

# This Fantastic, Unfolding Experiment

Reflecting on the history of the Insight Meditation Society and Spirit Rock Meditation Center, Jack Kornfield describes the challenges and tensions that have accompanied the movement to bring Buddhism to the West and the creative solutions that have emerged to meet them.



The Theravada lineage—“the Way of the Elders”—has a rich history and tremendous diversity. Anybody who is not aware of that diversity can learn more from my first book, published in 1976, called *Living Buddhist Masters*. Now, they’re mostly dead Buddhist masters, so it has been retitled *Living Dharma*.

You’ll notice that there’s a wide and often contradictory variety of approaches to dharma practice and liberation. If you go to Thailand or to Burma, many teachers will say, “We have the pure lineage from the time of the Buddha. We have the original sutras and the texts. Admittedly, the sutras weren’t really written down for five or six hundred years, but we have kept these teachings pure since they were brought here very early from India.” However, if you take a few steps beyond the main centers, you will notice that the countryside in Burma, Thailand, and Cambodia contains ancient Mahayana and Vajrayana temples filled with incredible iconography of the whole range of Buddhist traditions. In fact, the various traditions have been exchanging teaching for millennia. Monks in

Burma will say, “In Burma we have always been the carriers of the true way,” even though the ascendancy of Theravada Buddhism in Burma began only a few hundred years ago. So, in fact, the history of the Theravada, and the history of Buddhism generally, is actually a weaving of a number of different strands.

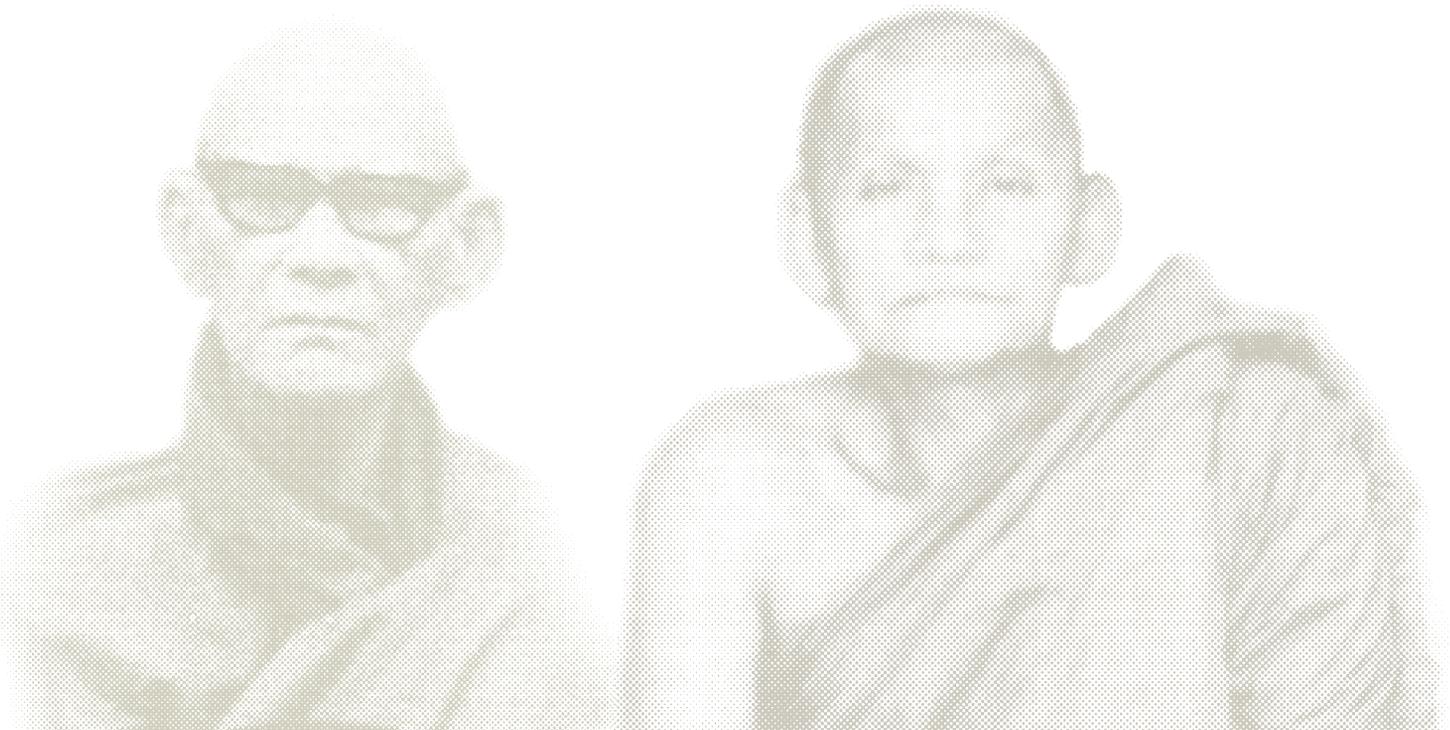
This diversity is one of the central dilemmas in my own spiritual life and has deeply informed how I have been teaching and how the dharma at IMS (Insight Meditation Society in Barre, Massachusetts) and Spirit Rock have unfolded. I had many teachers, but the most central were two of the wisest Theravada teachers of the past century: one in Thailand, Ajahn Chah, and one in Burma, Mahasi Sayadaw. While they were both considered deeply enlightened, these teachers did not agree at all on what enlightenment was or how you attained it. In fact, they disagreed, each believing that the other was not teaching the real way to enlightenment.

