



Vipassana Santa Cruz

NEWSLETTER

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BEFRIENDING THE SPIRITUAL TOPDOG

by *Carla Brennan, Teacher Trainee*

A deeply rooted pattern, sometimes called the “Spiritual Topdog”, is a common obstacle on the spiritual path. The term “Topdog” originated in Gestalt therapy; it describes the “alpha dog” of our multifaceted personality. The Topdog is a conditioned adaptive subpersonality developed in childhood that attempts to maintain control, to keep us safe and is usually pushing for change and improvement.

At its core, the Topdog is merely trying to protect our vulnerability and to help us succeed and survive in an insecure world. However, it continues to view life from the limited black and white, reward and punishment, perspective of childhood. While the Topdog’s intent may be noble, its skill and approach can seem self-righteous, judgmental, and dogmatic. It may manipulate the psyche through fear and threats of disaster if we do not obey its advice. In its extreme form, the barrage of self-criticism and the pain it causes can be heart-wrenching to witness.

The companion subpersonality to the Topdog is, of course, the Underdog. Usually, it can be identified by frequent feelings of unworthiness, inadequacy and deficiency. In reaction to the demanding Topdog, the Underdog aspect of the personality often feels defensive, put down, victimized, resentful, and self-blaming.

This pattern, while developed in childhood, is usually folded seamlessly into one’s spiritual practice as an adult. Since the Topdog is modeled on the powerful people of our early years, it

can easily imitate the voice of “divine authority” of our spiritual idealism. The Spiritual Topdog will endlessly tell you whether you are doing well enough or not (usually not) and what you should improve or do more of (usually everything).

Here are some hints for identifying the Spiritual Topdog in action.

- **Comparisons or competition.** We may consistently compare our practice as well as our understanding and knowledge to others. We can get caught up in strategies to “get ahead” spiritually and to strive harder.

- **Rigid set of beliefs.** Perhaps we believe subconsciously that meditating on a cushion is more spiritual than sitting in a chair. Or that wearing certain clothing or eating specific foods will make us more spiritual. We may become more concerned about our spiritual “appearance” than actual spiritual transformation. We may judge ourselves and others by dogmatic and simplistic rules of rights and wrongs.

- **Feelings of not being good enough.** This is perhaps the most common Spiritual Topdog effect. We may experience pervasive feelings of inadequacy and inferiority. We may even be convinced that the practice won’t work for us or that we are incapable of spiritual awakening. We may think that more must always be done: more retreats, more books read, more teachers, more self-improvement.

- **Threats and ultimatums.** Listen carefully to the nature of your self-talk. If there is an edge of harshness, impatience, belittling, or attempts to scare yourself into practice, the Spiritual Topdog is present.

Following the Topdog’s path can feel grim and very serious; practice may become lifeless and dry, and seem like a series of tedious tasks. The behavior and beliefs of the Topdog often contradict what is actually true; it insists on an old, out-dated, repetitive, untrue story about ourselves and our abilities.

Fortunately, investigating the Topdog can become a rich place to introduce compassion and to understand the possibilities for freedom. The first step in befriending the Spiritual Topdog is to see the pattern clearly, name it and know that you don’t have to believe it or be controlled by it. The task is not to attack or eliminate the Topdog but to bring it into the fold of caring and compassion. We can use wise speech on ourselves, meeting whatever arises in the mind and heart with kindness and acceptance.

The Topdog just wants us to be safe and to be loved. It becomes our job as adult, mature practitioners to take over for the Topdog and to create for ourselves with that loving, safe inner world. We can go beyond our conditioned habits and invite a radical acceptance, a radical openness and a radical spaciousness into our heart and mind. Mindfulness is the practice of cultivating that nonjudging, open and welcoming attention.

Wisdom can only arise in this moment – right now! – and this moment includes all the imperfections of existence and of ourselves. Facing ourselves with courage, humor and great kindness, we can embrace and see clearly who we are. And that includes our confusion, quirks, annoying habits, mistakes, beauty, gifts, our Topdog, and our Buddha Nature. Only then, can we understand what is real and can true compassion arise.



