

# Insight Retreat Center

## NEWSLETTER

### Greening of IRC

When we bought the nursing home that would become IRC we began the process of lowering the environmental impact of our new center. Before starting the remodel we focused on water conservation, transforming the existing landscaping with its high water needs into a low-water garden. During the renovation we used as much green building material and insulation as we could. We reduced our energy consumption by installing occupancy sensors and LED lighting, high-energy efficient appliances, low-flow toilets and showers, and clotheslines. We purchase recycled/recyclable unbleached paper goods and trash bags.

For our retreats we buy organic produce as much as possible. Our food waste gets composted. We also encourage the use of the carpool board on our website.

As our funds allow we will continue our green efforts by installing energy efficient washing machines and dryers, converting parts of the building that were not renovated to LED lighting, and switching to a more energy efficient stove. Our biggest wish at present is to convert our water heating to a solar system, with large solar water collectors on the roof. This would significantly reduce both our propane usage and our operating costs.

—Gil Fronsdal

### Solar Water Heater Fundraising Drive

We are currently fundraising with a goal of \$15,000 to install a solar water heater. The sooner we can raise this money, the sooner we can lower our propane usage and our expenses. Helping us install a solar water heater is a way to support IRC well into the future.

If you are interested in supporting our drive, either send a check payable to "Insight Retreat Center" and mail to Insight Retreat Center, 108 Birch St., Redwood City, CA 94062, or make an online donation at

[insightretreatcenter.org/donations](http://insightretreatcenter.org/donations)

### Practice Discussions with Retreat Teachers

by Gil Fronsdal

Going on an insight meditation retreat is like traveling with a guide into unknown territory. On a retreat, the guides are the teachers, and the unknown territory is the depth of one's own heart and mind. The teachers provide guidance in a number of ways—through instruction, teachings, exemplifying the practice, and in their individual discussions with retreatants.

During most retreats participants meet with the teachers in order to discuss their retreat practice. These meetings are referred to as "practice discussions" or "interviews," and they provide practitioners with important opportunities to explore themselves, the Dharma, and where these two meet. They're also occasions when retreatants can receive instruction and teachings specific to their individual circumstances.

Individual meetings with teachers usually run just shy of fifteen minutes; a lot can happen in that short time, especially if the conversation is focused and explanations are honed to what is most essential. If students make the most of their time by being succinct, this leaves the teacher more time to respond, offering thoughts and suggestions. Some people find it helpful to prepare for the meetings by writing down the main points they want to address.

If more than one teacher is leading a retreat, retreatants will have meetings with two of the teachers over the course of the retreat, alternating between them. There are a couple of reasons for this. First, meeting with different teachers allows retreatants to benefit from more than one perspective and approach. While all teachers have a deep understanding of the Dharma, each one's style and personality are unique. In addition, meeting with different teachers allows participants to focus more on developing their meditation practice and personal relationship to the Dharma than on their personal relationship with a particular teacher.

Many factors influence the discussions that take place between teachers and retreatants, and there's no "set way" for these meetings to go. While the primary purpose of these conversations is to support people's meditation prac-

tice, a wide range of topics may be discussed. For example, conversations might focus on clarifying the instructions or teachings. Or practitioners might report particular meditation experiences and challenges, or they may want to explore personal life issues through the perspective of mindfulness practice.

In most cases, retreatants initiate the topic for these discussions. Teachers will respond in a wide variety of ways, depending on their individual teaching styles, the kind of practice being taught on the retreat, and their best judgment about what would be most helpful. Depending on what the student presents, the teacher might simply listen deeply, offer understanding and encouragement, ask questions, probe into the issue that's been raised, give instruction and guidance, challenge, or simply affirm the experience or wisdom of the practitioner.

Sometimes these meetings with teachers stir up anticipatory thinking, feelings, or anxiety. I've had people tell me they spent hours thinking about their interview. These thoughts and feelings can be seen as an integral part of one's Dharma practice. Rather than considering them distractions from meditation, they can be treated respectfully as something to be mindful of. These are areas of the inner life in which to discover freedom and peace. It can be useful to tell the teacher when there is a lot of thinking, planning, and anxiety prior to the meeting. He or she may simply acknowledge the information and let the conversation move on to something else, or might choose to stay with the issue for further discussion or guidance. This is useful, because by bringing mindfulness to their relationship to a teacher, practitioners can learn how to practice with other interpersonal issues in their lives.

