

Great Cloud Refuge

Why Great Cloud Refuge?

Q&A with Florida Community of Mindfulness Dharma Teacher Fred Eppsteiner

The name Great Cloud Refuge was chosen by Fred for FCM's new residential retreat facility. In Zen a cloud symbolizes the true nature of reality: emptiness, interdependence, and impermanence. Clouds appear in the sky, yet have no solid substance and are always changing due to causes and conditions, appearing and disappearing. 'Great' signifies that this is the cloud of wisdom, which is one's true refuge. Long-time FCM member and the chair of the capital campaign Robbie Tisch spoke to Fred about the importance of building Great Cloud Refuge. In replying, Fred offers us a wonderful teaching on the importance of retreats to our practice.

Why is building retreat capacity at the Tampa Practice Center so important to our mission?

Fred: I believe deeply that providing significantly enhanced opportunities to deepen personal transformation through "retreat" is the natural next step for our community and our Tampa center. As a lay community, we need to support our members' ability to step back from their busy lives and responsibilities so they can turn inward and focus on their personal healing and transformation. This is essential if the transmission of the teachings and practices of Dharma are to occur in a consistent and meaningful manner.

A new residential building would facilitate that by offering retreat opportunities year-round. Members would have the ability to come to the center for a long weekend or even for several weeks or for solitary retreats. This is an important way to help people learn the Dharma, develop their practice of mindfulness and meditation, and internalize the skills and competencies they need to create a better life for themselves and others.

Can you speak to why retreats are so important to our practice?

Fred: If we go back to the time of the Buddha and the itinerant wanderings of his sangha, every year for three months during the rainy season they would go into retreat. Retreat has always been a fundamental way for those who want to go more deeply into their own awakening process by developing mindfulness, concentration, and insight.

There are multi-level purposes for retreats. These days people are so hooked into activity and stimulation, especially with the news since the election. Even usually well-balanced people are obsessively listening to the news and as a result experiencing more angry, fearful, and agitated minds. Our retreats can offer an oasis of stability and peace where people can turn off and step back from their activities and nourish themselves with mindful, present moment living.

Then there are those who want to deepen their practice of mindfulness, concentration, and insight, and explore deeply the nature of their mind, emotions, and self -- to clearly comprehend how they are creating happiness or unhappiness



for themselves and others. Without retreats, it is difficult for people to develop more than a fairly basic practice. The primary use of their daily meditation is simply to provide a stable ground for their daily life. Traditionally, a practitioner stepped away from their usual life and went on retreat to harness the energies of their mind in a more single-minded and concentrated way to look into these matters. You can't just look into these profound and important matters in 30 minutes of daily sitting if the larger context of your life is extremely scattered and overwhelmed with worldly activities. Both for reasons of mental health and for a pure transmission of Dharma, the meditative traditions of Buddhism have always understood the centrality of the retreat experience.



Consider the experience of attending a Dharma talk on Sunday. Although nourished and inspired by Dharma, afterwards attendees return to their ordinary busy life and often find it difficult to incorporate what they've heard. On the other hand, to hear a Dharma talk and then have time for the rest of the day and coming days to reflect on it, do guided meditations on it, and practice it, well, there is a much better chance that the effects of the teachings will take hold.

Why do you see this as the next step for our community's growth?

Fred: In the last few years we have created this wonderful place to practice in Tampa with our peaceful meditation hall, dining area and commercial grade kitchen, and beautiful gardens for walking meditation. Even newcomers comment on the beautiful and inspiring space we have created. In Asia, Buddhist temples have always had an ambience of beauty and peace that is palpable upon entering the grounds and buildings even before hearing any teachings. Instead of renting another retreat facility that is not designed with Dharma and meditation in mind, I want us to be able to practice here as much as we can.

In addition, there are three other important reasons for creating our own residential facility. First, while we have much gratitude for the availability of the Franciscan Center and other facilities that we've used over the years, we have limited opportunities to schedule retreats at these centers. We have to schedule retreats several years in advance and since these centers host many other activities, we can only hold our silent retreats when nothing else is taking place on their campus. If we had our own facility, we would not be so tied into scheduling things years in advance, plus we could do more weekend retreats. Also, a number of our current activities, such as classes and workshops offered through the Mindfulness Institute, could be offered as a Friday night to Sunday noon weekend retreat to fit into people's work schedules. I look forward to being able to do that.

Secondly, renting outside facilities is expensive and cost prohibitive for some members. We have very little opportunity to offer discounts or flexibility in pricing with this arrangement as nearly all of the monies we collect at retreat go to the facility. If we had our own facility with lower cost, we could offer more reasonably priced retreats as well as offer more subsidies and scholarships.



The third thing is that retreats have traditionally generated meaningful income for Buddhist communities. While we have been very fortunate in securing needed resources through donations and selfless service of members in the past, this retreat income will ensure that we are able to build a foundation that allows us to continue to offer many beneficial services on a sustainable basis in the future.

So with everything FCM is doing, why take on this major new venture?

Fred: Currently, our retreats are usually over-subscribed, and as our community has doubled in size in the past three years, we now have waiting lists that we didn't have in the past. Also, we used to offer



retreat space to non-members but don't anymore because our retreats are easily filled with members. With this 'numbers crunch', what's the answer? Larger retreats or more frequent smaller retreats? Personally, I'd rather do more smaller retreats, which are more intimate rather than getting bigger and bigger. Many centers and teachers have these large retreats, but I think something is lost in that it makes it more difficult for the teacher to interact with each person at retreat. This I believe is an essential part of Dharma transmission. I want to know my students.