SANGHA NEWS AND INFORMATION

BECOMING A TEACHER

By Mary Orr, *Guiding Teacher*

Often people attending VSC for a time wonder, “Where do teachers come from?” or, “How could I get to be a teacher?”. Or even, once in a while, “How on earth did that person get to be a teacher?”

For many years at Vipassana Santa Cruz, I was the only teacher. As is traditional in most Buddhist lineages, my teacher, Jack Kornfield, invited me to train with him. He did this after monitoring my practice for a number of years. The training lasted four years. It consisted of monthly study and discussion meetings, as well as attending many retreats as a teacher trainee.

But teaching alone, as I did at Vipassana Santa Cruz, is often lonely, and it can be easy to get out of balance. At Spirit Rock, our “mother” retreat center in Marin County, we have long had a teachers council. In that group we support and monitor each others’ teaching. So I was happy eventually to create a similar situation with our teacher group here at VSC.

Richard Shankman was the first teacher trainee, who became an associate teacher. He went through a several year period of training, similar to what I did with Jack Kornfield, under the supervision of Gil Fronsdal and myself. He is rarely with us these days, as he now lives in Oakland and has a new baby. Bob Stahl, also as associate teacher, trained during many years of monastic practice in Burma and here in the US; he also teaches Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction.

Carla Brennan is currently training to be a Dharma teacher under my supervision; she already plays a major role at VSC. And Jason Murphy is just beginning his teacher training. These people are or will be qualified to teach classes, daylong, and retreats on their own or with others.

We have two other levels of teachers. Spirit Rock offers a “Community Dharma Leader” training. This is a program

that lasts for 2 1/2 years and has five retreats as well as a study program. Jill Hyman and Carla Brennan (as part of her teacher training) are in that program.

Finishing this program qualifies people to teach sitting groups and day long retreats or under the supervision of a retreat teacher. “Mentors” assist in a teaching capacity, under the supervision of a teacher; they are also available to advise new students. Dan Landry and Bruce Hyman do this in our group.

Finally, Marcy Reynolds teaches Qigong and mindful movement at many VSC events and before the Thursday evening sitting. Her training has been under qualified teachers of Qigong.

In a sense, there is no simple answer to “who teaches”. As it has for 2500 years, this practice – and the teaching of this practice – is passed down, from teacher to teacher, from warm hand to warm hand. So if you have a yen to teach, practice hard, and let your teacher know!

FROM THE STREETS TO THE MEDITATION HALL: BUDDHISM FOR THE X GENERATION

By Jason Murphy, *Teacher Trainee*

I have been asked frequently recently to describe what the Santa Cruz Dharma Punx group is about. As the teacher of the local chapter of the Dharma Punx Nation, I thought I would share a few words about this group of young Buddhist practitioners who are banning together to rebel against our minds while at the same time rebelling against the status quo.

First started by Noah Levine in the nineties in San Francisco, the intention was to provide a place for the X generation or the next generation to feel welcomed and to be able to relate to the age old teachings of the Buddha Dharma. When I attended The Urban Dharma Group in San Francisco or the day longs at Spirit Rock for 20’s and 30’s I felt connected and

comfortable, but frankly got tired of having to drive two or more hours just to connect with other young people who were seeking truth through the Dharma. I spoke with a few teachers about the idea of starting a group in Santa Cruz aimed toward young punk rockers and those who were on the fringes of the social norm. I received encouragement and started a group in 2003.

Noah, in his book *Dharma Punx*, describes the common experience of Generation X’ers – angry, marginalized young people who grew up in time of failing peaceful ideals and parents who sold out to the consumerism of popular society. These kids had little hope for their generation and have sometimes been deemed the “lost generation.” Dharma Punx are a new breed of spiritual seekers and are not only Buddhist but are also Muslim, Hindu, Taoist, and Christian.

Dharma means truth and that’s our message. Punk refers to, not only music, but also a feeling of dissatisfaction with the status quo. Noah explains, “It is about those of us who, motivated by the same dissatisfaction with life that brought us to the punk scene, now have turned toward spiritual practice as a non-violent form of the revolution. It is a movement about finding in meditation and service the freedom we were looking for as young idealistic punk rockers. Having clearly seen the uselessness of drugs and violence, we have found positive ways to channel our rebellion against the lies of society. Still fuelled by anger at injustice and suffering, we now use that energy to awaken to our own natural wisdom and compassion instead of for self-destruction.”

