

# The SnowFlower Sun

May – June 2005

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In honor of Earth Day (April 22), we consider our Earth and the life it holds. This edition features excerpts from Susan O'Leary's commentary from Vietnam on the subjects of ecology, poverty and culture shock, and from Dave Creswell's dharma talk on eco-spirituality.

## E-Journal Entries from Vietnam

Written By Susan O'Leary

Monday, March 28, 2005: Perhaps the most striking thing here is the powerful way you see Thây affect people; the deep importance of this trip to Vietnamese people. Buddhism has been repressed for decades - not only under Communism, but before that with the South Vietnamese government, and before that under French colonialism. This trip is an opening, a possibility of true religious practice.... Thây gave his last talk in Hanoi last night, and when he was introduced, he was described as one of the three great religious teachers of the century. (I think the speaker was referring to Thây, the Dalai Lama and Gandhi?). We were sitting at the back of the hall with the English translation headphones, and near us were Vietnamese, standing, with eyes riveted on Thây. One man in particular struck me. He stood watching with hands held palms together, and didn't seem to move as he just watched. Except his throat, and the muscles of his face. You could see he was trying not to cry. Thây talked about how to practice in daily life, and how his teachings have been received in the West. He described simply, sitting meditation, walking meditation and deep listening. He also then explained why he thinks his teachings have been so well received in the West. That he encourages people to stay with their root traditions, to see mindfulness as a way of deepening their own religious practice. And he gives a way to bring awareness to daily living...to grapple with opposites - being/ non-being, birth/ death, material/ spiritual.

Wednesday, March 30, 2005: We are in National Geographic here. In the country, green rice fields with ancestor altars right in the middle. Water buffalo walking slowly next to bicycles. Storefronts...open onto the street, selling gas and water and motorcycle tires, shirts, fruit and candy.

Jim, Tom and I went to the Ethnology Museum yesterday. I stood in a Hmong home and climbed ladders to large buildings from other cultures. One thing they explained is how before building a structure there is a particular method for preparing the ground that pounds the dirt into floor.... The central building for one village had a grass ceiling that was over sixty feet tall. Amazing to imagine how it was built - no nails, only connections.

Saturday, April 2, 2005: This is an international religious and political exchange, involving hundreds of people, and almost no words. And the silence creates a peace that allows a very different exchange. It brings the question, how can people (across cultures and within cultures), communicate by presence? You see that here; you see that here in silence.

Wednesday, April 6, 2005: Quy Nhon is a poor city somewhat smaller than Madison. There is no sanitation system for the entire city. So here at the hotel we have a version of Western facilities, and the central city does, but the whole city doesn't. Three days ago, Jim, Tom and I walked through the fishing village that is a part of the city around a mile north of our hotel. Buildings morph into canopies as buildings. It is very, very depressed, both materially and psychically. All refuse was dumped on the beach (all refuse, you name it, it's there). The shops were smaller and much simpler than in the other parts of this poor city. Motorcycle repair shops. Barbershops with people asleep. Grocery shops with little food. It is the greatest urban poverty I have ever seen, much, much greater than we see or our kids live in at Lincoln.

I did not speak the language or understand the culture; I was foreign, large and white and I was there alone with my 12-year old son. (Jim had slowed down in walking to take pictures, and we agreed to separate.) It wasn't probably necessary, but my reaction was fear and a real desire to get away.

The Gross Domestic Product of Vietnam is \$2500 per person. The GDP of the US is \$33,000. So, let's see.  $\$2500 \times 4 = \$10,000$ ,  $\$10,000 \times 3 = \$30,000$ , and then 4 times 3 is 12. The GDP of the US is more than twelve times greater than Vietnam's. Kind of hard to get your mind around. How do you think of a 12 time ratcheting down from how we generally live to get to, to even *understand* the standard of living in Vietnam?

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**MAY CALENDAR**

<b>Tuesday (7:00 – 8:30 PM)</b>	<b>Friday (7:00 – 9:00 PM)</b>
5/3 Intro to the Basics – Led by Mary Michal	5/6 Vietnam Journey with Thây (w/ pictures) – Led by Susan O'Leary & Jim Roseberry
<b>Saturday, 5/7 9:30 AM – 12:30 PM</b> Half Day of Mindfulness at David Haskin and Mary Michal's home; Sitting and walking meditation (bring a brown bag lunch); Call (608) 924-3060 for more info	
5/10 Right Action – Led by Don Katz S	5/13 Using Mindfulness in Afghanistan – Led by Jon Reed
<b>Saturday, 5/14 9:30 AM – 12:30 PM</b> First Highway Clean Up of the Year With Madison Insight Meditation Group. Meet at Mt Vernon Park. Bring a bag lunch, sunscreen, and gloves. Afterward, we go to Donald's Park for a short meditation and eat overlooking the prairie at Pop's Knoll. For information/ directions, call David Lawrence for more info at 832-6444.	
<b>Monday, 5/16 8:30am-12:30pm</b> Morning Meditation – Vipassana Style: Four rounds of 45 minutes sitting meditation and 10 minutes walking meditation, at David Lawrence's home; Call 832-6444 for more info	
5/17 Rose Ceremony – Led by <b>Error! Reference source not found.</b>	5/20 Evoking the Bodhisattvas' Names & Extended Meditations – Led by Savitri Tsering
5/24 Nourishing Happiness – Led by Sarah Carroll	5/27 Using Mindfulness in Inviting the Bell (Practical Session) – Led by Karuna/ Micha Namenwirth & David Lawrence
5/31 <u>Old Path White Clouds</u> , Ch. 9 – Led by Anne Forbes	

