

Dharma 2.0

A new generation of practitioners waits to take the reins from their baby boomer elders. **ANDREA**



Jessica Morey

CLEAN ENERGY ANALYST, WASHINGTON, D.C.

“I see that as the work of our generation: integrating dharma into everyday life, into our jobs and relationships.”

Jessica Morey, based in Washington, D.C., wants to continue working in renewable energy policy and be a dharma teacher. “That’s a lot to want,” she says, “but many of my friends want to be in the world, yet deeply rooted to a spiritual practice. I see that as the work of our generation—integrating dharma into community, into everyday life, into our jobs and relationships.”

“Becoming a nun was what I was thinking about through college. My attraction to ordination, though, was that it was a kind of running away. Sometimes it’s hard to be in the world. I start to want stuff, like fancy houses, and I get frustrated when I’m not being mindful. Now I’m comfortable with the lay life. I feel a

PHOTO BY WILLIE DAVIS PHOTOGRAPHY

Jaed Coffin

WRITER, DEERFIELD, MASSACHUSETTS

“My mind is best off in a state of unknowing and ambiguity. That’s when I feel most free.”

Jaed Coffin’s mother grew up in Thailand in a house that sits on temple grounds. His father was an American soldier.

Coffin, now thirty, says, “Ethnic identity is, like most faces of identity, an abstraction and social construction. Through meditation, one can undo these constructions and find someone more authentic on the other side. That said, there’s no easy way to feel normal if you’re a half-Thai kid growing up in Maine.”

There was no Thai temple in his New England town, yet Buddhism was woven into his daily life. It was in the way he and his family ate, the simplicity of their household, and in his mother’s demeanor. It was also very much present during visits to Thailand, where Coffin relished the warmth of temples. As he describes it, “Even when I was young and couldn’t understand what anyone was saying, as long as I was sitting next to my

grandfather or mother, I felt right.” But then his grandfather died and his family stopped making trips to Asia.

Years passed and, against the backdrop of classmates calling him “Chinese freak” and mimicking his mother’s accent, Coffin grew wrapped up in the puzzle of his ethnic identity and increasingly nostalgic for his Thai village temple. In high school he began reading about Buddhist thought; in his junior year of college as a philosophy major, Coffin decided to return to his mother’s village and take temporary ordination.

In Thailand, temporary ordination is something approximately 80 percent of young men do and Coffin feels it’s important to have this ritualized time to step away from society. In America, says Coffin, we like to be financially stable before raising a family. Thais, on the other hand, believe a man should be philosophically and ethically stable first, and that this stability can be gained at a temple. Coffin continues: “My mother often reminds me, when I’m acting younger than my age, ‘Since you’ve been a monk, you’re now expected to behave like a man!’”

“I found my time as a monk difficult in this regard. Afterward,

MILLER profiles six young Buddhists bringing new issues, styles, and passions to the dharma.

wonderful balance that I'm very happy with. But finding balance was my struggle for the past seven, eight years."

Not long after completing her masters in international affairs and sustainable development, Morey began working for the World Bank in the central energy unit. She was part of a team coming up with ways to invest in renewable energy projects and developing climate change strategies. The problem was, she says, "I got frustrated with the bureaucracy and the slowness. Nothing was actually getting done." Fed up, she took a position with Clean Energy Group (CEG), which she describes as a classic think tank dedicated to developing cleaner energy technologies, such as fuel cells and solar. More than a year later, she is still working there and hopes to be for years to come.

Morey feels her professional and spiritual lives are connected by the big picture; compassion, the ideal of the bodhisattva, is her motivation for trying to make the planet a better place.

As a teenager, Morey began attending youth retreats at the Insight Meditation Society in Barre, Massachusetts. Her father

was an alcoholic (currently recovering), so the dharma and the sangha were a much-needed relief from the turbulence at home. Now, at age thirty, Morey wants to give back, so she has started leading teen retreats herself. She says, "If I can help teens see that there's another way of being in the world—that there's this possibility for peace—that's awesome."

Recently, Morey's practice has deepened. Despite participating in many lengthy retreats, it used to be difficult for her to have a regular home practice. For the past two years, however, daily sitting has stopped being a struggle. It's become natural, the thing she wants to do. Another change has been how she views teachers. They helped Morey so much—and continue to help so much—that she thought they were perfect.

