

Summer Newsletter

May 2008

Dear Sangha,

I hope you are all well and happy. The conscious cultivation of happiness is perhaps the most radical practice that we can do in such a troubled world.

I am engaged in just that, as I have recently moved into a beautiful house located in a sweet neighborhood in Berkeley.

For the first time in many years I am living in a neighborhood where I can bike everywhere and go for a stroll whenever I have the desire. What a pleasure it is to not have to drive -- to decrease my carbon footprint on this earth. Not to mention, the welcomed absence of nightly gunshots we heard from inside our previous home in West Oakland, some of which were literally outside our door, and, the occasional driver who tried to run me over when I went outside! I don't think I have slept so well since I left Switzerland at the age of 20.

I don't know why it took me so long to move out of West Oakland. Perhaps it was some underlying guilt about the privileges I enjoy, along with the belief that, "I can get by and make anything work," which my beloved friend Julia Butterfly pointed out to me.

So lately, the theme appearing in my classes has been recognizing where in our lives we hold ourselves back, where we keep from moving into something greater which we have created for ourselves, and, how when we do allow ourselves to exist in our fullest form at any moment, we expand into a new level of being, and, finally, how to maintain this new space. It is so easy to come up with reasons for why we don't deserve something we have achieved, even when it is a goal for which we have been striving for ages. As a result, we may sabotage good things that happen to us!

Yoga gives us the tools to shed light on these unconscious patterns, in which we all engage, and offers to us a way of breaking these habits. Yoga is like the proverbial wrench thrown into the wheel of Samsara, translated as the never-ending cycle of suffering. I am learning to enjoy the benefits of my own hard work, welcoming success into my life instead of shying away from it. However, I do not forget another facet of the practice that is so vital to my every day life - the social, or spiritual activism that yoga inspires within me. When I reflect on my life, I see that engaging with my community in the form of volunteering has been a constant for me. For example,

when I was living on the outskirts of the Morro de Santa Marta Favela in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, I was deeply involved with the people and the environment around me. Daisy, the woman who lived downstairs from us, often cared for kids from the slum while their mom or dad went to work. We cooked for, and fed those children.

Today, I continue to acknowledge and serve the varied communities around me. While Berkeley is a beautiful haven supporting and nourishing me tremendously, in the surrounding environs, there is much work to be done. This commitment to living with my eyes wide open to my community has led me to the most inspiring Karma Yoga practice at San Quentin Prison. Besides having a green card, which means I'm a "legal alien" of the United States, I am now also the proud carrier of a brown card, which gives me access to San Quentin without supervision! Every other week I teach yoga to Trust participants -- 15 to 20 men in San Quentin serving life sentences -- to help them with physical discomfort, health issues and, of course, to offer spiritual counsel.

My incredibly talented friend and filmmaker, Tamara Perkins, is shooting a documentary about the Trust, a program at San Quentin that focuses on rehabilitation and reintegration of the men in prison. The trailer is quite moving. Please take the opportunity to see the group of men (outside, I call them affectionately "my guys") to whom I have been teaching yoga:

<http://www.trustcommunity.org/TrustCommunity/trailer.html>

May you be well and full of happiness, and may you find the fulfillment you deserve,

Katchie Ananda