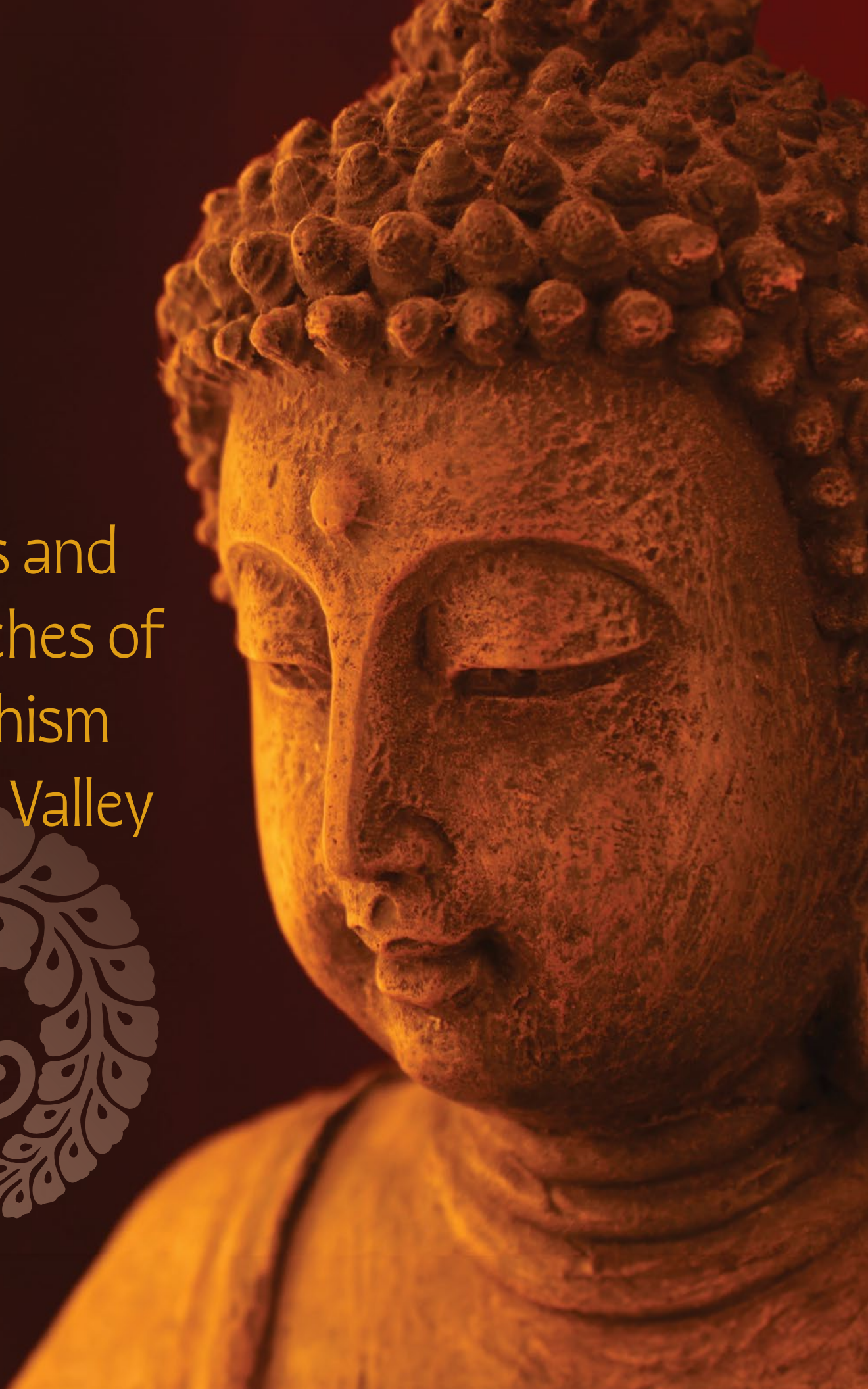


Roots and
Branches of
Buddhism
in Mill Valley



Mill Valley has quietly witnessed the ebb and flow of different cultural influences over the decades. One such profound and enduring influence is the introduction and evolution of Buddhism. With its earliest origins in ancient India, Buddhism has evolved over millennia into various branches, each offering unique perspectives and practices. In Mill Valley, this diversity is evident with traditions such as Pure Land, Zen, and Tibetan Buddhism all practiced here. Each branch brings its own teachings, rituals, and forms of meditation, contributing to the rich tapestry of Buddhist expression in the area.

