

WITNESS STATEMENT OF MOLLY SWAN

MY BACKGROUND

Since attending my first residential week-long meditation retreat in the spring of 1985, I've been devoted to the Buddhist path of inquiry, of living with compassion and without doing harm. That year unfolded with attending another week-long retreat in my home state of Massachusetts, giving up my home to travel to India on a 6-month visa to hear the Dalai Lama give teachings and choosing to spend time in a country where devotion and religion form the backbone of daily life. During that time I attended a 20-day retreat and also studied in Dharamsala, India, the home-in-exile of the Dalai Lama. On returning home I no longer felt tied to the life I had lead as an art teacher. I packed my bags again and traveled to a Buddhist meditation centre in Devon, England to study and practice Insight Meditation, also called Vipassana with a well-known teacher of the Theravada (the way of the elders) Buddhist tradition, Christopher Titmuss. After a one-month retreat I decided to stay at the retreat centre as a manager, living simply on a monthly stipend, in order to live in community with other like-minded people, and to support others in having the opportunity to practice. It was a most rewarding and beneficial experience. During that time I met Norman Feldman, a meditation teacher from Canada. We spent two years living in England and India, managing and teaching retreats, living simply and quietly, practicing meditation. On our return to Canada we married and settled in Ontario where we continued offering retreats, a sitting group and individual counsel. I also studied and then practiced and taught Homeopathy, a non-intrusive holistic form of medicine. In 1997 I began teaching retreats. In 1998 Norman and I felt too much of our time was

preoccupied with earning a living and supporting a home, car, etc., and we chose to let go of our day jobs, to let go of our home and set out in the world to support those interested in meditation practice and study. During the three years on the road we taught in India, Israel, England, the US and in Canada, living on voluntary donations of support (dana) according to the tradition began at the time of the Buddha to offer the retreats freely, supported by the students' generosity. It is a very humbling and inspiring way to live, truly a practice in itself! And when the time came to settle again, we chose Guelph. In the two years it took to find a home, we fell in love with the small town feel, the many places of nature and the wonderful resource of Ignatius Centre. We live just a five minute drive from Ignatius and have been holding day-long retreats there about twice yearly since our arrival 5 years ago. Our work continues to be teaching meditation, offering retreats here in Canada and internationally, leading a sitting group in Guelph, co-founding a residential retreat centre (True North Insight Meditation Centre) which is being created in Ontario, and going on long retreats for our own study and practice. We still rely on voluntary donations of support for our livelihood, committed to a life in harmony with the teachings of non-harming, non-greed, wisdom and compassion.

EFFECT OF ENVIRONMENT

ON BUDDHIST MEDITATION PRACTICE & RETREATS (which are held in silence)

Meditation is practiced to cultivate calmness and insight (the experiential understanding of reality – how things really are vs. our projections and commentary about them). The

Buddha taught meditation in four postures, sitting, standing, walking, lying down, which covers about anything we do in life!

A location is chosen for retreat

that will support the silence of the retreat & the quieting of mind and body

that is intentionally w/o the distractions & stimulation (sensory & mental) of our ordinary life

that puts us at ease in our body and mind:

safe, private, protected

Nature is where the Buddha instructed people to go to practice:

to go into the forest, or to the root of a tree, or to an empty hut.

Away from commercial culture we have a precious opportunity to experience how little is actually necessary for the happiness of contentment and peace. This insight is often accompanied by huge relief, by deep gratitude, by the wish to give back, and the intention to live in a caring and harmonious way with the earth and those who inhabit it.

(the choice of a natural protected setting is intentionally in direct contrast to daily life environment, w/ tv's, traffic, computers, demands, and the morality of 'buy more, buy better, you need this & this & this.)

This type of location, very importantly, mirrors back to us the ethical values inherent in Buddhist teaching and practice of:

respect for all life

non-harming, non-exploitation

non-greed

living harmoniously

living simply

stewardship – responsibility for the earth, the creatures, each other.

It is also important that the facilities are used by others who are engaged in ethical activities in the space.

A place is chosen with both buildings and land in mind, suitable places of privacy and quiet and protection for

Sitting meditation in a large spacious quiet hall

Walking meditation indoors/outside, in a quiet calming place

Personal interviews w/the teacher

Lunch – eating, resting, quiet reflection

Ignatius Jesuit Centre accommodates all this very well.

In addition, the cemeteries and CSA add important pieces:

Contemplation of life and death is important in Buddhist tradition.

Cemetery, wetland, woodlands, farmland and gardens are strong visual reminders of the impermanence, unreliability and renewing of life, and the preciousness of each moment.

Quote from a Buddhist monk: Ajahn Viradhammo

“A life of significant spirituality is greatly enhanced by a place which serves as a sanctuary for the individual and the community. The outer space of architecture and natural environment reflects the inner space of compassion and silence from which all authentic spirituality emanates. When the sanctuary is combined with the opportunity to hear teachings, then our culture is enriched with a place of profound goodness.”

EFFECT OF A LARGE COMMERCIAL CENTRE NEARBY

Profound interference with, and disturbance of, retreat life, meditation practice.