She explains: "It's been a growing up process to get closer to teachers and realize they're human beings with shortcomings." Yet there is something "sweet" about the realization, too, "because it means that I—also a human being with faults—might someday attain the levels of wisdom my teachers have attained."

as a twenty-one-year-old American kid, I felt I had a lot of living to do. I wanted to stay up late and go to bars. But always in the back of my mind I was thinking: I was a *monk!*"

After the rainy season that Coffin spent in robes, he returned to the States and became a writer. His book, *A Chant to Soothe Wild Elephants*, published by Da Capo Press, chronicles his time at the temple. He says, "Some of the criticism of my book suggested I wasn't a very serious monk. This was disappointing to me. I tried to grapple with the very real problems of the mind and the human heart. We get hungry. We get bored. We crave simple conversation. To assume we should so easily lead ourselves away from such desire is to fantasize that we, as a species, are much grander and more complex than we really are.

"Buddhist thought has led me to some helpful conclusions about who, for now, I really am. What I learned from the temple was that my mind, so bent on understanding the questions of existence and trying to find meaning in so many places, is best off in a state of unknowing and ambiguity. This is when I feel most free in the world."

PHOTO BY BRENT M. HALE





Dechen Hawk

MUSICIAN, BOULDER, COLORADO

“What I like about meditation is that it doesn’t quell my desire for adventure.”

“Music is a way of getting one-pointed focus, and playing for people is my most consistent practice,” says Dechen Hawk, whose performances have included shows with the likes of Leon Russell, R.E.M., and Fun Lovin’ Criminals.

Indeed, according to Hawk, his other contemplative practices—sitting meditation and yoga—are woven into his music making. “I hold myself in the same upright posture whether I’m sitting or playing the piano or guitar,” he says. Also, while meditating his gaze is slightly ahead, maybe seven feet, and it’s similar on stage. He describes performing this way: “I’m not staring into everybody’s eyes, but I’m also not completely introverted. Everything is more peripheral.”

Then there is his yoga training, which has taught him *pranayama*, or yogic breathing. Hawk says most singing is long and slow, so the heart rate drops and the speed of exhaling and inhaling decreases. This, for him, is a type of *pranayama*, and

PHOTO BY ALEX KING

Jessie Litven

TRANSLATOR, HALIFAX, NOVA SCOTIA

“When you spend all day translating, the dharma is in your face all the time.”

Sometimes, says twenty-eight-year-old Jessie Litven, translating dharma texts from Tibetan into English is just another job. More often, though, it’s a reminder to practice. “When you spend all day translating teachings on the nature of mind, it would seem funny, when you finish, to say, ‘I want to go out drinking.’ The dharma is in your face all the time.”

Jessie Litven is a second-generation Buddhist or, as she puts it, “a dharma brat.” It was her mother who sparked her interest in learning Tibetan. “I don’t know where she got it,” explains Litven, “but she had a sheet of paper with the Tibetan alphabet on it and she gave it to me.” Litven was nineteen at the time, and about to embark on a road trip from her home in Nova Scotia to California. Somehow the paper ended up in the car with her.

Litven’s travel companion from New York to Missouri was a guy she had met on craigslist. He mentioned that he was going to

continue on to New Mexico to stay at Joan Halifax’s Upaya Zen Center and Litven—who was broke—thought maybe she’d be able to stay there for a night or two for free.

The travelers had been dumpster diving for days, living off donuts and string beans and precious little water. That, plus the altitude, had left Litven disoriented, and when they arrived at Upaya in the middle of the night, the twenty-year-old Tibetan monk who greeted them seemed to her like an old man. Litven turned down all offers of food and the next day, while meditating, she began to feel flushed. She tried taking off her sweater but Joan Halifax said not to move. This was a surprise for Litven, as she was used to Shambhala-style meditation, which allows for adjustments. She struggled to comply with the Zen way, only she couldn’t. She fainted.

When she came to, she ate something and sat some more zazen. What she didn’t do was leave. Instead, Litven stayed for two months and became friends with the monk who’d originally greeted her, and she asked him to teach her Tibetan. No, he said, Tibetan is impossible to learn. And, indeed, when he did try teaching her, she found it extremely difficult. It took her a week and a half to remember how to say “See you later” in Tibetan. She

over the course of a show—anywhere from forty-five minutes to three hours—it changes his constitution. “It’s a calming release from stress,” says Hawk. “And once I feel clear, I end up singing things that could just as easily be mantras.

“The space opens up and I’m working with what’s arising. That’s my excuse, anyway,” Hawk laughs, “for not sitting every day.”

