

## HOW I SPENT MY SUMMER: REFLECTIONS ON A GYO

by Ray Innen Parchelo

**A**s summer blooms, most people head for the cottage or golf course. I made some unusual plans. I'm a Renfrew County social worker with ambitions to become the first Tendai Buddhist priest in Canada, so I attended the first of a series of annual training sessions at the Tendai Buddhist Institute, near Albany, New York. These sessions, called *gyo* are a two-week intensive training to prepare aspiring Buddhists for priesthood. About a dozen *gyo-ja* (trainees), aged from 20's-60's, represented East, West and South in the U.S., Denmark - and myself from Canada.

This wasn't my first intensive Buddhist training. I had decades of experience and background as a student of eastern religion, (I studied and lectured in the Religion Department at Carleton University). My Buddhist practice began in the early-70's, practicing with Zen groups in Canada and the US. I attended many extended retreats, with long hours, long days, doing sitting meditation. In the late 1990's, unsatisfied with the Zen style, I went in search of a new Buddhist source to meet my needs. One of my several criteria was that the group had to be within a moderate day's drive of my Renfrew home. Over the next few years I explored groups all over Ontario and New England. In 2004, frustrated with the absence of Buddhist training or community in rural areas, I founded the Red Maple Sangha. Sangha means 'community', in this case, a lay group who study and practice the many

different forms of Buddhism. I began sharing knowledge and practice methods with the people who joined Red Maple. Five years later, Red Maple, the only permanent Buddhist group in Renfrew County, now holds twice weekly practice sessions and retreats in Renfrew and Pembroke and attracts groups of eight to fifteen practitioners.

After those several years of exploring Buddhist communities, I 'stumbled across' the Tendai tradition which immediately resonated with my and the Red Maple's ideals. Buddhism, began in India about 2500 years ago. Tendai is a later and eclectic Buddhist tradition that began in China about 1200 years ago. It found its greatest acceptance in Japan, where it was practiced as imperial and state-Buddhism for centuries. Today, it is one of the great living traditions in modern Japan. The Tendai Buddhist Institute, (TBI) is the sole English-language Tendai training opportunity outside of Japan. It is lead by American-born and Japan-trained priest, Monshin Paul Naamon, who introduced official Tendai in the West in the early 1990's. Less well-known than other sects, such as Zen or Nichiren, Tendai, largely with Naamon's encouragement, only recently decided to establish itself in the West. There are now a half dozen branches, mostly in the US.

Within a few months of my 'discovery, I had attended the Spring and Fall public

weekend retreats in New York. Then, convinced this was a tradition wherein I could fulfill my ambitions, I requested participation in the advanced *gyo* training. Like the Red Maple Centre near Renfrew, the TBI temple is located along a quiet country road. The Adirondacks provide the backdrop for the site.

A typical *gyo* day begins at 3.30 am with a bracing cold water 'purification', followed by a 45 minute brisk walk along one of the many nearby country roads. A silent walk into the sun as it rises above the hills is an inspiring start to each day. The remainder of the day includes several 'services', formal Tendai temple events. Everyone has at least one opportunity in the *gyo* to prepare and assist at the presentation of a service. This would include selecting and performing the appropriate liturgy and readings. Mine was a 'memorial' for a friend who recently passed away. The day also includes several meditation and 'contemplation' periods, study and discussion periods and a two-hour work period. Interspersed are three periods of prostrations, where *gyo-ja* complete 108 full prostrations per period, while chanting. A *gyo* day is a mix of silent and social time, physical exertion and stillness, giving and receiving. The day ends officially around 9.00 pm but can stretch later depending on one's responsibilities. Those running the *gyo* were always earliest to rise and latest to sleep. The only time one can lie down on *gyo* is at the end of the day. By about day six all of us had completely let go of whatever we came from in our daily lives and each day, each moment, seemed fresh and full of life, and each night a quick release into sleep.

On two days this routine was altered for special practices. One was a day of '*shikan*' (sitting practice), the familiar rounds of

silent meditation. I had frequent flashes of being on one of those former Zen retreats - sit, walk, sit, walk, sit... you get the picture. The other special day was '*kokorodo*', a specific Tendai practice, which, to my great appreciation, acknowledges the value of walking meditation. The *kokorodo* meant a six hour, brisk and largely-silent walk around a 25km circuit in the panoramic hills near the temple. At intervals there were pauses for group chanting or a short talk.

Several things make the *gyo* unique. First and foremost is the authenticity of the training. TBI has ensured the consistency of Tendai training, as rigorous as any Buddhist training in the world. Western-trained priests will be registered in Japan alongside those trained in Japan. More importantly though, the Dharma or the teaching, which has been shared and practiced by Buddhists for nearly three millennia, has not been compromised. The training does not 'dumb down', re-package or simplify any of the teachings.

Apart from the richness of the practices and the intensity of the days, the single most striking and gratifying aspect of this *gyo* for me was the extraordinary kindness and harmony uniformly displayed by all participants and leaders. We regularly got 'scolded' for sloppy behaviour (a clumsy movement, a forgotten cue ) but the complete support and respect came through in every interaction. Even when tired and perhaps grumpy, everyone had a word of encouragement for each other. A smile and a '*gambatte*' - a phrase roughly equivalent to 'hang in there' were frequent and sincere.

Having now completed my first *gyo*, this

60-year old Ontarian is designated as a novice. After another gyo I will be allowed to lead services and perform memorials. Full priesthood could take another five years. I consider this all like the long walking practice, small steps which will get me to my goal of creating an active Buddhist presence in rural Eastern Ontario and, in time, spreading the message of Tendai across Canada.

For more on the Red Maple Sangha, its sessions and events, visit:

<http://www.realperson.com/>

For more on Tendai in the west, visit :

<http://www.tendai.org/>