Texas State Capitol to raise awareness and money for the land-mine project.

Organized social engagement by Buddhists in Austin isn't limited to the Buddhist Peace Fellowship. The Shambhala Prison Project nourishes reconciliation in a place of suffering most needful of compassionate action. For several years people from the Austin Shambhala Center have run a project to support Texas prison inmates' Buddhist study and practice. The Shambhala group has provided instructional and inspirational books to prisoners and maintains an active correspondence with inmates throughout the prison system. Last summer members of the Shambhala group visited with a Buddhist inmates' group at the Walls Unit in Houston. Planning has begun to initiate regular visits to the Three Rivers Federal Unit where a group of inmates has expressed interest in regular meetings to assist their practice.

## Some More of the Dharma

According to legend, the vast literature of Buddhism first emerged when the Buddha's contemporaries began to record his words on palm leaves, to copy and share beyond his immediate circle of followers. Not all that long ago curious Americans might have found writing about Buddhism almost as rare. Now several small publishers produce essentially Buddhist-themed lists, while major publishers have put out more than one (watered-down, say some) Buddhist best-seller. Examples include *The Art of Happiness: A Handbook for Living* by the Dalai Lama, with co-author Howard Cutler, and *Inner Revolution: Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Real Happiness* by Columbia University professor Robert Thurman, the first American ordained as a monk in a Tibetan Buddhist lineage. A quarterly magazine, *Tricycle*, concentrates exclusively on all aspects of Buddhism.

Buddhism pairs up a basic spiritual simplicity with a deep and challenging subtlety, so that even a lifetime of its pursuit would leave more yet to learn. Stephen Batchelor's *Buddhism Without Beliefs: A Contemporary Guide to Awakening* makes a helpful introduction for beginners (with special allure for religious skeptics). Charlotte Joko Beck, who founded the San Diego Zen Center, and Pema Chodron, a Buddhist nun who studied with Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, both came to Buddhism as middle-aged American women with kids and marital problems. Both appeal to readers with no-nonsense aim as they employ Buddhism to take on the ordi-

nary hassles of everyday life (Beck: *Everyday Zen: Love and Work* and *Nothing Special: Living Zen*; Chodron: *The Wisdom of No Escape: And the Path of Loving-Kindness*; Start Where You Are: A Guide to Compassionate Living; and *When Things Fall Apart: Heart Advice for Difficult Times*). The Austin Zen Center follows the teachings of San Francisco Zen Center founder Shunryu Suzuki, whose talks have been collected in an elegant short volume titled *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*. Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, who founded the Shambhala Centers in Austin and elsewhere, wrote fourteen books, among them *Meditation in Action*, *Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism*, and *Crazy Wisdom*. Books by Sharon Salzberg *Lovingkindness: The Revolutionary Art of Happiness* and Jack Kornfield (*A Path With Heart: A Guide Through the Perils and Promises of Spiritual Life*) represent the Vipassana tradition.

A literature of engaged Buddhism has begun to emerge. Thich Nhat Hahn's more than thirty books, chiefly *Being Peace* and *For a Future To Be Possible*, have profoundly affected peace workers worldwide. *Instructions to the Cook: A Zen Master's Lessons in Living a Life That Matters* and *Bearing Witness: A Zen Master's Lessons in Making Peace* recount the tale of Bernard Glassman's unique entrepreneurial adventures in Buddhist social engagement. g

—Dayna Finet

In Buddhist art, elaborate imagery signifies the vast diversity of experience familiar to us all. *Preta* symbolize anguished craving and the ceaseless suffering of want. The benevolent *bodhisattva* represent boundless, supreme compassion. Poised to enter nirvana, the *bodhisattva* delay their own enlightenment and instead choose to remain in the painful cycle of death and rebirth because their wisdom can help bring less fortunate creatures along.

"What the world needs more than anything else is active servants of peace dedicated to their *bodhisattva* vision," wrote Tibetan Buddhist teacher Sogyal Rinpoche. "We need *bodhisattva* lawyers, *bodhisattva* artists and politicians, *bodhisattva* doctors and economists, *bodhisattva* teachers and scientists, *bodhisattva* technicians and engineers, *bodhisattva* everywhere, working for the preservation of our world, and for a more merciful future."

