

# River Sangha



... a mindfulness meditation community

October 2019

You are invited to join us for mindfulness meditation on Wednesday evenings from 7 - 8:30 p.m. at the library in Woodland Chapel, located at 582 High Street SE in Salem, Oregon (come up the back stairs). We welcome newcomers and people from all spiritual traditions, sexual orientations, and racial and cultural identities.

## Jerry's Book Recommendation

**This month's recommendation is *In Search of Buddha's Daughters: The Hidden Lives and Fearless Work of Buddhist Nuns* by Christine Toomey.** Jerry's

incisive selection highlights the determination and courage of women who face the challenge of bringing change and equality to Buddhist monastic life. This is a deeply moving account of their often painful and harrowing journey in search of spiritual fulfillment.

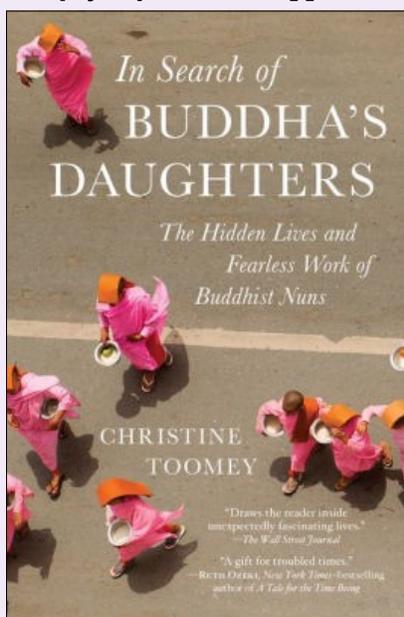
Toomey's idea for this book began in 2011 when she traveled to Dharamsala, India to report on the transfer of political power from the Dalai Lama to the newly elected prime minister of the Tibetan government-in-exile. While there she had a brief encounter with a former nun who had been imprisoned and tortured by Chinese authorities for five years. Their conversation inspired Toomey to explore the lives and experiences of nuns within Buddhist monastic communities.

The unexpected and sudden deaths of Toomey's father and then her mother made her book more personal. They provided the motivation to find "a deeper understanding and a wisdom that would heal."

Her journey began in Nepal and continued throughout Asia, North America, and Europe. The very heart of this book comes from the incredible nuns with backgrounds as varied and unique as the countries she visited. Many fled poverty and violence while others abandoned successful careers and lives of privilege. They include a Tibetan princess, an actress, a writer, a concert violinist, a former airline pilot, a journalist, and a policewoman. All made this sacrifice for the inner peace and fulfillment they could not find in their previous lives. As she explains, these extraordinary and unforgettable women consciously chose to dedicate their lives to Buddhism.

**"In a world numbed by the amount of attention paid to violence, terrorism, and political and religious**

**struggles, I find it profoundly refreshing to come across women whose lives are dedicated to nurturing the opposite."**



Toomey explores "who they are, their experience of suffering, what motivates them to seek enlightenment, and what stands in their way." Their answers describe a life of happiness with no regret for their choice. She realizes, "These are not women who have chosen to ordain as a way of running away from the world."

Toomey found that while the nuns shared a common devotion to Buddhist teachings and the practice of doing good, many also shared the desire to see women achieve equal status with monks. Some monks are understanding and sympathetic to full ordination, but many firmly oppose it.

Monastic life is challenging and requires strict physical and mental discipline. Yet Toomey finds the nuns do not stay silent in the face of injustice. She writes of the Singing Nuns of Drapchi,

imprisoned for peaceful protest, who secretly sang songs in their cells in honor of the Dalai Lama. When their secret was discovered, they suffered years of brutal torture.