When I went to Ajahn Chah’s monastery, first as a layman and then as a monk, the main form of

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CHRISTINE ALICINO



(Above, left)  
*Mahasi Sayadaw (1904–1982)*

(Above, right)  
*Ajahn Chah (1919–1992)*

practice was to meditate a moderate amount—two, three, four hours a day—and then to practice the dharma of letting go of suffering as you lived in community. The basic instruction was to quiet your mind enough so that you could see when there was suffering and recognize patterns of greed, hatred, and delusion when you were entangled in the world, then let them go. Meditation was the means to support mindfulness and loving-kindness throughout the day so that you could be free in any circumstance.

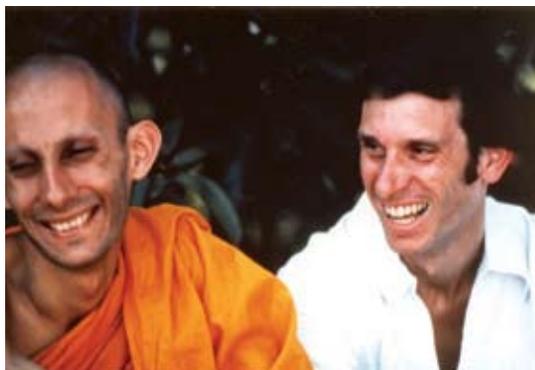
When I went to a monastery under Mahasi Sayadaw, figure and ground were reversed. There wasn't any community practice; everything focused on silent retreat. Everything you did was in the service of one thing: silent meditation. You would meditate for ten, fifteen, eighteen hours a day (like we do on intensive retreat now) in order to have certain deep experiences in meditation that would transform greed, hatred, and delusion.

Now, there were some particular problems in each of these systems. The problem I found at Ajahn Chah's monastery was that while he was a fantastic dharma teacher, he was not a very precise or detailed meditation teacher. The reason was simple: he wasn't that interested in meditation experiences. If you developed samadhi or entered the jhanas, he could teach you about them because he had practiced all the jhanas, but he wasn't really interested in that. However, I was. And after I trained with him for a while, I heard, "Oh, there is deeper and more systematic medita-

tion training at these other places. Why don't you go try that and see what happens?"