Confronting urgent problems—environmental ruin, economic disparity, human exploitation, disease, famine, and plausible nuclear crisis—socially engaged Buddhism embodies the *bodhisattva* ideal at work in the world. g

*It comforts sloppy precept-keeper Dayna Finet to know that in Buddhism, intentions count.*

# A guide for sitting around Austin

"We're hampered, or blessed, by how much we know as contemporary Americans," says Zen priest Barbara Kohn, resident teacher at the Austin Zen Center. "So we're less likely to have huge enlightenment experiences that last forever. We're more likely to have a series of enlightening experiences that in total make a transformed life. You realize one day that it's been a long time since you've reacted with great charge to something, or that you were so frightened that you couldn't continue with something, or that you actually seem to be able to move from depressed to not depressed with some speed. Whatever it is, the change comes, and I think it does come through these practices which get at you in ways that aren't as obvious as intellectual learning—which I think is fertilizer to help."

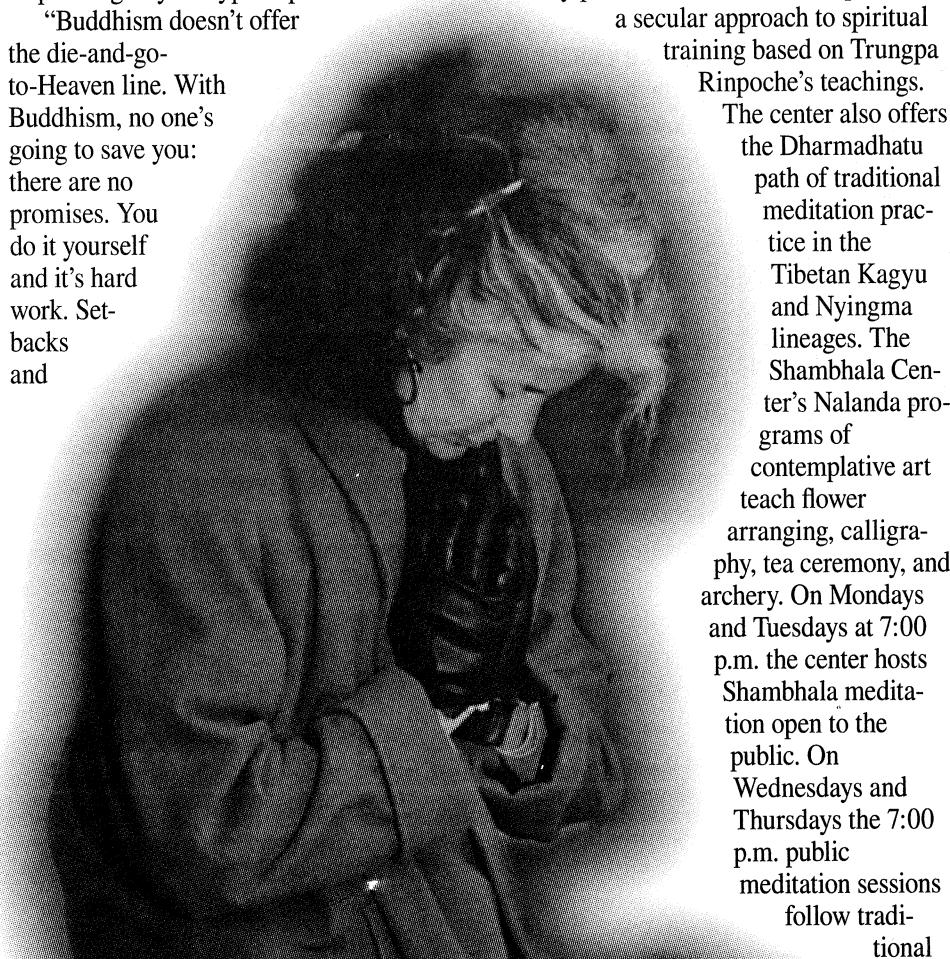
At its current location for just about a year, the Austin Zen Center (AZC) was established in 1998 by psychologist Flint Sparks. AZC follows the tradition of Japan's Soto Zen school as taught by San Francisco Zen Center founder Shunryu Suzuki. It offers sitting (*zazen*) and walking (*kinhin*) meditation each weekday beginning at 5:45 a.m. and *zazen* on Mondays and Wednesdays at 6:30 p.m. The service that follows includes chanting and prostrations, which some novices find moving and others exceedingly uncomfortable. Several times a year AZC sponsors intensive meditation periods (*sesshin*) that typically last a week. Monthly family sessions at the center support the meditation practice of parents and encourage children to give it a try. AZC hosts frequent Zen talks and a beginners' introduction each month.

