



## John Stevens, Alive in Mindfulness

By Helen Winternitz

IMCW welcomes a new teacher who was a Buddhist monk for nineteen years. John Stevens teaches meditation classes on Sunday evenings and Wednesday mornings as well as substituting for other teachers around the sangha.

“The monastic life brought for me the joy of selfless service,” John said with a quick and characteristic laugh. “It teaches how to feel your life is alive in mindfulness with what you are doing.”

John’s practice has been largely within the Thai forest tradition, which is followed at the Amaravati Monastery in England where Ajahn Sumedho is the abbot and teacher. Followers of this tradition, a branch of Theravada Buddhism, model their meditation practice and ascetic lifestyle on that of the Buddha and the first generation of his disciples.

They stay with the Buddha’s original rules of monastic discipline, including a rigorous daily regimen with many hours of meditation, a prohibition on personal possessions and adherence to celibacy. This allows them to simplify and refine their minds on the path toward realizing the inner truth and peace taught by the Buddha. These monks prefer to dwell and meditate in forests, surrounded by nature, as did the historical Buddha, according to the Pali canon.

John’s long spiritual journey began during his college years in the late 1970’s when he studied philosophy to offset his major in engineering. Being in Boston, he also studied yoga with John Kabat-Zinn and meditated with Larry Rosenberg. On a break from college, he worked on a high desert ranch in New Mexico while reading about Zen and remembers “how simply being in that wide open space had a very meditative effect on me.”

He soon found his way to Sri Lanka, India, Burma and Thailand. As he traveled, he soaked in the “spirituality of Asia—Sikh, Hindu, Buddhist, etcetera.” Armed with Jack Kornfield’s book, *Living Buddhist Masters*, he sought out great teachers and eventually landed in a Thai monastery that practiced Buddhism in the style of Mahasi Sayadaw of Burma. (This tradition of vipassana meditation has been an important influence for many teachers at the Insight Meditation Society (IMS) in Barre, Massachusetts.)

John arrived at Wat Boonsri Munigorn monastery, near Bangkok, looking scruffy, but was quickly transformed. “One day I was a traveler with a head of scraggly, curly hair and the next day I had a shaved head and was wearing a white skirt and shirt.” He was given an alms bowl. “So there I was with the monks going out at dawn, receiving alms from people keen to offer food into your bowl because they want to support you to meditate.”

He settled into the monastery regimen of gathering alms and meditating. He was “hungry” for spiritual knowledge and studied and practiced intensely. Since the language at the monastery was Thai, he set about learning that. Early on, meditation helped John gain insight into episodes

of depression that had plagued him for years. He began to see clearly how to interrupt his proliferating thoughts, and free his mind from the feeling of being stuck in his mental suffering. His practice deepened and he was invited to become fully ordained as a bhikkhu. With this new status as a monk, he was provided brown robes that “were easier to clean,” he explained with a sense of humor common in his conversation.

When John returned to the United States for his family’s Christmas, he traveled by air to New York in his robes and barefoot, conforming to the frugal custom of the monastery, but he was not allowed to board the train for Philadelphia. He was met by his father, who rushed to Macys to purchase a pair of sneakers for him. Although his mother pleaded with him during the holiday to disrobe and get married, he returned to Thailand.

After three years at the monastery, John was invited by IMS to stay for several months at its center in Barre, Massachusetts. While there he met a range of Western teachers and was able to have instructions for the first time in English, an inspiring situation for him. It was difficult for him to follow the silent retreat regime. Having done that for much of his three years in at the Thai monastery, he longed for conversation and relationship with Westerners, and often found himself talking with the IMS teachers and staff, including women, who were virtually taboo in the Thai monastic tradition. He suffered doubts about continuing on the path of a monk.

Unsure, John started back to Thailand but got no farther than England where he met Ajahn Sumedho and “got a second wind.” Sumedho, the senior disciple of the late Thai meditation master Ajahn Chah, had brought the Thai forest tradition to the West, founding four monasteries in England. He stayed with Sumedho for the next fifteen years, primarily at the Amaravati Monastery north of London, rising in the monastery’s hierarchy and taking responsibility as administrative secretary for running its large complex.

During his years of meditation there, John became “more rooted” inside himself. “The topsy-turvy winds of emotion” from his “aspirational, younger life” grew tame letting him “perceive in a more inner, collected way.” He worked on “dissolving the line between meditation and daily life” so that awareness also filled his workaday time spent maintaining and updating the old monastery buildings. “I discovered I could be more mindful with a wheelbarrow than on my [meditation] cushion.”

John began teaching at Amaravati at the urging of Ajahn Sumedho, first giving Dharma talks, then assisting with weekend retreats and ten-day retreats. But finally, conflicts in the monastic community and his own internal conflicts led him to take the hard step of leaving the monastic way of life. “Disrobing was like changing a job, moving and getting divorced, simultaneously,” he said.

John moved on to a job with a non-profit organization that used social science to better people’s lives, and married in 2006 before moving to the United States.

*John Stevens now works as part-time manager of a Washington apartment building, while also practicing as a craniosacral therapist, teaching yoga, as well as teaching insight/vipassana meditation. John’s hour-long meditation classes take place on Sundays at 5:30 p.m. and Wednesdays at 5 a.m. at Hot Yoga USA, located at the intersection of Wisconsin Avenue and Newark Street just north of the National Cathedral.*