



Monastics from Blue Cliff Monastery and Magnolia Grove Monastery leading the consecration ceremony for the new retreat hall, Great Cloud Refuge, 2016

Florida Community of Mindfulness

**Fruits of the Seeds of Thay's
Transmission**

By Angela Parrish

It is summer of 1994 in Plum Village, France. Thay speaks as he transmits the “Lamp of Wisdom” to Fred Eppsteiner, to whom he had earlier given the Dharma name True Energy.

“Brother True Energy, this lamp has been transmitted to us by the Buddha himself and so many generations of teachers and ancestors. Now it’s been entrusted to you. Please practice in such a way and live your daily life in such a way that this lamp is kept alive, always shining. You have the duty to transmit it to your children and grandchildren in the blood family and in the spiritual family.”

Fred began to share the Dharma and create a Sangha, after this ordination twenty-four years ago. This group would eventually become the Florida Community of Mindfulness.

After the ceremony in France, Fred returned to his home in Naples, Florida, a community then untouched by the Buddha’s teachings, and began to slowly introduce the Dharma. Initially, he offered all-day introductory mindfulness workshops. Seeds were planted, and a small Sangha blossomed in Fred’s living room. At first the Sangha met monthly, then bi-weekly, weekly, and eventually twice a week. Others who had attended Thay’s retreats formed additional small Sanghas in Florida and sought Fred as a Dharma teacher. They formed groups in Tampa Bay, Miami, and Daytona Beach.

The Tampa Sangha, of which I was an early member, was fairly typical of these small groups. Our group contained mostly



Photo by Alex Lerner

newcomers to both mindfulness and Buddhism. At our weekly gatherings, we meditated and took turns leading discussions of books by Thay and other Buddhist teachers. Our enthusiasm was strong, although (I smile as I remember this) it was not unusual for our discussion to sometimes meander away from practice into an intellectual wasteland. Discovering Fred, an authentic Dharma teacher ordained by Thay, was just what we needed. We made regular “Dharma Road Trips” to Naples for Days of Mindfulness and retreats, as did practitioners from other Sanghas across Florida.

By 2001, Fred’s residential street in Naples often had twenty-five or thirty cars parked in front for weekly Sangha gatherings. While he had happily “birthed” the Sangha in his home, Fred realized that the group had matured; it was time for them to take responsibility to care for the Sangha. After much discussion, the Sangha decided to incorporate as a not-for-profit religious organization. It then moved from Fred’s home to a rental space in a Naples yoga studio.

Not everyone in the Sangha was happy with this move. Why leave Fred’s comfortable home and have to worry about leases and money? Further, they’d have to find others to step forward to care for the Sangha. Nonetheless, the move was made. The Sangha blossomed as many new individuals found our new public space to be accessible and welcoming.

Fred added more activities in addition to the weekly meditation and talks. He brought the Florida groups together spiritually

in a common path of practice. He offered “intensive” Buddhist study and practice programs, typically lasting three to six months. We grew to know our Florida Sangha brothers and sisters, coming together frequently for Days of Mindfulness and retreats.

By 2005, our living rooms in Tampa were becoming very cramped. Fred increased his teaching time here but with the proviso that we needed to find a public meeting space. We rented space in a local yoga studio for two hours every Thursday evening. Once again, a number of people were more comfortable in the living rooms. However, our vision to share the Dharma and reduce suffering in the world called on us to step out of our comfort zones. The Tampa Sangha continued to grow. Individuals seeking an alternative to stressful and often unsatisfying worldly lives found us primarily through word of mouth.

Fred’s move to Tampa in 2006 brought a much greater quality and consistency of Dharma teachings. Within two years we considered expanding our offerings, thereby creating more doorways for those seeking change. How could we best serve this growing appetite for the Dharma? Should we offer more classes? More opportunities for meditation? More opportunities to connect as a community?

In 2010, Fred and a core group of twenty members met to explore the possibilities. Should we add more hours to our weekly rental arrangement? Should we rent our own space full time? We were deep into the recession, with its resulting low real estate prices. A member ventured, “Now’s the time to buy a building.”

Some reacted with shock and fear, some with excitement and enthusiasm. What if we were able to own our own space? What would we do with it? How would we pay for it?

