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Sampling monastic life

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NEWPORT, Wash. – Eyes closed, heads bowed, hands together in prayer, the 10 women and men inside the log cabin meditate in silence. "Through purity, freeing from attachment, through virtue freeing from the lower realm," they later chant out loud, sitting on cushions on the floor before an ornate altar to the Buddha. "...To the Dharma that is peace, I bow."

Their prayers are led by a nun – a thin woman with a shaved head dressed in flowing crimson robes. She is known as the Venerable Thubten Chodron, a Western Buddhist monastic in the Tibetan tradition, a spiritual leader renowned worldwide for her teachings.

Two years ago, Chodron established this monastery in a quiet, rural area about 50 miles north of Spokane. Encompassing 240 acres of forest and meadow, Sravasti Abbey is the only one of its kind in the area. While many cities have Dharma centers and Tibetan Buddhist temples, sacred spaces devoted to monastic life remain rare in the United States.

In recent months, the abbey has received a flurry of visitors from across the region to learn more about Buddhism and to volunteer. Together they pray, listen to Chodron's teachings and hold discussions in the log cabin known as the meditation hall. They cook and eat meals in silence inside the main building, a chalet-like home with large windows adorned with Tibetan prayer flags. They also help with construction projects or the garden beds of vegetables, lilies and wildflowers.

Many visit for a day or a weekend, some for a couple of weeks. A few have stayed for four months or longer. Although the abbey exists specifically for monastics and those preparing for ordination, it welcomes laity who seek to deepen their spirituality.

This week, seven people and three others who live at the abbey are in the midst of a retreat to clarify their calling to monastic life. Some aren't sure if they're meant to be a nun or monk – to pursue spirituality full time by leading a life of obedience, humility, celibacy and utter simplicity – but they wish to explore the possibility.

"I want to make the best use of this life," said Kathleen Herron, who turned to Buddhism 10 years ago after juggling motherhood and her career as an attorney and political activist. "I'm looking for the broadest and deepest way to practice my values."

Chodron, who has studied with the Dalai Lama, understands this quest for meaning.

Born in Chicago in 1950, she was raised by a "non-religious" Jewish family in a Christian neighborhood in Los Angeles. She graduated from UCLA and worked as an elementary school teacher after spending more than a year traveling Europe, Asia and North Africa.

In 1975, a meditation course she attended spurred her to go to Nepal to study with the teachers of that class, Venerable Lama Yeshe and Venerable Zopa Rinpoche. Chodron received novice vows in 1977 and full ordination in 1986. Chodron continued her studies in India, France and elsewhere. She also has taught at Buddhist centers in Singapore and Seattle and participated in Jewish-Buddhist and Catholic-Buddhist dialogues. Chodron is the author of several books, including "Open Heart, Clear Mind" and "Working With Anger." Many of the people who visit the abbey are longtime students of Chodron's.



Sravasti Abbey founder Venerable Thubten Chodron leads a meditation session before a teaching.

Looking ahead

Lectures set

The abbey's founder, Venerable Thubten Chodron, will present

two lectures this fall at the Unitarian Universalist Church,

4340 W. Fort Wright Drive.

Sept. 23: "Dealing with Difficult Times: How to be Realistic, Optimistic and Helpful," 7 p.m.

Dec. 2: "How to Be Compassionate When We Can't Stop All the Suffering in the World," 7 p.m.

While people bow their heads when she enters a room, Chodron's smile, gentle demeanor and the jokes she cracks immediately put them at ease.

"Venerable (Chodron) speaks in a language that I understand," said retreat participant Andy Housiaux, a 25-year-old high school social studies teacher who's working on his master's degree at Harvard Divinity School. "She has such clarity and a way of carrying herself."

A few years ago, Chodron searched all over the country for a place to start a monastery. She sought a rustic environment, a place "to make the mind calmer." She discovered the Newport property in a North Idaho real estate magazine during a visit to Boise in 2003.

Sravasti Abbey is a place built by the kindness of others, Chodron often says.