Okay, imagine we've raised enough money to build the retreat facility, and it's up and running. What do you envision is happening there on a regular basis?

Fred: We'd develop retreats for each of our three paths -- the Mindful Living path, Dharma path, and Wisdom path. I'd especially like to offer more retreats at the Wisdom level. While we have a number of members who are ready to go deeper on this path, the only Wisdom path retreat I currently lead is at Southern Dharma, which can only

accommodate 28 people once a year and which often has a waiting list of 75 people or more. There is a real thirst for these deeper teachings that can only be transmitted in retreat because they need to be practiced.

I see us offering all types of retreats that meet the needs of members and non-members: formal Dharma and meditation retreats, retreats for beginners and those experienced, retreats developed around specific topics, retreats of different lengths. When retreats are not going on, members could come and stay to be in residence for 3 days or 7 days so they can pull back from life and be in a healing environment that is intrinsically nourishing.

So many people are stressed and not in touch with themselves or with a natural life that just doing that, providing a place for them to be and recharge, would be so beneficial. Especially these days with what is going on socially and politically all around the world, which is so disturbing to the ground of true values and reality, there must be places where people can ground and center themselves. To help people find a way to be in the world that is stronger than the world is going to become more and more essential. It's easy to say these words but to really have that deep grounding within oneself and within the teachings takes continuous work. And retreat is one very important way to help people to do that and accomplish that.

Fred, could you please say more about this: given what's happening in the world today, why is this so important for us to be doing? Why not focus our generosity on the larger community such as soup kitchens or climate change activism?

Fred: This is a big issue. Many people are enamored of the Bodhisattva Path because they think it confirms their social activism or their desire to do good works in the world. Yet, as Shantideva writes, bodhicitta in action, as opposed to intention, is practicing the six *paramitas*: generosity, mindfulness, vigilant introspection, diligence, meditative stability, and wisdom. He writes that the world praises people who bring comfort to people who have headaches and other physical pains, yet how much more praise should be offered to beings who are able to bring an end to all the sufferings of human beings. Soup kitchens, clothing drives....these are all worthwhile efforts that churches and other groups do a wonderful job with. But is there anything *we uniquely* have to offer which can be of benefit that others aren't providing?

There are endless problems in the world -- social, political, health, environmental, etc. -- and there are a thousand nonprofits for every social ill. And yet, the list of social problems increases daily. We have to stop and ask ourselves, why is that? We need to look deeply and ask why human beings -- with enough resources right now to meet



the basic needs of everybody and take care of our planet -- why do we have the world we have? The social/political response is that it's all about differences in social policy and/or politics. This is true at a certain level, but what Buddhism says is that at a deeper level what the world really suffers from is not resources and policy but a lack of understanding the inter-connectedness of all life and a concurrent lack of compassion. It suffers from egocentricity, greed, indifference, and self-centeredness. As Thich Nhat Hanh has written, how can we expect beings who are unable to recognize and resolve their own suffering due to their shortsightedness be able to deal with the sufferings of others and the planet?



Let me be clear, I am not positing an 'either/or'. Bodhisattva literature clearly states that if you encounter a hungry person, you feed them. We should be open to helping all beings in every way we can. But human suffering transcends economics, because even people who have enough money to meet all their basic needs still suffer and often suffer greatly.

They still fear, they still hate, they still feel alone, they still can't love, they still think only of themselves. Why is that?

When I look at the world, I see a world suffering from a lack of intelligence, from irrational and illogical thinking, from emotional reasoning, where compassion, calmness and clarity of mind are absent. People are confused and getting more confused and are easily manipulated by the media, their 'leaders', and by their own emotions. How do we break out of this? Dharma is not the only answer, but I think it has the time-tested tools in its philosophy, psychology, and meditative disciplines that can give human beings the capacity to enter the world and stop living and acting this harmful way. That's what we're about. That's our major contribution.

Finally, could you say a few words about generosity in Buddhist terms?

Fred: The first of the six practices of the Bodhisattva is generosity. Most people find it easiest to be generous for our own well-being and happiness, our families, or a few specific social concerns. Many of us are very good at that kind of generosity. In Buddhist Asia, I saw that lay people clearly wanted to earn enough to take care of their families, but whenever they had surplus monies they traditionally thought about doing something to support their local temple, their teacher, or supporting someone's Dharma practice. In Southeast Asia you can go on retreat for free because there are people who want to support you. It's a mentality where people understand the preciousness of the Dharma, so they want to support the bricks and mortar and people and teachers that keep Dharma alive in the world. I don't think that American Buddhism has come to this understanding yet. Most people, including Buddhists, don't really understand the uniqueness of Dharma and the great benefits it can bring to a society.

In our country, people are more used to or comfortable giving to United Way or this or that nonprofit, which is all good and important, but helping to keep Dharma alive in the world is really essential if you want to help people get to the source of their suffering and unskillful behavior and stop putting bandaids on all their personal and societal problems.

Ultimately, the question we have to ask ourselves is what do we value? Do we see Dharma institutions as something incredibly valuable to the world and want to support them for ourselves, for others, and for future generations? That's the way I see it: it's an offering for the good of all.