But twenty-nine-year-old Hawk has been sitting for almost as long as he can remember. In 1985, he and his family moved to Boulder, Colorado so they could be more involved with the Shambhala community and Hawk himself did the first level of Shambhala Training when he was eight.

He never rebelled against his parents’ passion for the dharma. “There was nothing to rebel against,” he explains. “There was nothing I was forced to do. It was actually really inviting when I was younger. I could sit in on tea ceremonies and I enjoyed being around all the wonderful teachers. Who doesn’t love being around those people?”

Hawk found the traditional school system rather less inviting. Particularly when he was a young child, his non-Buddhist peers didn’t accept his upbringing and they made fun of him for not wanting to kill ants or “who knows what the scenario would be.” Plus, academically, Hawk felt his interests weren’t nurtured.

This led him to take a few years off after high school to focus

on his music and work odd jobs. At twenty-five he enrolled at Naropa, the Buddhist university in Boulder that was established by Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, the founder of the Shambhala Buddhist community. “I wouldn’t have gone anywhere else that I know of,” Hawk says.

He majored in music. But at Naropa all students are required to take contemplative courses, so he elected to study tai chi and do a meditation retreat for credit. These contemplative classes, he says, offered him a much-appreciated opportunity to balance his heavy course load.

“What I like about meditation,” says Hawk, “is that it doesn’t quell my desire for adventure and it doesn’t numb out my feelings of passion. But it does ease tension, so I can deal with situations more clearly.”

Hawk doesn’t think of himself as “a preacher teacher,” but in his lyrics and in his music in general he wants the dharma to be subtly present. When his parents were young, there were a lot of Buddhist buzz words floating around—words that his songs don’t contain. “That makes the Buddhist element easier for me to digest,” he says, “and that’s what I hope is true for other people.”

Hawk is pleased to be doing what his parents raised him to do: to take the teachings and make them current.



and the monk had a bet going. He said she’d never master the language and she insisted she would.

When Litven left Upaya, she got a book and taught herself Tibetan basics. Then, in 2004, she decided to move to India to live in a Tibetan community. In Dharmasala, she stayed at a hostel run by a monastery and was a volunteer English tutor.

“For the first months,” Litven says. “I didn’t have much opportunity to speak in Tibetan because everybody wanted to speak to me in English. There were just a few monks who were too lazy to want to learn English and they were the ones who saved me.”

When Litven returned home from Asia, she got in touch with Shambhala’s Nalanda Translation Committee and asked if she could apprentice with them. They said yes and she went on to obtain a permanent, full-time translator position with them.

“It’s an amazing job,” she says, “especially when we have meetings with rinpoches and they get deep into one particular Tibetan term and what it really means. On the one hand, the discussion is linguistic, but on the other it’s an amazing dharma talk.”

Left: Jessie (center) at a nunnery in eastern Tibet.

Iris Brilliant

STUDENT, ANN ARBOR, MICHIGAN

“The goals of Buddhist practice are to end suffering and become more self-aware, and feminism has the same values.”

“Feminism and the dharma are mutually beneficial and informing,” says Iris Brilliant, a women’s studies and creative writing major at Michigan University. “The goals of Buddhist practice are to end suffering and become more self-aware and feminism has the same values, just in a more specific way.”

Most young Buddhists, according to twenty-one-year-old Brilliant, are involved with some kind of activism. “This reflects well on the dharma,” she says. “It would be hypocritical to have a spiritual practice that didn’t extend beyond oneself.”

Brilliant became interested in the dharma when, at eighteen, she went to a lecture by Robert Thurman. His conviction impressed her, so afterwards, when she saw an advertisement for a Buddhist Peace Fellowship teen retreat, she signed up. Brilliant compares how she felt at her first retreat to a future guitarist picking up a guitar for the first time and intuiting that the instrument is exactly what she needed.

“I’m a very social being,” Brilliant says. “I often evaluate ideas based on who is drawn to them and the people who were at the retreat were incredible. Here were all these self-motivated kids wanting to engage in difficult work, which most people that age aren’t interested in, and they were all so kind to one another.”

Brilliant also felt that the dharma talks, which catered to teens, made sense. “Language can be exclusive,” she says, “and adults often exclude the youth without realizing it. It was important for me to be on a retreat where I understood the language and where there were other people my age, so I didn’t feel like, ‘Oh, this seems cool but I’ll come back to it in ten years.’”

Brilliant is a proponent of making the dharma accessible to everyone and, in addition to youth, one of her particular concerns is the LGBTQ community. Many Buddhist teachers, she notes, could be more sensitive in this area. When romance comes up in a dharma talk, the diction frequently implies that all men are attracted to women and vice versa and that everybody identifies as either a man or a woman. Brilliant, who identifies as queer, says this is painful.