So I went to a Mahasi monastery and trained with a famous monk, Asabha Sayadaw, who was quite skillful in teaching meditation but nevertheless turned out to be a very problematic teacher. I began very ardently, the way young men do, sitting and walking twenty hours a day, with minimum sleep. I did this for nearly a year and a half. With his instruction, all kinds of cool things began to happen. My body would dissolve into light, and I had all kinds of classic insights into emptiness, just like in the old texts. My progress in insight grew, and my understanding of impermanence and emptiness deepened, and I thought, "Wow, I know this is what the Buddha meant." But then I'd look out from the window of my cottage—he gave me the "nice" cottage near his, because I was a Westerner—and there he would be, Asabha Sayadaw, sitting with his feet up on the table, smoking his cigar and reading the paper, belching and yelling at the gardeners because they were doing the wrong thing, and throwing rocks at the dogs to get them to stay out of his garden. He obviously had deep meditation experiences, but by temperament and character he was a very coarse and, in many ways, not a terribly kind person. So I would be getting this refined meditation instruction from this teacher who really knew how to train the mind, then I'd look at him and say to myself, "Oh my God, even though I'm grateful, I don't want to be like this person."

The Buddha taught a host of skillful means to quiet the mind and open the heart and learn to let go, and they have developed into many traditions over the millennia. Yet people often latch on to one and misunderstand the others.



Jack Kornfield (left)  
with Joseph Goldstein, 1976

What I saw reflected a dilemma inherent in the models themselves. The model of intensive meditation practice is that you seek to have a certain profound experience—stream-entry, a taste of nirvana—and the idea is that it transforms you *forever*, and indeed there is some basis for this in the Buddhist texts. In this model (I’m not going to say whether it’s true or not, I’ll leave that to your own experience), people were taught that they could have a profound opening to nirvana, be assured of beautiful rebirths, and then feel like they were basically saved and would never need to do retreat practice again, or at least not very much.

U Pandita Sayadaw was an example of this belief. After very deep training, he became a skillful teacher in terms of samadhi and the higher realms of practice. When Mahasi Sayadaw died, U Pandita was the dharma successor and next abbot of Mahasi’s monastery. However, there were power struggles in that monastery and U Pandita had to leave. After this loss, he went on retreat again for some deep meditation training. I’m told it was the first time he’d been on retreat in thirty-five years.

In Mahasi’s model, enlightenment—or at least stream-entry, the first taste of nirvana—comes in the form of a cessation of experience, arising out of the deepest state of concentration and attention, when the body and mind are dissolved, the experience of the ordinary senses ceases, and we rest in perfect equanimity. We open into that which is unconditioned, timeless, and liberating: nirvana. Like Zen satori, this moment brings a whole new way of knowing. But there are a lot of questions around this kind of moment. Sometimes

it seems to have enormously transformative effects on people. Other times people have this moment of experience and aren’t really changed by it at all. Sometimes they’re not even sure what happened. Using this method of practicing, perhaps three percent of the people who went to Mahasi’s monastery would have had such a stream-entry experience. If you have a thousand people practicing at a given time, that means thirty people would have stream-entry experiences and maybe another hundred would be deep in the progress of insight. A lot of people have really cool experiences, but there are the other 870 who aren’t anywhere near that level.

Even so, retreats are amazing. I had fantastic experiences and I learned a great deal from those intensive retreats. The insights and freedom you can touch are very beneficial. Of course when I came back to Ajahn Chah’s monastery, I told him with relish about all of the experiences I had. He just looked at me and smiled and said, “Good. Something else to let go of.” And that was his perspective. He appreciated the experiences, but even if they were a taste of enlightenment, they were done. He was interested in whether I could embody them moment-by-moment, here and now.

At Ajahn Chah’s monastery, his belief and teaching about nirvana and stream-entry were different. He spoke about nirvana as the “unconditioned.” He said at one point, “If you’ve been in this monastery for six months or a year and haven’t entered the stream, haven’t tasted the unconditioned, I don’t know what you’ve been doing. You haven’t been practicing correctly.” If you followed his teachings correctly, you became mindful of the constantly changing conditions of sight, sound, taste, smell, physical perceptions, feelings, and thoughts. Through mindfulness practice you began to experience how conditioned the world is and how these conditions constantly change.