Origins of Buddhism in the West

The popularization of Buddhism in the West marks a significant cultural and spiritual phenomenon that has unfolded over the past century. Buddhism has gradually permeated mainstream consciousness, offering profound insights and practices to millions of individuals seeking meaning, mindfulness, and inner peace. The seeds of Buddhism in the West were planted through the encounters among Western scholars, travelers, and spiritual seekers. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, pioneering figures such as Sir Edwin Arnold, D.T. Suzuki, and Alexandra David-Néel played pivotal roles in introducing Buddhist philosophy and practices to Western audiences through their translations, writings, and firsthand experiences.

These early encounters sparked a curiosity and fascination with Eastern spirituality, paving the way for a deeper exploration and engagement with Buddhist teachings in the West. The introduction of Buddhism to Mill Valley unfolded as a reflection of the broader societal shifts that characterized the mid-20th century in the Bay Area. The counterculture movement, which gained momentum in the 1960s, brought with it a wave of interest in Eastern philosophies, including Buddhism. During these years, an increasing number of individuals in the Bay Area sought solace and spiritual guidance beyond traditional Western paradigms. This quest for enlightenment paved the way for the arrival of Buddhist teachings in Mill Valley, as practitioners and teachers began to establish a presence in the community. At the time, Mill Valley was a haven for artists, intellectuals, and free spirits, and the community's embrace of diverse spiritual practices laid the groundwork for the integration of Buddhist teachings.

Zen in the Beat Generation

The Beat Generation of the 1950s and '60s emerged as a cultural watershed moment that brought Buddhist ideas and practices to the forefront of Western consciousness. Influential figures such as Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, and Gary Snyder drew inspiration from Zen Buddhism, incorporating its principles of spontaneity, nonconformity, and direct experience into their literary works. Snyder made his first trip to Japan in 1956, and while studying at a temple in Kyoto, he was introduced to a form of walking meditation often performed on nearby Mount Hiei. The circumambulatory practice, called *pradakshina* (Sanskrit for “the path surrounding something” or “to the right,” depending on the source) is a religious rite that involves walking clockwise

BY NATALIE SNOYMAN

around a sacred object or space. This ritual, often accompanied by chanting or silent meditation, serves as a tangible expression of devotion, mindfulness, and reverence for the sacred.

With Mt. Tamalpais acting as the spiritual center of Mill Valley and Marin County at large, it naturally speaks to practicing Buddhists and has played a central role in its history here. As longtime Mill Valley resident Ed Sattizahn, former Central Abbott of the San Francisco Zen Center, noted in a recent interview, “Zen is nature-oriented, and mountains are significant. Mountains are always teaching the dharma and teaching the truth of life.” On October 22, 1965, Snyder, Ginsberg, and fellow poet Philip Whalen stood at the base of Mt. Tamalpais and chanted the Heart Sutra before setting out to consecrate the mountain through ritual circumambulation. That historic hike would be cemented in Snyder’s narrative poem “The Circumambulation of Mt. Tamalpais” and Whalen’s poem “Opening the Mountain, Tamalpais: 22:x:65.” The first stanza of Snyder’s poem introduces the story: “Walking



Above: Altar and incense burner (foreground) at the Buddhist Temple of Marin in Mill Valley. Founded by the Japanese monk Shinran (1173–1263), Pure Land Buddhism was brought to North America by Japanese immigrants in the 19th century. Photo by Abby Wasserman.

Opposite: The Wisteria Crest is the official crest of Pure Land temples. It symbolizes humility, a welcoming heart-mind, and sincere reverence to Buddha.

up and around the long ridge of Tamalpais, ‘Bay Mountain,’ circling and climbing—chanting—to show respect and to clarify the mind. Philip Whalen, Allen Ginsberg, and I learned this practice in Asia. So we opened a route around Tam. It takes a day.”

