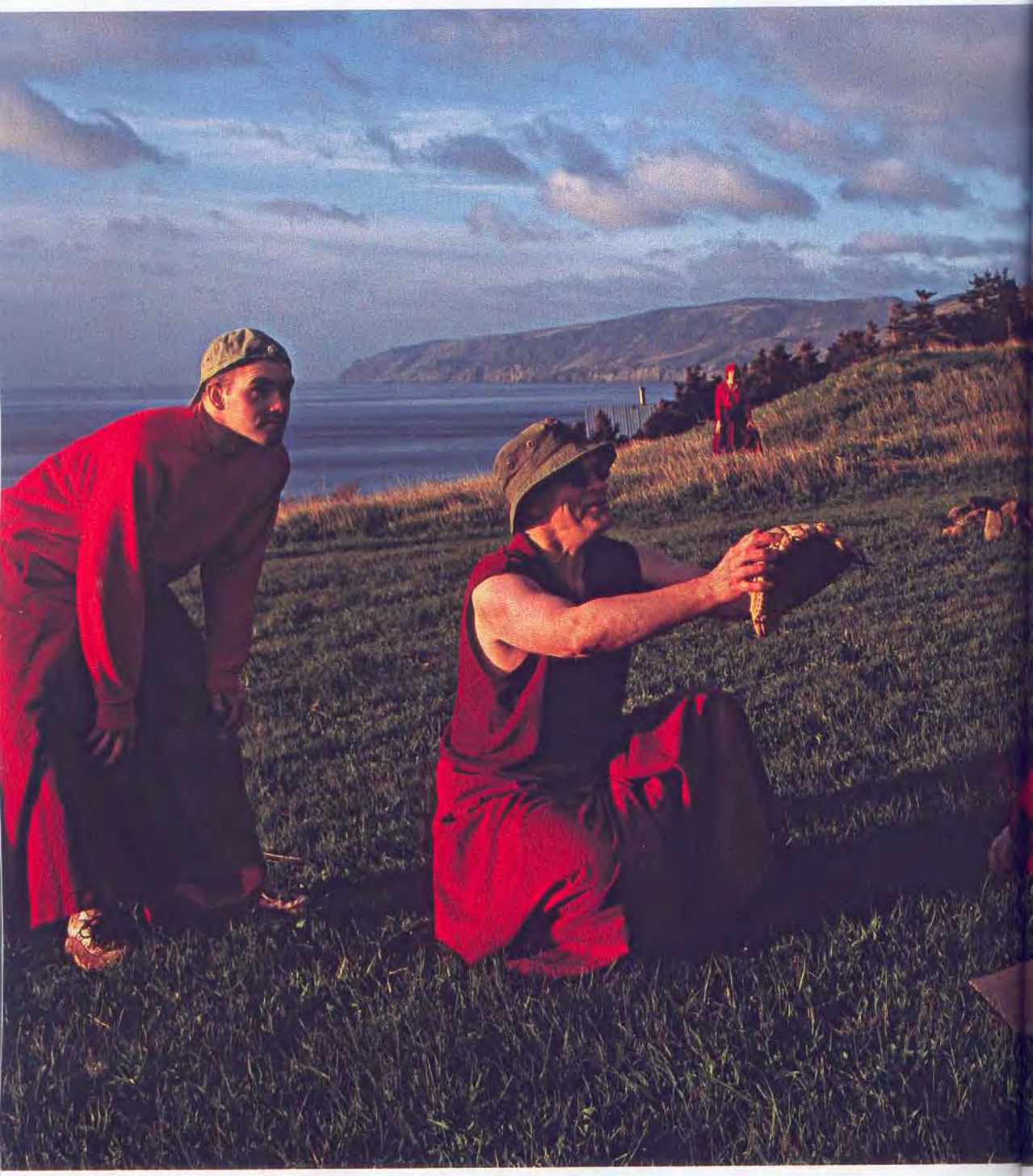
