

TCVC Summer Retreat with Steve Armstrong and Kamala Masters

June 14–23, 2013

Koinonia Retreat Center Annandale, MN



Invest Everything In Your Practice

by Kamala Masters

There was a reverential silence as the head nun prepared to shave my head for ordination as a Buddhist nun at the beginning of my participation in a two-month retreat. It was December of 2001, at the Forest Meditation Center of Sayadaw U Pandita, 40 miles north of Yangon, Myanmar (aka Burma).

In the old, dark wooden office building, I sat in a rickety chair with a clean white towel around my shoulders. The head nun approached gracefully with the office scissors in her hand, and proceeded to take random handfuls of my thick dark hair, cutting closely to the scalp. There were no words exchanged. In between the clip, clip, clip of the scissors, the gulping sounds from my throat were clearly audible, and pregnant with astonishment.

In contrast to the quietness of the room, the words going through my mind were loud: “Oh my God, this is shocking!” The first bolt of that shock went through my whole body and left my limbs feeling like jello. “Your body let go of your hair already,” I said to myself. “Now allow your mind to let go.” But it was all happening too fast. I stared at the messy

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ANNUAL MEETING/POTLUCK

Saturday, April 13

7:00–9:00 PM

Home of Naomi Baer

1812 Princeton Ave
in St. Paul

Phone: 651-698-1458

Please join us for the TCVC Annual Meeting. We'll celebrate another year of good-hearted generosity from those who offer their service to keep the dharma wheel rolling in the Midwest.

Bring a pot luck dish to share (or not) and join us for a short sit, lively conversation and a bit of official TCVC business.

We welcome your presence whether you're interested in becoming more involved with TCVC or would just like to connect with fellow yogis outside of retreat. And we appreciate your feedback and input anytime—not just at the annual meeting.

Drum roll please... thank you TCVC Board: Elizabeth Archerd, Naomi Baer, Matthew Buzzard, Evelyn Kaiser, Nora Murphy, Todd Stitt and Bob Zeglovitch!

Thank you registrars Joanne Skarjune and Laurie MacLeod, and retreat managers Bob Zeglovitch and Mimi Jennings for your kind and generous service! Thank you Jean Fagerstrom for looking after our post office box! Thank you Joanne for doing the newsletter!

Thank you everyone who came to our retreats!

If you are interested in helping TCVC in any way please contact Naomi Baer at 651-698-1458.

piles of my dark hair on the floor, wanting to slow things down, to give myself time to accept and let go.

The Burmese nun's voice, soft and straightforward, interrupted the silence, "Please soap and rinse your head in the sink," as her hand motioned towards the bathroom. "After that I will use the razor to shave your head completely." I stood in front of the mirror, a bit dazed as I took in the reflection before me. My face was recognizable, but my head and what was left of my hair were unfamiliar—choppy and scary-looking. I didn't know whether I would laugh or cry at the ridiculousness of my appearance. I could sense the mind scrambling, trying to put together that familiar sense of self, trying to hold on to something that wasn't there anymore.

Soaping and feeling the bristly unevenness of the bumpy clumps of hair on my head, I let my hands take in the state of things as they actually were. Strange as the feeling was, the undeniable reality of the sensory perception through my hands allowed me to accept what is, and to let go of what was. A wave of buoyant lightness passed through my body, and the words, "This is how it is right now," floated through my mind, reassurance that calmness and equanimity were supporting me for a few moments.

For the next step, I was kneeling on the wooden floor, gazing at a large pan of water beneath me. I felt the slow and steady scrape, scrape, scrape, as every inch of my head was methodically shaved. Now and then I heard the refreshing sounds of the razor dipping into the water to rinse out the hair. This, along with the gentle pressure gliding over my scalp, slowed down the beating of my heart. There was enough clarity and truthfulness to see how attached I was to my hair! And then I was surprised to see that after noticing this attachment, lovingkindness spontaneously arose for this woman's caring and careful attention.

The letting go of one's hair is one of the first physical acts of renunciation a woman must go through in order to ordain as a nun in most Buddhist countries. It's about beginning a more simple lifestyle, giving up the burden and complexity of so much to own, so much to physically deal with and mentally think about. This simplicity helps one see more deeply into the nature of life.

As I watched the bits and globs of hair and soapsuds dropping into the pan of water and around the wooden

floor, I thought of how letting go of one's hair meant letting go of all the shampoo and conditioner, combs and brushes, hair dryers and curling irons. Hair requires so much time and energy pondering and deciding on curly or straight? Long or short? It was a huge relief to let go of all that... at least for this time period. The mess on the floor felt like such a heavy burden in stark contrast to my cleanly shaven head. The lightness of renunciation invited me into its potential greater freedom.