Snyder knew the mountain well, having taken up residence on the mountain’s flank of Montford Avenue in an improvised zendo and creative hub for Beat poets and writers. He later explained his motivation for pioneering the ritual walk: “I felt it was time to take not just another hike on Mt. Tam, the guardian peak for the Bay and for the City—as I had done so many times—but to do it with the intent of circling it, going over it, and doing it with the formality and respect I had seen mountain walks given in Asia.” Word spread among the Bay Area’s countercultural community that the poets had completed a ceremonial walk around the mountain, and admirers soon committed to perpetuating the ritual. Snyder led a group of about 70 followers on the first public circumambulation in 1967 and by 1972 the ritual was performed four times every year, on the Sunday closest to the dates of the solstices and equinoxes. For over four decades, this ceremonial walk was led by local framer and hiker Matthew Davis, author of *On Foot in Homestead*, who had attended the original group walk and went on to complete the route at least 160 times before he



Sculpture by Sonoma artist Takayuki Zoshi of Venerable Shinran Shonin, founder of Pure Land Buddhism.

died in 2015. The walk is still led today by his son, Oren.

Alan Watts, a prolific author, lecturer, and interpreter of Eastern philosophy, played a pivotal role in introducing Buddhist teachings to Western audiences. Born in England, Watts, an ordained Episcopal minister, moved to the Bay Area and Mill Valley in the 1950s, where he became immersed in the study of Zen Buddhism and other Eastern philosophies. Watts’ charismatic presence and gift for communication captivated audiences across the Bay Area and beyond as he shared profound insights into the nature of existence, consciousness, and human experience. Through his books, lectures, and radio broadcasts on KPFA, Watts introduced countless seekers to the principles of Zen Buddhism, offering a bridge between Eastern wisdom and Western consciousness. During the 1950s Watts and his family lived on Laverne Avenue in Homestead Valley. There, Watts found a receptive audience eager to explore the depths of Zen teachings and incorporate them into their daily lives. His lectures drew crowds of spiritual seekers, intellectuals, and artists, fostering a lively cultural milieu where the principles of Zen Buddhism could take root and flourish. His legacy continues to inspire generations of practitioners seeking to embody the timeless truths of Buddhist wisdom in their daily lives. Watts spent his last few years (1970–1973) at Druid Heights on Mt. Tamalpais.

San Francisco Zen Center: A Beacon of Urban Retreat

In the heart of San Francisco, just a stone’s throw from the bustling streets of the city, lies the venerable San Francisco Zen Center—a beacon of Zen practice and urban retreat for seekers from around the world. In 1959 Soto Zen priest Shunryu Suzuki received a temporary position to minister to the Japanese American community in San Francisco’s Japan Town. Discovering the “beginner’s mind” of Americans interested in Zen, Suzuki-roshi (“roshi” is an honorific for a respected teacher) founded the San Francisco Zen Center in 1962 which, over the years, has played a pivotal role in introducing Zen Buddhism to the West Coast and popularizing its teachings.

From humble beginnings, the San Francisco Zen Center has grown into a thriving community of practitioners, with multiple locations in the Bay Area, including the serene Tassajara Zen Mountain Center in California’s Ventana Wilderness and the verdant Green Gulch Farm Zen Center just outside Mill Valley. Over the decades SFZC has become a beacon of Zen practice, offering zazen (meditation) instruction, residential training programs, and a rich tapestry of religious ceremonies and cultural events.

Jakusho Bill Kwong, one of Suzuki-roshi’s most serious and dedicated students, established a sitting group at the Almonte Community Center, a modest meeting hall for that Mill Valley neighborhood, in 1967. Kwong started studying with Suzuki-roshi at the San Francisco Zen Center in 1960, becoming one of his first students. “He really inspired me,” Kwong said in a recent interview. “I started when I was 25. He was the first true person I met in my life. He accepted you, unconditionally...I had never met a person like that before.” Those who sat zazen at the Almonte sessions would set up cushions there and sometimes Suzuki-roshi himself would come to give the dharma talk.