Now and then, a teacher will give particular instructions for how practice discussions are conducted, but if no instructions are provided, retreatants are free to bring up any topic they think will support their meditation practice or any issue they wish to explore from a Dharma perspective. A meditation retreat is usually not

*Continued inside*

## Introducing Kamala Masters

We are very pleased that Kamala Masters, a senior teacher in the Insight community, will be coming to IRC in March 2014 to teach a retreat with Andrea Fella. Kamala is one of the founding teachers of the Vipassana Metta Foundation on Maui, where she is currently developing a Dhamma Sanctuary with her husband Steve Armstrong. She teaches retreats in the Theravada tradition at venues worldwide, including as a Core Teacher at the Insight Meditation Society at Barre, Massachusetts. Kamala has a commitment to carrying and offering the purity of the teachings of the Buddha in a way that touches our common sense and compassion as human beings, and allows the natural inner growth of wisdom.

Kamala lives on Maui where she raised four children and is now blessed with five grandchildren. She has practiced since 1975 primarily in the Theravada lineages of Burma as taught by Mahasi Sayadaw, Sayadaw U Pandita, Anagarika Munindra, Shwe Oo Min Sayadaw, Sayadaw U Tejaniya, and Dipa Ma. She has practiced both insight and loving kindness meditation intensively in Burma, Australia and the USA as a lay woman and as a nun under the guidance of Sayadaw U Pandita.

## Registering and Managing Retreats

by Bruni Dávila

Registering and managing retreats at IRC, especially doing both for one retreat, bore fruit I could not have imagined. Motivated by the vision of the center, I decided it was time to engage more and take responsibility for my contribution to what this retreat center can be. I chose retreats whose dates aligned with other commitments in my daily life, but guess what—I signed up to be both registrar and manager for the same retreat, without noticing until the retreat date approached!

Engaging in the responsibilities, I was having fun learning, and was curious about the teachings that would show up for me. Fear of making mistakes turned into a strong desire to benefit the yogis registering for the retreat. Self-doubt showed up sometimes, and surprisingly faith and confidence too. I was receiving benefits as I was benefiting others. The whole process was energizing.

As registrar replying to e-mails from yogis, I was grateful to witness their desire to practice. Unexpectedly, I noticed a big smile on my face when the lottery was conducted, feeling great joy for other people's good fortune and happiness!

The retreat came and with it teachings about relating to the identities of registrar, co-manager and yogi. Checking in the yogis, there was already familiarity, respect for their practice, a sense of caring and good wishes—the fruit of serving as registrar. It was a wonderful way to transition to co-managing. As the retreat

## Schedule of Retreats 2013–2014

**Insight Retreats** are opportunities to engage in full-time mindfulness training. A daily retreat schedule involves periods of sitting and walking meditation, instructions, dharma talks, work meditation, and practice discussion with teachers. Silence is maintained throughout most of the retreat, except for discussions with the teachers and communication needed for work meditation.

- November 17–24, 2013 Insight Retreat with Gil Fronsdal & Paul Haller.
- December 8–15, 2013 Insight Retreat with Gil Fronsdal & Andrea Fella.
- January 26–February 2, 2014 Insight Retreat with Gil Fronsdal & Leigh Brasington.
- February 18–22, 2014 Insight Retreat with Gil Fronsdal and John Travis. Registration opens October 18.
- March 13–20, 2014 Insight Retreat with Andrea Fella & Kamala Masters. Registration opens November 13.
- April 5–11, 2014 Study Retreat with Gil Fronsdal and Andrea Fella. Registration opens December 5.
- May 4–11, 2014 Insight Retreat with Gil Fronsdal, MelWeitsman, & Max Erdstein. Registration opens January 4.
- May 30–June 8, 2014 Insight Retreat with Gil Fronsdal and Adrienne Ross. Registration opens January 30.
- June 26–29, 2014 Insight Retreat in Spanish with Rebecca Bradshaw and Andrea Castillo. Registration opens February 26.