I remembered the words of the Buddha: "If by renouncing a lesser happiness, one may realize a greater happiness, let the wise one renounce the lesser having regard for the greater."

As if she could read my thoughts, in her own everyday language, the nun beside me said, "This physical level of letting go will give you the trust

you need to let go at deeper levels of the mind." I had no doubt she was speaking from experience.

Ever since I was a teenager I was aware of what seemed to be an aspiration to complete some ancient promise I had made to myself to ordain as a nun, even if it was only for a short time, and not for life. (In Burma, temporary ordination is respected as long as the motivation is for the deepening of one's practice.) This aspiration was a mystery to me. During the years that I raised my four children, totally committed and enjoying my role as wife and mother, I continued to hold this vision gently in my heart. Now at 54 years old, with my children mature enough to be on their own, I was finally able to fulfill that promise.

As I remained in the kneeling posture with my head bent over the pan of water, I remembered how the difficulties of motherhood and household living strengthened my resolve to be more patient and persevering. I could see how those strengths were primary supports during the ongoing deepening of my practice through the years.

As the shaving of my head was coming to completion, soothing voices nearby began chanting the "Refuges":

Buddham saranam gacchami
I go to the Buddha for refuge

Dhamma saranam gacchami
I go to the Dhamma for refuge

Sangham saranam gacchami
I go to the Sangha for refuge

This physical level of letting go
will give you the trust you need
to let go at deeper levels



Sayadaw U Pandita

As my heart chanted silently along, I realized how deep and unshakable my faith was in the Buddha's realization, in the teachings of how to live a noble life, and how important it is to be guided by those who have realized the Buddha's teaching.

When I stood up I felt dizzy. I took a moment to close my eyes. Slowly and mindfully I placed the palms of my hands over my newly shaven head, feeling the smoothness, the coolness and the strangeness of it. Somehow this helped to restabilize and realign my body and mind. I noticed how easeful it was to take time to do this in the company of others who were used to silence and long moments of simple awareness.

When I opened my eyes, the nun who had shaved my head stood in front of me, holding a set of neatly folded, saffron-hued robes. It touched me that she held them with such respect and offered them to me with both hands. In Burma, when you offer anything to a person, it's usually done with both hands, as a sign that you are offering wholeheartedly.

It is believed that the act of giving benefits not only the recipient, but also endows the giver with positive karmic energy, supporting both the giver and the receiver in their journey to inner freedom. Stretching out both hands, and feeling the sacredness of the moment, I received the offering... also wholeheartedly. Knowing that it is an

especially powerful act of generosity to offer monastic robes, when I bowed to her in gratitude, a quivering vibration traveled throughout my body.

With some help and girlish giggling at my awkwardness, the robes were finally on my body. It was only 10:30 in the morning and already it was hot and humid. Yet the nuns around me looked so fresh, neat and comfortable in their robes. They wore their robes with such dignity. A twinge of worry went through my mind about whether I could maintain that level of neatness and physical comfort each day, especially with the crazy hot flashes that fired up my body at regular intervals. "What was I thinking?" I lamented to myself, momentarily falling into a crevasse of doubt about my decision to ordain during menopause. Luckily wisdom prevailed, and I said to myself, "It's just a passing moment of doubt, Kamala, don't let it weaken your resolve. You crossed an ocean, took a year to make preparations to get here, and you've already let go of all your hair. Keep your intention clear! Faith in yourself is crucial."

Giving myself time to tune into the confidence I needed to go forth, I was finally on my way to take formal vows from my teacher, Sayadaw U Pandita. He is known as one of the strictest monastic teachers in Burma, and the integrity of his virtue is recognized even by those in the military. He is described by many as being a demanding teacher because he expects his students to put forth the utmost energy and commitment toward their practice. When I began my practice with him in 1985, it didn't take me long to realize that this attitude came from an unwavering confidence in the freedom possible through the Buddha's teaching.

As I walked the pathways to his residence at the monastery, I remembered the various times in retreat when I thought I couldn't continue with my practice... it was just too hard to open to the pain in my body, the pain in my mind/heart. I had wanted to roll up my mat and go home. He maintained such a 'high bar' of Dhamma practice, and expected so much from his students. Understanding how rare it is to have a teacher who expects the highest from you, I revered him for this; and at times I feared him for this.