Detrimental impact of noise, pollution, traffic, energy

On mind, body, heart of meditators

On the land and its creatures

To explain:

Nature (trees, sky, spaciousness) and silence and people moving slowly and thoughtfully all has low impact on the energy of mind AND body. In contrast, the sight and sound of

traffic, development, lots of people moving quickly, talking, all this has high impact on the energy of mind and body. The Buddha specifically directed people away from the high impact things while on retreat. This is to give mind and body a chance to settle, quiet, calm, be UNstimulated, so that the nature of mind and its reactions, its attachments, its aversions, its inclinations, its struggles, can be seen and understood, and also so that the nature of life itself can be seen and understood. And then when we go back out into the world we do so with an understanding and wisdom born of experience, with the intention to respond wisely to life, to oneself, to others.

In addition, during a retreat, as the body/mind quiets and settles, the sensitivity of the senses heightens dramatically.

Noise, pollution, traffic, activity

Interferes w/ the ability to quiet the mind and body

Interferes with calmness

Disturbs and upsets the calmness that has been realized.

Feel very jarring, causes contraction: it can be very physically and emotionally painful and threatening.

“The Buddha’s attitude to noise is very clear from the Pali Canon [discourses of the Buddha]....Noise is described as a thorn to one engaged in the first step of meditation.”

The Buddhist Attitude Toward Nature, Lily de Silva.

Countless people at the end of the day-long retreats I facilitate at Ignatius comment on how much the nature has been a tranquil, safe, supportive environment for them. They express the wish to renew the connection with nature on a regular basis to cultivate what allows them to care for themselves and others.

I understand the Centre is proposed to be 155,000 sq. ft. Given the location of the Centre, there will likely be all of the above, significant negative impacts when retreatants and others wish to make use of trails for walking meditation, walking the CSA, use the cemetery lands or many of the other spaces in the southern areas of the Jesuit Centre or cemeteries.

PERSONAL EXPERIENCE OF TEACHING AT IGNATIUS

My partner and I have been giving day-long silent Insight Meditation (Vipassana) retreats at Ignatius since living in Guelph (several years). The retreats are not exclusively for Buddhists. The practice and teaching is non-sectarian. Aboriginals, Catholic nuns and priests, Christians, Muslims, Jews, Hindus all have sat retreats with me.

We offer both day-long retreats and residential retreats which can be a weekend, a week, or longer. Many of our residential retreats are held at the Ecology Retreat Centre in Orangeville. However, this location is too far and not easily accessible for the day-long retreats which are becoming so popular.

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The Jesuit Retreat Centre has been the primary location for the day-long retreats. The day-long retreats have also been popular with Torontonians, who seem to find this location easy to get to. It is accessible by transit etc. It is clear to me that the day-long retreats are meeting a real need in the community. We are being asked to offer more and more of them.

If the proposed commercial development were to go ahead, it is quite unlikely that I would be able to continue to use the facilities of the Jesuit Retreat Centre. As a retreat director and teacher, I must take into account the needs of my retreatants. Other than the Jesuit Centre, there are no suitable alternatives locally which would meet the needs for day-long Buddhist retreats.

I am aware that the Jesuit Centre has signed a mitigation agreement with 6 & 7. I have reviewed the letter, dated December 6, 2001, which confirms the mutual understanding with the resolution of IJCG's physical impact concerns. While this understanding may have met the needs of the Jesuits, they are not in a position to speak for me as a Buddhist. These mitigation efforts would not meet my needs as the leader of Buddhist retreats.

The Centre works for us the way it is. Part of it is the energy of the space. Large-scale commercial development would affect this energy and change this energy. It will affect the creatures which currently live on the Centre lands.

Noise travels. Mitigation efforts will not protect the larger space, which we use, from noise. We need the spaciousness of the grounds which the Jesuit Centre offers. The

visual peacefulness contributes to the retreat experience. We need real protection from sound and intrusion, which these mitigation measures would not offer.

People comment frequently at the end of retreats how much they love coming on retreat at Ignatius and feel very supported by its quietude, its spacious and peaceful outdoors, its courtyard, big hall, and easy access.

I don't know another place locally that offers what Ignatius buildings and land offer.

PERSONAL EXPERIENCE OF RETREAT

I've done many retreats

As teacher since 1997

As student for over 20 years

As retreat organizer since 1987

Location profoundly affects:

the retreat experience

the meditation practice

receptivity

ability to listen (within and to the teachings)

Beauty and spaciousness outside, of the land,

Touches the heart, relaxes the mind/body.

Hearing the birds, seeing the squirrels reminds me I'm not alone. Despite my personal struggles, life goes on.

Seeing the trees – how firmly they are rooted in the earth, flexible in strong wind, inspires and teaches me, and mirrors possibility to me.

Seeing the life cycles on repeated visits to Ignatius, the cycles of life with buds, blooms, leaves falling and dying, new life of spring, ripening and harvest of summer, decay and death of autumn, the cycle of rest and regeneration of winter reminds me I'm not the centre of the universe, life unfolds as it will, including all aspects of life and death. This is just how it is, not just with me, but it is the nature of things. This is also the teaching of the Buddha, so at Ignatius, nature is also a quiet and gentle teacher.

Nature reflects and manifests the essential teachings of the Buddha:

Anicca – impermanence

Anatta – the interdependence and conditionality of all life.

Dukkha – yes, there is suffering, stress, unreliability in life because all things are impermanent and changing and conditioned; there is a cause – clinging, attachment (how can we hold on to anything that is changing and conditioned?); and we can know the ending of suffering in any moment.