

In Process

A Journal of
Spiritual
Practice

from A Center for the Practice of Zen Buddhist Meditation
Memorial Edition • February 1989



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May 11, 1944 - January 19, 1989



A Journal of Spiritual Practice

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Table of Contents

Real Loving	2
Sylvia's Gone	3
Acceptance of Change	4
All God's Creatures Great and Small	5
A Parable	6
Sylvia's Death	7
Eyes	8
Reminded	8
In Search of Willingness	9
A Thank You	10
A Letter	10
Sylvia's Gift	11
To Sylvia	12
A Silent Pause	13
The Gift of Sylvia	14
Doorway to the Light	15
Gassho	16
The New Retreat Center Building	18

Real Loving

In the last few years of doing this practice, I have come to realize that I have lived a life mostly without love. The stuff I called love was actually something closer to fear. I had an emptiness inside that I sought to fill by getting something, something that I called love.

In the last few years I have been privileged to see demonstrations of what I would call real loving, the kind of loving that simply is, without expectation. I have also been privileged to participate in real loving, grateful for the examples that made it possible. I used to think of love as a noun – something I could get or have. Now I think of love as a verb – something I do.

The most profound example for me of real loving has been the process of Sylvia's dying and death. For me, this has been a process of ultimate loving. First and foremost is Sylvia, the one who made it all possible. She chose to share those tender moments, reaching out her hand and opening her heart. And those of us who chose to share those tender moments with her reached out our hands and opened our hearts. When all the open hearts touched there seemed to be something much greater than any of us – a oneness that goes beyond our worldly selves to a place where goodness just is. Like the strength and fragility of a rosebud, it seemed to contain all things.

I viewed Sylvia as an extraordinary person, someone with a great deal to teach. In her presence, I recognized gentleness, humility, patience, courtesy, compassion, and wisdom. I enjoyed Sylvia. And I enjoyed how I was when I was with her. I am grateful that our lives have touched. I will miss her and will continue to hold her in my heart.

I knew that death could be beautiful because that has been my experience. It was quite wonderful to see loving demonstrated in so many ways after Sylvia's death, as well as before. Only real loving could do the painful things that are normally left to strangers. Only real loving could prepare a loved one, wrapping her into a pure, white form, head resting in a halo. Only real loving could cover her body with flowers and meditate beside her for three days. Only real loving could build a coffin and place her in it. Only real loving could accompany her to the end and watch as her body turns to dust.

Perhaps death can be said to be the ultimate reality. For many of us it is the ultimate fear. Watching Sylvia, in her dying and her death, removed a lot of that fear for me. Thanks to all who made it possible, I will always remember Sylvia as one who became an open heart and provided an opportunity for real loving.

Sylvia's Gone

People keep their backs to her door,
the one that leads to the silence.
When we open it
our eyes go home like fast horses
to her empty face,
the lids half closed,
the teeth visible.
She is melting into the bed;
they've scattered flowers
all along the white stem of her shroud.

In the air not rest, but a sense
of unseen collision
where the times meet and make their claims.
Sylvia's language now is silence;
we don't speak it,
though we understand enough to hear
that we will learn.
What of the country
where we'll learn it?

Sylvia, you threw down your weapons
and walked without flinching into that place
you can't tell us of.
We're left with nothing where you were.
Already your teeth and bones
have grown out of your body
the way the scattered stones of a ruin
seem to grow out of the ground
and make us believe that more will rise
under the ones we see
and form themselves again.

There is a strong sun;
the earth gives as well as takes away.
We know you are there,
an idea the world has.

Acceptance of Change

Death used to seem to me the acceptance of loss, emotion-based and rather self-centered:

Now death seems to me more acceptance of change...of what is...ongoing.

With a death in the family or

A death in the sangha

Emotion still cries out and experiences loss

Yet...inside

The heart knows no loss. A physical presence changes to the presence of memory, and the spirit remains.

It was probably no accident that I watched "Gandhi" just prior to receiving news of Sylvia's death. There was the same essence--

the same peace, and the same lesson--

The acceptance of all that is.