To register or for more information visit:  
[insightretreatcenter.org/retreats/](http://insightretreatcenter.org/retreats/)  
or email [info@insightretreatcenter.org](mailto:info@insightretreatcenter.org)



opened, the identity of yogi appeared, too. I was holding all these different identities and could choose which to take up as needed. As the retreat progressed, the identities of registrar, co-manager, and yogi starting flowing together, and sometimes they disappeared. All was just practice.

Co-managing was a kind way to learn to do things differently. Used to doing things on my own, it was refreshing to feel supported by another person, and to support my co-manager in return. I could see the positive effect for others of following through on simple things—posting the schedule of the day, putting out the laundry baskets the last day of the retreat, or posting which manager was on call at night. Assistance was there when yogis needed it, and the flow of the retreat continued to support the sangha's practice. I saw the wisdom of having beginner's mind, dropping views of how I thought things "had" to be done because I had done them "my" way at other centers or in other settings.

Being part of the group of registrars and managers, being trained and supported during the process, nourished a sense of interconnectedness, devotion and love for the sangha that carried right through driving home and continued long after the retreat. Re-entering daily life, I found myself naturally following the retreat schedule when possible. I felt more balanced and loving, and cared more deeply about myself, others, and both. I feel deeply grateful for the opportunity to serve in this way.

*Bruni Dávila has practiced Vipassana and Zen since 1995. Her dharma practice focuses on the Four Noble Truths and the brahma viharas.*

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## Practice Discussions with Retreat Teachers, cont'd

the time for abstract discussions about the Dharma or for long explanations about past events. Because the very purpose of retreats is to deepen one's own personal practice, it's much more useful to discuss topics that have direct relevance for one's practice and life.

So what do people talk about in these interviews? Sometimes they ask questions about their meditation experience, or the instructions, or the teachings. If they don't have questions they might simply report how the practice is going. This can be a brief description of what meditation approach they're using and the intention they have for their practice. Even if practitioners are following meditation instructions given by the teacher, when they explain the practice in their own words, the teacher can then offer input and refine the instruction. These reports can also include an account of what the person finds challenging and what is going well. If a practitioner notices that his or her reports are always focused on what is challenging—or the opposite, on what is going well—it can be useful to look at this and to consider what is being left out.

Sometimes meetings with teachers focus entirely on what is happening right there in the present moment, during the practice discussion itself. This can be a mindful exploration of what the student is experiencing in the moment instead of a discussion or analysis of

it. In the same way that a practitioner tries to stay attentive for the present moment experience in meditation, he or she can also do this during the discussion with the teacher. The teacher might ask questions or guide this exploration. The willingness to be honestly open about one's present moment experience in the presence of a teacher can help a practitioner develop a profound trust in the potential of mindfulness.

Occasionally a person's retreat practice unfolds so that very little at all is said during these meetings. This might happen when mindfulness, concentration, and inner freedom are strong enough to evoke a profound peace where nothing needs to be discussed and nothing needs to happen. Rather, the practitioner stays in touch with his or her inner stillness and lets whatever is spoken emerge out of that peace. If nothing is said, the inner state communicates for itself. When appropriate, the teacher's inner freedom may meet the state of the practitioner so the distinction between teacher and student falls away.

The role of a teacher on retreat is to serve and support the practice and awakening of everyone participating in the retreat. Practicing on retreat is one of most noble and sacred things a person can do. For teachers, meeting with those who do this practice, whether they are new to retreats or well experienced, is a great honor.

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## Water Conservation at IRC

IRC's water comes from a shared well system with seven of our neighbors. This summer the water levels have dropped significantly, and we are doing all we can to conserve water. All our new toilets and shower heads are ultra-low water use, but now we need to convert the older 15 toilets & shower heads also. We are considering developing a water catchment system (rain water harvesting) to utilize the roof run-off water for watering the landscape. This requires purchasing and installing a couple of 5,000 gallon water tanks. We ask that those of you sitting retreat at IRC, especially during the dry summer months, minimize water use to what's absolutely necessary.