Toomey illustrates how these nuns have become strong and unselfish models who work tirelessly for good and peace in the world. Their stories restore our faith in the resilience of the human spirit and its ability to thrive in the face of inexcusable hardship. This is a powerful lesson that inspires us to reframe our perspective and find true happiness in our present lives. — Vickie Stiteler

*Christine Toomey is an award-winning journalist and author who twice won Amnesty International's Magazine Story of the Year. She has reported from over 60 countries and worked more than two decades as a feature writer and foreign correspondent for the UK's Sunday Times.*



Nuns in the Public Eye

Toomey's book profiles nuns whose remarkable and tireless work is concealed from public view, but other nuns with a higher profile are building an increasing worldwide interest in Buddhist philosophy. Below are just two examples.

**Pema Chödrön**

During a time when Chödrön was dealing with a significant loss, she read an article by Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche that turned her life around. She was not aware that he was a Buddhist and knew nothing of Buddhism. She ultimately became his disciple and studied with him from 1974 until his death in 1987.



Chödrön was ordained as a novice nun in 1974. Since full ordination is denied to women

in the Tibetan tradition, she received full monastic ordination in the Chinese lineage in 1981 in Hong Kong.

**"We can make ourselves miserable or we can make ourselves strong. The amount of effort is the same."**

With Chödrön's assistance, Trungpa Rinpoche established Gampo Abbey in Nova Scotia in 1985. She was the first director and continues in that role today.

Chodron is best known for her charming and sensible interpretation of Tibetan Buddhism for Western audiences. She is an inspiration whose teachings have touched countless lives by awakening compassion and understanding throughout the world.

**"You are the sky. Everything else—it's just the weather."**

**Sister Dang Nghiem (Sister D)**

Sister D is a survivor. Born in Vietnam in 1968 during the Tet Offensive, she is the daughter of a Vietnamese mother and an American soldier. She was just twelve

when she lost her mother. Amnesty for Amerasian Children brought her to the United States when she was seventeen. Despite many obstacles, including three different foster care homes, Sister D graduated high school with honors, earned two undergraduate degrees, and became a doctor.

**"Peace does not mean you don't have any problems. It means you can be quietly with what is."**

Sister D was determined to devote her life to healing others but when her partner died in a sudden and tragic accident, she felt lost in her grief. Leaving her residency, she went to Plum Village in Southern France and joined the monastic community. Thích Nhất Hạnh ordained Sister D in 2000, giving her the name Dang Nghiem (Adornment with Nondiscrimination).

**"When we teach mindfulness, we are not transplanting something new or something exotic; we are igniting a capacity that is already there in each of us."**

Sister D's magnetic presence includes her frequent and inviting smile. She is a powerful Dharma teacher and motivational speaker. A frequent topic she shares is the transformative role that meditation and mindfulness play in relieving stress, pain, and life trauma.



She incorporates her own experience dealing with headaches, depression, Lyme disease, and past sexual abuse. Her book *Mindfulness as Medicine* includes step-by-step instructions for embracing and transforming suffering.

**"There is a misconception that meditation will take time from other things we are doing, but in fact, meditation actually helps us to see ... and to do the things we are doing in a much more effective way."**

— Vickie Stiteler

2019 Gandhi Mandela Peace Medal

Thích Nhất Hạnh, global spiritual leader, peace activist, poet, author and father of mindfulness was awarded the first **Gandhi Mandela Peace Medal**. This award is given to global leaders for their notable contributions to humanity.



The jury selected him for his "Impact on Spirituality" and his teachings that changed the lives of millions of people worldwide.

The medal was awarded at the Gandhi Mandela Peace Initiative in New Delhi, India. The Initiative is an annual event with the vision of celebrating 150 years of Gandhi's and 100 years of Mandela's inspirational lives.

Family members of both Mahatma Gandhi and Nelson Mandela were present at the ceremony. The award was accepted on his behalf by the Ahimsa Trust Sangha and members of his Order of Interbeing.