To free ourselves, we need to quiet the mind through some mindfulness in meditation. Then, instead of identifying with the changing conditions, we learn to release them and turn toward consciousness itself, to rest in the knowing. Ajahn Chah called this pure awareness, “the original mind,” and resting in “the one who knows.” Similarly, Ajahn Jumnian talks about awareness as pure consciousness, *amattadhamma*—the deathless, the unborn. The senses and the world are always changing conditions, but that which knows is unconditioned. With practice, we discover the selflessness of experience; we shift identity. We can be in the midst of an experience, being upset or angry or caught by some problem, and then step back from it and rest in pure awareness. We let go; we release holding any thought or feeling as “I”

or “mine.” No problem needs to be solved. We release the whole sense of identification, and the conditioned world is just *anicca* (impermanent), *dukkha* (unsatisfactory), and *anatta* (empty of self)—it has nothing to do with our true nature. We learn to trust pure awareness itself. This is one of the ways Ajahn Chah taught about liberation based on the forest tradition. Awakening is always here and now. Practicing this way, your life is transformed.

Each of the many different dharma perspectives gives rise to teachers and students who say they know Buddha’s real true way, the very best way to practice. They let you know that others *don’t* have the right way. You find this attitude all over the Buddhist world, and to some extent it has been imported to America. Often when you visit monasteries in Asia, either the teachers or their disciples will say, “Those guys in the other tradition don’t know what the hell they’re talking about. They won’t get you to liberation.” There is a kind of competition between them. But in truth, there isn’t only one view or technique that brings liberation. The Buddha taught a host of skillful means to quiet the mind and open the heart and learn to let go, and they have developed into many traditions over the millennia. Yet people often latch on to one and misunderstand the others.

The roots of this conflict can be traced to the moment before the Buddha died, when he said to Ananda, “When I die, you may abolish the minor rules.” Alas, Ananda didn’t ask which minor rules. So after the Buddha died, and they had the first Council of Elders, Ananda reported that he did not ask which rules they could abolish. Immediately, there was a fight between the disciples who wanted to adapt by abolishing certain rigid rules and the ones who said, “Since we don’t know which rules to abolish, let’s conserve every single rule exactly as the Buddha said.” From then on, it’s been an ongoing conversation. In every generation, there will be those who adapt and those whose role is to conserve. We may be those original disciples, reborn again in America, carrying on the same arguments.

You can sense the tension that comes from the clash of different models and beliefs. It happens in every religious tradition. There is the transcendent view and the immanent view. There are those who say God is best known through deep prayer and deep mystical experience. There are those who say God is immanent and everything shines with holiness all the time. Similarly, there is a tension between those who would like to adapt the teachings and those who would conserve things the way they believe they were. But meanwhile, everything *is* changing. When the Burmese or Thai say,



“We practice the way it was around the time of the Buddha,” they ignore the fact that Mahayana temples dot their landscapes.

When we started IMS, it was primarily a Mahasi-oriented center. I brought in the flavor of Ajahn Chah as well. But because Joseph (Goldstein) and Sharon (Salzberg) had done most of their practice through the Burmese lineages of Mahasi Sayadaw and of U Ba Khin, and we shared this training, this is mainly what we taught. From the very beginning we offered the practices of both Mahasi Sayadaw and U Ba Khin, with Ruth Denison and John Coleman leading retreats. We also asked U Ba Khin’s great disciple Goenka if he would come and teach, because Joseph, Sharon, and others were very devoted to him. He responded in a letter saying, “If you open a center and have more than one lineage teaching there, it will be the work of Mara, and it will be the undoing of the dharma.” Goenka’s teacher U Ba Khin believed this. However, his letter came the day *after* we signed the mortgage—fortunately, it was too late.