I did not know nor experience Sylvia's pain--

Yet in knowing the experience of my own pain and feelings of loss at another's dying, there is a place to go to that is probably common ground shared by all in their grief--

And, in allowing myself to be, for a time, in pain, there was then a willingness and an ability to move on through the emotion to the heart-state of acceptance and peace.

The daily recollection has a different feel to it lately, as I sit, in gratitude for the sangha and especially for Sylvia, who allowed us to share and to be more a part of and to learn from all that is.

Gasshō.

What flowers must come to an end.

—J. Krishnamurti



All God's Creatures Great and Small

"I am bleeding," said the young one. "But our freedom is closer."

"You are bleeding," said the other. "And their freedom is closer."

When it began the three great gray creatures had meant to go with the others, as usual. But as the time drew near, The Power embraced the three and they knew they must stay behind.

"We may die," said the smallest. But, like the other two, he lay still and waited, for The Power was in him and there was no choice.

"Do this for me. I am Love," The Power had said.

The nights came cold and black, like the infinite reaches of space. An eternal quiet surrounded them, then gave way to the steady inhale of water changing to ice.

"Keep breathing," said the oldest. "That is our only duty now. Breath is life."

Many days passed and the ice became an impenetrable sky. Then the noise began, brought by small, dark creatures with furry heads and sparkling eyes. And wherever there was noise there were little pools of water and air.

But the smallest was spent. "It is too hard for me. I lose my life for Love," he said, his breath ceasing.

Still the noise continued, then grew louder. The little pools of water became bigger pools – more than the small, dark creatures with the furry heads and sparkling eyes should have been capable of creating. Then there was a channel.

The small, dark creatures multiplied and lined the edges of the channel, speaking not in one tongue but many. Giant noisemaking hulks appeared and, on one, enemy banners flapped side by side in the wind.

The channel grew longer, and because they understood that this was for Love, the great, gray creatures faithfully followed the noise-making hulks while the small dark creatures shouted in joy or wept.

"But they believe they have come to help us," said the younger one. "They do not understand."

"That is their way," said the older one. "Most of their existence is detail. They cannot

yet see the face of Love unless it is filtered through an illusive veil of purpose and control."

"They do not know then that we are One?" asked the younger.

"Some know," said the older. "But not enough."

"And is that why we had to stay behind?" said the younger.

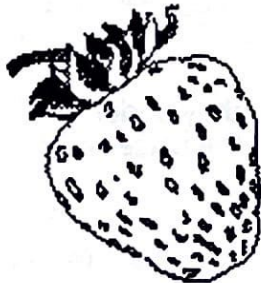
"That is why we had to stay behind," said the older. "In attempting to save us, they attempt to save themselves. Some day they may see that. Some day they may break through."

--Stephanie Salter, in the SF Examiner

A Parable

A woman traveling across a field encountered a tiger. She fled, the tiger after her. Coming to a precipice, she caught hold of the root of a wild vine and swung herself down over the edge. The tiger sniffed at her from above. Trembling, the woman looked down to where, far below, another tiger was waiting to eat her. Only the vine sustained her.

Two mice, one white and one black, little by little started to gnaw away the vine. The woman saw a luscious strawberry near her. Grasping the vine with one hand, she plucked the strawberry with the other. How sweet it tasted!



Sylvia's Death

In the quiet of an early evening hour
In a moment of eternity when time stood still
A precious gift was given.
It came as no surprise; there was release in it--
Freedom--

Spaciousness--

And joy.

It came as an awareness of nothingness
A nothingness pregnant with the very meaning and depth of life and death itself.

It came with an airy lightness that but with the last deep intake of breath would have
lifted into weightless flight her form that received it.

Yes, a wondrous gift was given.
It crept in silently and emptied her being that she might be filled
And the gift was received in humble gratitude.

A wondrous gift, filled with the power to unite all beings as One
To break down all barriers until we were one integral being:
One with All That Is--

She stood on the edge of time and gazed across the vast plain of infinity
There was absolute silence, and peace, and space without end.

There was nothing. Yet all was there.
The silence echoed and she knew that she was All.
And yet was nothing.

She sensed her Oneness with all other beings who stood beside her and around her.
For she was in them and they in her--
Each of us nothing,
Yet all that is...

And we rejoiced.
We knew that here lay the secret of life and death:
Exuberant joy granted to finite beings as an unexpected gift of eternal unity.

