

THE CADET CHAPEL BUDDHIST PROGRAM  
AT THE UNITED STATES AIR FORCE ACADEMY  
2011-2012: a progress report  
31 March, 2012

With the Baccalaureate Service of May 20, 2012, the Buddhist Program at the United States Air Force Academy will mark the conclusion of its fourth complete academic year in the Vast Refuge Dharma Hall. Graduating this year will be cadets who began attending services during their Basic Cadet Training. Some have stayed very active in the program, some not at all. All have played some role in the shaping of this program and this small sangha.

It has become more and more apparent that the Buddhist Program is shaped by many factors, from the actual presences of cadets and others participating, to the experiences and training we offer, to the shifts in schedule, requirements and priorities that come with being part of a military academy. Here is a review of the tenor and activities of the program as we come to the conclusion of the 2011-2012 academic year.

### **The regular schedule:**

#### **SPIRE (Special Programs in Religious Education) meets on Monday evenings:**

SPIRE meetings this year have taken a somewhat different form: they still include meditation and discussion, but this fall we were able also to offer weekly Tai Chi instruction by Rev. Pho Khai, Abbot of the Dharma Rain Buddhist Temple in Colorado Springs. The group participating was small, but responses from them were very enthusiastic and cadets would like this to be offered again next year. While the cadets certainly engage in physical training constantly, moving meditation is not readily available to them, and Rev. Pho Khai offers this in the context of Buddhist teaching. We are very fortunate to have had his involvement.

Chaplain Darlene Avery, our SPIRE volunteer leader, has also been a significant support to the program, especially to those cadets who are interested in taking up Buddhist practice while continuing their connection with Christianity or Judaism. Her experiences as a youth leader and social worker have also come into play, as well as her passion for vegan cooking---she's an outstanding Head Cook for retreats!

During the second semester of this year, SPIRE discussions have been focused on Ken Wilber's Integral Spirituality, in preparation for a meeting with him this April.

### **Wednesday Morning Meditation**

Dr. David Levy, professor in the Management Department at the Academy, long-time meditator, advisor to the Buddhist program and mentor to a number of Buddhist cadets, leads an early morning meditation on Wednesdays. This offers an opportunity for cadets who want a chance to meditate in community, with no religious form, to do so on a weekly basis.

### **Meditation and Dharma Talk on Thursday evening:**

Thursday evening Dharma talks and discussion this year have kept returning to the study and practice of the Buddhist precepts. During the second semester, these have especially focused on precepts relating to speech and listening, and the precept on not indulging in anger. Precepts study is an ongoing essential of practice at the Academy for too many reasons to list; graduates come back to tell us how important precept study has been to them as they have gone forward, and cadets know that this is a place where they can bring very real concerns of their life at USAFA and see them in a different way.

Twice this year we have offered the Ceremony of Taking Refuge in the Bodhisattva Way. Rev. Darlene Avery took refuge at our Bodhi Day Ceremony, and Cadet Dan Dwyer at our Spring Meditation Retreat. Cadets have said that the experience of watching someone receive the precepts, and make vows for life, is a big one for them.

Hi Fu Roshi continues to meet with the group when he has been in town, offering talks and discussion with cadets. His presence is very much appreciated.

### **Sunday morning services:**

Our Sunday service continues to include one period of meditation, a sutra service, and then time for a brief talk and discussion, occasionally extended over brunch. This is the most formal service of the week. Participation continues to be small, but there is no way we would give this up now. Those who come really count on this time to sit, to sing sutras, to learn and to talk. Instruction and discussion has focused on the sutra service itself--each Sunday, a different part of the liturgy is studied and discussed. This is also the service most often attended by visitors and newcomers from the community.

An addition to some of the sutra services this year has been the presence of Karen Gados, a young woman from Colorado Springs who brings her didgeridoo, mouth harp, guitar and drum with her; during those services, we've noticed how the addition of instrumental voices changes the way one hears the sutras.

## **Ceremonies and Celebrations:**

This year, we again found that ceremonies and celebrations of special days in the Buddhist calendar were important to the program. Some cadets who do not attend on a regular basis do come for ceremonies and celebrations, and in this way stay connected with the Buddhist community.

On August 14 we held a service for Ullambana (sometimes called Parents' Day or Ancestor Day), with 9 attending. This year, our ceremony was followed by a field trip on Aug. 21 to the Parents' Day ceremony at Phap Vu Temple, a Vietnamese Buddhist Temple in Colorado Springs (11 attending). For this coming summer, I have been invited to help lead the Parents' Day services at Phap Vu Temple, and am happy to do so, as this ongoing connection with Rev. Pho Khai and his community enriches the experience of the cadets.

December 8 we held a Bodhi Day Ceremony and dinner. This year's ceremony included the Ceremony of Taking Refuge in the Bodhisattva Way for Rev. Darlene Avery. This was a powerful combination: the root story of our tradition, with the fruit of practice in refuge: vows for every day life.

February 2 we held a ceremony of re-dedication of the Hall and the Sangha, followed by a community dinner.

Our Wesak service and dinner for this year is scheduled for May 6, and our Baccalaureate service for May 20. Our Baccalaureate speaker this year will be Chaplain Jeanette Shin, who serves as a Buddhist Chaplain in the U.S. Navy. As the U.S. Air Force does not yet have a Buddhist chaplain, this will be an opportunity not only for cadets to meet and learn from Ch. Shin, but also for the Chaplain Corps to have conversations with her. My hope is that we can explore the way towards having a Buddhist chaplain in the Air Force.