Participants ranged from teachers to artists, and the group was active until 1973. Jakusho Kwong-roshi founded the Sonoma Mountain Zen Center in 1973 to continue the lineage of his teacher. He recently retired as head abbot and last September he was succeeded by his son Nyoze Kwong.

Raised in Los Alamos, Ed Sattizahn—another talented student of Suzuki-roshi’s—came to Buddhism from a science background. He was in the process of getting his PhD when he was “sucked into the counterculture.” A friend loaned him a copy of Philip Kapleau’s *The Three Pillars of Zen* and the same friend told him about Shunryu Suzuki and Tassajara. Sattizahn traveled there “to find the truth.” He visited Tassajara with the intention of spending a day at the mineral spring baths, but was invited to stay “to learn more in a week about Zen from Suzuki-roshi than all the books on Buddhism.” He did, and eventually became the treasurer, then the director of Tassajara, and eventually president of the San Francisco Zen Center, running its businesses that included Greens Restaurant and a bookstore, bakery, and clothing shop. “The San Francisco Zen Center was a counterculture nexus,” Sattizahn recalls, “an energetic field with Roshi as the central spiritual force of it.”

Ed Sattizahn notes that it was not difficult to come to Buddhism as a scientist: “Science is a discipline of the mind and the mental power of being a scientist requires the same power in meditation. There is an integrity in thinking in science,” he says, “and that exists in Zen.”

Early Influences: Green Gulch Farm Zen Center

The history of Zen Buddhism in our area is deeply intertwined with the establishment of the Green Gulch Zen Center, a sanctuary nestled in the verdant valley just north of Mill Valley near Muir Beach. Acquired in 1972 by San Francisco Zen Center, it quickly became a beacon for those seeking spiritual guidance amidst the natural beauty of Marin.

George and Hope Wheelwright purchased the land in 1945 with the intention of raising Hereford cattle. The Wheelwrights loved the land and were determined to find a way to preserve it. In 1965 they signed over the land under the federal Williamson Act, which offered tax reductions in exchange for a 10-year pledge to preserve its agricultural status. This agreement was termed a “covenant running with the land.” In 1972, George Wheelwright made arrangements to sell the ranch to the San Francisco Zen Center for a modest sum. A number of forward-thinking organizations and individuals were responsible for this arrangement, including Trust for Public Land, the Nature Conservancy, Yvonne Rand, Huey Johnson, George’s lawyer Dick Sanders, and Suzuki-roshi’s dharma heir Richard Baker. Wheelwright explained at the time, “I was raised Unitarian, and I do not consider myself a Zen convert. But I am attracted to Zen Buddhism as one of the few religions that doesn’t make war on nonbelievers.” His commitment to preserving the land on which the center stands laid the foundation for a harmonious integration of spiritual practice and environmental stewardship.

Suzuki-roshi died in 1971. Six years later, between 1977 and 1983, Zen priest Lewis Richmond was the head of practice there.



From left: Zen priests Al Tribe, Lewis Richmond, Ed Sattizahn, and Peter Coyote following Tribe’s and Coyote’s dharma transmission on January 23, 2016. As new priests, they joined the theoretically unbroken line of teachers and disciples going back to the Buddha himself. Courtesy of Ed Sattizahn.



Roshi Shunryu Suzuki (left) and Jakusho Bill Kwong, 1960s. Courtesy of Sonoma Zen Mountain Monastery.

Of this time, Richmond recalls, “I was young, in my early 30s, so it was a little precocious—I would often give those Sunday talks to 150 people.”

Under the guidance of other teachers like Baker-roshi and Tenshin Reb Anderson, Green Gulch flourished as a place of contemplation, meditation, and communal living. Its organic farm, study center, meditation hall, and fertile gardens provide a nurturing environment for practitioners to deepen their understanding of Zen teachings while cultivating a profound connection with nature. It is rare for a Zen center to have a farm and individuals to tend to it, so Green Gulch is unique in this respect, but there is a long tradition in Zen of not only working hard in order to eat and share food, but to also share teachings and practice with others.