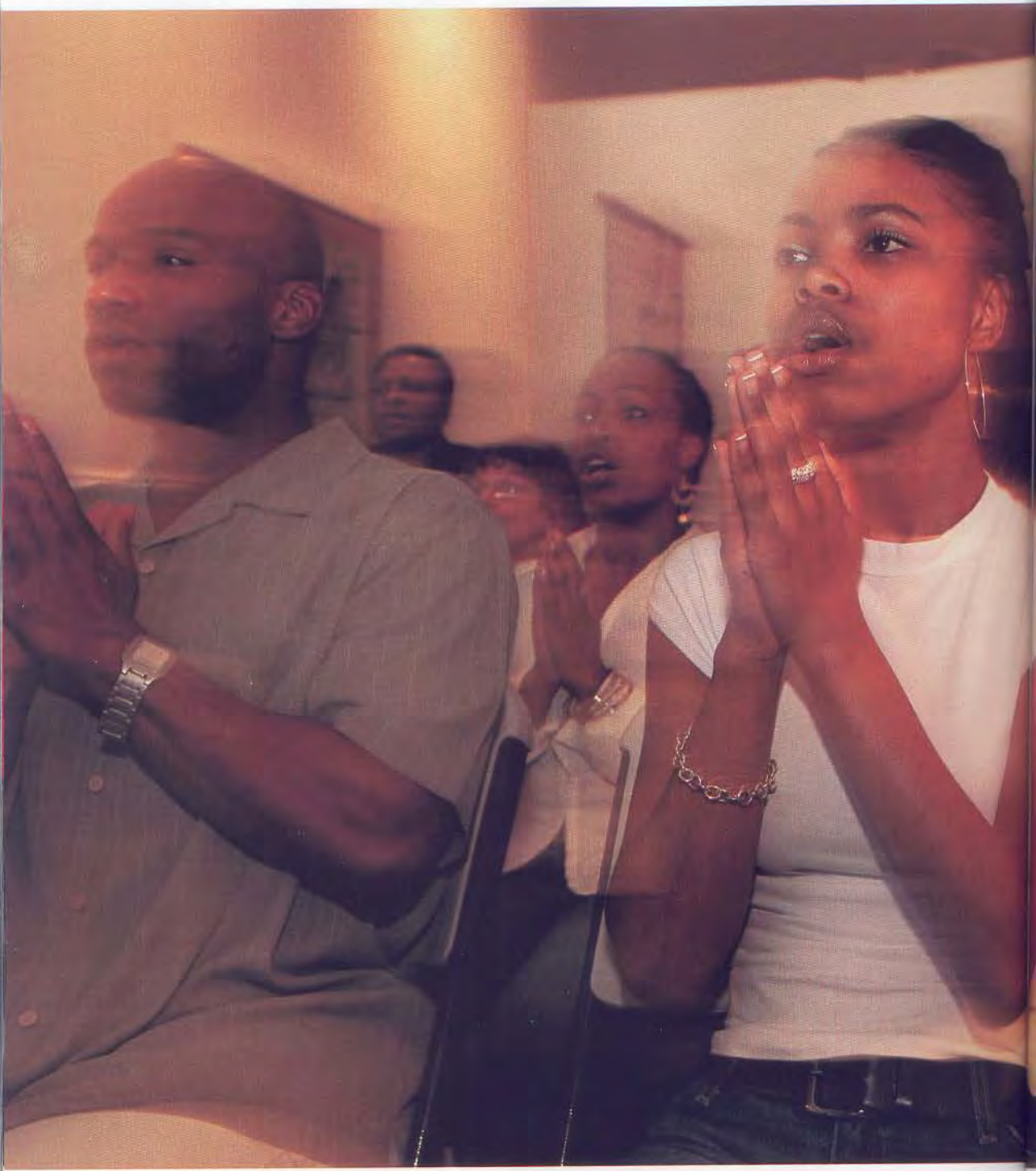
BUDDHA RISING

