

**Aware in mind and body – *University City Magazine*, October 2008**

**Buddhist group brings study of meditation to local Unitarian Universalist church**

By Janet Cooper Haas

They come seeking peace and awareness. They might be recovering from a brutal crime, the effects of a disease, the illness of a loved one or simply workplace stress. Whatever brings them, they are finding solace in a meditation group that meets weekly at Piedmont Unitarian Universalist Church in University City.

The group, called the Mindfulness Sangha – sangha means a community of Buddhist practitioners – meets each Tuesday in the church's sanctuary. They've been practicing weekly group meditation since February 2003. "Many of us are so busy looking for wisdom outside of ourselves, that our inner wisdom never can surface," said Darla Davis, lay leader of the group and a practicing Soto Zen Buddhist.

One side of the church sanctuary boasts an expansive wall of windows, leaving an unobstructed view to the natural surroundings outside. "I like it there very much because of the trees and calming influence it provides," said Meredith Merritt, a member of the sangha for the past four years.

After greetings and light conversation, group members quietly take their places in a semi-circle. Some sit on meditation cushions with hands and legs folded, while others fully recline or choose chairs for comfort.

Davis reads a passage from Pema Chodron's "Practicing Peace in Times of War" as her candle flickers on the altar and incense wafts throughout the room. Setting sunrays bounce off the head of her bronze Buddha statue.

Davis rings a bell three times to begin their seated meditation, or zazen. "The bells allows you to move more quickly between everyday actions you're doing and into meditation by sort of following that sound as it goes away," said Davis.

Except for the hum of the air conditioner, occasional street noise and creaks of the building, the sangha spends the next 25 minutes in silent meditation.

Davis rings the bell once, ending the sitting meditation. The group rises, and she rings the bell two times to signal the beginning of their walking meditation, or kinhin. Each person synchronizes his or her breath with slow, deliberate steps, taking ten minutes to complete a clockwise revolution. In addition to getting leg circulation moving, "what it helps you to do is to gradually build to the point where you can be mindful when you're alert and doing whatever you do in your everyday life," said Davis.

After 20 more minutes of sitting meditation and another reading, their time together is over.

“We downplay much ritual,” said Davis. “We try to make it as basic as possible so that anyone would feel welcome and sit with us and find the benefits of meditation. We try to be as eclectic as possible.”

Merritt said: “There are many different ways to meditate. It doesn’t really matter, as long as you do it. It’s not about getting from A to Z; it’s about traveling from B to Y. And as you practice, you will gradually become more mindful of the world around you. Meditation makes you happier and frees you up from a lot of perceptions and prejudice.”

### **Solace in Meditation**

Merritt turned to meditation after a near-death experience 20 years ago. She was attacked by a man who put his hand over her mouth and nose and said he was going to kill her, as he shoved Merritt’s face into the snow. Unable to breathe, she described seeing a “black space with an even blacker space, where if I had gone through it, I would have been dead.”

“When he got up, he said, ‘Oh, my God. I’ve got the wrong person.’” Then he apologized and ran off.

With Merritt’s cooperation, the police were able to identify her attacker and his intended victim, his ex-girlfriend who lived in the same neighborhood and who owned a white jacket similar to Merritt’s.

Merritt says: “I realized that my spiritual work in this lifetime had not been completed.”

Her journey into Buddhism started with reading books and culminated into a study of Tibetan Buddhism. “My goal is not to obtain enlightenment in this lifetime. I just try to get a little happier and a little kinder and little bit better able to laugh at myself and better able to accept my infirmities. “

Merritt, who was diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis nine years ago, said, “Meditation gives me quite a lot more endurance and acceptance. The phrase I use is ‘to transform suffering into compassion.’ That is my goal.”

Many Unitarian Universalists, like Davis, are attracted to Buddhism because of the clarity and insight meditation adds to their everyday lives, in addition to aiding stress relief. For some Unitarians, the spiritual framework of meditation counterbalances their secular quest for knowledge. Many Unitarians believe in karma – the understanding of the causes and effects of one’s deeds. Still others relate to Buddhism’s fundamental belief in attaining enlightenment, or Bodhi, when one is “awakened” to the truth about life.

Unitarian Universalism is a creedless liberal religion with Judeo-Christian roots. In each of the 1,041 UU congregations around the world, people of all colors, religious and non-religious backgrounds, sexual orientations and gender identities are welcomed and encouraged to seek their own spiritual path. Famous Unitarians include Thomas Jefferson, Susan B. Anthony, Benjamin Franklin, Frank Lloyd Wright, Louisa May Alcott and Christopher Reeve.

Davis, once a self-described “nightstand Buddhist” who occasionally meditated, put down the books and took her study to the next level when she attended a day of mindfulness with the Rev. Teijo Munnich of the Great Tree Zen Temple based in Alexander, N.C. After years of practice, Davis took the Buddhist Precepts in a Jukai (lay ordination) ceremony in April 2008.

First workplace stress, and then her husband Scott’s diagnosis with a terminal illness led Davis to seek refuge in meditation. She said: “I was dealing with all of that and spending so much time worrying about the future and stressing and missing my everyday life. He needed me to enjoy our every minute together.”

In March 2001, he was diagnosed with primary amyloidosis, a rare blood disease affecting only eight out of 11 million people per year. In early 2003, after her husband underwent his second stem cell transplant and endured chemotherapy, Davis realized she needed help to “cope with the reality of life.” It was then that she started the sangha with then PUUC minister Wyman Rousseau. Davis’ husband died in January 2006.

“In order for me to be present with Scott, I had to have time and awareness of what was going on with me. I was able, I think, to stay present with him and where he was at each moment those last few years we were together, and it enabled me not to have a lot of regrets. That was such a gift. “

### **Want To Go?**

Join the Piedmont Unitarian Universalist Church Mindfulness Sangha every Tuesday night from 7 to 8 p.m. at 9704 Mallard Creek Rd. People of all beliefs are welcome. For more information, e-mail [info@puuc.com](mailto:info@puuc.com).