I feel our group has begun a new journey, one that portrays hope, if not for our generation at least for ourselves. Through cultivation of kindness, compassion and understanding of the mind and the suffering caused by striving to obtain material success. This group has taken a new step toward spirituality. Feel free to join us: Meditate and Destroy Greed, Hatred and Delusion.



SANGHA NEWS AND INFORMATION

EACH CUSHION IS A METTA PRACTICE

by Leslie Tremaine, Student

Volunteering is usually thought as a generous act of sharing time and talents, a way to be of service. A lofty idea, but my own experience is both less lofty and yet richer. I volunteer here as a way to feel that I belong, that I am a part of a community – this sense of being part of a circle of giving and receiving that connects me to this sangha. By doing more than coming to weekly sittings I gain a sense that I am a “member” here. Like the “members” of our bodies the actions of an arm aren’t “volunteer work” – they are just being part of the body.

Last fall, new to the community as well as to the sangha, I signed up right away to be a volunteer, sensing this would be a way to begin getting involved in a new place and new life. The first set of tasks to come along were cleaning which was perfect for me. I work at a job that taxes the mind more than the body and I loved the idea of more straightforward work than my Monday–Friday tasks.

Denny gave me my training and we naturally divided the work up – my calling was the zafus and zabutons! Piling them up, plugging in the vacuum and working away to remove the month’s accumulation of dust and hair – for a couple of hours each month I am absorbed, muscles moving, stretching and bending with a rhythm that leaves my mind at peace and my body humming. Focused on the realities of dust and dirt the time passes quickly and the work takes on a ritual quality. Sunlight usually streams in the windows, and Denny’s companionable presence adds to the warmth. I clean each cushion as a metta practice, wishing ease and well being for the people who sit on them. Work as practice seems to make such sense here. Sitting feels different the next time: as a volunteer I am part of this place and it feels good even when it is hard or sweaty.

Consider this next time you are asked about volunteering!

BOOKKEEPER NEEDED

The Bookkeeper will be trained by, and work closely with, the Treasurer of Vipassana Santa Cruz. They will perform normal bookkeeping tasks for the sangha (i.e. record dana, pay bills, reconcile accounts, generate monthly reports), with assistance from the Treasurer as needed. A working knowledge of Excel and either Quicken or QuickBooks software programs is desirable. This job will take about 1-2 hours per week of work. This person’s contribution will be much appreciated and valued by the entire sangha!

PUBLICITY VOLUNTEER NEEDED

Our media publicity volunteer, Isabelle Rosenlund, is taking a leave of absence and we need a new volunteer to replace her for 6-12 months. The task includes notifying local newspapers about some of the upcoming events at VSC. Please contact Val Nelson or Carla Brennan (carlabrennan@hotmail.com). Thank you!

OTHER VOLUNTEER OPPORTUNITIES

Here are some of our current volunteer needs. For more information on any of them, please feel free to ask Valerie Nelson, one of our teachers, or a Board member;

- We are looking people to regularly place fliers on local bulletin boards around the Santa Cruz area, such as Pacific Avenue, Westside, Eastside, and Aptos. If you can volunteer to be responsible for one area on a regular basis it would be very helpful to us for promoting events to the larger community.
- Do you have carpentry, mechanical, electrical or other “handy-person” skills? We would like to establish a team of volunteers who can be contacted when a need arises.
- Assisting with a special event or being a contact person for an event is another great way to give service to the sangha.

START A DHARMA FRIENDS GROUP!

What is a Dharma Friends group? The Buddha emphasized the importance of having *kalyana mittas* – spiritual friends – to accompany us on our spiritual path. Dharma Friends Groups are a way to meet with others in the sangha for support, study, sharing, friendship and fun. The groups are initiated, organized and led by members of the sangha.

