



BY PERRY GARFINKEL

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The man who taught me the most about Buddhism wasn't a monk with a shaved head. He didn't speak Sanskrit, and he didn't live in a Himalayan monastery. In fact he wasn't even a Buddhist. He was Carl Taylor, a life-long San Franciscan who looked to be in his late 40s. At the moment, he appeared cold, sitting upright in a bed rolled into the gardens off the hospice ward at Laguna Honda Hospital. It was a blue-sky summer afternoon, but in this city that often means a bone-penetrating chill. Carl was dying of cancer.

I was spending a week with the Zen Hospice Project, a Buddhist organization whose volunteers assist the staff of the 25-bed hospice unit at the hospital, perhaps the largest public long-term care facility in the United States. The project, now emulated around the world, uses two of Buddhism's central teachings—awareness of the present moment and compassion for others—as tools to help bring a degree of dignity and humanity to those in the last stages of their lives. They're not easy lessons to learn.

I sat beside Carl, helping adjust the well-worn jacket he used as a blanket. He wore his terminal diagnosis with resigned bravado. I tried to make small talk, but it was going terribly. What solace can you offer someone who doesn't have long to live and knows it?

"So what kind of work do, er, did you do?"

Long silence. Slow drag on his cigarette. An eternity passed as we watched a white tuft of cloud break the blue monotony and move across the sky.

"I don't really talk about my past."

OK. Squirming to keep the conversation moving, I mentally scrolled through my list of questions. If I couldn't ask about the past and there

was no sense in asking about the future, that left only the present. And in the present, I was learning, there are no questions; there is just being. This made me feel awkward at first: Stripped of his questions, the journalist has no identity.

But Carl seemed content to have me just sit there, my company alone helping ease some of his suffering. Once I accepted that I had nothing to do and nowhere to go, I relaxed. Carl looked sideways at me and smiled. We both understood I had just learned a small lesson. Together we watched another white cloud go by.

That week there were other lessons drawing on Buddhism—lessons about the impermanence of life, about our attachment to the way we want things to be, and our disappointment when those things don't come to pass. About physical and mental suffering and about the value of what Buddhists call *sangha*, which best translates as "community." But most of all I saw how the lessons one man learned in India 2,500 years ago have been adapted to the modern world.

Around the globe today there is a new Buddhism. Its philosophies are being applied to mental and physical health therapies and to political and environmental reforms. Athletes



India's Mahabodhi Temple is steps from where Siddhartha achieved enlightenment and became the Buddha. His Four Noble Truths: Life entails suffering; suffering arises from attachment to desires; suffering stops when attachment does; to transcend life's pains, follow the Eightfold Path. A key practice is meditation

use it to sharpen their game. It helps corporate executives handle stress better. Police arm themselves with it to defuse volatile situations. Chronic pain sufferers apply it as a coping salve. This contemporary relevance is triggering a renaissance of Buddhism—even in countries like India, where it had nearly vanished, and in China, where it has been suppressed.

Buddhism is no longer just for monks or Westerners with disposable time and income to dabble in things Eastern. Christians and Jews practice it. African Americans meditate alongside Japanese Americans. In the U.S. alone, some experts estimate, there are roughly three million practicing Buddhists. And according to a 2004 study, more than 25 million Americans believe that Buddhist teachings have had an important influence on their spirituality.

The Zen Hospice Project is one example of "socially engaged Buddhism," a term coined by the Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh, who was

exiled from Vietnam in the 1960s for his non-violent antiwar activities. Still engaged at the age of 79, he traveled in his native country for three months this year—the 30th anniversary of the Communist Party takeover of Vietnam—spreading Buddhist teachings where he had once been a pariah.

In southwestern France, at his Plum Village meditation center, he regularly hosts, among others, Palestinians and Israelis in workshops on conflict resolution and peace negotiation. These sessions often begin with animosity, Hanh tells me, and just as often end with embraces.

"It all starts with a spin on an old adage: 'Don't just do something, sit there,'" he says in a wisp of a voice. A rail-thin man with large ears and deep-set eyes, Hanh is sitting on the porch of his cottage overlooking verdant Bordeaux vineyards. "With all this socially engaged work, first you must learn what the Buddha learned, to still the mind. Then you don't take action; action takes you."