

A smile, breath and bow for a Buddhist priest



Highland Views

Chris Highland
Guest columnist

The philosophy and practice of Buddhism has had a profound influence on my journey as a minister, chaplain and now humanist celebrant. In his first sermon, the Buddha taught that even in a world full of gods and religious teachers, he had not reached “the highest, complete enlightenment.” I have found this to be true for myself. And along the way I’ve appreciated the wisdom of women and men who teach not only by words but by example.

I received word that a good friend and colleague passed away. He was one of those treasured teachers, a Buddhist priest who left a lasting impression.

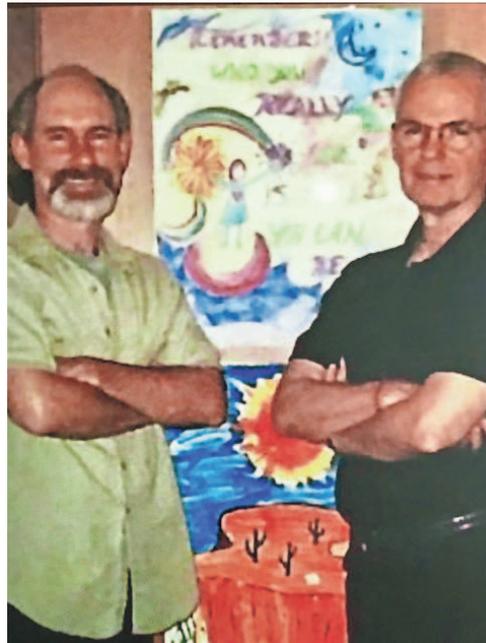
Seido Lee deBarros was a friend yet also an instructor (“seido” is a title of respect in Zen). The San Francisco Zen Center describes him as “a Dharma teacher in the Suzuki Roshi Soto Zen lineage. He serves as a Buddhist chaplain at San Quentin prison and is a minister to the homeless and to hospice patients.” His wife Martha initiated the Zen Hospice Project in San Francisco in 1986. Martha and Lee have been planting and growing compassion together for many seasons.

Lee came to my attention while I was making a personal retreat at Green Gulch Farm in Marin County, California. I can’t remember our first meeting but it was perhaps 25 years ago. Lee’s calming voice and delightful laughter conveyed his gentle nature and the basic teachings of his peaceful way – the Dharma way (“dharma” is truth-teaching).

I came to Lee’s attention when our paths intersected. I was a street chaplain and former jail chaplain, he was a “minister to the homeless” and a chaplain for prisoners in nearby San Quentin. He joined me, walking, sitting and being attentive among people who live outside. Lee was a welcomed member of our chaplaincy board, eventually serving as chair. His humble leadership was deeply valued.

Lee and I taught several classes together at local churches. His teaching style rubbed off; it was evident that knowledge is not so much about words but “inviting” students deeper into mindful awareness and Life itself.

When I drove a van-load of our street community



Lee deBarros and Chris Highland in street chaplaincy office. CHRIS HIGHLAND/COLUMNIST

out to Green Gulch each month to enjoy an amazing lunch fresh from the garden, Lee would often eat with us before offering a few minutes of meditation instruction in the zendo (meditation hall). Some weren’t interested, but many appreciated a few moments of silence and peace before walking through the farm and forest.

When we arranged to place a tree in front of the Catholic mission church downtown as a memorial for those who died on the streets, Lee brought a small Japanese maple from Green Gulch. A colorful array of interfaith representatives and unhoused friends joined us to roll the tree through town in a wheelbarrow, leading the silent procession to the memorial site. Lee picked up a shovel to help dig the hole as we planted the sturdy little tree that still flourishes today.

I’m sure I’ll reflect on Lee and his goodhearted presence for the rest of my life.

Lee modeled a remarkable presence of stillness and action, silence and engaged listening. He brought a grounded calmness into the room, the space, with a warm and welcoming smile. He embodied a contented compassion. He was a master of that, I think, though he was no “master.”

He taught that helpfulness is fulfilling, deeply meaningful. Simply to serve others opens your heart, “because it’s your nature,” he said. Helping helps everyone. You don’t have to be Buddhist to have “buddha-nature.” Any of us can be a bodhisattva (awake like the Buddha) to another, or they to us.

Always needing to raise money for the chaplaincy, Lee would say we were “giving the opportunity for someone to give.” We would introduce the people and their stories, the “human side of homelessness,” and donors would respond. We gave them an opportunity to do the good and right thing. And it was good for them to give.

With time and experience, I learned there is a kind of brilliance – one could say an enlightenment – in the way Buddhists speak of their “practice” rather than “faith.” Unintentionally, Lee was a part of my gradual release of faith. His emphasis on how we live, how we breathe and practice daily, may have nudged me to take a mindful step beyond belief, beyond faith, toward becoming more human, more awake, more alive.

I’m sure I’ll reflect on Lee and his goodhearted presence for the rest of my life. He will be dearly missed by his sangha (community) at Green Gulch and by the wider sangha in the interfaith circles he touched. He will rest in my life as he rests in the roots and leaves of that small maple by the mission in Marin.

I bow and breathe deeply to him.

Chris Highland served as a Protestant minister and interfaith chaplain for many years. He is a teacher, writer, freethinker and humanist celebrant. Chris and his wife Carol, a Presbyterian minister, live in Asheville. Learn more at chighland.com.