

## **Letters from Maylie to the AZG**

*These letters were published in the AZG newsletter from 1997 to 2000 as part of Maylie's way of keeping in contact with the AZG, especially before she moved up here. They cover many areas, such as the jewel of sangha, Dharma transmission, and Big Flat, and reflect both AZG history and Maylie herself.*

**June, 1997**

"We do not have to practice intensively in a monastery. If we allow ourselves to be a good Sangha, transformation will come naturally. Just being in a Sangha where people are happy, living deeply the moments of their days, is enough. Transformation will happen without effort. The most important thing a Dharma teacher can offer his or her students is the art of Sangha-building. Knowing the sutras is not enough. The main concern is building a happy Sangha--taking care of each person, looking into his pain, her difficulties, his aspirations, her fear, his hopes in order to make everyone comfortable and happy. This takes time and energy." Thich Nhat Hanh

The jewel of the AZG practice is its sangha reliance. Reliance on the sangha was born of necessity in the group's early years; a small, persistent number of practitioners was all there was. In the six years I've come, I've watched the development from a kind and tolerant and diffident group to a kind and tolerant and committed group.

Discovering harmonious and functional sangha structure takes years and is the hall-mark of mature practice. The AZG has already done considerable work:

- The BASE group helped a core group get to know one another much better.
- A practice period including members' "way-seeking mind" talks made the richness and diversity of members' practice more visible.
- Regular newsletters have grown from simple announcements to engaging commentary.
- The practice committee, begun a year ago, has made the Group's shape much clearer, spelling out procedures and providing a container for group discussions and vision.
- Innumerable coffee hours, Sunday mornings, well-planned retreats, extra meetings, and phone calls fill in gaps.

Now we are on the verge of the major next step of finding our own home. The group is taking on responsibilities of incorporation, by-laws, and board of directors. While we are very grateful to Lloyd Fulton for sharing his home with us for so long, it is time for the group to find its own quarters and to discover its own daily, Sunday, and retreat shapes.

We are beating our way through thickets of decisions and patience is tested and practice challenged. Our most important ally is good process; agreeing to guidelines that manifest the Dharma and sticking by them. This is the solid base of harmonious sangha; we continue to work at it "stitch by stitch." The sangha has been called "the matrix of enlightenment." It is the joint expression of personal and social transformation. Each one of us plays a unique part in its support. May all beings be well, happy, and peaceful.

**October 1997** (*I think this is when she broke her foot*)

Dear AZG,

I really missed not being part of the September program! All your good faces - an outdoor sesshin. Oh dear! Many thanks for your many expressions of concern that kept me connected anyway.

Great satisfaction arises as I see the AZG strengthening; keeping up the sesshin schedule in my absence, adding a sitting day on the month I don't come up, the creation of the practice committee, Sangha Day, newsletter vitality, continued willingness to slog through all the issues of property acquisition. May such vigorous sangha life continue.

I look forward to our five day November retreat. I hope that as many people as possible can stretch to commit to all of the days and that everyone can attend at least part of the schedule. The concentration that builds in longer sittings is a significant practice experience. Try it and see.

Warm wishes,  
Maylie

**December 1997**

Dear AZG Dharma Friends,

Thank you for the generous gift certificate to Shambala books. What a pleasure to go and browse with that permission in my pocket. Thank you also for your continuing support of me as teacher, allowing me to explore my voice and place in that role.

As I write, the winter solstice is close, the darkest time of the year, reminding us of our own cycles of life and growth and death and retraction. Buddha's Enlightenment was on December 8th. His birthday will be in the spring, near Easter. We are invited to let the short days slow us down so we can sense the cold ground beneath the business of our lives and listen quietly and attentively.

I walked past a spread of dried leaves in the corner of an empty lot and, hearing a particular rustle, noticed a sparrow, the same dusty color as the leaves, shaking itself out. The sparrow takes care of its life form and we take care of ours for the short spans that are given. This narrowing time reminds of our origins, the dynamic matrix we arise from and return to. When we can abide, stripped down in this un-knowing, that includes our own doubts and insecurities, and chronic limitations, we can realize that the seeds of wisdom and compassion are actually planted right here. And then we can light candles and look into our neighbor's eyes and see the light generated in our own eyes reflected in theirs and meet one another as Dharma friends.

Best wishes for the holidays,

Maylie

## **February 1998**

### Extended Practice Period

In Buddha's time when the monsoon rains began, Buddha's wandering disciples gathered together for intensified Sangha practice. The AZG continues this custom today amid California rains with other sanghas all over the world. Practice period is an opportunity to intensify our effort for a limited period of time and to offer this effort to the sangha. In monasteries, the hours of zazen are extended and there are more sesshins.