Eyes

"My eyes are shrunk from crying
like pickled onions."

Lying in white
light,
mouth, eyes
half open (a
shrug is it,
leaving it to us?)

Sylvia's dead.

Quite clear,
this hawk
fanning the cord-grass, nothing
wrong with its
eyes.



Reminded

A few months before she died, I remember Sylvia saying something like, "Don't wait until you get sick to do your training."

Another time, she came to the Retreat Center just before a workshop, and we were setting things up in preparation. She said, "How's it going?" And I answered, "We're still getting ready" (as if there were an ending point to be reached where we could stop and go to sleep). She replied, "Aren't we all!"

Being with Sylvia, for me, was a reminder to be present, and not to fool around with my practice as if I had a lot of time. Without her saying or doing anything special, she reminded me that there wasn't anything more important than to be who I am, honestly; to attend to the business at hand, with humor, lightness, and compassion; and to do this process wholeheartedly to see as much as I could see.

What a gift. I miss her. And I continue to feel her presence and be reminded. Gasshō.

In Search of Willingness

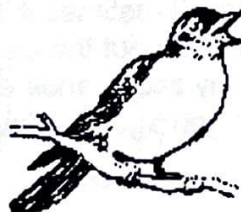
The Final Chapter, and only the beginning...

...Jensing knew that to complete her Journey, she must meet, tangle with, and grasp her Willingness. Her unwillingness, and thus her lack of success in doing so on previous occasions, didn't matter now; she had known she would have the Opportunity again. This time, confident in her own adequacy, she felt ready. She sat down, facing inward, and gently closed her eyes, unfocusing her attention, and opening her awareness. Completely in the moment, she saw actions, feelings, emotions, sensations, and movements pass by. As they arose and fell away each time, she felt gratitude and appreciation for the experience of each one. The completeness of It All, which included all that it had taken to bring her to this moment since the beginning of beginningless time, opened the way for Willingness to appear.

Suddenly, without warning or further ado, her Willingness peeked out and carefully glanced around. Jensing maintained her stillness, and without moving a muscle, she lunged for it from the depth of her clinging, and managed to get a very loose and tentative grip on one of its tail feathers. Her Willingness struggled, which is not in its true nature to do, and yanked itself free.

Jensing remembered that there never need be compulsion to pursue Willingness, so she waited, being still and quiet, very out of breath and very clever in her strategy. She slowly began to construct a net in her mind, of endless length and width, completely surrounding her and encircling the entire universe as well, with nothing left out. "This will surely catch my Willingness," she said determinedly. Waiting patiently now, she saw her Willingness arise once again, and it ventured out and flew straight into the net. Finding itself completely caught in the resistant fabric, it began to struggle, patiently, endlessly, effortlessly in order to free itself. Jensing knew that it would never tire, that it would continue its struggle until it was free. She also knew that in order for her to grasp her Willingness and have it for her very own, she must first let it go free. Then, and only then, would it be available to her, at each and every moment she chose to find it. Jensing immediately dissolved the binding fabric, and her Willingness, with a sigh of release, laughed with delight, rejoicing in its new life, and rejoined Jensing to continue the Journey.

Jensing recalled what had been written as a reminder for those who chose to Journey in this way: "Whatever is being sought is that which is doing the seeking." With these words, she vowed to continue her training and her journey, at peace with her self and her newly reclaimed companion.



A Thank You

Sylvia shared a year of her life with me. She also shared her death. That's how generous she was.

There was a time, early on in my coming to the Center, that I hoped to get to know Sylvia personally, socially. I was attracted to her wisdom and honesty and humor. Instead she became like an older sister in the practice, and our relationship felt "intimate, not personal" (to borrow a phrase from the last "In Process").

Being with Sylvia was easy, even as she approached death. Thoughts running through my mind created fear and separation around continuing the contact. But the need or desire not to abandon either Sylvia or myself invariably proved the stronger. Each communication – whether by phone with Jeannie to see how Sylvia was doing or an in-person visit – offered the opportunity to go beyond the fear and separation. And waiting on the other side of each such experience was gratitude and more letting go.

