

## Our Second Anniversary Tea Ceremony **32**

BY MITCHELL RATNER

ONE RECENT Wednesday evening, like every Wednesday evening, members of the community began arriving just after 7:15 for the mindfulness practices evening. Leaving their shoes and coats in the holistic health center's waiting room, they climbed two flights of stairs to the attic meeting room. The first people to arrive pulled out the mats and cushions and arranged them in a rectangle along the room's periphery. The large meditation bell was set out and the room was transformed into a small meditation hall with space for twenty people to sit.

The early arrivers sat quietly on cushions, facing the blank walls and windows. In a few minutes the room filled. At 7:30 the bell was invited three times to begin the meditation period. Twenty-five minutes later, it was invited once again to end the meditation. People massaged their legs and turned around.

As bell master, I informed the group that this evening was special. We would have a Tea Ceremony to celebrate the second anniversary of the Still Water Mindfulness Practice Center located in Takoma Park, Maryland. After a brief introduction to the Tea Ceremony for a few newcomers, the group waited silently downstairs while the tea servers set up. Several minutes later a bell sounded, the Sangha members came up the stairs, one by one, and were welcomed to the Tea Ceremony. Once everyone was settled, flowers were offered. "In gratitude we offer these flowers to all Buddhas and bodhisattvas, wise men and wise women, throughout space and time." Then the ginger-lime tea, homemade cookies, and clementines were passed

on trays from person to person. After reciting a gatha, there was silence, except for the crunching of cookies and the sipping of tea.

After most of the cookies had been mindfully nibbled, as tea master, I invited people to share: "The questions for tonight are: What has Still Water meant to you? What difference has our community made in your life?"

One after another, members of the community bowed to the group and spoke. Many of the comments were about having a home or a haven, where the practice of mindfulness was understood and appreciated. Valerie said:

My feelings about this place are that it is so wonderful to have a community like this, a Sangha like this, where I feel safe and embraced by mindfulness. I think someone coming here for the first time can have the sense that this is a place of peace and presence, safety and trust. That is a very rare and precious thing today, particularly in this city.

From Joan:

When I remember it is Wednesday and I can come here, there is this sense of haven. . . . [I value being able] to come and experience it and also to connect with those same feelings when I am not here, during my daily life, which is not so peaceful.

Another theme that people mentioned during the Tea Ceremony was the quality of the sharing, a sense of being fully accepted in this group. Sharron told the group about her first morning:

I will never forget the first morning that I came. I had been looking for a Sangha for a long time. I got Mitchell's number from the Internet, called him up, and then came one morning at 6:30. I will never forget the feeling when we all turned around and everyone bowed and everyone was smiling at me. It just made me feel so good. When I left I was thinking, "This is the first time since kindergarten I've been in a room full of people who were smiling at me."

Chelsea talked about her experience of the Dharma discussions:

I really enjoy sharing with everyone. Everyone is so open. You don't have to wonder or worry or think, What did they mean by that? I'm just very glad to be here.

Marie talked about the openheartedness of the Still Water community:

Still Water is a ballast. I can leave whatever it is I am doing at home. The roots go down deep, soak in the energy during our sitting. Then what we discuss strengthens my roots, helps me to open up and then keep that openness. . . . It is truly incredible to have a place so safe that these feelings can come up from deep, deep down. It is a real gift of the Sangha.

Peter wrote a poem about his experience of morning sittings.

*Still Water*

A place I have learned  
that cars passing by  
can ebb and flow  
    into its waters and out  
with the beauty of a sunset and sunrise.

Sharron talked about how for her, as a young adult, the community provided role models:

One of the things that is particularly amazing about Still Water as opposed to other places I've practiced is that there are a lot of parents here. When my partner and I think about having children we know that there will be people we can call on or ask questions of. People here are good role models as dads and moms, taking care of themselves as well as their families. I think that is extremely rare.

Joan talked about a night the community explored art and mindfulness.

One of the memories that stays with me is the night we did body diagrams. I had a very pregnant body at that time. I drew a little fish inside the diagram, and very big breasts. There is no group of

strangers I would do that with. The drawing has been up in my art room ever since. It is a wonderful memory of Still Water honoring my pregnancy.

Once the sharing began, it flowed, and there was more than can be included here. I took a few moments to thank everyone for sharing and for supporting Still Water these past two years.

I noticed, also, how much the community has matured. During the first six months, Dharma discussion sharings frequently began with “I don’t know much, but . . .” or “What would a Buddhist say about . . .?” Now sharings begin with statements like, “The way I’ve learned to practice with anger is . . .” or “Having learned to calm down, I am better able to deal with . . .” The community as a whole often radiates a stability and confidence in the practice. We have succeeded in creating a place in the city where mindfulness can be honored, supported, and nurtured. We have become a concrete manifestation that this is possible.

The anniversary celebration ended with a Still Water MPC rendition of the Plum Village song “I Have Arrived, I Am Home,” first in Plum Village-style, measured and stately, and then a second time with an upbeat tempo, clapping, and impromptu percussive instrumentation, as rousing as a jazz version of “When the Saints Go Marching In.”

We ended with hugging meditation.

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