In lay practice, we commit to a sitting practice schedule that stretches us and is also do-able. In this way we can renew intention and avoid ruts. We also strengthen our intention to practice throughout the day - eating, walking, driving, working, speaking, etc. - so that we can have some experience of the world as monastery. Sharing these different practices is a way of encouraging ourselves and others. Each person makes a commitment. Nobody else monitors that commitment, but its energy is felt. A smallish group signed up for the AZG's first practice period, and then quite a few more joined in as the positive energy became apparent.

"I am coming to feel that Buddha Sangha, and by that I mean zendo membership, is a cadre of change. It is a community of people secure in their vision of universal Sangha, grounded in their personal sanctuary, who seek to transmute the poisons of the world in organized and coherent ways." (from: Encouraging Words by Robert Aitken)

-- Maylie

## **October 1998**

Dharma transmission or entrustment is a joyful occasion for sangha and recipient alike. The week of intimate ceremonies at Tassajara was like a stone dropping to deep bottom, waves moving out and out. I felt close to all of you and supported by you. Thank you, dear friends, for the "Gassho" calligraphy and the two hats, one for cold, the other for sun. A very complete gift! Your generous reception continues to resonate in my heart.

Our eight year connection is fruitful. Nothing is lost in the good effort of a sangha; some members have come and gone, and their energetic contributions survive their absence. The Group that persists year after year is finding a balance of stability and diversity. A core of people have worked hard on making the Practice Committee into a body that includes some openness and some efficiency (and, sometimes, some laughs). Gradually, through business meetings and many different practice occasions, an AZG style is being forged. The Newsletter publishes it. The new Articles of Incorporation will hopefully contain it in a Group structure that will engage and nourish sangha energy through various circumstances in years to come.

On a more personal level, my teacher, Sojun Mel Weitsman, said that the biggest reward for him as a teacher is to see students' lives change. While AZG members' practice has a strong, independent quality and varies widely, members can look at themselves and at others and see significant changes. As long as we ripen together in the Dharma our lives will be continuously renewed.

As I think about moving to Arcata I am encouraged by the possibility of enlarging and deepening sangha focus; setting up a daily practice center and making connections with HSU are obvious beginnings. Many of us share a dream of finding a local form that brings practice and social change work into clear and workable focus, combining zazen and activism.

The ceremonial week at Tassajara is a powerful, ancestral dream in the background. A new community dreams ahead. Meanwhile our many lives weave the Group's Dharma intention into a shape we cannot foresee, yet still, each day, carefully nurture. Wonderful adventure.

### ***February 1999***

Dear Friends,

The January retreat was an unforgettable beginning. Sitting, eating, working, meeting together in the new Park Ave. property, taking in all the new energy, had for me the quality of a dream. Can it be true? It seems to be. So how do we protect this beginning, nourish it and to allow the space for the group to come into its most fully articulated body. The excitement, the sweetness is a little like holding my six week old granddaughter, the small, entirely open face that changes week by week.

How to just be with beginning. To appreciate this new, constellation of group effort. Not to load it too quickly with plans, nor to slump back into mere repetition. How to keep balance in the midst of excitements, anxieties, and diversity of views.

I'm really grateful for all of our history together, hours of zazen, the many sesshin and committee and group meetings and trips and, in the past couple of years, the property-seeking excursions. We have earned the base of trust and know-how that made the process of selection and purchase of the property flow easily.

I deeply appreciate the group energy and commitment to this new project. Having a common practice and work focus will strengthen our purpose and make us more available to the wider community. I think we all felt this at the retreat. As I sat in what will be the Community Room, my heart warmed with the question, is it mine? is it ours? As the days went by and we settled in, working in and outside even in the rain, the question settled itself.

This is who we are, our different hands and minds and hearts, clarifying our intention to awaken together amongst ourselves and with all beings. Bodhi Svaha. May it be so.

### ***June 1999***

Each year Big Flat receives us and works as a powerful focus for us. We used this retreat to study Dogen's fascicle on Miracles. "The miracles I am speaking of are the daily activities of buddhas, which they do not neglect to practice." We began the walk in with the question, "What is 'undivided mind'?" Ocean, shore, and wind and steady pace supported our study. As restless minds gradually settled, we began to experience the miracles of the freed senses; eyes just seeing, skin feeling the continuous changes of breeze, ears widening to include all

the sounds.