In fact, opening the center felt like good karma or grace, like we were being carried by the dharma. I love the story of how we got the money for IMS. Three people who had been to India or loved the dharma each put up \$15,000, which gave us enough money for the deposit on the \$150,000 property. This was \$150,000 for ninety rooms, a bowling alley, tennis courts, eighty acres of land, a huge kitchen, and all of the furnishings! When we went to the bank, and the bank saw our name was Insight Meditation Society—IMS—they thought it

Jack Kornfield (second from the right) at the Wat Tow Kote Vipassana Center in Thailand, 1971.

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was the International Meditation Society, founded by Maharishi Mahesh Yogi of the Beatles fame, and they said, “Oh, sure, how much money do you want?” They lent us the money based on a complete misunderstanding!

When we started, the first principle that we got right—partly out of necessity (or out of desperation)—was that we would do collective teachings. One can see that the centers that have had the most difficulty have invested all the power in just one teacher. Often that person gets terribly isolated, and, as you know, many dharma centers in the West have suffered in some fashion or another



*Front row, from left:  
Sharon Salzberg, Joseph Goldstein,  
Jack Kornfield,  
Jacqueline Mandell-Schwartz.  
Back row, center: Mahasi Sayadaw.  
Insight Meditation Society, 1979.*

due to the misconduct of their primary teacher. When we started IMS, I was twenty-eight, Joseph was twenty-nine, and Sharon was only twenty-one. As Sharon likes to say, “It all happened without adult supervision!” In our wisdom, combined with abject terror, we said, “Let’s hold hands for this one, guys.” And as a result, we created the team teaching model that has saved us so many times. It offers a much more intelligent way of holding power, especially in a new culture here in the West.

The second principle that we got right—and I was a passionate advocate for this—was having multiple lineages. Even though there was a Mahasi lineage through Munindra, Mahasi Sayadaw, Dipa Ma, and Asabha Sayadaw that we shared at IMS, it was very important from the beginning that we invite other lineages and teachers. So early on we invited Christopher Titmuss and Christina Feldman—people who had studied with Ajahn Buddhadasa, Ajahn Dhammadoro, Ajahn Chah, and other teachers. From my own experience, it was healthier for both students and teachers alike to have access to a range of dharma teachings and perspectives. This is an underlying principle at Spirit Rock as well.

The Buddha is often described as the master of many skillful means. Gradual and sudden, outer

and inner, form and emptiness were all aspects of his teaching. A wise teacher, and a wise center, needs to offer a whole range of skillful practices, because people come along at different stages of their inner development, with different temperaments, and with different sets of problems. If we limit ourselves to one technique, it will only serve certain people and it won’t be helpful to others. Diversity of practices is an underlying vision at IMS that has also been carried through to Spirit Rock. On our retreats, though we use the basic instructions from Mahasi Sayadaw, we also draw from the teachings and perspectives of Ajahn Chah, Buddhadasa, U Ba Khin, and many others.

By adopting the retreat model rather than Ajahn Chah’s wise way of communal dharma living, we paid very little attention to the integration or the embodiment of dharma outside of retreats. In the beginning, we had no integration period at all. At the end of the first three-month silent retreat, we just said, “Three months are over; see you later.” Two days later, we saw one of our yogis in her pajamas doing walking meditation in the general store in Bucksport, Maine. There was no real integration and care. In fact for a number of years, James Baraz, now a teacher himself, ran a kind of halfway house in Berkeley for people coming out of the three-month retreat.

It became clear to many of us that we needed to establish a way of practice that was not just focused on retreats, because people would come back after doing a ten-day retreat or a month-long retreat, or even a three-month retreat, and say, “I’m having so much trouble integrating what I learned on retreat into the world out here. How do I embody this practice in my everyday life?”