In the last few days of her life, I thought of Sylvia often. Many times those thoughts would lead me off into imaginings, trips of fantasy, expectations, and the like. Other times, though, thinking of Sylvia took me "home," back to my center, into the present moment. She spoke no words to draw me there; it was the example of her own living and dying that magically reminded me of what it was/is all about.

Sitting with Sylvia shortly after her death and during the next couple days, I experienced waves of fear, gratitude, letting go, separateness, peace, anxiety...and a sense of the perfection of it all. I had no control over their comings or goings; there was just the flow.

Thank you, older sister, for allowing me to make this journey with you. Your shining courage, openness, and compassion have lit up and shown me my own.

Gasshō.

A Letter

Dear Sylvia,

I don't know what I want to say, except that I want to say something. It's rather hard to put into words because it resides in my heart. There's just this glow of stuff and it's very big and very constant. And in the midst of the glow is a memory of you. It feels warm and safe and loving. And when I think of you, which is often, it's good. Sometimes there are tears, but in the pain there is joy. Sometimes there are smiles, but in the joy there is pain. It seems that there is not one without the other. I do not like this outcome, but it just is. Your acceptance has made my acceptance easier. The last time we spoke, I left saying, "I don't know if I'll see you again." You smiled and said, "It's okay."

Sylvia's Gift

There is an old almond tree near where I live. Since I moved here in the beginning of winter, the tree had no leaves. I thought it was dead. I filed it away in memory: tree, dead.

A few months later, in February, I was working around the house when I happened to look in the direction of the almond tree. I gasped. I marveled. "Tree, dead" was covered with white blossoms! Completely covered with white blossoms! Beautiful!

Mike delights in such miracles, where what I think is so ain't so. Mike is often delighted.

Sylvia appeared to be dead. Someone sat with us, holding his breath, eagerly anticipating the moment that Sylvia would sit up, yawn, and ask what's for breakfast. No miracle this time, our friend Sylvia was really dead. And yet...

While:

- walking near the bay, windy, ducks feeding, clouds reflecting in the marsh pond;
- sitting in the meditation hall, quiet, breathing slow, so still;
- waking up, yawning, what's for breakfast? Oatmeal!
- hearing raindrops - no, snow! Dressing the earth in pure white;

Someone (who is not exactly me) speaks to someone (who is not exactly Sylvia) asking, "Hi, Sylvia, how are you today?"

Sylvia answers, "I'm all right! How are you?"

Someone (who I often think is me) speaks to Sylvia (well, not exactly Sylvia), saying, "I'm not sure that I'm all right."

Mike giggles. Sylvia smiles. I feel tears in my eyes and gratitude, deep gratitude for the gift of Sylvia and for Sylvia's gift.



To Sylvia

We said almost everything we had to say to each other – even before we knew there wasn't much time, we had said almost everything. But there's something else now that I need to tell you. I couldn't say it before because I didn't know it then, or at least not so clearly. It's this: that I learned more from you than I have from anyone else.

Right from the beginning it was hard – not like taking a class, where I could figure out the answers with my mind. You posed questions that could be answered only by collision. I had to run up against them again and again, giving one wrong answer after another, until at last my mind was battered and defeated. And then, after a while – because you never gave up on me, you never just withdrew the question and walked away – I would find that some little piece of me had shifted, without my noticing, into a new position, and the question had answered itself.

In the last nine months of your life, I had so much learning to do I could barely keep up with it. Let me be honest: I could not keep up with it, I am barely beginning to take it all in now. It was the hardest final exam I have ever had, and I might have failed it, if the teaching had been less excellent. But you had grown clear, like a pane of glass. You stopped that interior fighting and puzzling and thrashing about that I still do, and the light shone right through you. You spoke so calmly and with such assurance that sometimes I hardly recognized you. But by then I knew enough to pay attention, and when I could calm my own struggles for a moment, I could hear what you were saying. "Everything is all right," you said, "you are all right. There's nothing to fear."