Out of the monastery, into the living room

Practitioners at Colorado's Shambhala Mountain Center use color to gain clarity and compassion.



Looks like a hit: Monks at Nova Scotia's Gampo Abbey practice for their annual softball game against the local volunteer fire department. "We always get trounced," says Ngedon Sangpo, far left. "But all we want is a good game." The monks lost, 19-7, but Buddhism is gaining Western followers drawn by its ideals of pacifism, selflessness, and social action.



People gather at the home of Paul Pryde (purple shirt) in Washington, D.C., to practice Soka Gakkai, one of many sects to flower from Buddhism's source: the 2,500-year-old teachings of Siddhartha Gautama. "Whether you're happy or not has less to do with circumstances than with how you perceive them," says Pryde. "Buddhism offers a regimen to live a happier life."

BY PERRY GARFINKEL

PHOTOGRAPHS BY STEVE McCURRY

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 lifelong 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 nonviolent 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."

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SIDDHARTHA GAUTAMA, who later came to be known as the Buddha, was born around 500 B.C. near the foothills of the Himalaya, the son of a local king. In the centuries after his death, as his reputation grew, fact intertwined with myth, and a legendary Buddha was born as well. In one version the Buddha toddled out of his mother's side at birth and took seven steps in each cardinal direction, with lotuses appearing under his feet.

Most versions agree, however, that at age 29 the married prince, disillusioned with his opulence, ventured out of his palace and for the first time encountered old age, sickness, and death. So moved was he by this brush with the painful realities of life that he left his comfortable home to search for an end to human suffering. For six years he withstood all the deprivations of his fellow seekers—he fasted, he observed silence, he lived alone in a cave—until he realized he had not found what he sought.

There must be another way, he thought, a "middle way" between indulgence and asceticism. He decided to sit in meditation under one of the broad pipal trees that dotted the plain of the Ganges River until he found his answer. He examined his thoughts to discover how and why human beings often create their own mental suffering. He emerged from under the shade of the tree as the Buddha, which simply means "enlightened one." (The tree, *Ficus religiosa*, is now known as the bodhi tree.) Until his death at 80, the Buddha traveled the corridor of what are now India's Bihar and Uttar Pradesh states, sharing his insights with all who would listen.

His ideas were based not on faith, as in other religions, but on empirical observation, starting with his own outside the palace. He arrived at Four Noble Truths:

1. There is suffering in the world, whether mental or physical.
2. Suffering occurs because of too great an attachment to one's desires.
3. By eliminating the cause—attachment—you can eliminate suffering.
4. There is a method to eliminating the cause,

Canned food, chocolate, even potato chips—almost any vegetarian donation is welcome when the monks of California's Shasta Abbey collect monthly alms. In return they live simply and strive to conquer the passions that can lead people astray. Nuns in Yangon, Myanmar (opposite), also rely on the local community—as did the Buddha himself.

called the Eightfold Path, a guide to "right" behavior and thoughts. The Eightfold Path is a moral compass leading to a life of wisdom (right views, right intent), virtue (right speech, conduct, livelihood), and mental discipline (effort, mindfulness, concentration).

One of the key practices of the Eightfold Path is meditation. Though the technique may differ from sect to sect—alone or in groups, facing a wall or fellow meditators, eyes closed or slightly open, in silence or chanting phrases—many types begin by paying close attention to your own breathing. There is nothing mystical or otherworldly about it, no levitation, no out-of-body experience. With each in and out breath, your awareness becomes more refined, more focused.

Buddhism's path to

GOING GLOBAL

A PRINCE AWAKENS

Born in what is now Nepal around 500 B.C., Siddhartha Gautama was a prince who left his regal life to seek an end to suffering. After his death, the Buddha's disciples spread the word.