As a Buddhist monastic, she and other nuns and monks rely solely on "dana," Sanskrit for donations – not just for the purchase and maintenance of the monastery, but also for food, clothing and medicine. While they grow some vegetables, people at the abbey never go grocery shopping – they eat only food offered to them by neighbors and visitors. In return, the abbey does not charge people for staying at the abbey or for its books, programs and services.

"We live our lives as lives of generosity," Chodron explained. "We share what we have, and we survive on donations. ... In America, we have such a consumer society. We try to pull people from that materialistic state of mind so they can learn how good it feels to give."

Those who stay at the abbey for study and meditation also must follow the rules, which include eating only vegetarian food; abstaining from sex, alcohol, tobacco and activities that include dancing and singing (even radios and musical instruments are not allowed); and observing silence from 7:30 p.m. until 7:30 a.m. the following day.

During this current two-week session called "Exploring Monastic Life," many of the participants have been waking at 4 a.m. to meditate. Some enter the Meditation Hall to bow, chant and make offerings of food, flowers and bowls of water to the gold statues of Buddha at the altar. "The whole idea of offering is not because Buddha needs us to bow, but it helps train our mind and develop the habit of giving," Chodron explained.

They spend the rest of their day listening to teachings, participating in Dharma discussions and working together – cooking, doing chores, following a schedule posted near the kitchen.

"I love the simplicity of it all," said 22-year-old Nerea Keese, an abbey resident who was first drawn to Buddhism as a 15-year-old, when her mother brought her to Spokane's Chagdud Gonpa-Padma Ling Buddhist Center. "Buddhism teaches us to take responsibility for our actions, not to blame and to help others. It's a message that has always spoken to me."

As they continue to learn more about monastic life, Herron and others are shedding romantic notions of saffron-robed monks meditating peacefully. Through discussions and Chodron's daily teachings, they've learned that becoming a Buddhist monk or nun doesn't mean retreating from the world, but embracing it and giving back to the community.

Since the abbey opened in 2003, Chodron and other residents of Sravasti have adopted a stretch of highway that they regularly clean. They also offer a portion of the food they receive to the food bank and extra building supplies to Habitat for Humanity. They're involved in prison work – while Chodron visits area jails and prisons, the others exchange letters with inmates. In addition to writing books, Chodron gives talks in Spokane and other places. This past year, for instance, she offered classes in Newport on stress management and dealing with anger.

"So much of Buddhism isn't dogma or theology," said Chodron, who wears the same clothes everyday and shaves her head in order to "cultivate inner beauty" instead of focusing on her physical appearance.

"It's really about common sense and learning how to work with your mind," she said.

It's certainly a practice that lay people can incorporate into their lives, said Herron, who was raised Roman Catholic.

Making a commitment to monasticism, however, requires a drastic change. Those at the abbey this week are delving deep within themselves as they contemplate leaving careers in education, law, physical therapy and other fields.

Monasticism would also alter their relationships. Herron has been living with her partner of seven years in Portland. She also has a son who's 30, and she expects to have grandchildren someday. As a Buddhist nun, she probably wouldn't be able to babysit, let alone live in the same town. "I'm working with my fears," she admitted. "I'm between 'yes' and 'I don't know.' "

Even if they don't become Buddhist nuns or monks, those who come here say they're beginning to find solutions to problems that have plagued them for years. Keesee, who changed her college major multiple times, wanted an end to her "emotional rollercoaster." Housiaux hopes to become a better listener and bring more meaning to his life. Nanc Nesbitt, a landscape artist from Seattle who has been living at Sravasti for a year and a half, longs to find a place of contentedness, to put an end to that nagging question: "Why is there nothing in this world that brings me a happiness that lasts?"

Chodron, meanwhile, continues to teach about the qualities of a monastic mind: humble, respectful, tolerant, able to develop a sense of joy and love inside oneself instead of looking outward.

"It requires counteracting our own self-centeredness," she said on a recent morning. "We must cultivate a heart that cherishes others in a society that says the individual is all important."