In truth, though, my fear was that I would not be able to do the practice expected of me. He seemed to have more confidence in me than I had in myself. Though over the years, confidence in my ability to open to whatever unfolded had grown slowly, but steadily.

When I arrived, the translator ushered me into

U Pandita's receiving room, and we took our places on the woven mats on the floor. The room was austere but impeccably clean. The walls were the dark teak hardwood of Burma, beautiful with a soft shine. The many large windows invited in the golden forest light and fresh air, along with the joyful chattering of birds.

Sayadaw (which means spiritual teacher) is a heavy-set man. When he enters a room, one can feel the gravitas of his Dhamma energy representing all the years of his practice and study as a monastic since he was a young boy. Kneeling with my palms together at heart level, and head slightly bowed, I watched as he took his steps mindfully towards his chair.

There is one chair, with a not-too-ornate carving in the backrest. When Sayadaw was completely seated in this chair, the translator and I simultaneously made three mindful bows to our teacher. The room is large enough to hold 20-30 visitors seated on the floor, but there were only two of us, and I was feeling nervous.

U Pandita's face bestowed a slight smile before he began to offer the formal vows of ordination. This helped me be more at ease. He asked that I repeat after him in the ancient Pali language. Though I didn't know the exact meaning of the words, I felt an indescribable connection to countless other sisters, back to the time of the Buddha, who have taken these vows of renunciation and aspiration for liberation.

When the formal vows were complete, without a translator he asked in his simple English, "Why are you here? You have come from so far away."

"I'm here to purify my heart," I responded.

When we say this to our teachers it means many things: I am willing to do the best I can to open to whatever arises in my practice, to see it clearly, without avoiding or distorting. I am willing to let go of what causes harm to others and to myself. I am willing to cultivate the causes and conditions for the deepest peace.

As I said the words, "I'm here to purify my heart," I noticed the softness of his gaze, and at the same time how his piercing presence held the stillness in the room. The birds seemed to stop their chattering and the leaves to stop their fluttering, as my attention was focused only on whatever advice he had to offer.

Sayadaw's wise words filled the room: "You must be willing to invest everything you have in your practice."

The words echoed against the walls a few times before I truly understood their meaning. The word 'invest' had

special interest for me. I had never heard him use that language before. U Pandita had guided me through several intensive retreats already, and knew the challenges that required me to either develop greater Dhamma skills or to continue suffering in the same way. Of course, there are still many more skills yet to be developed and made stronger in my practice.

In recollecting what had transpired in the last hours before arriving at Sayadaw's residence, I remembered the skills that showed up spontaneously because of wholesome habit patterns through years of practice... skills like mindfulness, equanimity, patience, loving-kindness, faith, and truthfulness. Some skills needed more practice in order to show up more effortlessly, like confidence in oneself and renunciation.

It was clear that Sayadaw U Pandita was advising me to make good use of the beneficent forces already in my own heart, to invest them in my practice, and they would grow like all wise investments grow. Since that time, especially when I know I need to raise the bar in my practice, I remember his words with deep gratitude for his guidance: "You must be willing to invest everything you have in your practice."



TREASURY REPORT

Retreat Fund	\$5,892
Retreat Deposits	4,500
Scholarship Fund	4,440
Balance	\$14,382

Thanks to everyone who donated to TCVC. We're grateful for all your donations especially considering these difficult economic times. Your donations to the scholarship fund make it possible for people to attend retreats who could not afford to go otherwise. Donations to the retreat fund help lower the cost of retreats for everyone.

Donations were boosted this year by those who responded to the "Give to the Max Day" event in November and also by individuals who took advantage of their employer's matching donations.

TCVC is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization; your donations are tax-deductible. To make a donation, send a check to TCVC, PO Box 14683, Minneapolis, MN 55414, or donate online at www.givemn.org

For more information, contact TCVC's treasurer, Todd Stitt, at 612-729-1715.