EXPANSION IN ASIA

Monks took Buddhism south to Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia, north to Central Asia, China, and Japan, and later north again to Tibet.

REACHING EUROPE

European intellectuals imported Buddhism in the 1800s, but numbers remained small and largely European until Buddhist Asian immigrants arrived in the late 1900s.

EAST TO AMERICA

Chinese seeking gold brought Buddhism to California in 1848. Japanese sent to harvest sugarcane in Hawaii soon followed. The 1960s brought a new influence: immigrants from Southeast Asia. Roughly three-quarters of American Buddhists are Asian.

World Population, 2005: 6.5 billion

Buddhists: 379 million or 6%

BEYOND ASIA: BUDDHISTS BY REGION

373 million (98%) of the world's Buddhists live in Asia. The other 6 million (2%) live in:

SOURCE: WORLD CHRISTIAN DATABASE

Breathing in . . . you become aware of the sensations of your body, and of your most distracting organ, your mind. Breathing out . . . you experience a release of body tension, and you struggle to bring your wandering mind back to your breath. In . . . the air tickles the tip of your nose. Out . . . the pain in your knee subsides, the mind still meanders. In . . . Shouldn't I be doing something more useful with this time? Out . . . Who's the "I" in that last thought? With ever more subtlety, eventually you come to understand, sometimes painfully, sometimes joyfully, what the Buddha realized. "We are what we think," he said.

The Buddha did not intend his ideas to become a religion; in fact, he discouraged following any path or advice without testing it personally. His dying words, as it's told, were: "You must each be a lamp unto yourselves." Nonetheless, within several hundred years of his death, the Buddha's teachings had taken strong hold. Today, with 379 million followers, Buddhism is the world's fifth largest religion, behind Christianity with 2.1 billion followers, Islam with 1.3 billion, Hinduism with 870 million, and traditional Chinese religion with 405 million.

Some people argue that the Buddha was right, that Buddhism should not be categorized as a religion but as a philosophy or form of psychology. After all, unlike other religions, there is no supreme being, and it encourages you to question—even challenge—authority.

There are those in my generation, growing up in the latter half of the 20th century, who were attracted to these traits of Buddhism. It was nondogmatic (we distrusted authority); it relied on evidence you could test with your own senses (ours was the age when science became the new god); it suggested that you, not some external force, hold the answers to your own happiness (we were on the front lines of the Me Decade); it saw your mind as both the obstacle and the key to truly understanding yourself (enter Dr. Freud and psychoanalysis).

While many Europeans and Americans are drawn to the ornate and complex rituals of Tibetan and Japanese Zen Buddhisms, others seem to prefer the simplicity of Southeast Asia's Theravada Buddhism. From that tradition, I practice *vipassana*, "insight" or "mindfulness" meditation. This has not brought me enlightenment—yet—but it has helped bring

Rising each morning and deflating each night, Paranirvana—a 26-foot-long Buddha on exhibit at Ohio's Columbus Museum of Art—represents life's impermanence, says artist Lewis deSoto. The artwork captures the pose of the Buddha as he died and passed into nirvana.

into sharper focus some of the questions I grapple with: Who am I? Why am I here? How can I achieve lasting happiness?

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IN A TRIBUTE to Buddhism's adaptability, the same meditation technique I use has become the centerpiece of an innovative prison reform program spreading throughout India.

"I'm not doing time, I'm doing vipassana," says prisoner Hyginus Udegbe. Having waited four and a half years for his cocaine possession case to be heard, Hyginus, who is Nigerian, has been kept at Tihar Jail Complex in New Delhi. It's one of Asia's largest prisons, with almost 13,000 inmates, more than twice its capacity. The overcrowded conditions, inadequate sanitation, and a staff that sometimes resorts to oppressing and dehumanizing prisoners make it a living, incarcerated hell.