After the first ten years at IMS, a group of us—James Baraz, Sylvia Boorstein, Anna Douglas, Howie Cohn, and many others—wanted to create a wider dharma stream that focused on more than retreat experience and that would help people embody the dharma in their lives. This was the vision that drove a committed group of West Coast practitioners in the mid-eighties to look at property for a center. We found cheap, beautiful places far out in the country, and some board members thought about buying them. But a bigger group held out for a center near the city, where silent retreats, classes, and community could grow together. Thus Spirit Rock was born. Just as at IMS, the founding of Spirit Rock involved some amazing karma. For \$900,000 we bought almost a square mile of land in a gorgeous secluded valley in Marin County (some say it’s a Native American sacred site) from the Nature Conservancy, giving them money to save rain forests in the Amazon.

Another problem we had encountered at IMS concerning our dharma diversity influenced how we set up Spirit Rock and how our entire com-

munity has evolved. After inviting Ruth Denison, Christopher Titmus, Christina Feldman, Vimalo Kulbartz, and others to teach at IMS, conflicts periodically arose about the best way to teach, because people were teaching from different perspectives. We started having teacher meetings to try to work out our conflicts. Robert Hall was our psychiatrist. He would come in as a friend of the community at that time, before he was a dharma teacher, sit down and listen to the arguments and problems, and help us sort them out.

One particularly instructive teacher meeting at IMS involved the center's first fifteen vipassana teachers. The dharma conflict was most strongly represented by a polarity between two teachers, one who at that time was devoted to a strict Mahasi Sayadaw style of meditation taught in a very systematic, conservative manner. The other teacher, though equally devoted to the Buddhist texts, was more formless and free, in a "Krishnamurti-like" phase. He valued the radical side of the Buddha's teachings of liberation: "Throw out the bondage of tradition and live in the reality of now." This conflict had carried on over a number of years. As I look back, I often find it somewhat amusing, although sometimes it was very painful and still is. Nevertheless, I think conflict is part of human experience, and I'm actually interested in how conflict is incorporated into practice rather than avoided.

So there were conservative voices that wanted to keep things the way it was done in Mahasi's retreat center in Burma, and there were voices that said, "We're in a new culture; we have to adapt and be free." We were polarized concerning how to set the wisest direction. At that point Robert Hall did a very skillful thing. He said, "I'd like one of the most polarized voices to leave the room. Go out, and we will call you back later." So the most radical teacher of those who wanted to adapt the teachings in new ways left the room, and Robert said to the group, "Suppose this teacher was banished from the community, so that we didn't have him to bother us any more. How would that affect you all?"

We sat in the circle and reflected on it. Of course, without the conflict, our lives would be easier and



While we are dedicated to preserving and sustaining the core teachings of our lineage, we are also willing to be innovators. Of course, no matter what we do, we will be criticized as well as praised.

*Jack Kornfield giving a tour of the land at Spirit Rock in 1993.*

more relaxed. But then something else became quite clear. If that voice weren't here, the need for that voice would be so apparent that it would have to be supplied by the rest of us. Then Robert invited this teacher back in and sent the most conservative teacher out of the room. He asked, "Now, suppose this teacher—who is concerned about tradition and conserving Burmese forms of practice quite strictly—was no longer part of the community. How would that affect the rest of you?"

At first we could feel the relaxing of the tension. But then several of us said, "If he were not teaching the traditional perspective that he does, we would do more of it because it's so important that people get it. His conservatism allows us to be more creative." It became apparent to everyone in that circle that the approaches of the various teachers complement each other, that we needed each other, that we do best when we represent not one particular stream or lineage but rather a mandala or a whole, where we each have a piece to contribute.

This, then, is some of the ground on which Spirit Rock was founded twenty years ago. When we came together in the early years to try to establish what guidelines and what sense this center on the West Coast would hold, we created a vision statement, which you can still see on our website. Spirit Rock is a mandala that includes the practice of intensive retreats and the ongoing embodiment and integration of dharma in all of the dimensions of one's life. We wanted this whole range. We

put the *Dharma of Liberation* in the center of the mandala; surrounding it are the other key elements of the mandala: *retreats*, following a year-round schedule; *study*, such as the Living Dharma retreat, Dedicated Practitioners Program, or Steven Batchelor's study retreats; *hermitage*, with forest huts for very long-term practice, which will be exciting when we are able to do it; and *right relationship*, cultivating wise relationship with each other, with the earth, and with other beings, following all the steps of the eightfold path. This comprehensive vision provides deep training in practice. It also trains practitioners in how to integrate practice into daily life through classes and workshops that promote and support wise and compassionate action in the world.

