

# INSIGHT

NEWSLETTER

SPRING  
SUMMER

2004

IMS Schedules:

The Retreat Center 2004  
The Forest Refuge 2004/05

BCBS 2004/05

Course Schedule Outline

Teacher Interview

IMS News  
and Developments

## A Seamless Process: Practice On and Off the Cushion An Interview with Kamala Masters & Steve Armstrong

Kamala Masters and Steve Armstrong have been teaching mindfulness retreats together, both at IMS and worldwide, for more than ten years. They live on Maui, where they are developing a Dharma sanctuary and hermitage *Ho'omālamalama* (the ground for awakening). In talking with *Insight Newsletter*, they offer their perspective on the relationship between intensive practice and householder life.

**Over the last decade, you've offered introductory courses for those new to the practice, as well as longer retreats for advancing students. How do you meet the needs of students in different stages of meditation experience?**

**Steve:** Kamala and I respect and teach from a Burmese model of understanding how students progress in their Dharma practice. The distinguished Burmese meditation master Mahasi Sayadaw, a pioneer in teaching meditation to those in a lay or householder life, outlined this model about 55 years ago. Prior to that, meditation instruction was not easily available to those outside the ordained community of monks and nuns. He taught that householders can develop the essential practice of the *paramis*, those positive forces or skillful qualities

of mind such as generosity, renunciation, effort, truthfulness, lovingkindness and balance of mind.

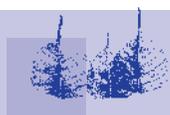
These are the forces which, through various Dharma practices, can become our default setting – our first response to situations – rather than emotional reactivity, resulting in less harm and suffering. In Burma, householders practice the paramis in their everyday life, raising children, on the job and among their neighbors and friends. As these qualities ripen through ordinary daily activities, the ground is prepared for the deeply liberating insight that arises through sustained vipassana retreat practice.

**Kamala:** So we encourage the cultivation of the paramis at home, at work and in our social and civic interactions. While one or more paramis

*(continued on page 2)*



Steve Armstrong and Kamala Masters



## INSIGHT NEWSLETTER

A twice yearly publication of the Insight Meditation Society, a tax-exempt nonprofit organization whose purpose is to foster the practice of *vipassana* (insight) and *metta* (lovingkindness) meditation, and to preserve the essential Buddhist teachings of liberation.

The goal of the practice is the awakening of wisdom and compassion through right action and cultivating mindful awareness in all aspects of life.

Editor: Gyano Gibson  
Production: Eowyn Ahlstrom  
Cover photo: Libby Vigeon  
IMS Buddha Photo: Dawn Close  
Design: Lux Productions

Please address any correspondence to IMS,  
1230 Pleasant St.  
Barre, MA 01005, USA  
Phone: (978) 355-4378  
Fax: (978) 355-6398  
Email: [ims@dharmia.org](mailto:ims@dharmia.org)  
Website: [www.dharma.org](http://www.dharma.org)

PRINTED IN CANADA



Printed on recycled paper  
using soy-based inks

CHRISTINE PICHLKOSTNER

of their liberating insight, but also in their skillful application of Dharma understanding in daily life.

### **Kamala, can you say a little about the impact of your practice in Burma?**

**Kamala:** Over the last two years, I've traveled to Burma three times – twice to undertake some months of intensive practice with my teacher and meditation master, Sayadaw U Pandita. The third trip involved sutta and Pali study at Sitagu Monastery.

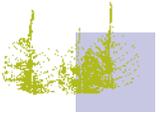
For a long time prior to that, as I reflected on and practiced the paramis, the quality of renunciation resonated deeply in my heart. As I gave this more energy and attention, the wish to ordain arose – to shave my head, don the nun's robes and utterly simplify my life. I was interested to see if outer renunciation would help the inner renunciation of abandoning greed, hatred and delusion. So, I traveled to Burma in 2001 and ordained for two months with Sayadaw U Pandita. I did this again early this year. These two times have been amongst the happiest of my life; the simplification of my activities together with his monastery's clearly defined practice regimen allowed the constrictions of heart and mind to easily let go.

While in Burma I realized how supportive and strengthening it is for me, as one who guides others, to have my own guide. Of course, the bottom line is that the Dharma is our truest guide. There is, however, immense value in turning to someone much wiser who can, with fierce compassion, tell me where to refine the practice; a teacher who can direct and help me reach new horizons without embellishment or coddling. Two important things Sayadaw U Pandita said to me were, "You must

are practiced, other virtuous qualities are simultaneously nurtured. For example, whenever we remind ourselves to practice patience – the parami the Buddha called "the supreme virtue" – we not only create harmony in the outer conditions of our lives, but in addition support the growing inner presence of loving-kindness, equanimity and renunciation.