But for Hyginus and thousands of other inmates in India, practicing vipassana has transformed prison into an oasis for self-reflection and rehabilitation. There are silent ten-day retreats every other week in a section of Jail No. 4, cordoned off as a permanent retreat site. Prisoners can repeat the sessions every three months, and many do.

"I had high blood pressure and couldn't sleep," says Hyginus, a barrel-chested, bald six-footer who looks more like a prizefighter than the meditating type. Behind us, painted on a high wall is a yellow wheel, the traditional symbol of the Buddha's teachings, or dharma. "After my first retreat here," Hyginus says, "my pressure dropped, and I slept ten hours. I used to have quick temper. Now I feel like a dove, very peaceful. I am so much happier."

I am struck even more by a conversation with a man who has been a Tihar prison officer for 14 years. He'd done three retreats here, all voluntarily. "I just wanted to experience for myself this thing I had heard about, vipassana," he tells me. "Before the course, I used to beat the prisoners. I felt so much stress it turned me into a monster. After the course, I felt more human." Now prisoners come to him for counseling.

Bearing witness to the Holocaust, Grover Gauntt meditates during an annual Buddhist-led retreat at the Auschwitz-Birkenau death camp, where more than a million people, mostly Jews, were killed by the Nazis. Where does such evil come from? "It's in each of us," says Gauntt, co-leader of the interfaith retreat. "Each of us has to face it, own it, deal with it."

"We are all prisoners—of our minds," says Satya Narayan Goenka, an 80-year-old Burmese businessman turned meditation teacher who has spearheaded the vipassana resurgence in India. "Where better to recognize this than behind bars?" Indeed, in prisons around the world, meditation groups now meet regularly. Practicing these techniques, studies show, prisoners ease their own suffering and inflict less on others.

"I'm not teaching Buddhism," Goenka tells me emphatically when I meet him at his home in Mumbai. He's a big but graceful man, with a booming bass voice. "I am not interested in converting people from one organized religion to another organized religion. I'm interested in converting people from misery to happiness, from bondage to liberation, from cruelty to compassion.

"There's no mystery to it," he continues with a chuckle, his ample belly shaking. "Vipassana means 'to see things as they really are.' After watching your breath for a few days, you begin to pay close attention to your sensations. You realize very quickly that you are obsessed with cravings—food, warmth, all sorts of desires—and aversion to unpleasant things. Then you realize the impermanence of it all. Everything changes. From these simple understandings, discovered by each person starting with Buddha himself, an entire doctrine eventually unfolds."

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AS BUDDHISM MIGRATED out of India, it took three routes. To the south, monks brought it by land and sea to Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia. To the north, they spread the word across Central Asia and along the Silk Road into China, from where it eventually made its way to Korea and Japan. A later wave took Buddhism over the Himalaya to Tibet. In all the countries, local customs and cosmologies were integrated with the Buddhist basics: the magic and masks of demon-fighting lamas in Tibet, the austerity of a Zen monk sitting still as a rock in a perfectly raked Japanese garden. Over centuries Buddhism developed an inclusive style, one reason it has endured so long and in such different cultures. People sometimes compare Buddhism to water: It is still, clear, transparent, and it takes the form and color of the vase into which it's poured.

And yet from the start, the spread of Buddhism

Holding on while letting go, cancer patient Suzanne Lewis-Abed receives comfort from her daughter and Robert Chodo Campbell, a Buddhist chaplain, at a hospice in New York City. "In Buddhism there is no birth or death," Campbell says, "just transitions." Noah Levine, who runs a meditation program for young prisoners, lets his tattoos do the talking (opposite).

—a peaceful process in itself—has periodically met with hostility. In China, in A.D. 842, the Tang Emperor Wuzong began to persecute foreign religions. Some 4,600 Buddhist monasteries were annihilated, priceless works of art were destroyed, and about 260,000 monks and nuns were forced to return to lay life.