REGISTRATION JUNE 14–23 with KAMALA MASTERS and STEVE ARMSTRONG

Retreat registration deadline is Friday, May 24. There is a \$25 late fee after May 24, 2013.
Mail your registration to Joanne Skarjune, 3518 E 25th St, Minneapolis, MN 55406

Name _____ Male/Female (circle one)
Address _____ City _____ State: _____ Zip: _____
Phone _____ Email _____

- Email confirmation is sufficient Enclosed is a stamped, self-addressed envelope for postal confirmation
 This is my first retreat I can help set up or clean up I need a ride I can give a ride
 I have special accessibility, dietary or other needs. (Please enclose a description or contact the registrar.)
 I use a CPAP or other medical device. (Please specify or contact the registrar.)
 Enclosed is a scholarship request for \$_____ Maximum scholarship is \$275.
\$_____ Retreat Fee* Double \$550 Single \$725 Singles are available on a first-come basis.
\$_____ Add \$25 late fee if mailing after May 24
\$_____ Optional tax-deductible donation to TCVC: Retreat Fund Scholarships Either Fund
\$_____ **Total Enclosed** (Make check payable to TCVC)

* The teachers that we ask to lead our retreats do not request or receive any compensation from us for their teaching. At the end of the retreat, students are encouraged to practice *dana* (generosity) by offering a donation to the teachers.

Vipassana (insight) meditation is a simple and direct practice: the moment-to-moment investigation of the mind/body process through calm, open and precise awareness. Learning to observe experience from a place of spacious stillness enables one to relate to life with a balance of wisdom and compassion.

Retreats are held in noble silence and include sitting and walking meditation, instructions, Dharma talks, and time for questions with the teacher.

As the teachings of the Buddha are considered priceless, they have traditionally been offered freely. The teachers do not receive payment from TCVC for teaching. The registration fee covers room and board, travel expenses for the teachers and other expenses. At the end of the retreat, students are encouraged to offer a donation to the teachers to support their living expenses so they may continue to practice and teach.

To apply for a scholarship, include a letter with your registration giving the background of your need. Scholarship requests must be received by the due date and are limited to one retreat per person per calendar year.

Those who wish may help others by donating to the TCVC Scholarship Fund or Operating Fund.

Registration Send a check for the full amount to secure your registration. If you are applying for a scholarship, subtract the scholarship amount requested from the registration fee.

Cancellations Notify the registrar if you need to cancel. TCVC retains a \$25 fee for cancellations received after the due date, along with any cancellation fees charged by the retreat venue.

Schedule

Fri 6/14	Registration	3:00–6:00 PM
	Evening meal	6:00 PM
	Retreat opens	8:00 PM
Sun 6/23	Retreat ends	After lunch

Attendance Yogis are expected to arrive by 6:00 PM on opening day and to stay for the duration. All exceptions must be approved by the retreat manager.

Yogi jobs are included in the schedule for all participants. These mindful work periods are assigned on a first come, first served basis at check-in time.

Meals Vegetarian meals begin with an evening meal from 6:00–7:00 PM on opening day and end with lunch on the last day.

Accommodations at the Koinonia Retreat Center have modern plumbing. Handicap accessible and single rooms are available on a first-come basis.

Detailed information about the retreat is mailed upon registration. Contact the registrar, Joanne Skarjune at 612-724-1951 or retreats@tcvc.info

Directions to Koinonia from Minneapolis

394 West to 169

North on 169 for 1/4 mile

West on Highway 55 2.5 miles past Annandale

South (Left) on County Road 3 for 4/10 of a mile

West (Right) on 80th Street for one mile

South (Left) on Pilger Avenue for 2/10 of a mile

Allow two hours travel time from Minneapolis.

See also KoinoniaRetreatCenter.org.

You may leave Koinonia's phone number, 888-801-7746, with family for emergency contact only.

Twin Cities Vipassana Collective
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Minneapolis, MN 55414

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Twin Cities Vipassana Collective Calendar Visit us at www.tcvc.info

Retreats are held at Koinonia Retreat Center near Annandale, MN www.KoinoniaRetreatCenter.com

Date	Teachers / Event	Contact
June 14–23, 2013 Full-time only	Steve Armstrong and Kamala Masters	Joanne Skarjune 612-724-1951
Feb. 14–16 or Feb. 14–21, 2014	Chas DiCapua and Rebecca Bradshaw	Bob Zeglovitch 612-462-0270
June 13–22, 2014 Full-time only	Steve Armstrong and Kamala Masters	Evelyn Kaiser 612-412-0072

TCVC is a community of people interested in developing and deepening their meditation practice. We provide opportunities to hear and practice the teachings of *vipassana* (insight) and *metta* (lovingkindness) meditation, with an emphasis on residential retreats led by senior teachers in the Theravada Buddhist tradition.

Practice opportunities for *vipassana* meditation are blossoming in the Midwest. In addition to Common Ground Meditation Center, which offers non-residential and residential retreats in and near the Twin Cities, look for other practice opportunities on the “Links” tab at www.tcvc.info