Left: Wendy Johnson, a founder of the Organic Farm and Garden Program at Green Gulch Farm Zen Center. Photo by Kodo Noah Roen. Courtesy of Upaya Zen Center.

Right: Dr. Evelyn Junko Nakagawa, president of Buddhist Temple of Marin and the daughter of its founder. Photo by Abby Wasserman.

Wendy Johnson, a Buddhist practitioner for over 50 years and a lifelong ecologist, lived and trained at Green Gulch between 1975 and 2000. Johnson was one of the founders of Green Gulch’s Organic Farm and Garden Program and was close to the Wheelwrights for many years. Johnson was not initially looking for quiet meditation; she wanted to work, take care of the land and see humans protecting the treasure of the natural world. However, she took to heart a seminal text by Eihei Dogen (1200–1253), the founder of the Soto Zen school: “When you find your place where you are, practice occurs.” In a recent interview, Johnson reflected, “Mindfulness does not have to be slow; working rhythmically and with intention and dedication is in the Zen tradition.”

Pure Land Buddhism and the Buddhist Temple of Marin

While Zen Buddhism has been a dominant force in Mill Valley’s spiritual landscape, it is important to acknowledge the presence of other Buddhist traditions that have contributed to the town’s cultural tapestry. Among these, Pure Land Buddhism holds a distinct place, offering a path of devotion and faith centered around the aspiration for rebirth in the Pure Land. It was the first Buddhist tradition brought by immigrants from Japan to America, and thus is the oldest Buddhist practice in the United States. Its cosmology describes a heavenly realm presided over by Amitabha Buddha. While Pure Land Buddhism may differ in its doctrinal emphasis from Zen, both traditions share a root in Mahayana Buddhism and a common thread of compassion, gratitude, and the pursuit of awakening. The Buddhist Temple of Marin on Miller Avenue in Mill Valley, a gathering place transformed from its original identity as Brown’s Hall, Homestead Valley’s community center, embodies these shared values while offering a unique perspective on the path to enlightenment.

The temple, with its ornate shrines and friendly outreach to all, is a testament to the enduring legacy of Pure Land Buddhism in the area, providing a place of worship and community for followers of this tradition. Dr. Evelyn Junko Nakagawa is the current president of its board of directors, and she is deeply entwined with the temple’s history. Dr. Nakagawa is the daughter

of Masao “Frank” Nakagawa, who moved to the United States from Hiroshima, Japan, in the 1920s in order to work as a farmer in the Central Valley. He worked Monday through Saturday and on Sundays would attend temple. His wife Kazume, also from Hiroshima, worked at a strawberry farm in Lodi. The couple always intended to return to Japan but were interned during World War II. Frank and Kazume moved to Marin to start a gardening business. There, he became involved with a group of fellow Buddhists who would meet in homes to sit and listen to lectures. In the 1960s the group purchased Brown’s Hall and established the Buddhist Temple of Marin.

Dr. Nakagawa was born into the Pure Land tradition. While she had friends and peers from many different religious backgrounds, she deeply resonated with Buddhist teachings, particularly The Golden Chain, a traditional recitation in Buddhist temples that serves as a reminder of the profound interconnectedness and interdependence of all things, guiding practitioners toward greater mindfulness, compassion, and ethical living.

Despite hardships over the years—particularly the temple’s closure during the Covid-19 pandemic—the Buddhist Temple of Marin is doing well. Dr. Nakagawa reflects that, post-pandemic, the temple has reached more people with online offerings. “There are so many Buddhist organizations that did not exist in the ’60s, and that’s so cool. It’s hopeful that people are interested in studying Buddhism and all different sects until you find your path,” she says. Dr. Nakagawa also points out that the temple has attracted a younger audience in recent years, introducing a new generation to the Pure Land tradition.

