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OJAI RETREAT: HOME GROWN GATHAS
by Gilly and Tony Coote

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"Our own life is the instrument by which we experiment with Truth."
Thich Nhat Hanh

(Gilly, Tony and Gully Coote participated in Thich Nhat Hanh's 12 day
retreat at Ojai in May this year.)

We were eighty people drawn to participate in this experiment together,
most of us strangers to each other. We were camped high on a mountain in
coyote country, with wild sage and hot desert winds and temperatures well
over the century. Some had no experience of zazen at all but practised
their art from the heart and wanted to be with others of like nature.
Others came from different Buddhist paths, like Rick Fields (Tibetan),
while still others came from yoga and shamanic practices. There were
also women who worship the goddess. The invitations to participate in
this retreat had come from a wide range of organisations and the people
reflected this diversity. The Buddhist Peace Fellowship had invited us.
So when the first three days were described by Joan Halifax there was
some sense of unease - because we would be following the same schedule as
we did at Burradoo with Thay - walking meditation, zazen, dharma talk,
silent meals, tea meditation, and an evening discussion followed by more
zazen.

We also had samu to do - in silence - sweeping the mountain trails for
our morning walk, sprucing up the dharma yurt for zazen, cleaning under
the Teaching Tree for the dharma talk.
And of course we each had to find time in the schedule to have a shower
in one of the outdoor bathhouses. For some, who had arrived with an
expectation of immediately jumping into creating an art piece of some
sort, this schedule was pretty daunting. All this sitting around in
silence when they could be meeting others, sharing ideas, painting,
writing. But Thay found a way to engage these restless ones, and at the
start of the first discussion, he proposed a personal expression of the
gathas of mindfulness that he had learnt as a monk. First he spoke the
gatha in Vietnamese, eloquently. Then he gave us the English
translation. Then he asked us to sit with these words until we felt we
had made them our own - and then reword them to make the gatha our own.
He began with the waking-up gatha:

Waking up with a smile,
I know the 24 brand-new hours are all for me.
I vow to live them fully,
And to look at everyone with eyes of compassion.

There was a long silence inside the yurt while everybody sat
with this gatha, and then out came the notebooks and an outpouring of

words. After a long time, Thay smiled and suggested he move on to another gatha, the one for turning on the tap in the morning to wash the face:

Water flows high from mountain sources.
Water runs deep beneath the earth.
Wonderfully, water comes to me.
Its benefits touch me deeply.

Again a long silence and again a long time of many hands writing. This was a wonderful way to exercise creative energy! By this time we had run well past our time, and so with a bell of mindfulness we began our period of zazen to end the evening. But gatha writing did not stop there. They invited people to personalise the gatha for walking meditation too, and Tony offered to collect all the gathas and inscribe them onto separate cards to be hung up round the dharma yurt for all to see on our last day. Every day more gathas would be pushed through the flaps of our tent, and by the end there were enough to completely encircle the yurt. I believe they will find their way into a publication about the retreat which is to be published, but I would like to share some of them now, and invite readers to also find their own words for these gathas to truly make our own life the instrument by which we experiment with Truth. Thay has said,

"If a teaching is not in accordance with the mentality of the people and the realities of society, it is not truly Buddhist. In order for Buddhist teaching to bring about understanding and compassion, it must be appropriate. On one hand, the teaching conforms with the basic tenets of Buddhism. On the other hand, it must truly help people. It is said there are 84,000 dharma doors to enter Buddhism. In order for Buddhism to continue being a living source of wisdom and peace, even more doors should be opened."

Naomi Newman is the founder of the Travelling Jewish Theatre. Here are her gathas.

WAKING UP

First breath
smiles me
awake.
And each
one after.
All day
awake.

ON MEDITATION

For a long time
I waited for meditation
to make me happy.
Now I finally see

that it was waiting
for me.