In the next three days, we learned something of the miracle of 15 independent people living as one body. This was evidenced in the concerted chanting, in the tendency for people to be in their zendo seats before the period began, and in the hard work we did together, chopping and collecting wood, mowing, cooking, weeding, and digging a new privy hole. All this ordinary activity was “no small matter.” It is important for us to have sesshin experience with no coming and going; to enjoy intimate group mind and remarkable energy that arises from common ritual.

“Not to be hindered by either form or formlessness and not to depend on intellectual understanding are miracles.” We sat zazen in the upstairs room with bay windows looking out on the ocean. We were continuously helped by the changing light, the swallows’ chatter, our breaths, the distant surf. Inside or outside? Afternoons, we walked to the beach in kinhin and chanted Kanzeon and sat a period facing the ocean. Nothing excluded.

The last night, we sat in a campfire circle, exchanging places as the breeze brought the smoke around. We expressed appreciation for one another and excitement about the opportunities the new practice place presents. We hope soon to begin the garage remodel, to continue the miracle of devoted work together even in the midst of differences and difficulties. We hope to find ways as a sangha of addressing the suffering in our community and bioregion and world. Each voice in our circle was unique and spoke to the whole intention. A new crescent moon rose in the low western sky.

### ***September 1999***

Dear Friends,

With your help and support, I’m moved in and am quite settled in this beautiful house. If you haven’t seen it, I invite you to come by and have tea. The schedule of up-coming classes and zazen periods is in this newsletter and also circulating in the community. I am interested in talking to anyone who has comments or ideas about what else the group might do. I’m also inviting people to call me for practice discussions. It is not necessary to have a grand question, but just to have an opportunity to describe your practice and for us to begin or continue a dharma relationship.

Maylie

### ***December 2000***

Dear Friends,

2000 was an astonishing year that brought Rin Shin-ji (Forest Heart Temple) into being. Starting just at the beginning of the rainy season, Rob and Dan, together with a band of dedicated volunteers (most often Mark as well as Gordy, John, Pete, and many more) tore down roof and walls of the large garage. We were unusually lucky to have Rob in our group -

a skilled carpenter and designer as well as a steady practitioner, who kept his robust cool, accommodating whatever circumstances arose, with apparent ease. I usually made lunch for the workers and the cooking and the appreciation of it was a significant factor in making me feel more deeply at home in the new sangha family.

The remodel was done in April and Sojun, Abbot of Berkeley Zen Center, came up to formally open the zendo. He gave a memorable talk at the Aikido Room and then we all returned to the new temple for an Opening Ceremony. He painted open the eyes of the antique Chinese Buddha on the altar (who has presided over ceremonies in at least three countries in the last 500 or so years). Fragrant flower petals strewn over the assemblage completed the celebration.

Meanwhile, in January nine people had begun studying the precepts and sewing rakus, in preparation for Jukai, the Soto Zen lay ordination ceremony. Rebecca came up three times from Berkeley and Amy once to hold sewing classes. Unbelievably all the rakus were ready in time for me to inscribe them with English letters and Japanese kanji and we were all completely ready for the ceremony on July 9th, assisted by Rebecca and Mary Mocine, who had orchestrated many such ceremonies at San Francisco Zen Center.

Projects abounded and were completed - the grand "tool shed" (that looks like a dokusan hut), the raised beds for vegetables in the apple orchard, along with deer-proof fence that sprung up in one long afternoon under Gordy's hands. Pete built a fire-wood shack and a charming work altar. Rob, Dan, Mark, and others designed and erected a graceful bamboo fence, marking off the orchard from the parking strip. Finally two substantial donations - one anonymous, the other from the Berkeley Zen Center - made the laying of the zendo tan-oak floor possible.

As the visible temple came into being, the sangha became more articulated. The Tuesday evening "orientation" group became an on-going practice and discussion forum. A Social Action committee was born and a Garden Committee to envision a landscaping plan will have a first meeting. A web-site is underway. Suzanne continues to produce lively newsletters that keep us all in step. Erika organizes our library. Monique, in her efficient background way, keeps our data base, financial records, and tax preparations all in wonderful order. The Practice Committee and the Board of Directors continue their steady work. A small and devoted band of early morning sitters are learning the intricacies of Soto services. Classes, sesshins, and a six-day-a-week sitting schedule keep the beat of practice going.

We enter the millennium with a running start, hopefully ready for challenges that lie ahead. How do older students deepen and share their practice? How do we continue to attract and orient new students? How do we make ourselves available to the wider community through social service and social change work? The tolerant and generous spirit of the group is an enduring asset, growing more vigorous in its exercise, providing each of us with precious opportunity.

In deep appreciation of sangha effort,

Maylie