Now there's silence where your voice was, and I sit and listen to my own voices talking. Pain and grief are still clamorous; fear mutters along with them, sometimes, fear of my own death, fear of being alone. But behind them – I think I will see it more and more clearly as time goes on – is gratitude, gratitude for everything, even – when I can gather the courage to say so – even for the hardest parts. You said, "This is the perfect way for it to happen," and I didn't agree, but you were right. It's the way it did happen; all the other ways I envisioned never existed except in my mind. I can pine after those other ways, or I can say, "Yes, all right, I'll take this one," and find out what it has to teach me. That's what I have to do, isn't it? That's the path that leads toward the light. Did I say "thank you" enough while you were still here? Probably not. I say it now, Syl, with my whole heart.

Gratitude is the thing that brings us the most grace...I have learned this from experience, try it, and you will see. I am content with whatever God gives me. And I show Him this in a thousand little ways.

—St. Therese

A Silent Pause

A death for me is a time to stop – take a good, long, deep look – and then continue on. After my dad died years ago, I stopped, I looked for a good long time. When I continued on I knew there was nothing for me except to find out how to live and to find out how to die.

Many people I have known have gone since then, and each time I stop and take notice.

Because of where I am in my spiritual training, Sylvia's death has had a very profound effect on my life. I'm in the long, deep pause time and I'm looking very hard.

Her death has meant many things to me, and what she's left me with that I treasure most is the motivation to redouble my efforts to train spiritually. I see there is nothing – nothing in this life – nothing – not money, sex, power, education, material goods, being thought well of – nothing in this life more important than finding and living from the compassion of one's True Nature.

All we have left in the end is our True Nature. All the rest is dust. Why stack up bags of dust when we can have the Light? All else is mere distraction – distracting us from the Light – distfacting us from our True Nature.

I can see when I look (at Sylvia), it's not hard. It's just accepting All That Is – being in the moment and accepting. And then during one silent, still moment we realize that we are a part of All That Is – we are one with All That Is – we are one with our True Nature.

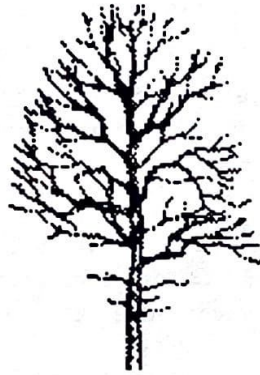
Thanks, Sylvia, for the teaching. I am deeply grateful. Gasshō.

The secret is in seeing life and death as a single process.
They are one process, a unitary phenomenon.
Then you are not afraid.
Then...you are thankful to death,
because life becomes possible only because of death.
Through death, life becomes possible;
through dying everything is renewed.

The Gift of Sylvia

People ask me how I am – they mean how I am now that Sylvia has died. I don't know. I can't answer that. I feel every way it's possible to feel, I suppose. But mostly it feels like being six and getting a wonderful gift. A beautiful gift. Something you always wanted. The thrill of it, the joy. The world is wonderful, life is good. And then it gets dropped, it's shattered, broken – so broken it can't be fixed. And the light goes out and the world is cold and dim – and it hurts.

I hear people say how grateful they are, how thankful for Sylvia and the teaching. I am, too. I remember the laughter, the kindness, the clear insights, the courage, and the honesty. And I know as time goes by that this will be my primary experience of Sylvia. But for right now I'm six and there's no birthday party and my best friend moved away and my gift got broken – and it hurts.



The point is to know, beyond any shadow of a doubt, that "I" and all other "things" now present will vanish, until this knowledge compels you to release them—to know it now as surely as if you had just fallen off the rim of the Grand Canyon. Indeed, you were kicked off the edge of a precipice when you were born, and it's no help to cling to the rocks falling with you.

—Alan Watts, The Book

Doorway to the Light

"The blessings of love and respect we offer to all, in times past and present, who have opened the doors of wisdom, reuniting all beings with their intrinsic purity."

It is with this love and respect that I wish to write about Sylvia's death. Although I was not able to visit at all during her last days, I nevertheless felt very connected to Sylvia's process. On Wednesday, the 18th of January, while on a long drive, I began to work on a guided meditation on the dying experience. I planned to do it with a dying 92-year-old woman I was to visit later that day. I remember thinking, "This is so good I'm going to give it to myself, too." Also, I wished I could give it to Sylvia. Then I thought, I can! I could just send it right now. In that moment, I felt I clicked into her experience. I have found that with that movement of love, any connection is possible. Until then, I didn't know how close to death she was. Friends had visited on the previous Sunday and said she was doing fairly well. But in that moment we connected, or rather our separateness dissolved, and the next 48 hours were filled with light. During my work and even my sleep, I could taste some of Sylvia's light and joy. I felt she stood in the doorway of some great luminescence, holding it open for all of us to experience. What a wonderful gift she gave us all.