We also encourage students to sit a silent vipassana retreat every year, whether it's for nine days, or a month, or longer. When we take the time to temporarily disengage from household activities and move into a semi-monastic environment, the momentum towards progressively deeper levels of freedom in the mind joins forces with the momentum gained from strengthening the paramis in our heart.

**Steve:** The Dharma lifestyle of householder parami practice combined with intensive meditation retreats is a middle path between a full monastic way of life, and a full householder life without any spiritual practice. It is a form that seems to suit Western lay people. We have noticed significant maturation in our students who sit annual retreats, not only in the depth



be willing to be admonished,” and “You must be willing to invest everything you have in the practice.”

**Is it possible to undertake intensive mindfulness practice while in a household situation, fulfilling parent, partner and financial responsibilities?**

**Kamala:** Being a mother and respecting family needs are primal forces within me. Nevertheless, while raising my children I also honored a deep need to take time out now and then for intensive retreat. Sometimes, I had to plan for this up to three years in advance. I didn’t shirk that inner responsibility. So, yes, with careful preparation it is possible to fulfill both worldly obligations and intensive practice needs.

Recently, on the way to Burma, I visited India, and had the opportunity to talk with Dipa, the daughter of an extraordinary and wonderful Indian woman, Dipa Ma, whose teachings and practice have contributed greatly to my own development. I asked Dipa what was the most awesome thing that she remembered about her mother. She told me that when she was a child she and her mother were at the Mahasi meditation center in Burma. Her mother’s teacher, Munindraji, instructed her mother to practice for three days, while Dipa was being cared for by friends there. This was not a weekend retreat of sitting and walking, with breaks in between; it meant Dipa Ma sat down for three days solid, without moving. Dipa said “She didn’t even get up to go to the bathroom or to eat!”

This story inspires me, because it validates my own efforts to be both a devoted parent and a devoted meditation student – though I’m not sure I’ll ever sit for three days without moving!

Another simple yet profound practice that helps create a seamless process between householder life and retreat life is known as ‘Mindfulness of the Four Postures’ – sitting, walking, lying down and standing. Munindraji, my other teacher, who passed away in October last year, often reminded me to practice a general awareness of the entire body as it sits, walks, bends or turns throughout everyday activities. I have found this technique brings about a significant continuity of mindfulness.

**Steve, you were a monk in Burma for many years. How did this prepare you for developing a new sanctuary on Maui?**

**Steve:** I spent five years in robes, doing intensive practices with Sayadaw U Pandita in Yangon. This was while Kamala was raising her family. Now, while she is undertaking intensive practice, I find myself much more involved in householder activities. Our roles have reversed.

We are in the process of building a Dharma sanctuary on Maui, which requires a lot of raising money, managing finances, and communicating with supporters, neighbors, contractors and the local government. The practices I did in Asia provide essential tools for skillful interaction in these often challenging situations. My household work is the test of my Dharma practice.

**Do you see the teachings of Burmese masters continuing to influence Western Buddhism?**

**Steve:** Most definitely! While Kamala and I were in Burma two years ago, we heard about a book in Burmese by the late Mahasi Sayadaw that had never been translated into English. It is a two-

volume work called *Practicing Vipassana*; a definitive book from the Buddhist teachings on how to practice vipassana, and much of its content is generally unavailable to Western students. In it, Mahasi Sayadaw discusses the preparatory practices that householders can develop and experience both in their everyday lives and on retreat.

We have undertaken subsidy of the book’s translation and publication. In January, Kamala asked Sayadaw U Pandita what he thought about making it available in the West. He responded, in English, “The sooner, the better.” Not only will it provide a valuable resource for Dharma students and teachers alike, it will also establish a baseline in the West for reviewing our own practice and gauging its authenticity.

**How relevant is the Buddhist understanding of mind today?**

**Steve:** In our view, its relevance is just beginning to be appreciated, at least here in the West. Last September, Kamala and I attended the *Mind and Life Conference* with the Dalai Lama in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where Western scientists of psychology spoke with the Dalai Lama and senior Tibetan and Theravada monks and scholars about the nature of the mind. It was a fascinating dialogue to witness – Western scientists are just starting to document, through their scientific method and machinery, what Buddhists have been experiencing for millennia, through their meditation.

*For further information about Kamala and Steve’s Dharma activities, please visit [www.vipassanamettra.org](http://www.vipassanamettra.org).*