

Friends & Neighbours

Finding peace

By Heather Thomson

In the hills surrounding Merritt there is a special place where people go to find inner peace.

The Dhamma Surabhi Vipassana Meditation Centre of BC is located approximately 20 minutes from Merritt off Coldwater Road. This weekend it opened its doors to offer the public a rare peek at what it offers.

Vipassana means to see things as they really are. It is one of India's most ancient techniques of meditation and was taught in India more than 2,500 years ago. According to people who practise Vipassana it has made an amazing difference in their lives.

Bevan Hemsworth drives a bus in Vancouver and believes the only reason he is still able to do his job is because he discovered Vipassana.

"My wife took the course first and I saw such a change in her that I took a course," he said. "I saw it as an opportunity to grow. People have all different reasons for taking a course but mostly it is because they have seen such a benefit from it in someone they know."

Each course is 10 days long. During that time the men and women are segregated from each other and for all but one day there is no talking. For the first three days of meditation students are instructed to concentrate on their breathing. This is a time to bring ones mind into staying in one place. By the fourth day it is time to move on to deeper meditation. This is when the students focus on their bodies and how they react with the world around them. They observe the connection of the mind and the body through the sensations they

experience. On the last day the students gradually begin to talk again and are encouraged to share their experiences.

The centre was a dream to the organizing committee for almost 20 years. For much of that time they looked for a place that they could zone properly and that offered a high level of privacy. When they approached the Merritt council shortly after finding the spot of their choice the city was fully supportive of the idea.

"We were very surprised at how welcoming the community was," explained Sheldon Klein. "It is very important that people understand the restrictions of the centre. The community was very open to us, and it was a really positive experience."

Construction began in the spring of 1999. The centre is approximately 9,300 sq. ft. and consists of indoor sleeping quarters for 60 people, a meditation hall that holds 70 meditators, a teacher's residence and interview room, a dining hall for 60 people and a commercial kitchen, a courtyard garden and miscellaneous storage, office and bathing spaces. The site is currently under construction as they are adding accommodations for short-term volunteers.

Hemsworth pointed out this is the only Vipassana centre in British Columbia, and it is the only one that was purpose designed, offering everything they need. He added its location makes it accessible to people in the Lower Mainland and Victoria, by far the biggest area from which they draw students, and Alberta and Washington State.

Perhaps the most amazing part of the centre is that it was built completely on donations.

"There is not a hint of



(Above) Ida Cootauco, Veronika Gruber, Katherine Hemsworth, Sheldon Klein, Steven Armstrong, Naga Shunmugam and Bevan Hemsworth are just a few of the volunteers who welcome visitors at the open house. (Below) The centre has a commercial kitchen (top) where volunteers are busy and a dining hall that holds 60 people (below).
Photos by Heather Thomson

commercialism," explained Robert Strand. "Everything is so commercial these days that this makes the centre so unique."

He said no one gets paid and students contribute an amount they feel is appropriate based on what they got out of the experience. Hemsworth said no one would ever be turned away because they can't afford to pay.

The committee that oversees the day-to-day operations of the centre is actually a trust group. The group of 14 people, based out of Vancouver, manages the donations and makes sure the centre has everything they need to offer the courses.

The students who attend the centre are from all walks of life and are of all ages. They come for a number of different reasons, but for the most part they all experience similar results.

Hemsworth found the meditation gave him a way to destress.

"I was able to clear out the negativity and feel compassion for other people again," he said. "I was just a happier person."

Strand said his experience was quite similar, "I was such an angry person on the



inside and I was thinking badly about people. It made my life miserable.

"What I discovered was that lots of our problems are in ourselves, and through meditation anger becomes weakened," he continued. "I am free of that anger now and have compassion and am a happier person."

He said it also taught him to let go of the negativity.

"That leaves more space for who I really am," he added.

Hemsworth said they have had a number of people take the course from the Merritt area, including a few from the neighbouring Coldwater



Band, but they would like to see more people from the area take advantage of what the centre has to offer.

The centre offers a 10-day course almost every two weeks. This summer they also offered a few shorter

courses, including one for youth.

The next course with spots available starts on Oct. 12. For more information on the centre and Vipassana check out their Web site at www.surabhi.dhamma.org.