

Retreat for Legal Professionals

September 11-14, 2008

Menla Mountain Retreat Center, Phoenicia, NY

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After a six-year hiatus, the Center's Law Program returned to New York with a successful Law Retreat this past September. Over 40 lawyers, judges, mediators, professors, and law students gathered to meditate and reflect on their lives as legal professionals. The leadership team featured Zoketsu Norman Fischer, Zen priest and leader of the Everyday Zen organization; Charlie Halpern, founding dean of City University of New York ("CUNY") Law School and Chair of the Board of the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society; Susan B. Jordan, renowned criminal defense attorney; and Doug Chermak, Law Program Director for Contemplative Mind. The diverse attendees included practitioners representing numerous areas of legal practice – from public interest law and legal services to corporate law – united by a common bond of bringing a meditative perspective to their work and to their lives. Supported by the nourishing Menla Mountain Retreat Center and the welcome gentle fall rain, participants spent time primarily in silence, practicing sitting and walking meditation, qi gong and yoga, and periods engaged in thoughtful small and large group discussions connecting their inner experiences with the external realities of their professional lives.

Friday



"Emotions, Stress, and Zealous Advocacy" was the theme of the first full day of the retreat. Charlie led the group in an early, pre-breakfast qi gong session followed by sitting meditation before breakfast. The morning session including alternating sitting and walking practice interspersed by a dharma talk from Norman on coping with emotions and stress in the practice of law. Norman spoke about the importance of educating ourselves emotionally, and the

role of emotions as part of the four foundations of mindfulness. He offered suggestions how lawyers might develop and use emotional skills as allies in their work to promote justice. Doug ended the morning session by leading a guided eating meditation.

In the afternoon, after more meditation, Susan presented a talk on zealous advocacy, reflecting on her relationship with the subject over a long career practicing criminal

defense, and offering her perspective on New York Lawyers' Code of Professional Responsibility's guidelines on zealous advocacy. Subsequent to her talk, participants shared in small groups their own reflections on past challenges with zealous advocacy, incorporating the role of emotions and their internal experiences. Doug then facilitated a large group discussion, drawing upon the energy of the small groups.

In the evening, a panel of Norman, Charlie, and Victor Goode, a professor at the CUNY School of Law who teaches a class on meditation and lawyering, offered their reflections on the day, in particular noting the strong presence of individual's moral values throughout the day's questions and discussion. The group then engaged in another large facilitated discussion, where many folks shared stories about how they've sought to incorporate contemplative practices into their work lives. The evening ended with a brief yoga session and some sitting practice.

Saturday

Saturday's theme was "Establishing Trust, Effective Communication, and Competent Representation" and the structure of the day was quite similar to the previous one. Norman offered a powerful dharma talk on trust, the practice of law, and the meditative perspective. He noted that to be trustworthy, one must be trusting of basic human goodness, oneself, and others. This was a radical notion to many of the lawyers' traditional views on trust but quite aligned with the meditative perspective of legal practice. He then spoke about ways for lawyers to become more trustworthy, and how that might transform their practice of law.



In the afternoon, Charlie presented a talk on the trusting relationship between a lawyer and a client, and offered his take on the NY Code's rules regarding the subject. Small and large group discussion followed, where many grappled with the challenges of trustworthiness and their internal reactions in the myriad situations comprising their legal practices.

The evening featured another panel discussion, this time also including the valuable viewpoint and fresh perspective of Mercedes Cano, a public interest attorney from New York who also attended all of the past California retreats. After some group discussion, participants had the opportunity in dyads to reflect about what they wanted to take from the retreat with them to work the following week. This was a particularly useful way to crystallize the benefits from the weekend.

Sunday

The final morning's breakfast was the first non-silent meal since the opening dinner. Retreatants were eager to connect with both each other and the retreat leaders as a pleasant, engaging energy pervaded the dining hall.

At the closing session, Norman suggested ways to establish a regular meditation practice and how to invite the stillness into one's life throughout the day. He gave answers to many questions that had accumulated during the weekend. During the following closing circle, the emotions were palpable. The legal professionals and students in attendance were deeply moved, grounded, profoundly impacted by the meditation practice and conversations, better in touch with their motivations to practice law, and excited at the possibility of having another retreat in New York. Through sitting and practicing together, and engaging in deep, intentional dialogue, a true sense of sangha had emerged.