We all have built walls starting from early childhood. Walls against feeling, seeing, and knowing who we really are. Becoming more "real" to ourselves and isolated from everything we consider "other." To me, this is the most tragic death – these parts that are walled off and separate from the light. Sylvia worked at dissolving these walls. And, since we are not separate beings, when any one of us stands in the light and with great love holds that door open, we all stand there. It is a chance for all walls to crumble, for the "great death of forgetting" to die, and for us all to remember the lightness and vastness of our intrinsic purity. This is not an event that happened only when Sylvia died. It exists in the now...accessible to everyone. Thank you, Sylvia. Thank you, all beings past and present who have cared so deeply that you paused in that doorway and included us all. Gasshō.



Gasshō

I felt it last year around this time, maybe a little closer to Christmas, and, as we slip into November, I can feel it building up again this year. This "it" is hard to describe. It is not seasonal; I feel it at other times of the year, too, but perhaps not with the same depth or intensity. If words could do it justice, here are some I would start with: love, joy, adoration, and gratitude. The trouble is I'm not at all sure how to put these words together with other words to convey the meaning to someone else. Would it help to capitalize? Love. Joy. Adoration. Gratitude. Maybe once for emphasis, but I'm afraid if I continue to do it, the meanings will become hard and freeze.

Even my sleeping, dreaming self gets into the act. One night last year at the retreat center, I dreamt I walked with others over those green mountain hills to the accompaniment of an offstage chorus grandly singing, "Oh, come let us adore Him." That same song played a part in a dream I had just a few nights ago: I was in a large, noisy hall of people, and said, "This is stupid – I'm leaving." A couple of other people rose to join me, and we left the hall to the full choral strains of "Oh, Come All Ye Faithful." "...Choirs of angels sing in exultation" – right inside my head! Beautiful, yes, but dreams nevertheless. I mention them only to emphasize the underlying joy that produces them, not because they are extraordinary or because I believe I'm unique for having had them.

If anything, the experience I'm trying to describe points away from uniqueness – mine or anyone else's. It shows me that all of the things I thought were me – all of the things that made me different from everyone else, defined me, set me apart – are not, to my great relief, who I really am after all. The fearful, lonely one, the waif, the social klutz, sarcastic joker, and angry protector are all plates of armor that keep me from knowing my true self. With a list like that it's easy to understand why not seeing these characteristics as the real me would be a relief, although "positive" self images can prevent me from knowing my true self in much the same way – if I believe them, not because they are real. But when I believe neither the "positive" nor "negative" images, a whole new world opens to reveal a "self" that has always been there but seems infinitely new. I put "self" in quotation marks here because there is no separation between what this self is and how it is – they are the same thing, and so there really is no self in the sense of its doing or having anything. There is just the experience of its "self."

When this true self says "I am goodness" or "I am love," it is not referring to the Ego/I that either struts or cowers, depending on its mood, but rather to the infinite goodness and love that is everywhere and in everything. It is anything but personal. It belongs to no one, and yet we all have it. True self is hidden under layers of personality, opinions, and standards of right and wrong, but its essential nature remains the same, pure and untainted. You can take the drop out of the ocean, but you can't take the ocean out of the drop.

When I speak of love, joy, adoration, and gratitude, I am speaking of the experience of this true self, its essential love and compassion, the joy of that experience, and the tremendous gratitude to everyone and everything that points to this experience and then encourages us to accept its reality instead of dismissing it in favor of the "real world" to which we've been so thoroughly conditioned.

I had another dream recently in which I watched a man push a woman to the floor. After a few seconds she stood up, walked over to the man, and bowed to him. He then turned and bowed to me. I have seen anger, rudeness, and sarcasm dissolve in the presence and deep bow of loving kindness, and I have seen this loving kindness grow in everything it touches. I am deeply grateful for this.