Some suggestions for groups include: book groups, topic groups (aging, chronic illness, raising children, for example), walking groups. For guidelines and help in organizing your own Dharma Friends Group contact: Margaret Seidler at bargaret@att.net, or 831-689-0670

QIGONG AT VSC

Qigong is a term used to describe a multitude of moving meditation forms that spring from roots in ancient China. Today, all around the world, Qigong is used to build strength, improve immune function, relieve stress, and cultivate wisdom. For the practitioner of sitting meditation qigong has many benefits including simply settling the body and mind to allow for comfortable sitting. This is why Marcy Reynolds teaches a Qigong class scheduled before the Thursday night sit.

Thursday evening Qigong is a drop-in class which allows the focus to change to meet the needs of those who show up on any given night. Currently, the classes are focusing on deepening the awareness of qi flow in the body, especially through the legs. They have also been focusing on relaxing shoulders and arms, allowing for increased flow through the Lung meridian which supports the entire immune system. If there is enough interest we may explore a meditative movement form called, “A Trip to Heaven” which will be taught in a master workshop in December for those who want to learn the entire form.

Qigong at Vipassana Santa Cruz is offered Thursdays from 5:30 pm – 6:30 pm. All are welcome anytime.



SANGHA NEWS AND INFORMATION

WHO'S WHO AT VSC

TEACHERS

Mary Grace Orr, *Guiding Teacher*
 Bob Stahl, *Associate Teacher*
 Richard Shankman, *Associate Teacher*
 Carla Brennan, *Teacher Trainee*
 Jason Murphy, *Teacher Trainee*
 Jill Hyman, *Community Dharma Leader*
 Dan Landry, *Mentor*
 Bruce Hyman, *Mentor*
 Marcy Reynolds, *Qi Gong Teacher*

BOARD MEMBERS

Ann Zweig, *President*
 Dan Landry, *Vice President*
 Bill Culman, *Treasurer*
 Margaret Seidler, *Secretary*
 Mary Grace Orr
 Carla Brennan
 Alice Tarail
 Ann Russell
 Val Nelson
 Carol Van Der Bos
 Gee Shulz
 Jason Murphy

FACILITIES MANAGERS

Ann Russell
 Carol Van Der Bos

EVENT COORDINATOR

Mary Lou Nicoletti

VOLUNTEER COORDINATOR

Valerie Nelson

OMSBUDPERSON

Heidi Renteria

OMSBUDPERSON

VSC has an ombudsperson. What's that? An organizational ombudsperson is a confidential and informal information resource, communications channel, complaint-handler, and dispute-resolver, and a person who helps an organization work for change.

Our ombudsperson is Heidi Renteria, who welcomes you to call her at (831) 458-9039 to discuss any problem or situation within the sangha in which you feel values of fairness and respect are not demonstrated in words and deeds. These may include conflicts or difficult situations within the group or with teachers, the board, or others related to the sangha. Such conversations with the ombudsperson are kept completely confidential.

SANGHA TAPE AND BOOK LIBRARY

In the small room off the meditation hall is a large case that contains a variety of Dharma-related audio cassettes, CDs and DVDs. You can check out an item by finding its card in the small box on the table and signing your name. We will soon also be offering dharma books.

DHARMA TALKS ONLINE!

Several Dharma Talks are now available on the Vipassana Santa Cruz website (www.vipassanasc.org). There are two ways to hear the talks. You can either download them and listen at your leisure on your computer or iPod. Or, you can listen to them 'live' as streaming audio straight from the website. The page comes complete with directions for downloading and listening. It is our intention to continue to record the Thursday evening Dharma Talks and post them to the website. Additionally, we will try to record other special talks.

INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEWS

Individual interviews with teachers can be arranged. These are opportunities to ask questions and receive Dharma guidance. It is most useful if you come to an interview with specific questions about your formal meditation practice, integrating practice into your daily life or understanding the teachings. These meetings are offered to students on a *dana* basis.

Mary Grace Orr can be reached by e-mail, mgrace.orr@gmail.com, and also at 688-3958. She will schedule according to mutual convenience during a weekday.

Carla Brennan will be periodically scheduling approximately 30-minute interviews at the Center on Wednesdays at 4:30, 5:00, 5:30, 6:00 pm. Other times may also be arranged. Contact Carla at 831-336-0136 or carlabrennan@hotmail.com.