**ECO-SPIRITUALITY**

Written by Dave Creswell

Eco-spirituality is an inner transformation that serves the ecological sustainability of our precious planet as well as promotes personal joy.

Sustainability and inner transformation are especially worthy of our attention today, when greed, aversion and delusion are so rampant in our society. We are consuming our way toward an ecological catastrophe of unknown dimensions. These issues are central to my practice and one of the reasons I'm so drawn to Thây's teachings. For me, a useful model for our cultivation of eco-spirituality involves three practices, all of which overlap and reinforce the teachings of interbeing.

First, the most outwardly focused (and for many of us the most problematic) practice is **material simplicity**. In the 14 Mindfulness Trainings, Thây advises us not to accumulate wealth while millions are hungry, but instead to live simply and share "time, energy and material resources with those in need." Gandhi challenged us to "live simply so that others may simply live." And the Buddha himself emphasized renunciation. In the second factor of the eightfold path, "right thinking" or "right intention" includes the intention toward renunciation. Commentators say we are fooling ourselves if we think inner renunciation doesn't require some degree of outward renunciation.

This practice of material simplicity really speaks to me, and yet, there are *huge* challenges to those of us raised in abundance. We've been strongly conditioned toward feelings of entitlement and 'need' around our standard of living. Nonetheless, the importance of this practice is reinforced by a study published by the American Academy of Sciences, which indicates that humans are already consuming more than 20% of the sustainable yield of the planet. We Americans, of course, consume way more than our share of the planet.

Practicing material simplicity doesn't have to be embraced in a spirit of self-denial. On the contrary, this practice can generate great joy. Cultivating eco-spirituality is aided by a second practice, which I call **wonder, awe and reverence**.

**JUNE CALENDAR**

<b>Tuesday (7:00 – 8:30 PM)</b>	<b>Friday (7:00 – 9:00 PM)</b>
	6/3 Bringing Mindfulness into Conflicts –Led by Dave Haskin
6/7 A Beginner’s Look at the 4 Foundations of Mindfulness – Led by Savitri Tsering	6/10 Building Community – Led by Cheri Maples
<b>Monday 6/13 8:30am-12:30pm</b> Morning Meditation – Vipassana Style: Four rounds of 45 minutes sitting meditation, 10 minutes walking meditation, at David Lawrence’s home; Call 832-6444 for more info	
6/14 Spiritual Aspects of Visiting Tibet & Bhutan – Led by Edward Celnicker	6/17 Panel on Using Mindfulness with Aging Parents – with Edward Celnicker, David Lawrence & Margot Kennard
<b>Saturday, 6/18 – 9:30 AM – 12:30 PM</b> Half Day of Mindfulness at Karuna and Micha’s home; Sitting and walking meditation (bring a brown bag lunch); Call (608) 832-6658 for more info	
6/21 Extended Sit – Led by Savitri Tsering	6/24 Spiritual Journey to Bhutan and Tibet – Led by Edward Celnicker
6/28 <u>Old Path White Clouds</u> Ch 10– Led by Heather Mann	

**ECO-SPIRITUALITY** continued...

In dharma practice, we watch the particulars of our moment-to-moment experience. We can look deeply at birds, insects, plants, sunsets and sunrises, and seasonal changes right where we are. When I practice immersing myself in the present moment, I remind myself to slow down and connect with my body and breath, and then exercise my inner child, which is naturally full of wonder. Mindfulness often makes a dramatic difference in turning an “everyday experience” into one of exquisite wonder.

When we are mindful, we understand that the earth (Gaia) is a self-regulating system of an atmosphere (air), hydrosphere (water), lithosphere (rock), and biosphere (life). With somewhere between 10 and 100 million species on earth, our biodiversity is one of the most beautiful phenomena known to us, and the protection of this biodiversity is our sacred duty. It could take tens of millions of years or longer to replace the sheer quantity of biodiversity we are losing in this century.

To face all of this drama with equanimity and staying power, we come to the third practice: **inner simplicity**. In this practice, we train ourselves to work at deep levels to replace the greed, aversion and delusion that are not only part of the human condition, but also “as American as apple pie.” As we practice inner simplicity, we see more deeply into the nature of our suffering, and into the universal characteristics of impermanence and emptiness of self.