“To be able to engage in a practice as vulnerable as meditation is, there has to be a level of trust involved,” she says. “If I’m already

Trevor Maloney

ZEN PRIEST, SAN FRANCISCO

“Where does a priest like me fit in? I’m excited to find out!”

“I went to grad school for the wrong reasons,” says thirty-year-old Trevor Maloney. “I didn’t know it, but I needed a monastery, not an academic program.”

Maloney’s master’s degree was in theology. He’d had a born-again experience at seventeen that left him, in his words, “wanting to know and align himself with the truth.” He spent his time in churches, going to prayer groups, and reading books. Yet Maloney sensed something was missing.

One night in 2003, he went through all the theology papers he’d written. He realized he’d mostly written about God’s relationship to the world and that he was trying to break down the separation between God and himself. “I wondered if I still believed in God,” says Maloney, “if it was important for me to believe. I realized I had no idea what this thing was that was seeking God.”

Maloney’s roommate gave him a copy of Jack Kerouac’s *Dharma Bums* and he was impressed by the disciplined yet joyful Japhy Ryder. When he discovered that Ryder was based



exploring challenging material, I feel it more intensely if someone is making heterosexist remarks or not even seeing my identity.”

Brilliant is pleased that Spirit Rock Meditation Center, where she has done various retreats, has taken steps to be more inclusive. They currently have a few teachers who identify as queer and they hold an LGBTQ retreat.

The last retreat Brilliant did at Spirit Rock was focused on *metta* or loving-kindness and it was open to people of all social identities. During the *metta* retreat, when Brilliant was struggling to focus, she would often open her eyes and look at a woman in her sixties who was in the row in front of her. This helped Brilliant stay grounded because the woman always sat very upright. But one time, while they were doing a guided meditation, she looked over at the woman and saw that she was crying. “Then I started crying,” Brilliant says, “and I felt so connected to her.” It didn’t matter that they weren’t the same age; they had their practice and their humanness in common.

“Meditation,” Brilliant concludes, “has helped me to become open to interacting with and loving more and more people.” And that’s one way in which meditation is political. It helps people cross divisions.

PHOTO BY JENNIFER HUNT



on Gary Snyder, a Zen practitioner, he read about Zen.

In 2004, Maloney and a friend were sitting in a café in Pittsburgh, where he was living at the time. “Look,” she said, “the Zen Center of Pittsburgh is offering an introductory meditation session. You should go.” He hesitated. “Trevor,” she told him. “It’s all you’ve been talking about.”

Days later, Maloney dreamed he was meditating and crying, and that someone asked what was wrong. “It’s like a fire,” he answered. Shortly thereafter, Maloney received meditation instruction for the first time. He says, “It *was* like a fire, a boring, painful, sleepy, confusing fire. I could tell there was something to it, though I didn’t know what.”

Four months later, Maloney left for a nine-month stay at Tassajara Zen Mountain Center, which is part of San Francisco Zen Center (SFZC). Nine months turned into more than two years. Then he moved to SFZC’s City Center, where he is now an ordained monk.

“Sometimes I meet folks who are new to Buddhism and the more overt religious elements—bowing toward images, the priesthood, even the teacher/student relationship—prove to be difficult for them,” Maloney says. “I was already a fundamentally religious person, so it was no big jump to go from prayer

PHOTO BY DEBRA KAHN

to invoking cosmic bodhisattvas. My training at SFZC temples is communal, ritualistic, regimented, and recognizably religious. This isn’t how it is for a lot of young practitioners.”

Buddhist youth tend to be looser about defining their sangha and lineage affiliations than Maloney is. “Where does a priest like me fit in?” he asks. “I’m excited to find out!”

Maloney has recently become involved with the Young Adult Dharma Council, which meets weekly to meditate and talk about the dharma. “In my SFZC sangha,” he says, “there aren’t many situations where someone with my low level of seniority gets a chance to do a little teaching. In this group, however, I’ve had several opportunities to lead and participate in discussions and—who would have thought?—I actually know a bit about this stuff! It’s been very encouraging.”

Just the kind of encouragement Maloney needs as he takes his next step—moving to Austin Zen Center in Texas, where he will serve as head of the meditation hall, develop an outreach program, and study with his teacher. ♦

For a special section on Buddhism for a New Generation, go to www.shambhalasun.com