History repeated itself with the Chinese Communist Party's attempt to suppress Buddhism—most visibly in Tibet. According to the International Campaign for Tibet, since 1949 more than 6,000 Tibetan Buddhist monasteries, nunneries, and temples have been destroyed and at least 500,000 Tibetans have died from imprisonment, torture, famine, and war. But today Buddhism in China, like the lotus flower that

emerges from mud, is resurfacing. With more than 100 million practitioners, it's one of the country's fastest growing religions.

On the surface, Chen Xiaoxu is a most unlikely poster child for this renaissance. At 39 she heads one of Beijing's top advertising agencies, but she's better known as a former Chinese television star. She started her agency in the early 1990s, when advertising in China was in its infancy, soon earning success beyond her dreams. "Once I got the taste, I always wanted more and more, bigger and bigger status symbols," she tells me, as we sit in the conference room of her company, Beijing Shipang Lianhe Advertising, in a modern Beijing high-rise. Her long neck and delicate features evoke Audrey Hepburn, whose portrait hangs on the wall behind her, but her warm, empathetic eyes mirror paintings and sculptures I've seen of Guanyin, Chinese Buddhism's female representation of compassion.

Gradually, she says, it took hold—that feeling of emptiness so many people experience when they have all the material possessions they desire. In Buddhism this desire has a nickname: the Hungry Ghost, an appetite that can't be filled.

"Though I had it all—big car, beautiful house, travel wherever I wanted, surrounded by fame and luxury with plenty to share with my family —I was still, somehow, unhappy."

Then someone gave Chen a book about the life and teachings of the Buddha, and she became a serious student of Buddhism. Now one wall of her stark white office is dedicated to pictures of her teacher, Chin Kung, as well as Buddhist statues and paintings. Her employees know to hold phone calls during lunch hour, when she takes a break to meditate and chant.

A Buddhist in a profession whose goal is to whet the appetites of the Hungry Ghost? What's no less remarkable is that so public a figure as Chen Xiaoxu is openly practicing Buddhism in communist China.

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WHILE BUDDHISM COMES BACK in China, it's been losing appeal in Japan, long considered the wellspring by Westerners.

"If it doesn't meet the changing needs of modern society, Japanese Buddhism will die," says Rev. Yoshiharu Tomatsu of the Jodo Shu Research Institute of Buddhism in Tokyo.

To get the ground truth about homelessness, Jim Bastien spent three days on a Zen retreat living penniless on the streets of New York City. "I felt what it was like to be invisible," says Bastien, an executive who usually is the center of attention (opposite). Buddhists stress the unity of all life. "The illusion of separateness," he says, "is the foundation of all human suffering."

A third-generation priest in the 800-year-old Jodo Shu Pure Land sect—which emphasizes faith in the saving grace of Amida, another enlightened being, rather than through meditation—the boyish 50-year-old is the head of the Shinko-in Temple. We sip green tea in the small 16th-century wooden temple, situated at the base of Tokyo Tower, Japan's iconic image of technological modernity. A club DJ in college, Tomatsu harbored dreams of becoming a music industry executive, but he instead earned a master's degree in divinity from Harvard University. When he's not in suits or black robes, he wears khakis and pastel crewneck sweaters draped around his neck with the sleeves tied, Ivy League style.

Sedona Tire and Auto in Arizona receives the blessing of monks and nuns from Kunzang Palyul Chöling, a Tibetan Buddhist center. The visit is part of the center's spiritual outreach, which includes a 20-year nonstop prayer vigil for world peace. As for this shop, something got fixed, says co-manager Barbara Hess: Right after the ceremony, sales hit an all-time high.

Most Japanese are "funeral Buddhists," he says, meaning they partake in Buddhist rituals only when someone dies. With the fast pace and competitiveness of Japanese society, young people in particular find little emotional support or sense of community in the ancient rituals of traditional Buddhism.

"It's ironic," Tomatsu says. "As much as Japan has looked to the West for its cultural cues, it has not embraced the engaged Buddhism that has become so important among Buddhists in the West."