Affiliated groups, including the Texas Hill Country Buddhist Peace Fellowship, also meet at AZC. AZC maintains a cooperative relationship with Tenzo, a retreat center near the Pedernales River, and is associated with the San Francisco Zen Center (SFZC) and its affiliates Green Gulch Farm and Tassajara Zen Mountain Center. Last fall, the president of SFZC, ordained Zen priest Barbara Kohn, moved to Austin to teach and guide AZC practitioners. This coming spring, SFZC Abbess Blanche Hartmann will travel to Austin to

ordain Flint Sparks as a Zen priest.

"The essence of Buddhist practice is the wisdom to see exactly how things really are," says Carol Lovett, a senior meditation instructor at the Austin Shambhala Center. "You sit down to meditate and start to cut through the soap opera, thinking: the point of practice is to get over that stuff, to stop responding in your typical pattern.

"Buddhism doesn't offer the die-and-go-to-Heaven line. With Buddhism, no one's going to save you: there are no promises. You do it yourself and it's hard work. Setbacks and



Susan Solar

obstacles arise: you keep messing up. And the change is subtle. It's hard sometimes to see how practice has made a difference unless you look back at the way you used to live. So while Buddhist practice is very easy at one level, it's also very difficult. That's why any really good teacher, in any Buddhist tradition, is very humble."

The Austin Shambhala Center takes its name from a mythical society of enlightened beings in ancient Tibet. Tibetan Buddhist teacher and author Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche established Austin's Shambhala Center (then called Dharmadhatu) during a 1978 trip to several Texas cities. Its activities coordinated by a membership of lay practitioners, Shambhala provides a secular approach to spiritual training based on Trungpa Rinpoche's teachings.

The center also offers the Dharmadhatu path of traditional meditation practice in the Tibetan Kagyu and Nyingma lineages. The Shambhala Center's Nalanda programs of contemplative art teach flower arranging, calligraphy, tea ceremony, and archery. On Mondays and Tuesdays at 7:00 p.m. the center hosts Shambhala meditation open to the public. On Wednesdays and Thursdays the 7:00 p.m. public meditation sessions follow traditional

Austin hosts some smaller Buddhist groups. Locations and schedules for these groups sometimes change, so it makes sense to confirm before attending.

Two local groups practice in the Rinzai tradition of Japanese Zen. Lone Star Zendo (512-970-9575 or [www.aoa.org/lsz](http://www.aoa.org/lsz)) meets at Aikido of Austin, 5501 N. Lamar Blvd., on Wednesday evenings and Saturday mornings, and at Austin Zen Center on Sunday mornings. Rinzai Zen Group (512-459-6332) conducts meditation and Zen service Saturday mornings at Clear Spring Zendo, 3918-C Far West Blvd.

The Ordinary Mind Zen Group (512-419-0260) follows the teachings of San Diego Zen Center founder Charlotte Joko Beck. It meets Sunday mornings at Clear Spring Zendo.

Following the teachings of Thich Nhat Hahn, the Plum Blossom Sangha (512-428-9921) holds Sunday evening sessions at Austin Yoga School, 1122-C S. Lamar Blvd.

A Vipassana group (512-916-4499) meets at Austin Yoga School on Tuesday evenings.

Strongly shaped by Soto Zen but also drawing on other Buddhist and non-Buddhist traditions, The Community for Contemplative Practice (512-280-9330) gathers Tuesday evenings at the Austin Zen Center for meditation, a brief talk, and discussion.

Austin Zen Center  
1308 West Ave., Austin  
(512) 479-4022  
[www.austinzencenter.org](http://www.austinzencenter.org)

Shambhala Meditation Center  
1702 South Fifth St., Austin  
(512) 443-3263  
[www.shambhala.org/centers/austin](http://www.shambhala.org/centers/austin)

Buddhist Peace Fellowship,  
Texas Hill Country Chapter  
(512) 258-6591  
[www.austinzencenter.org/bpf](http://www.austinzencenter.org/bpf)

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