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## Help IRC when Buying or Selling Your Home

Carol Collins is an IMC sangha member and long-time local real estate broker, now retired. If you are buying or selling your home, she can be available as a consultant through the whole process at no charge, refer you to a realtor, and the realtor will make a donation in your name to our Retreat Center.

She has facilitated this process for sangha members in San Mateo, Santa Clara, Santa Cruz and other Bay Area counties. If you have real estate questions, or would like to discuss buying or selling your home, contact Carol, [carolcollins888@gmail.com](mailto:carolcollins888@gmail.com) or 408/348-1385.

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## Volunteering

### Helping to Care for IRC

IRC is run entirely by volunteers. It's the continuing support of our volunteers that allows us to take care of the center and offer retreats. There are many ways to volunteer, but we particularly need to fill these positions:

**Caretaker:** We are looking for an individual or a couple with handy-person skills who would like to live at IRC, participating in our retreat center community. For more information, please email [insightretreatcenter@gmail.com](mailto:insightretreatcenter@gmail.com)

**Have a Truck?** We periodically need help picking up plants or other items that require a truck, or hauling something away. If you and your truck are occasionally available, please email: [insightretreatcenter@gmail.com](mailto:insightretreatcenter@gmail.com).

**Housekeeping Manager:** Oversee and help with the housekeeping at IRC. Help fine-tune retreatant jobs so cleaning gets done on retreats, and help organize cleaning volunteers at periodic "work days". Help streamline and improve the current procedures.

**Time Commitment:** Average 6–8 hours a month plus overseeing periodic Work Days.

**Volunteer Coordinator:** Coordinates meeting and placing new volunteers, helps keep track of and organize current volunteers. Updates volunteer descriptions, and posts requests for volunteers needed. Is the point person in the sangha for volunteer questions and issues.

**Time Commitment:** 6–8 hours a month.

To volunteer, please fill out a Volunteer Form on our website:

[InsightRetreatCenter.org/volunteer](http://InsightRetreatCenter.org/volunteer) or email: [insightretreatcenter@gmail.com](mailto:insightretreatcenter@gmail.com).

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## Other Ways to Donate

**Amazon** – Use this link:

<http://tinyurl.com/imc-amazon> when you make purchases at Amazon, or use the Amazon Search link on our Donate and Recommended Books pages. A small percentage will go to help support IRC.

**E-Script** – Register your grocery club card and credit/debit cards with E-scrip and the participating merchants will donate a small percentage of your purchases to IRC. You keep all your credit card rewards. Register at [www.escrip.com](http://www.escrip.com). The Group ID is 238528.



# The Factor of Attention in Meditation

by Andrea Fella

In every moment of experience our minds are attending to something. Attention is an interesting factor of mind, partly because it is amenable to conscious control as well as resulting from causes and conditions. In a way, it is like the breath: we can consciously control the breath, or we can settle back and let the breath breathe itself. Similarly, we can consciously direct the attention—for example, we can choose to pay attention to our hand, our foot, our breath, and so on. It is also possible for the object of our attention to be the result of causes and conditions, rather than being consciously chosen. We could say that when we are not consciously choosing what to pay attention to, our habits and conditioning are choosing for us.

To illustrate this, when we first learn to drive, we have to consciously pay attention to many things: seeing all the other cars on the road, checking the rear-view mirrors, reading the road signs. Over time those choices become more automatic, and we don't have to consciously think about them anymore. The forces of training, habit and conditioning direct the attention for us. This is a natural and very helpful part of the way our minds work, especially for learning a skill. The mind can attend to things much more efficiently and quickly when we don't have to consciously think about them. The more we train in a skill, the more natural and effortless it can feel. Training allows attention to flow without the intervention of conscious choice. Yet the mind is still attending to many things while doing that skill, whether or not we have consciously chosen the object of attention.