The core group decided to explore purchasing a home for the Florida Community of Mindfulness, which by now encompassed multiple Sanghas under Fred's guidance and support. We knew that having an established, cohesive, and growing core group was paramount to this search. Some of this core were newly or almost retired. They committed to offering significant "selfless service" to support the establishment of a new center. We canvassed the larger Sangha and discovered strong financial support for the purchase of our own building.

Enthusiastically, we looked at properties, perhaps with some initial naiveté. We soon learned about the many City of Tampa code requirements for parking, occupancy, and other use factors. High prices and limited parking quickly redirected our search away from our original target locations.

One day, a member called Fred. This person had been volunteering at a rundown and mostly abandoned church in a very poor area of town. Because of a possible very low price, he asked Fred to look at the property, which included three buildings and over seven thousand square feet of usable space. When we visited the property, many of us were taken aback by the seriously neglected buildings and overgrown grounds. Moreover, a very visible "street business" operated nearby. Could it be possible to make this property, in this neighborhood, into a home for the Florida Community of Mindfulness? Once again, Fred helped us imagine what might be possible. Where better, he argued, to envision a haven of Dharma refuge and beauty than on this street of obvious suffering?

On August 1, 2012, we closed on the purchase of our new home. We had raised 100% of the funds needed to purchase it and complete the first phase of rehabilitation. We embarked on our journey, putting joyful effort into the array of tasks: painting, plumbing, window replacement, wiring, floor refinishing, altar creation, and more. We found our meditation seats amidst the dust and slowly created a beautiful home and garden for the Sangha. We deeply understood the meaning of selfless service and community. We were establishing ways to care for our grounds and facilities and to support our Sangha through various programs.

We realized it was easy to look like Buddhas when we came together in rented space for two hours each week. Here, though, we were together much more frequently to clean the bathrooms, work in the kitchen and gardens, and otherwise serve the Sangha. We learned how to bring our practice more deeply into our relationships and let go of our egos. We used the Beginning Anew practice when on occasion our speech and actions were unskillful. As more members embraced the practice of serving others, our Order of Interbeing Sangha grew. Today, its numbers are over fifty ordines and aspirants.

We've found that having a physical home gives us great flex-

ibility for offering more meditation programs: Dharma teachings, classes, spiritual friends groups, a Wake Up group, family and teen programs, and more. We've instituted three concurrent, intensive courses for practitioners at different experience levels.

People are very hungry for community. The warm and welcoming attitude of our members draws in many who wish to spend meaningful time with like-minded individuals. We are indeed a community that practices the way of harmony and awareness. Fred has always emphasized the importance of community; he has helped us be very deliberate about how we engage, mentor, and otherwise care for our members. We now have nearly three hundred members, while many non-members also attend our programs.

Historically, we've held three retreats a year at a nearby Catholic center. Demand for the transformative experience of retreat has continued to increase, however. We realized that having a residential capacity at our Tampa center would be very beneficial. Once again, Fred's vision and leadership helped guide the board through another exploration: the replacement of our small and crumbling caretaker's cottage with a new four-thousand-square-foot residential building. After a lengthy petition to the city council, our plans to construct Great Cloud Refuge were approved. Funds were raised to make this vision a reality. When completed in early 2019, we will be able to offer six to twelve retreats per year for groups of twenty-four to forty-two people.

Fred never set out to build a large community and a Dharma center. He simply took to heart Thay's instruction to transmit the Dharma. His great wisdom, skillfulness as a teacher, and compassion for all have attracted and benefitted many beings. Florida Community of Mindfulness members are honored and deeply grateful to be on this path of transformation and service with him. We are grateful to the other centers and Buddhist practitioners who have shared their wisdom and experience with us. We will happily share what we have learned with those who might benefit from our experience.

As instructed by Thay, Fred has brought the practice to his children, grandchildren, and his one-hundred-year-old mother, Ruth (the matriarch of our community!).



Angela Parrish, True Land of Fragrance, received the transmission of the Five Mindfulness Trainings from Thich Nhat Hanh in 1999 and was ordained as a member of the Order of Interbeing in 2009. She is the Executive Director of the Florida Community of Mindfulness.