Our mandala reflects Theravada Buddhism and the riches of the Buddhist tradition overall. If you look at the monasteries in Thailand and Burma, the retreat centers make up a tiny fraction of the Buddhist culture. Most of the Buddhist teachings in these Buddhist countries focus on generosity, on service, on right speech, right action, and right livelihood. The whole eightfold path is the way of practice.

There is a wonderful book called *Buddha in the Jungle*, by Kamala Tiyavanich. From her research of Buddhism in Thailand, extending back to the earliest written records of the eighteenth and nineteenth century, you see a very wide range of meditation practices in use during that period. You also read how the forest lineages included healers, educators, schoolteachers, priests, peacemakers, and meditators; some were soothsayers and others were shamans who worked with the ghosts and spirits of the other realm. In most of these monasteries, there were rituals and festivals and dharma arts, such as painting and music. Other monasteries trained elephants and some held sky burials. There were even monasteries on the Mekong River where the monks used to enter into boat races with one another. There was a wide range of ways in which the Buddhist teachings were integrated in the community. The monasteries were community centers, education centers, and centers for people in every aspect and phase of their lives.

Someone might look at this and ask, "Where's the Buddhism in that?" If you simply consider the Buddhist sutras, you might say, "I don't see anything about elephant training or community centers in the Buddhist texts" or "I don't see anything about Eastern and Western psychology in there; isn't the Buddha's teaching on the four noble truths enough?" And it is enough. But the four noble

truths includes the eightfold path, which instructs us in how to live and embody dharma in every part of life through right view, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right mindfulness, and so forth.

Another great principle in our community of teachers, along with our mandala of practice, is that we all have continued to be students. Every one of us in the Teachers' Council here and at IMS is dedicated to continuing to practice, both within our tradition and outside of our own lineage. We have all studied with many great teachers in other traditions. Our practice has taught us to value depth in the many forms, and we look for skillful means to amplify what we know in our tradition. Both at Spirit Rock and at IMS, we want to deepen our realization of liberation, our embodiment of it, and then find ways to communicate the dharma we have inherited through skillful means in this culture.

Over the decades, our way of presenting the teachings has matured. For example, in the begin-

ning we put an emphasis on great striving and effort, just as we were taught in Asia. But we learned that, in this culture, when people use great effort they tend to judge themselves or tie themselves in knots. Feelings of unworthiness and self-criticism create

huge problems, so we now use a lot of metta. People get to the same profound levels of insight in a more integrated way.

Our range of skillful means has expanded. During our two-month spring retreat, students go very deep, and many have the classical inner transformative experiences of jhana and vipassana samadhi that come from long-term training. But the deepening is enhanced by adding metta, by the spacious attention that comes from Ajahn Chah's nondual perspective, and by our understanding of Western psychology. Our retreats now incorporate a sophisticated understanding of how to work with the common kinds of traumas and conflicts that come up as we open our minds and hearts.

To preserve the strength of our tradition, the majority of our retreats teach vipassana and the four foundations of mindfulness. Many of our other retreats focus on the brahmavihara (the divine abodes of loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity). Those are our two central streams of dharma practice. The third stream offers an integration of mindfulness practice with other aspects of our dharma vision. These retreats combine mindfulness and yoga, or mindfulness and the creative process, or mindfulness and loving-kindness and psychotherapy. In addi-



Jack Kornfield meets with the design committee in 1996 to discuss the architect's model for Spirit Rock's residential retreat center.

tion, we have hundreds of daylongs, which along with retreats provide the aspect of our mandala that has to do with integration and how we live. This would also include our Diversity Program, which is committed to offering the dharma to as diverse a population as possible; our Program for Socially Engaged Buddhists; our Family Program, for children and their parents; our Teen and Young Adult Program; and our Program for Yoga Teachers.