The factor of attention is quite important in our meditation practice. Often, we train our minds by choosing to direct the attention to an experience such as the breathing. When we notice our attention has wandered off of the breathing, we choose to connect the attention with the breathing again. In this way we gain some mastery over our often unruly minds. In this practice the factor of attention is highlighted, and the meditation unfolds by using attention consciously. In fact, sometimes people assume that meditation means choosing what to pay attention to.

In the practice of open awareness, rather than choosing what to pay attention to, we settle back and observe—or receive—what the mind is already attending to. We sometimes call the practice of open awareness “choiceless awareness” because we are not consciously choosing an object of attention. Instead, we watch the unfolding of causes and conditions that draw the mind to one experience over another. So many things happen in every moment, and the mind makes choices about what to notice. When we settle back and allow a receptive awareness, part of what we see is that our mind is drawn to some things and not to others.

For instance, when I first started practicing open awareness, pretty much every experience that I noticed was unpleasant. It was an interesting lesson to see how strongly my mind oriented towards unpleasant experience. I said to my teacher, “This can't be a completely choiceless awareness! Surely if it were really choiceless, the attention would be drawn to pleasant experience sometimes.” With that very first exercise in open awareness, I could see that my mind had a strong bias. I wasn't consciously choosing to notice unpleasant experience, but the habits and conditioning of my mind were orienting the attention towards the unpleasant.

So, in open awareness, rather than directing the attention with conscious choice, we settle back and watch what the mind chooses to pay attention to. This reveals to us that many processes in the mind are operating automatically, based on habits, causes and conditions. That can lead to a deepening understanding of how our minds work.

In our practice, it is helpful to become familiar with both ways of relating to attention, directed and receptive. At different times in our practice, either directed or receptive attention may be what supports us. Sometimes the most helpful and skillful way to settle our minds down is by choosing an object of attention. And sometimes the mind is more relaxed and present simply watching the unfolding flow of experience. Both will teach us a great deal about ourselves!

## New! Questions & Answers

We're beginning a new Question & Answer feature. You're invited to send one or two questions about your practice, specifically retreat practice, to [news@insightretreatcenter.org](mailto:news@insightretreatcenter.org). Please limit your questions to those whose answers would be useful to other students. A teacher will respond to one or two in next February's newsletter. You're also invited to send suggestions for article topics in future newsletters to Shelley Gault, the new newsletter editor, at [news@insightretreatcenter.org](mailto:news@insightretreatcenter.org).

## Garden Days

Help Improve our Paths & Other Gardening

We have moved some of our fences to maximize IRC's outdoor space, and created paths winding through the trees around the perimeter of the property. The next step is to smooth the paths, clear debris and do erosion control before the rains come.

Join us to help develop our paths or any other gardening you'd like to participate in.

- Saturday & Sunday, October 5 and 6, from 9am to 4pm. Lunch will be provided. You may come for all or part of a day.
- Wednesdays, October 2, 9 and 16 from 9am to 4pm. Please bring lunch.

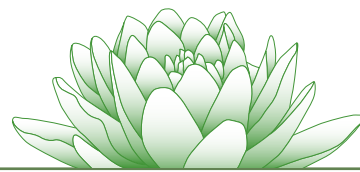
Please RSVP if you're coming to: [gardenblessings@gmail.com](mailto:gardenblessings@gmail.com).

## Work Days

Work days are an integral part of taking care of IRC, and thus supporting retreats. Many of us who participate in the monthly work days appreciate the sense of community when we sit and work together this way. Whether working in the gardens or sweeping the floors, it's inspiring knowing that days later retreatants will be doing sitting and walking meditation in those areas.

You are invited to join us for the following work days, 9am to 4pm. Come for the whole day or just morning or afternoon. Mark your calendars; announcements will be made a couple of weeks prior to the work days. Contact Eileen Messina, [messina.eileen@gmail.com](mailto:messina.eileen@gmail.com) or 650/269-5801.

- Saturday, October 19: Please RSVP online.
- Saturday, November 16.
- Saturday, January 25



## IRC Email List

For future e-mail newsletters & updates, please subscribe to our email list at [www.insightretreatcenter.org](http://www.insightretreatcenter.org)

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