

## Searchlight Casting for Faults in the Clouds of Delusion

By Steve Armstrong

Title from lyrics of “Dark Star” by Robert Hunter, performed by the Grateful Dead

My introduction to dhamma practice and meditation was a silent retreat. No book, class, dhamma talk, instruction nor sitting preceded my entry into 14 days of silence. At the time I thought it was a huge mistake. But in retrospect, I consider myself fortunate that lack of experience and expectations allowed a beginner’s mind to just try it. One challenge we all face in on-going practice is to sustain freshness of mind. To paraphrase Krishnamurti, “I do yoga every day, but I never let it become a habit.” If a daily practice is not to result in a feeling of disempowered lassitude with the torment of routine, a greater commitment to dhamma practice calls forth a refreshing of the mind for a closer look at the familiar.

The simple routine of a silent meditation retreat, however, is a tool to relieve the mind of the distractions of our daily “to-do” list which can keep us on the surface of our lives. A retreat supports the energy of intention to just observe in greater detail the mind, body and environment, and the interface between them. To give an example from the world of art, from a distance the narrative of a tapestry may be captivating, but upon closer inspection one understands how the tapestry is constructed. So too with the captivating narratives of our life, from a distance they are all so familiar. When observed up close, the knotted threads of the narrative emerge and are understood to be just so many pixels of impersonal conditions unfolding over time.

Dramatizing ordinary events by liking-disliking, valuing-devaluing, approving-disapproving is so exciting. Sayadaw U Tejaniya reminds us that, “Excitement undermines awareness.” Lack of awareness entangles the mind in defilements, the source of suffering. It is challenging to simply observe the familiar threads of our personal narrative and understand them as deeply impersonal conditions. Just observing can be so boring unless we truly understand the disentangling process. When I was a monk in Burma, my teacher, Sayadaw U Pandita’s encouragement took the form of asking me not to repeat in my daily check-ins anything I had mentioned before. This set off a scramble of creativity to say the same thing differently; but he was not impressed. I had to look more closely.

Sustained attention gradually pierces the veil of familiar identification to reveal the appropriation of impersonal events as “my” story. When experiencing pain, one of three responses is possible. 1) We can indulge in the feeling of the pain. 2) The suffering can be narratively knotted ever more deeply into identification within “the tapestry of my life.” Or, 3) awareness recognizes the painful feeling as an impersonally conditioned, momentarily fleeting experience being known. The first is suffering. The second is entanglement. The third is wise understanding that reveals the peace of freedom.

In June, Kamala and I will offer our annual 9-day silent mindfulness retreat, this year without the weekend option. By keeping the attendance to full time participants, there will be a longer period of time to develop the stability of awareness that reveals and explores the subtlety of mind. The added days, which allow our practice to continually deepen, is an invaluable opportunity to pierce the veil of identification. It is challenging in the face of the busy-ness of our lives to allow ourselves time without distractions to stop, wait and simply observe without any agenda to fix, figure out, accomplish or acquire. Multi-tasking as a tool works wonders in our daily life, but we also need the continuity of awareness to reveal the deeper structure of the mind from which liberating insight emerges.

Dear friends,

It has been another year of change for TCVC.

The TCVC Board has been looking at ways to reduce expenses for the past few years. In response to rising costs we looked again for places in the region to hold retreats. We are happy to have found a wonderful facility at Koinonia Retreat Center. Koinonia (pronounced koy’ na nee’ a) is located near Annandale, Minnesota on 114 acres of old prairie, big woods and lake shore. All accommodations have modern plumbing with no more than two people to each room. Single rooms are available.

The June retreat is our first nine-day without a weekend option. With the continuity of silence and inner stillness, yogis may gain momentum earlier in the retreat, strengthening mindfulness to experience more deepening in their practice. We encourage those of you who haven’t tried a longer retreat to join us.

With so many people struggling to make their way in this economy, we are grateful for everyone who has donated their time and money to help make TCVC retreats possible. We are grateful also for everyone who attends the retreats. Without our collective commitment to retreat practice close to home, people would need to travel some distance to longer retreats with senior teachers.

TCVC welcomes beginners and experienced meditators, men and women from all life experiences, backgrounds and diverse communities. We encourage you to extend this welcome and encouragement to people you know.

Peace and happiness to all,  
TCVC Board of Directors