## From a Cave in the Himalayas

One of the most staggering stories from Toomey's book centers around Tenzin Palmo, a British Buddhist nun who spent 12 years living alone in a remote cave in the Himalayas. She later founded a nunnery, with some 70 nuns in her care. *The following is an excerpt of Tenzin Palmo's story from In Search of Buddha's Daughters courtesy of the publisher, The Experiment:*



At the time of her ordination as a novice, [Tenzin Palmo] was just twenty-one and only the second Western woman to be ordained in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition ... Following her ordination,

Tenzin Palmo went to work as Khamtrul Rinpoche's assistant and found herself the only woman living among 100 monks, all trained to keep their distance.

In addition to intense feelings of isolation and loneliness, she immediately hit a spiritual glass ceiling. Chauvinistic attitudes, which for so long in Tibet had reserved the heights of spiritual endeavor for monks and relegated nuns to subservient positions, continued to prevail in monastic communities in exile. The monks, though kind, said prayers that in her next life she would have the good fortune to be reborn a man. Despite her deep devotion to Khamtrul Rinpoche, after enduring years of such treatment, Tenzin Palmo became convinced her spiritual path lay in a different direction.

With his blessing, she undertook to become the first Western woman to follow in the footsteps of male yogis, or spiritual practitioners who, through the ages, have retreated to remote caves for long periods of seclusion. Traveling by foot over a high Himalayan pass, she sought solitude in a remote corner of Himachal Pradesh called Lahaul, close to India's border with Tibet, an area renowned as a place conducive to meditation. Once there she eventually found a small cave perched at almost 4,000 meters—the height of some of the tallest peaks in the Alps—that would become her refuge for the next twelve years. The cave was little more than an indent in the mountains, a space she closed in with a simple brick wall, window, and door, giving her a living area of approximately three by two meters.

During the twelve years she spent alone in this cave, Tenzin Palmo survived blizzards, avalanches, the attention of wolves, even a snow leopard, and temperatures plunging to  $-35^{\circ}\text{C}$  in the winter months that lasted from November to May. On a small stove she cooked simple meals of rice, lentils, and vegetables—supplies brought up to her occasionally by local villagers. Her days began at 3 a.m. and were divided

into three-hour periods of intense meditation. During one stretch of three years, she neither saw nor spoke to a single soul. Tenzin Palmo was thirty-three years old when she entered her mountain retreat and forty-five when she was forced to emerge by a policeman who scrambled up to her eyrie to warn her that her visa had expired ...

"I think the reason we get so much support for our nunnery is that people see how happy our nuns are ... They are so relieved to see that there are girls in their teens and women in their twenties and thirties totally immersed in studying the dharma, leading disciplined lives based on abstinence, who are happy.

"This life is not for everyone," she concedes. "But knowing that there are groups of monastics who are happy being monastics gives people a sense of proportion," she concludes. "I think it's very important to have a group of people who are living a life based on contentment with little, who live the example that genuine joy comes from within, from a sense of leading a life well lived."

*Excerpt from In Search of Buddha's Daughters: A Modern Journey Down Ancient Roads, copyright © Christine Toomey, 2015.*

Tenzin Palmo is yet another extraordinary woman shaping the transmission of Buddhism in the West. Here are just a few of her quotes:

***"The answer lies within ourselves. If we can't find peace and happiness there, it's not going to come from the outside."***

***"Meditation is for you to realize that the deepest nature of your existence is beyond thoughts and emotions, that it is incredibly vast and interconnected with all other beings."***

***"In the very deep darkness of this world, little pinpoints of light show up very brightly and can shine a long way."***

Details of Palmo's story can also be found in her biography, *Cave in the Snow: Tenzin Palmo's Quest for Enlightenment* by Vicki Mackenzie.





Mindfulness Trainings

Please join us on Saturday, **October 5**, from 9-11 am for recitation of the Five Mindfulness Trainings ([Learn More](#)). This month we will gather at 794 Creekside Drive, Salem. All are welcome!

**Online Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings** recitation, **3rd Tuesdays** 7-8 pm; next recitation is **September 17**. The 14 Mindfulness Trainings are the deep precepts received from Thày, passed down from the Buddha to benefit our precious world. Using the Zoom platform is simple, just click on the link: <https://zoom.us/j/516471433>. Or smartphone one-tap: +19294362866,,516471433# [Learn More](#).