Bob Stahl can meet with people at his office in Santa Cruz. To schedule an interview and get directions, he can be contacted at (831)469-3338 or bob@mindfulnessprograms.com.

PRISON PROJECT

Several members of Vipassana Santa Cruz have been leading Buddhist meditation programs in both Salinas Valley State Prison (SVSP) and Correctional Training Facility (CTF). The programs were started by Richard Shankman who had a long history of doing prison work and was able to achieve the difficult task of getting the programs approved. The program at CTF runs on Tuesday evenings and the SVSP program runs midday on Tuesdays.

The programs differ due to different levels of security. CTF is a level II (medium security) and SVSP is a level IV (maximum security) prison. In general, programs consist of opening Qi Gong or Yoga, guided meditation, short dharma talks, discussion and closing metta.

We, the volunteers, find the the work profound. Stereotypes are erased, great compassion arises and our showing up can be a wonderful expression of generosity. The work has become a fundamental part of our spiritual journeys. If you are interested in getting involved in the Prison Project, contact Bruce or Jill Hyman at: jbhyman@earthlink.net.



Meditating in the "Enchanted Forest" during the "True Nature: Dharma Practice in Nature" daylong on October 20.

VIPASSANA SANTA CRUZ EVENTS AND PROGRAMS

Please check the website regularly for any additions or changes to the schedule and for registration information.

www.vipassanasc.org

REGULAR MEDITATIONS

MONDAYS

NOON - 1:00 PM

45-minute sit followed by a short reading

7:00 TO 8:30 PM

45-minute sitting followed by Dharma talk
Andrews Episcopal Church, Ben Lomond

TUESDAYS

12 NOON - 1:15 PM

45-minute sitting followed by a short
Dharma talk

WEDNESDAYS

7 AM - 7:45 AM

45-minute sitting with chanting

THURSDAYS

5:30 - 6:30 PM

Qigong with Marcy Reynolds

7:00 - 8:30 PM

45-minute sitting followed by Dharma talk

SUNDAYS

45-minute sit every Sunday at 9:30 AM

- 1st Sunday: Followed by the Family Program. Ends at noon.
- 2nd Sunday: followed by a short reading.
- 3rd Sunday: Followed by more sitting, walking and Dharma Talk. Ends at 12:15
- 4th Sunday: Followed by taking of the refuges and precepts.

6:00 - 7:30 PM

Santa Cruz Dharma Punx

30-minute sitting followed by talk and discussion

PLEASE NOTE: There will be no meditation on Thanksgiving, November 22.

CLASSES

MEDITATION FOR BEGINNERS

4-Week class, Fridays

Nov. 2, 9, 16, & 30

1:30 - 3:00 PM

With Carla Brennan

This class will include the basic instructions for mindfulness meditation, the philosophical underpinnings of Buddhist practice and

suggestions for practicing mindfulness in daily life. This practice can be useful to anyone regardless of religious affiliation. Please try to attend all four sessions. Open to completely new as well as experienced students.

RETREATS

HALF-DAY RETREAT EVERY 3RD SUNDAY MORNING (NOV. 18, DEC. 16, JAN. 20)

9:30-10:15 Sitting

10:15-10:45 Walking

10:45-11:30 Sitting

11:30-12:15 Dharma Talk

Come for all or part of the morning.

WORKING WITH ANGER: A HOUSEHOLDER RETREAT

Nov. 5, 6, 7, and 9, 6:30-9

Nov. 8, 5:30-9

Nov. 10, 9-noon

With Mary Grace Orr, assisted by Jill Hyman, Marcy Reynolds, Qi Gong

Working with anger: All of us, students, teachers, the wise and the foolish, experience anger. And all too often, the experience is so intense that actions arise which are not so skillful and which cause suffering both to others and to ourselves. How can we learn to be more skillful with such an intense emotion? How can we develop what Pema Chodron calls, "Radical patience"? And how do we differentiate this from a strong, possibly even appropriately ferocious response? In this householder retreat, we will work with teachings from Pema Chodron and also from a text on patience from Shantideva, discussing the situation and exploring it with exercises and inquiry.