As equanimity and inner simplicity grow, we are able to look at the condition of our planet, look at our habit energies, look at others’ weaknesses, and see it all with compassion rather than judgment or dread. This feeds our ability to be childlike in wonder, adult-like in gratitude, and elder-like in reverence – even as we know what is at stake in our world. What a blessing!

The Buddha showed us how to transcend the dhukkha (suffering) of individual life where our mind and spirit may incline toward the infinite, but our bodies anchor us in the animal world of aging, sickness and death. Today we also experience a new form of planetary dhukkha. The drama of our planetary crisis calls us to “urgent action,” yet leaves many of us feeling frustrated and impotent. We must be able to totally let go into our relative helplessness as individuals as this drama unfolds...and yet act with morality and joy. No small task!

Gandhi said you must BE the future you want to see in the world. So, as the Buddha instructed, we practice for the benefit of all beings. In these amazing and troubling times, my passion is to try to live in a way that exemplifies the future that I want to see, and when I stumble, to get up and find the path again. ###

**E-JOURNALS** continued...

And poverty is relative. Vietnam is doing much, much better than ten years ago when there was such hunger that one Vietnamese-American has told of how there were beggars everywhere on the streets. The cat I saw three days ago was eating from the dregs of a rice pan that had been set out for it. Ten years ago the pan probably wouldn't have been set out.

I lost my moorings in the poverty I saw. And the next day, I thought about the certainty within daily-ness that we wake up in each day, the illusions we hold fast to about what reality is. We can wake up certain of hatred or a sense of being used; it can be a sense that our life makes a difference or that family supports us. It can be as seemingly small as soil is grayish black and not reddish brown; that pasta is what you eat regularly for dinner. But that certainty holds everything we see and do and think. That certainty we wake with each day we may suddenly lose in a new culture. I lost certainty with my 12-year old son in foreign poverty. It is, if you let it, overwhelming to newly see poverty.

So poverty, death, and the jolt of recognition that I don't know really where I am brought on full-fledged culture shock. In French, the word *choquer* has with it a physical, abrupt sense of collision. And culture shock comes and returns at a physical level.

Culture shock is, too, in part homesickness. There is a word in Portuguese *saudade* that means specifically homesickness for your country, for your land, your origins, for what is gone now. Culture shock holds a longing for the familiar, for what you thought was real. For what may remain real inside you. You have this displacement of longing for what is inside you, but not around you.

When I wrote this, it was Opening Day for the baseball season, and on that day I most longed for home (with the gift of being with my husband and son). I imagined my family (all of us) in the living room, watching baseball on TV. We were eating our favorite foods, our dog and cat were there, and we were in the colors, textures and love that for years have brought us together and held us. Because I love baseball, I longed to be home on Opening Day; with the return to the season, to possibility, to Ron Santos' voice on the radio that Opening Day means. But I will be home now in a little over a week.

I think of our Mexican mothers and fathers at Lincoln who know that the color of soil is a dusty reddish brown. Or our Hmong and Khmer grandparents who now have spent decades missing, longing for reality. I will see them more deeply when I return. ###

- 2004 was the fourth warmest year on record. The 10 hottest years on record have all occurred since 1990.
  - A massive ice shelf the size of Rhode Island broke off from Antarctica in 2002. Rapidly warming temperatures on the Antarctic Peninsula were blamed for the loss of the Larsen B Ice Shelf.
  - Alaska's worse fire year on record was 2004. A total of 703 fires consumed over 6.5 million acres of forest, an area the size of Maryland. Global warming will increase the risk of more intense, destructive wildfires.
- From Environmental Defense

**MEETING TIMES & LOCATIONS**

We meet Tuesdays (7–8:30pm) in the Wesley Room of the Trinity United Methodist Church, 1123 Vilas Ave. (2 blocks west of Park St.). Enter through parking lot door on right side of building, go through double door to right, turn left to go upstairs, and Wesley is on the right. *NOTE:* All entrances locked at 7:30pm per church policy.

We also meet Fridays (7–9 pm) in the Sanctuary of the Friend's Meetinghouse, 1704 Roberts Court, near the Stadium in Madison (straight ahead after entering, leave coat and shoes in the hall). For both, please try to arrive at 6:55pm so that we can begin our sits in quiet (earlier if you can help set up).

**SANGHA WEB SITE & E-MAIL LIST**

The SnowFlower Sangha web site is <http://SnowFlower.org>. You can subscribe to the Snowflower listserv on the web or by sending an email to [SnowFlower-subscribe@yahoogroups.com](mailto:SnowFlower-subscribe@yahoogroups.com). Don Katz currently maintains the web site and mailing lists. Contact him with any questions (260-8575 or [questions@SnowFlower.org](mailto:questions@SnowFlower.org)).