

A deep breath for the new year



Highland Views

Chris Highland
Columnist

Quietly slipping into the entryway of the Asheville Insight Meditation center, I sat by myself in a chair, not wanting to disturb folks meditating in the next room.

I thought it may be meaningful to meditate with some Buddhists again. It had been a long time.

I sat in the silence. Breathing. Quietening the mind. Not as easy as it sounds — the silence, calming the mind. Thoughts wander, jumping the fences when you're trying to corral them, escaping to yesterday or tomorrow, 5 minutes ago, or lunch.

I found myself thinking about Buddhists who have taught me through the years, with words, friendships, silent bows of respect. Priests I've known, particularly Lee Debarros, Norman Fischer, Dan Leighton, Fu Schroeder, Arlene, Suki, Mark, "Luminous Owl" and others at Green Gulch near San Francisco.

On my first retreat at Green Gulch, the silence was deafening. The noise of the city and my own mind was hard to shut off. Owls and frogs sang me to sleep in my simple, tiny and tidy room. Awakening to the bell, to the smell of freshly baked bread and the smiles of the sangha (community) was heavenly — in a natural, earthly way.

Sitting in the zendo (meditation hall), walking through the farm along the sandy paths to the Pacific Ocean (pacifying for mind and body) — I learned the meaning of "retreat." Hawks, coyotes, bobcats and an occasional whale my only companions.

In my room I read a copy of the classic "Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind" by D.T. Suzuki. In the cosy-as-a-nest library, I picked up "Thus Have I Heard," a collection of teachings from Gautama The Buddha translated from the original Pali text. Lee was impressed. He said very few in the sangha ever read that. "Take it with you, if you'd like." I did.

Deep breath, bow and smile.

Back to the present at AIM, with feet on cold linoleum, I sat up straighter in my stiff chair as my eyes drifted from the empty spot on the floor to the shelf of the lending library. Books read; books yet to read; respected teachers such as the Dalai Lama and Thich Nhat Hanh whispering, "Leave the books; where are you now?"

Gently I drew my gaze back to the empty spot and took a deeper breath. Finally, after 15 minutes, I was "breathing" — aware of only my breath. A welcome time when time, like the fences and shelves and "monkey-mind"



And so the river of time brings us to a new year. CHRIS HIGHLAND/COLUMNIST

thoughts, was simply smiled away.

When the door opened I entered the circle where we viewed a short video of a monk who told a story from his time in Thailand or India. He described meditating all night on a rocky mountainside when a young goatherd brought him gifts of bananas and a blanket. Gestures of generosity. A message of compassion, letting go, liberation through giving to others and giving ourselves the gift of this moment, this life, and each opportunity to give along our daily path.

From their cushions or chairs people commented on the monk's lesson. Afterward I spoke with Scott, the practice leader for the day, thanking him for the reminder to breathe, to be present and generous with others, and myself.

What good is all the busywork and stressful thinking if we forget to breathe? We live today, now. Isn't that all that matters? This isn't Buddhism.

It's sensible awakening.

Deep breath, bow and smile.

Feel free to borrow this meditation that came to me at the transition to a new year. It may help to take a breath at each pause.

A new year ... new month ... new week ... new day ... new hour ... new minute ... new second ... new moment ... new Now.

(Do we need a "spiritual tradition" or ancient book to tell us there is nothing more than Now?).

If that sounds too New Age to you, maybe stop and consider what you have, where you are, who you're with (if anyone), and ask yourself: Who else and what else is here, now? Is yesterday or tomorrow here, right now? Who else but you, and I, can live our lives, this year, this moment?

The "spiritual retreat centers" I have visited were wonderful yet natural places and open spaces have been my

central sanctuaries for renewal. With time, year by year, moment by moment nature itself has become the Great Teacher as I step with more awareness being present for what nature is doing in the endless cycle of renewing.

For me, it was never about becoming a Buddhist. It was and always has been like my visit to the Asheville Insight Meditation room, a gentle reminder to breathe, to be alive.

May you have a breath-full day, and year, and life.

Chris Highland served as a Protestant minister and interfaith chaplain for many years. He is a teacher, writer, free-thinker and humanist celebrant. Chris and his wife Carol, a Presbyterian minister, live in Asheville. Learn more at chighland.com. His new book, "A Free-thinker's Gospel," is available from Pisgah Press.