Creativity and Mindfulness at the O’Hanlon Center

The O’Hanlon Center for the Arts has emerged as a unique venue for the integration of Zen practice and creative expression. Since 1969 the center has been a sanctuary for artists, writers, and practitioners of mindfulness to explore the intersection of creativity, spirituality, and inner transformation. While not a Buddhist institution, the Center offers a diverse array of programs and workshops based on Ann O’Hanlon’s philosophy and practice that also draw inspiration from Asian principles and



Left: Pure Land minister CJ Sokugan Dunford leads services at the Buddhist Temple of Marin every other Sunday, alternating with Rev. Kiyonobu Kuwahara. Photo by Abby Wasserman.

Right: Longtime Buddhist Temple of Marin member Earl Minagawa, a bonsai sensei, with his miniature azalea in full bloom. The meditative art of bonsai lends itself naturally to Buddhist practice. Courtesy of Buddhist Temple of Marin.

contemplative practice. From haiku writing to painting, sculpture, and meditation, participants are invited to engage in creative expression as a form of spiritual inquiry and self-discovery.

Zen practice began at the O’Hanlon in 2003. Lew Richmond was approached by a group of young mothers who were interested in sitting zazen while their children were in school. Together with Ed Sattizahn, Richmond formed the Vimala Sangha with a mission of practicing the traditional “householder” teachings of Zen. Richmond eventually relocated his sittings to the Community Congregational Church in Tiburon, assisted by Al Tribe. Richmond, a composer and musician, is now retired, but Ed Sattizahn continues to lead Vimala Sangha, which meets every Friday morning, alternating in-person and online sessions.

The Legacy of Buddhism in Mill Valley

Beyond its spiritual dimensions, Buddhism in Mill Valley has also been deeply intertwined with environmental consciousness and community activism. The teachings of the Buddha emphasize the interconnectedness of all beings and the importance of living in harmony with nature.

At Green Gulch, this ethos is reflected in the community’s commitment to organic farming, land preservation, and sustainable living practices. Through hands-on work in the garden and participation in environmental initiatives, practitioners deepen their understanding of ecological stewardship and cultivate a sense of reverence for the natural world.

Similarly, the Buddhist Temple of Marin engages in various outreach programs and social justice initiatives aimed at addressing environmental issues and promoting social harmony. Through educational workshops, interfaith dialogues, and community service projects, temple members actively contribute to the well-being of both local and global communities.

The history of Buddhism in Mill Valley is a testament to the transformative power of spiritual practice, community, and environmental consciousness. Mill Valley has become a sanctuary for seekers of all backgrounds, united by a shared commitment to wisdom, compassion, and awakening. Reflecting on the journey of Buddhism in Mill Valley recalls the relevance of the Buddha’s

teachings in an ever-changing world. Through mindfulness, loving-kindness, and collective action, we can honor the legacy of past generations and cultivate a more compassionate and sustainable future for all. ❁

Natalie Snoyman is the Supervising Archivist at the Lucretia Little History Room in the Mill Valley Public Library. Her last feature article for *Review* was “Eight Decades of Racial Justice Work in Southern Marin” in 2021.

In his interview with Natalie Snoyman, Zen priest Lewis Richmond reflected on the future of Buddhism in the West.

“My generation is fading out, you know, we’re retiring or dying. We did what we did, and it’s up to younger people to take this ancient religious tradition and make it relevant to today’s world. One thing I would say about the world today versus the world of 40 or 50 years ago, we have some very serious planetary issues, from climate change to political strife to economic inequality. And I think that all religious traditions are challenged to figure out how they can be relevant to all of that. I think that the most fundamental teaching of the Buddhist tradition is kindness and compassion and helping other people, and it seems like we certainly need that more than ever right now. There are three areas where I think Buddhism has really entered the mainstream culture and had a real impact. One is death and dying—the hospice movement that really was spearheaded by Buddhists. The second would be prison work. A lot of Buddhists work in prisons, setting up meditation groups. And the third would be the therapy community. Psychotherapists have incorporated and adopted mindfulness and other Buddhist practices into their therapeutic work. Those are three areas in which 50 years of Buddhism in the West have made an impact.”