WALKING GATHA ON A 2-COUNT BREATH

Footsteps Green earth
thank you. thank you.
Heart beats Sun shines
thank you. thank you.
Eye sees Bird sings
Thank you. thank you.
Ear hears Cool breeze
thank you. thank you.

Ellen Sidor is a long-time member of the Providence Zen Centre and has recently edited material from the Women in Buddhism conferences as "A Gathering of Spirit: Women teaching in American Buddhism" published by Primary Point Press in 1987. (Order forms for this book are available at the Zendo.) These are her gathas.

WAKING UP GATHA

heart. Waking with a smile
 This gentle moment I vow
 To carry all day long
 and meet each creature
 with a newly-opened

WATER GATHA

streams From high mountain
rivers, And deep underground
waiting 10,000 water Buddhas are
 at the tap to save me.
thank you. Thank you, thank you,

Vijali is a sculptor who travels to remote areas of the world alone, with her tools, and after many months of solitude and meditation, emerges again, having created another enormous stone Kanzeon figure.

WATER GATHA

Weeping inside
My heart fills as a lake
spilling over
thru' eyes wide awake.

Rob Rikoon is another long time Zen student, and a painter who works in a bank in Idaho.

WAKING UP GATHA

Returning all night
this moment arrives,
daybreak brings me
endlessly back home.

WATER GATHA

Like the earth
I am filled with

rivers, ponds and puddles.

Turning the faucet I
water.

honour myself,

.

And finally here are a couple of our own gathas.

WAKING UP

Here is the world

again!

Breathing and smiling,
Heart and eyes open.

WATER GATHA

Hot or cold
Sun and moon
Wake me again.

This search for our own expressions of gratitude and interbeing extended beyond the writing of our gathas at Ojai. There were so many opportunities for such joyful and whole-hearted expression which came through pen and ink, paint, words, song, pottery and landscaping, that the initial concern of those new to meditation were transformed. Many expressed the intention of spending time at Plum Village, and since May there have been meetings amongst Ojai participants. Another fruitful avenue of personalised practice culminated during the tea meditation on the last day when Thay had invited everybody to write a poem about their experience of interbeing. After tea and biscuits had been passed round, a basket was passed and one by one we read our poem and then dropped it

into the basket which was then formally taken to the altar by Thay. These beautiful poems will also appear in the book of the retreat.

Words on paper seem the most tangible signs of something having happened, and yet the loving support and respect that developed amongst people was also precious and enduring. As people prepared themselves to return to life in the fast lane towards the end of our time together, a basket was hung in the community yurt titled "Gathas for the fast lane" and suggestions about how to live mindfully in Los Angeles or New York (or wherever), were dropped in. Just yesterday a letter arrived from Atomic Comic Fran Peavey: "I guess we have all returned to our homes, lives and work and are involved in our breathing between phone calls. I continue to carry the many insights and sense of joy I gained from interactions with you and am asking new questions of my life thanks to you all." And another letter from Marlow Hotchkiss, a founder of the Ojai Community and one of the guiding spirits of the entire experiment ends thus: "In closing, I want to thank all of you for your presence and inspiration during our time together and since. The event was more profound and moving than Cynthia, Joan and I had imagined. And the depth and impact was a direct outcome of your talents and commitments. For us this is a continuing project. Thank you again. I bow to you a Buddha to be, and wink conspiratorially to everyone who was there. (If you meet the Buddha in a gallery, buy one of her paintings.) Ojai councils are endless - I vow to undertake them".

Gilly Coote.

(During this time at Ojai I videotaped some of the group events, such as calligraphy and architectural dreaming, and some of the poetry reading, as well as descriptive scenes of the retreat centre and participants. Some of this has been screened at the Zendo, and I am happy to repeat it if more people are interested. Gilly)

OPENING GATHA

(Ojai author

unknown)

awareness are deep and subtle.

The paths to

us to choose and walk right now!

They are open to

them fully with all my interbeing.

Let me enter

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