To keep Spirit Rock connected to the core of our Buddhist tradition, we made a rule that when people outside our lineage come here to teach retreats, they would always be joined by one of our teachers in order to connect their teachings to our practice. In this way our core practices of generosity, virtue, mindfulness, and loving-kindness are complemented by other lineages and skillful means. This practice holds even for masters like Tsoknyi Rinpoche. We respectfully asked him to teach at Spirit Rock because we highly value his teaching on Dzogchen.

However, we explained that the way our community works is that we try to have visiting teachings relate to our own tradition, and we asked if he would be comfortable teaching with one of our teachers, such as Guy Armstrong or Ajahn



Amaro. He said, “I love those guys. I love that monk. Sure, I will teach with them.” So we have had wonderful retreats with Tsoknyi Rinpoche and both Ajahn Amaro and Guy Armstrong on different occasions.

While we are dedicated to preserving and sustaining the core teachings of our lineage, we are also willing to be innovators, as indicated by our willingness to learn from many lineages. We draw wisdom from Western psychology; we have hosted a series of international teacher meetings over the past two decades; we have honored and embraced the feminine since the early years; we have been a pioneer in our Diversity Program; and we’ve been innovative in our teacher training and in our Community Dharma Leader’s program, a two-and-half-year training regimen for senior vipassana students who wish to offer classes and daylong retreats to their local sanghas. We do our best to deal with our conflict openly, which is a life-long process. Our teachers and staff have trained in council practices and mindful listening. Now many of these areas are being developed at other centers. Commitment to diversity is spreading, the complementary value of Western psychology is widely being incorporated, women are becoming dharma leaders all over the West, and the major

dharma traditions are learning from one another. In the eighties, our community was one of the first in the West to create an ethics council. Our ethics statement for Western teachers and communities has become a model for others.

When we established Spirit Rock, our notion was to make the governance more egalitarian than traditional dharma centers. We wanted to have a dialogue that would integrate the wisdom of the dedicated community, board members, and teachers and guide the center. So instead of setting up a pyramid with guiding teachers at the top who make the main decisions for the board to enact, we set up two bodies—a board of directors and a teachers’ council—which have now come together to jointly carry the responsibility and the vision for Spirit Rock for the century ahead. It’s clear to me that we need a real coordination between teachers and community and board members. There’s a collective wisdom at the heart of Spirit Rock that we want to draw from.

The board, teachers, staff, and community members are all long-term dharma students. We have a joint responsibility to ask, “How can we bring the blessings and freedom of the buddhadharma to all who come to Spirit Rock, and how can we sustain this while

working together as people who have different views? How can we make a collective of teachers and followers and practitioners who share different perspectives and yet underneath are really committed to those essential dharma principles?”

Our task is to preserve the practices of mindfulness, loving-kindness, compassion, ethics, and virtuous conduct. We want to preserve the whole eightfold path. We want to foster the deepest teachings and practices we can to bring awakening to all who practice with us. That’s what will sustain a healthy center and a healthy dharma stream, and bring benefit to the world. Our next step is to more fully support the hundreds of sitting groups, *kalayanamitta* senior-student groups, and community dharma centers that are growing around the country with this same open-hearted spirit. Of course, no matter what we do, we will be criticized as well as praised, so all we can do is stay true to our highest intentions.

It’s a fantastic experiment that we’re all engaged in, bringing the dharma to the West. We’ll try our best, and if things work, wonderful, and if they seem to be unskillful, then we will stop doing them. That’s what’s called wisdom. No matter how it unfolds, it’s been a blessing and an honor to be part of it all. **BD**

*The Residential Retreat Hall at Spirit Rock Meditation Center in Woodacre, California.*