## **Other Events:**

Several events are coming up:

On April 9, Ajahn Thanasanti Bhikkhuni will come and speak to the Buddhist SPIRE group. There are very few Bhikkhuni, fully ordained women, in Theravadan Buddhism, and Thanasanti Bhikkhuni is a clear and engaging speaker. We look forward to her Dhamma presentation.

On April 16, Khen Rinpoche Lobzang Tsetan will give a talk at the Academy, open to the community as well as cadets. This is also being sponsored by the Cadet Interfaith Council, which will broaden awareness of the program.

On April 21, we will meet with Ken Wilber at his loft in Denver----a rare opportunity for cadets to meet Ken and to be exposed to his teaching, as his health does not allow him to travel. We have done this once before, and it was a really big experience for those participating, so we are very much anticipating this visit.

Either this spring or during the summer, cadets will go to the Phap Vu Temple for a service day. Cadet Jessica Wong, who has been very active on the Cadet Interfaith Council this year, has also been instrumental in providing other service opportunities for cadets this year.

Students from two different groups at Colorado College (who had met me at the College) have initiated contact with our group this year: a student-led meditation group, and the Nonviolence Living and Learning Community. Scheduling has been tough, but the LLC will visit us April 5, and we still hope to arrange for the student meditation group to visit the Academy before the year is out.

### **Retreats:**

This fall we again held a Doolie retreat in the mountains. Doolies are incoming freshmen. The retreat included instruction in meditation and Buddhist practice, but also a lot of time for the new cadets to form as a community. Eight attended this year, and again, the time together seemed very important. Although the numbers were small, this year more of the Doolies (Freshman) have stuck----have continued to participate in Buddhist services and gatherings through the year.

March 9-11, 12 of us held a meditation retreat in the Black Forest, silent and with Oryoki meals. This year's retreat included a refuge ceremony, a Qigong workshop (led by Eleanor Coriell) and a Big Mind experience led by Dr. Levy. The cadets participated fully. Sitting was not as strong as last year, as we had a much larger proportion of freshmen! But several of them did engage deeply with the extended meditation time. Lt. Noel Trew, who joined the sangha as a cadet and is now returning to teach at the Academy, came to town to join us in retreat and get reconnected with the sangha before his official return. It was great to have him there, remembering what a wiggly freshman he was, himself! Things change.

### **Other events and service:**

The Chaplain's Corps at USAFA, with my assistance, made contact last fall with the Pike's Peak Inter-religious Clergy Alliance. The Chaplain's Office then invited the PPIRCA to the Academy for a luncheon meeting to learn about the Religious Respect Curriculum at USAFA, and Academy Chaplains have also attended meetings of the group in Colorado Springs.

Also in the Fall Semester, I was asked to be on a team reviewing the Religious Respect Curriculum, and was happy to do so over the course of the year.

In March, I gave a reading at the National Prayer Luncheon at USAFA. Actually, I sang a dedication from our sutra service. This was the second time I've presented at a National Prayer Luncheon, and it was encouraging to see how much more this year's event emphasized and celebrated religious diversity at the Academy.

Individual spiritual direction and Buddhist training is set up by appointment. In addition, occasionally a cadet or two will come home with me on a weekend, just to have some time away. We held one movie night at my home and a barbeque at the home of Rev. Avery.

This year I was also asked to meet twice with a Comparative Religion class at the Academy. They came to the Dharma Hall one time, and I joined them for their discussion of Buddhist ethical teachings in their classroom.

### **The Dharma Hall Itself**

The Dharma Hall, a Buddhist Chapel within the Cadet Chapel, continues to be an important presence. Cadets do come to sit, and sometimes to leave dedications on the altar. Thousands of tourists come through, and it's very interesting to be around when they are there. Most seem to be touched by the beauty, warmth and calm of the Hall, and by the presence of so many faiths in one building.

This year's new additions to the Chapel are a beautiful bookcase made by Takayuki Kida, a Moku-Han and a frame for our calligraphy also made by him, and more than enough books to fill the new bookcase, donated by Hi Fu Roshi! We also purchased beautiful tea bowls, hand made for our chapel. The bookcase and Han were purchased with USAFA appropriated funds, which was some excellent support from the Academy and confirmation of the ongoing recognition of the importance of this program.

### **Plans and Questions:**

How to best serve cadets who come from Buddhist countries remains a question. Participation by cadets who come from Buddhist countries or cultures has increased, but is still sporadic. It seems most likely that two things are needed: specific requests for Buddhist cadets to share with others their home traditions and teachings, and individual invitations from Buddhist leaders and cadets. These will take time and deliberate organization, and will be priorities for next year.

How to provide for the differing needs and interests of this transient population also remains a question. Some are more interested in community, others in meditation,

others in study; they enter at different times, and with differing degrees of preparation and interest. Again, presence of the Buddhist leader on campus more of the time and at more times of the day would be helpful, but is still a reach for us.

### **Our heartfelt thanks!**

The generous support of the Lenz Foundation and the Friends of Zen, especially the support of Dai En Hi Fu Roshi, continues to make possible a fully articulated program---with retreats, speakers, multiple services per week, ceremonies and celebrations, and individual Buddhist instruction ---which would be very difficult to accomplish without this support.

In addition, your support to me as leader of the program has been extremely welcome and helpful this year. Please accept my deep thanks for this. Do feel free to contact me by phone or email if you have any questions about the program or this report.

Sincerely,

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