



Volunteer Profile: Keeping Us Centered

Anne Trench

On Tuesdays as I make my way to the new SIMS Dharma Center, I physically experience my heart softening and the tension ebbing from my body. Maybe you do, too? It's as if the Center exerts its own energy, and of course it does—the energy of the sangha and of its members, collectively and individually. I've also come to realize that it is the energy of the quiet volunteers who tend our new home with care and attention, especially the energy of Lloyd and Candace, our facilities managers.

When the call went out on a Tuesday night last fall for someone to take on the challenging responsibility of managing our new space, Lloyd asked himself, "Well, why not?" He had experience in property management and, at least for the time being, some spare time as well.

Candace asked herself "Why not?" too, even though she was busy with a hectic job. At the sign-up table, ready to commit their names to the candidate list, Candace and Lloyd found themselves standing together. They both live on Capitol Hill and had run into each other on occasion and shared some informal "dharma chat." It was enough to have formed a level of mutual trust.

"Shall we volunteer together?" Candace asked. "Sure," Lloyd responded, "How much work can it be? Everything is brand new." And thus a real partnership was born. Emblematic of that partnership: while Candace told me in her interview that Lloyd really does most of the work, in his interview Lloyd gave Candace the credit for the heavy lifting. And though they divvied up responsibilities from the start, they both say they're crossing over all the time to lend each other a hand.

As anyone who has ever moved into a new home knows, this volunteer job turned out to be a lot of work after all. Among the things that needed to be sorted out: how to fit into a smaller space, how to get systems working without glitches, and how to schedule the work of the volunteers who care for a center for which we have sole responsibility, right down to the cleaning of the toilets. Every procedure needed to be honed down to set of easy-to-follow instructions, a process still underway. Lots of challenges, but for Candace and Lloyd, one of the most rewarding things they've ever done.

For both Candace and Lloyd, their volunteer service is an extension of their deepening spiritual journeys. Candace came to the dharma through love. Her partner of many years found and started attending a beginning meditation class in the spring of 2010. After the first class, she came home excited. "You gotta go!" she said, but Candace demurred—she was swamped with work and other obligations. After a time, the urging softened to "let me know if you are interested." And Candace eventually did become interested, especially as she saw someone she deeply loved evolve. Over a very short time, Candace says, "I watched her become the person I've always known she was. She just radiated a grounded sense of happiness and peace."

Candace had grown up in a strong religious tradition but rejected it in her teenage years when some of its contradictions really began to grate. After that, she fed her soul by reading lots of books on spirituality and psychology and even meditated a few times with friends. But she had never taken meditation on

seriously. That changed with her first intro class. “I was hooked,” she says. “Rodney was able to put into words what I had always been feeling and knowing but wasn’t able to express.”

Now Candace is fully committed and feels blessed that she and her partner are on the path together. Although her initial act of volunteering for facilities manager was impulsive, the job has helped her understand that, for her, the real way to practice is through service. “It’s the pavement on the road,” she says. The only drawback of the facilities manager job: sometimes her partner has to find her own ride on Tuesday night.

Lloyd also came to the dharma through love, but his was the love of a friend. Although he was not raised in a religious home, Lloyd began his conscious spiritual journey very early. He says that he first came to believe “in existence without time” when he was in junior high. Over the years, his quest took him through a stint as a born-again Christian in a counterculture group. “You should have seen me with holes in my pants and hair down my back,” he laughs, showing me the well-thumbed bible he carried in those days. For a time, he even lived in a commune.

Eventually, Lloyd became disillusioned, rubbing up against the rough surfaces of a gospel of love that was sometimes practiced with a lot of intolerance. Lloyd now believes he was being pulled inexorably toward Buddhism over all those years.

Browsing through bookstores, Lloyd stumbled across voices like Timothy Miller and Eckhart Tolle, which sent him searching for more. Then, just about 10 years ago, a friend suggested to Lloyd that they attend the intro meditation class together. Lloyd responded, “Oh yeah, I’ll go.” He says that the timing was so right. Both friends have both been active members of the sangha ever since.

Lloyd says that Buddhism has helped him to drop self-imposed barriers and allow himself to be vulnerable and open. Somewhere in all his reading and listening, he came upon this saying by Ramana Maharshi, a Hindu guru: “Let what comes come. Let what goes go. See what remains.” It has become a touchstone.

Both Lloyd and Candace experience directly the peace and beauty that have become imbued in our Center. Lloyd says, “I like being down here by myself.” Sometimes he just sits quietly and lets himself feel the deep stillness. Candace feels the pull of the Center as she drives down, even for meetings that in other venues might be fraught with potential tension. It’s been wonderful working in partnership with people who are all Buddhists. “There is so little ego,” she says. “Volunteering is really selfish; it’s what I want to do and it nurtures me.”

So next time you feel the magnetic pull of our Dharma Center on a Tuesday evening, whether on your bike, in your car, or on the train, think of all the volunteers who make it work, from those who mopped the bamboo floor to those who greet you as you come in the door. And, as you settle into your chair or zabuton, take a moment to look around for Candace and Lloyd and give these quiet dharma heroes a nod of thanks for the work they do and the love with which they do it.