A DAY OF MINDFULNESS AT TAUNG PULU KABA-AYE MONASTERY

Saturday, Dec. 8, 10AM - 4PM

With Bob Stahl.

This is a benefit retreat for the Monastery, which is supported solely through donations. We will be meditating in the Monastery Shrine room as well as the World Peace Pagoda. This pagoda was built in 1984, and it is extremely rare to see this type of structure in the west. Please feel free to invite and bring any family and/or friends with you and know that your support will further the

practice of mindfulness in the west.

Location: Taungpulu Kaba-Aye Monastery
18335 Big Basin Way
Boulder Creek, CA. 95006

MEN'S RETREAT

Saturday, January 12

9am - 4pm

With Bob Stahl, Jason Murphy,
& Dan Landry

This daylong retreat for men will alternate sitting and walking meditation and include discussion of practice in the context of our daily life as men. Please bring a lunch.

DHARMA FRIENDS GROUPS

DHARMA LUNCH BUNCH

Last Tuesday of the month

Contacts: Valerie Nelson, Ann Russell, Carol VanDenBos

Would you enjoy meeting with dharma friends and expanding your sangha connection? Meet with Val, Carol or Ann in the foyer after the noon sit, and we will walk or drive to Kelly's. Bring a lunch or buy something to eat there.

BOOK GROUP

Margaret Seidler is offering a book based group at her home in Aptos. The group will meet to decide what to read or study. The book, *A Year to Live* by Stephen Levine, has been suggested. The group will meet 1-2 times a month. Contact Margaret Seidler at 689-0670 or bargaret@att.net. Times to be determined by those interested.

MUSIC GROUP

Barry Seidler is offering his home in Aptos for a music Dharma Friends Group. Share your music, ballads, blues, jazz, what ever you do and some jamming too. Contact Barry Seidler at 689-0670 or bargaret@att.net. Times to be determined by those interested.

SPECIAL EVENTS

ANNUAL HOLIDAY CELEBRATION

Thursday, December 6

5:30 - 7:00 Potluck

7:00 - 8:30 Sitting & Talk

Bring a vegetarian dish to share for a festive celebration of the season.

DANA (DONATIONS)

Vipassana Santa Cruz is dedicated to continuing the ancient Buddhist tradition of freely offering the Dharma without charge, knowing that it is priceless. We encourage the practice of *dana*, which means generosity in Pali (the original language of the Buddha). The generosity of our community supports the teachers and pays all of our sangha's expenses: rent, utilities, insurance, phone, supplies, bank and bookkeeping charges, website, etc.

Gifts of any amount are very welcome and much appreciated. It's especially helpful if you can commit to contributing a certain amount each month. Donations to Vipassana Santa Cruz, a non-profit 501(c)(3) organization, are fully tax-deductible and can be made in any of the following ways:

• BY CREDIT CARD

On our website (www.vipassanasc.org) you can use Network for Good. It is possible to make this a recurring monthly, quarterly, or annual donation.

• IN PERSON

There are donation baskets at each VSC program, one for Teacher Dana and the other for Sangha Expenses. You may donate by cash or check, made out to Vipassana Santa Cruz.

• BY MAIL

Donation checks, made out to Vipassana Santa Cruz, may be mailed to:
Vipassana Santa Cruz
1010 Fair Ave., Suite C
Santa Cruz, CA 95060

• THROUGH AMAZON

Please patronize your independent bookstore, but if you are intending to shop at Amazon's online store, please use the Amazon link on our website. By clicking on this link, VSC receives a small percentage of your purchase price at no cost or hassle to you.

• ENROLL IN E-SCRIP

E-Scrip is an effortless way of raising funds for VSC. If you register your grocery club card, and/or credit/debit cards with eScrip, the participating merchants donate a small percentage of your purchases to VSC.

HOMELESS SHELTER DONATIONS

We have a basket available for the homeless shelter. Items needed include toiletry items, clothing and whatever else you think would be useful.

MAILING LIST & CHANGE OF ADDRESS

To be added or removed from our mailing list or to update your contact information, use the form on the website at: <http://www.vipassanasc.org/contact.html> or go to the website and click on "Contact". For VSC Newsletter questions, contact Carla Brennan at carlabrennan@hotmail.com.



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