Ironic indeed: Many Westerners first heard of Buddhism through Zen, the Japanese derivative of China's Chan Buddhism. Zen was popularized by the American Beat Generation of the 1950s: novelist Jack Kerouac, author and radio host Alan Watts, and poets Allen Ginsberg and Gary Snyder, among others. Soon you could take adult education classes in Zen art forms like calligraphy and ikebana (flower arranging) or rituals such as tea ceremony or archery. Once Madison Avenue discovered Buddhism's selling power, Zen became synonymous with cool, giving birth to dozens of products named Zen, from a skin-care line to an MP3 player.

Tomatsu offers to show me signs that the heart of Japanese Buddhism is at least still beating.

One is an organization he helped establish in 1993. Called Ayus, meaning "life," it channels about $300,000 a year to national and international groups working for peace and human rights. Two-thirds of the 300 contributing members are Buddhist priests.

There's also the sect called Rissho Kosei-kai, founded in 1938 and now boasting 1.8 million households. While firmly planted in the Buddha's teachings, this organization is different. It's a lay group—and it emphasizes service to others. Members forgo two meals a month, donating the money to the sect's peace fund. Rissho Kosei-kai has given about 60 million dollars to UNICEF in the past 25 years.

At the sect's world headquarters in Tokyo, the imposing central meditation hall has a ceiling-high pipe organ and stained-glass windows—more like a Christian church than a Buddhist temple. Tomatsu and I sit in on a *hoza,* or dharma session, focusing on the social problems that beset Japan but remain conversational taboos: divorce, drug addiction, depression, suicide. In a large, brightly lit multipurpose room, casually dressed participants, mostly women, sit in metal folding chairs in a loose circle around a facilitator, sharing personal dilemmas such as marital problems, disrespectful kids, and aging parents. After each story, the group issues a supportive round of applause. It's a reminder that the new Buddhism doesn't always have to address global issues; the kitchen table can be a war zone too.

Tomatsu also introduces me to Rev. Takeda Takao, a Buddhist priest whom I'd seen leading a protest in front of Japan's parliament building in the heart of Tokyo. Hundreds of demonstrators had gathered to oppose the national Self Defense Forces' involvement in Iraq. Amid the chaos, Takao, in a monk's vest, stood at curbside with several other priests carrying bullhorns, drums, and a banner.