But there is more than just gratitude to those who teach well by their example of loving kindness, to those who point toward this experience – an experience available to everyone, an experience in which there is no separation, in which nothing is wrong or bad – not even suffering – and in which forgiveness, if it is to include others, must start with my forgiving myself. There is also gratitude to the experience itself, this love, this force. I am tempted to call it God, but that implies a separateness, something outside of me, and that is not the case.

It is also tempting to look for something "out there" to explain how adoration fits into all of this – if not adoration of God, then perhaps of some person. The word implies an object, but in this case there isn't one. Subject and object are one. There is just adoration.

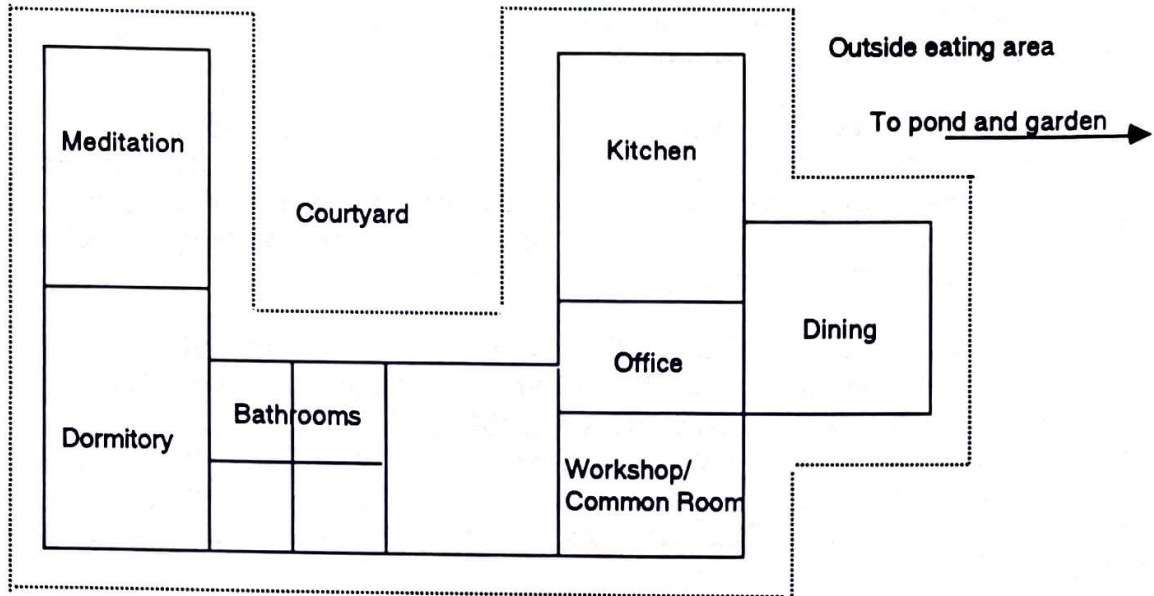
The other night an image came to me of my falling off a cliff and shouting, "Thank you" before I hit the ground. There's a good chance that when I die – whether quickly or slowly – I won't have the time or the presence of mind to say "Thank you." That's why I'm writing this. I want it on the record. But whom am I thanking? No one in particular, everyone and everything in general.

I will amend my dying words to "Thank All."



– Sylvia Reid,
November 1987

The New Retreat Center Building



This is a diagram of the building planned for the retreat center. It will have an enclosed courtyard and will be surrounded on all sides by a covered walkway. We hope to begin construction this spring.

The building will be dedicated to Sylvia.



(This piece was inadvertently left out of In Process. Because we wanted very much to include it, we've printed it separately. We apologize for the error.)

To Sylvia

You came into my life in the midst of my suffering
Your eyes filled with compassion
Your gentle voice conveying hope in words that wound their way through my
grief-filled haze to pour balm on my raw inner wound.
I continue to mourn, but you have made that mourning bearable.
I see you now, sitting across from me – calm, composed, utterly present in the
moment, listening.
To listen is to love.
I missed you when you were no longer there to guide me.
I miss you now that you are gone from the only world I know.
But as you made me realize how much of Ralph remains alive in my heart
Now I am comforted because you touched my life and will remain with me
always.
