

## 4 Letters from Lay Buddhist Trainees

*[As part of our Stupa Building Project people have been handwriting scriptures and Litanies used in our ceremonial. These will be put into the Stupa underneath the Buddha Statue, so the Stupa itself will be the embodiment of the Teaching. Writing out scriptures is an age old way to practice, and help maintain and spread the Dharma. If anyone is interested in participating in this, please talk to Rev. Phoebe.]*

Dear Rev. Master Phoebe,

I hope you don't object to my writing on parchment paper. These sheets are two of several which had to be discarded because of errors during the transcription of the scripture. On the back of these sheets you can see two typical errors, failing to capitalize a word, or writing one word instead of another: "virtuous" instead of "virtue".

The transcription was made in my best 4<sup>th</sup> grade handwriting, to make it as legible as possible. Its readability and, hopefully, its accuracy will compensate for its lack of elegance. As I was writing I sometimes fondly remembered sitting in grade school taking dictation from a nun and felt grateful for such exercises.

Writing in a more or less straight line was a constant challenge. I overlapped two ruled sheets and placed them under the parchment paper so the lines extending beyond the edges would guide me a bit.

I read aloud as I wrote, usually 2 – 5 words at a time. Sometimes as I was reading I would find myself saying out loud: "really?" at some statement in the scripture. Other times I would say: "right on!" At times the whole affair was a beautiful and sobering experience. Not infrequently the words would stay with me as I fell asleep for typically I wrote before bedtime in lieu of formal meditation and other bedtime reading. It usually took 45 – 50 minutes to write one page, or considerably longer if I made an error late in the writing. I learned to correct errors occasionally without sacrificing all the writing on the sheet up to that point. I fancied myself a sculptor who makes a mistake while fashioning a work or statue, yet manages to salvage or incorporate the error. Minimizing paper waste was of course important too.

You showed a scripture or two at Pine Mountain which had some pictures or embellishing images. It reminded me that a great teacher I had in university encouraged the students to include images in the papers we submitted. You can see I followed suit. The leaves at the beginning and end of the scripture are a rendering from the Sala tree. The Dharma Wheel idea at the top of the pages came to me during meditation at the Berkeley Priory last week. I hope these additions are welcomed and not distractions.

I thoroughly enjoyed transcribing the scripture though it was not easy. It required concentration, patience and flexibility. I hope some bit of it sunk in. Thank you for offering me the opportunity to do this. If there is anything that needs changing or correcting, please send me an email and I'll do it right away.

Thank you again,  
Rafael

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Dear Rev. Phoebe,

How are you this week? I hope the weather has cleared up a bit, and Sangha members have been able to get through. I made fruit soup in remembrance of similar times of weather conditions at Pine Mountain. It was delicious, just as yours was those many years ago.

You made me so happy by sending me the verses on mind-training. I read them, read

them again, and then read them slowly. I read one verse before going to bed at night. They fit right in with what I needed just now, and I wondered if you knew that. A few weeks ago I observed that when I woke up at night, or in the early morning hours, my mind would start running 'tapes of negativity.' These were recriminations about choices and circumstances during my life and were very negative. I thought they were true, and therefore I had to suffer through them.

Finally, I had the idea that yes, these things may be true, but there is nothing I can do about them now, and I don't need to spend the wee hours of the morning dwelling on them. I told my mind to stop. It was like giving a dog a command—loving but firm. It did. It felt odd for the first few nights—where were my tapes? What was supposed to happen in the space that was left? And then I either slept or got up. No more tapes.

I did have one short, bright good memory of the past. It was as though I had to move the cloud cover out before it could shine through. I'm not looking to replace 'bad' memories with 'good', but it was nice to have one. Now, and after reading renunciation as a letting go of negativity, I catch my mind during the day. Negativity can be an up-tightness, a discontent, and irritation that can be let go. I'm working on dealing with the actual irritation (housemate does laundry for one item) and letting go of the build up of negative thoughts (speak to her kindly and drop the negativity in the mind). Also, just generally catching my mind being cranky, dissatisfied or whatever—letting it go, making some space. Anyway, I'm excited and happy to be lightening up my mind; I hope I'm on the right track, and if so, thank you for putting me there.

With much deep gratitude, in gassho,  
Sally

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Dear Monks,

Thank you for the beautiful New Year's Retreat. It was particularly meaningful for me to be there with old friends Joellen and Patrick. Jo and I talked about Right Speech on the way home. My "resolution", which I now call "opportunity" for the year, involves Right Speech...I wrote out a little 3x5 card asking, "Is it significant? Is it kind? Is the tone gentle? Is it true?", which I'll refer to each day. This will be my meditation in the world, and I've already had several "opportunities". During one opportunity, I realized that my opinion of another person's self-centeredness was really, truly my own self-centeredness. This hit me like a little thunderbolt—not just a passing conjecture—and will hopefully serve as a framework for other opinions that might need a little crumbling apart also.

I have thought about the evening of deeply super-silent meditation. Is it possible that there exists a silence vastly beyond ordinary silence? There is still a hint of some "after-retreat" glow in my meditation, but alas, these things seem to fade quickly. I seem to see the setting and feel the meditation hall when I sit, even here at home.

The evening after the dharma talk tea when I discussed an old pain that never seems to fully release, my meditation took me right back to that issue, which I sat with, sat with, sat with...no pulling away. That night, wow, a most incredible dream of crashing thundering power: me sweeping clutter off desks, throwing stuff around the room....and feeling intensely alive, enjoying every bit of it!! Some energy being moved...?

Once again, in gratitude for your training, sincerely,  
Carol

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Dear Rev. Master Seikai,

I had just re-read your article, entitled "The Buddha Seeking Mind", in a recent Newsletter. I was impressed with the way you talk about Impermanence. I have often thought of impermanence as something that, even though I repeatedly have seen to be true, was something that made me feel uneasy and even frightened. I am starting to see how it can be something that should not be that way but could actually be an encouraging concept—one that could help me be less attached to so many things and live with less desires and inadequacies. This article has helped me to get a glimpse; it is something I will need to work with for some time to come.

Homage to the Triple Treasure!  
Brandt