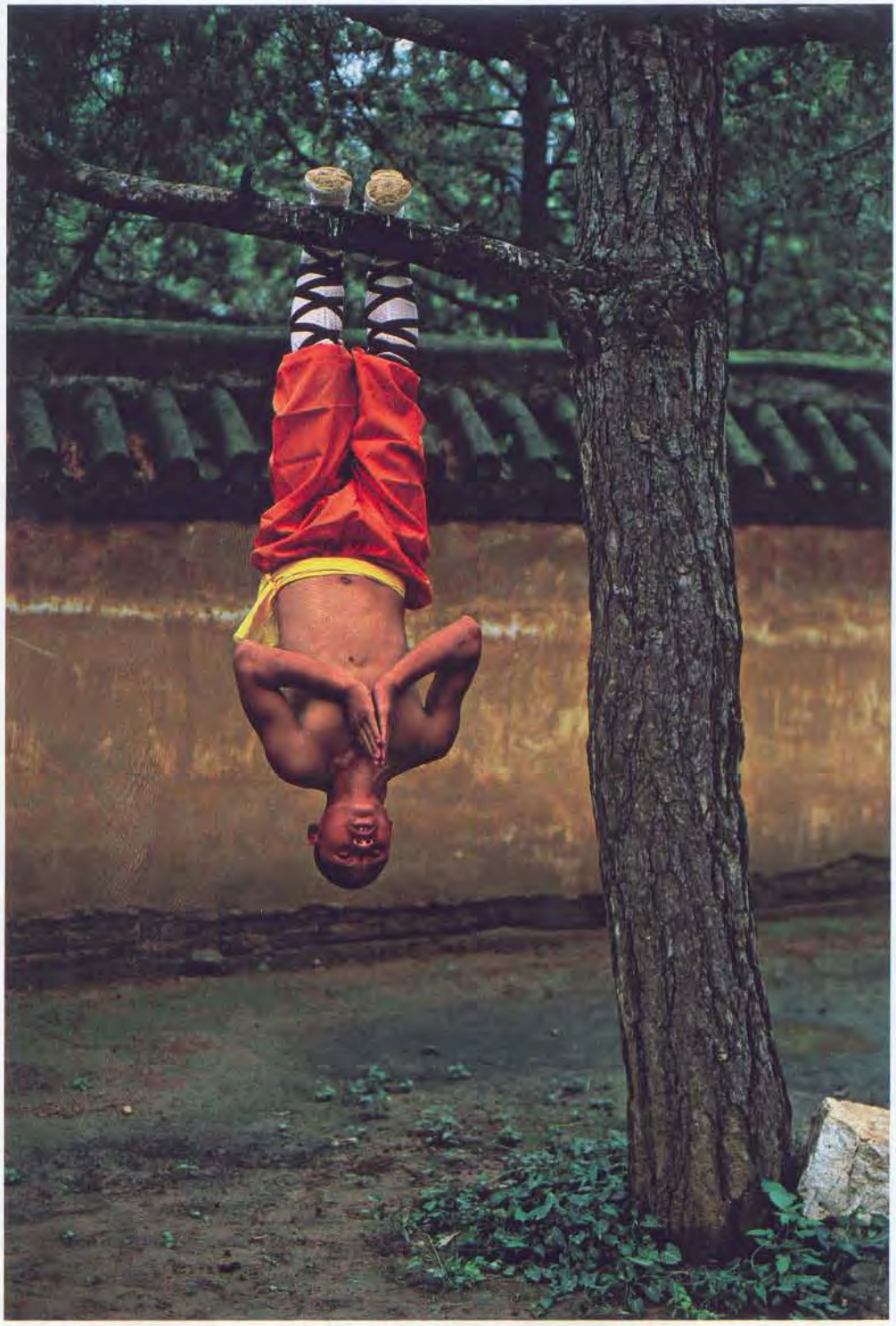
Takao belongs to Nipponzan Myohoji, an international Buddhist organization founded in 1918 whose monks and nuns conduct long peace marches, chanting and beating their drums all the way.

"Peaceful protest is the only way to make a peaceful planet," he says. It's a conclusion he came to after participating in demonstrations against the construction of Tokyo's Narita Airport. In the 1970s several policemen and protesters were killed, and thousands injured, defending the rights of vegetable farmers whose land had been taken by the government for the runway. As a monument to the tragedy, the Nipponzan Myohoji Order erected a peace pagoda in 2001 just outside the airport fences.

Later that afternoon, as my plane takes off from Narita, I catch a glimpse of the tiny white pagoda. It stands out against the gray industrial sprawl, a bright memorial to the Buddha's timeless message.

Indeed, from Tokyo to San Francisco, from the prison class to the privileged class, a worldwide community of socially engaged Buddhists assures that the tradition remains a powerful force. Back in San Francisco, someone else now occupies the hospice bed that was once Carl Taylor's. And beside that person is another Buddhist volunteer, just sitting. □

BUDDHIST RENAISSANCE See the West embracing Buddhism in a multimedia show narrated by Steve McCurry. Then find out why Perry Garfinkel calls the Buddha the "world's first baby boomer" in a video interview at **ngm.com/0512.**



To see life as it truly is—that's one goal of a student in China who strengthens mind and body under the rigorous tutelage of a Shaolin kung fu master. It's also the goal of millions of followers whose lives hang on the words of the Buddha: "With our thoughts we make the world."