Retreat Opportunities

**Eugene Insight Meditation Center Dharma Talk & Meditation - Choosing Wisdom & Love in Difficult Times:** Friday **October 4**, 6:30-8:30 pm (free but suggested dana is \$10-25).

**Retreat: The Path of Happiness**, Saturday **October 5**, 9 am-4:30 pm Unitarian Universalist Church, 1685 W 13th Avenue Eugene, Oregon.

Guest Teacher Howard Cohn, MA, from San Francisco's Mission Dharma & Spirit Rock Meditation Center. Mindfulness, concentration and love, guiding us from attachment to letting go, from confusion to clarity and from tension to tranquility. Cohn has taught Vipassana retreats since 1985 and is the author of "Invitation to Meditation." (\$30-\$75 sliding scale facility fee, plus optional teacher donations welcome). [More information and registration](#).

Announcements

**Salem Peace Vigil - First Wednesday** from noon to 1 pm at Polly's corner: Liberty & Chemeketa; signs provided or bring peace and economic justice signs. Sponsored by the Salem Friends Meeting & Salem Fellowship of Reconciliation. Call 503-371-6109.

**Silverton Peace Vigil - Last Monday** from 5:30-7 pm at Town Square Park near Main and Fiske Streets. Sponsored by Silverton People for Peace. Call 503-873-1446.

JOYFULLY TOGETHER IN VIETNAM 2020

Loving Work Foundation supports humanitarian programs to improve lives of disadvantaged Vietnamese children and families; global community-building and engaged service.



**Loving Work Retreat - March 6-20:** Participate in service-oriented work projects. Begin in Hue and end in Hanoi.

**Discovering the Homeland of Our Teacher - March 27-April 12:** Practice in active monasteries, visit historic sites, engage with humanitarian aid projects. Begin in Hue and end in Hanoi. [More](#).

[The Mindfulness Bell](#): a journal that inspires insight into the benefits of a committed practice of mindfulness and includes teachings by Thich Nhất Hạnh. [Subscriptions](#) support the work of Thày and the worldwide Sangha.



Day of Mindfulness



Trappist Abbey Fountain @ VS

Please join us on Friday, **October 11** at the Trappist Abbey near Lafayette. This is an opportunity to water seeds of compassion and joy while finding peace and calm within. [Learn More](#).

Resources

- [Books by Thich Nhất Hạnh](#)
- [Books by Jerry Braza](#)
- [Books by Christine Toomey](#)
- [Books by Pema Chödrön](#)
- [Books by Sister Dang Nghiem](#)

Books are also available on the River Sangha bookshelf at the Woodland Chapel library for checkout on the honor system.

Sangha Leaders

Dharma Teachers: Jerry Braza and Nisi Ségor  
Sangha presenters: Jerry, Alice Phalan, Bob Muir, Cheryl Randall, Julie Frasier, Lisa Umscheid, Sharon Cooper, and Val Self  
Stewardship Council Chair: Kirsten Bammes  
Communications: Sharon  
Finance: Val, Kirsten, and Alice  
Mindfulness Trainings Recitation Facilitators: Alice and Sharon  
Room Coordinator: Julie  
Website: Nadene LeCheminant  
Newsletter Editor: Vickie Stiteler

**Find Us Here:**  
Woodland Chapel Library  
[582 High Street SE](#), Salem, Oregon  
**And Online at Our [Website](#).**  
**Contact Us** - for more information or

suggestions for future newsletters: [RiverSangha@gmail.com](mailto:RiverSangha@gmail.com)  
**Support Us:** Voluntary donations (dana) are welcome and can be offered on Wednesday evenings. It

supports the community, Woodland Chapel, Dharma teachers and scholarships. Dana, in Sanskrit, means generosity, which we offer in appreciation for the teachings.