

Actress brings Buddhist retreat to Windhover

By Gail McCarthy - Staff Writer

Lindsay Crouse, an Academy-Award nominated actress and lifelong Annisquam summer resident, found wisdom and serenity in the 2,500-year old Buddhist teachings.

In an effort to share what she's learned with others on Cape Ann, Crouse organized a program from Aug. 22 to 28 at the Windhover Performing Arts Center in Rockport, presented by the Asian Classics Institute of Los Angeles.

Brian Smith, an ordained monk in the Gelukpa lineage of Tibetan Buddhism, will teach at the week-long retreat.

He was the professor of comparative religion at Columbia University and professor emeritus of religious studies at the University of California. He also is a scholar of Sanskrit, the ancient Indian language.

"Brian's bio can sound intimidating," said Crouse, who has been in about 25 movies and numerous television movies and series. "But he's witty and fun and one of the best teachers I've ever had. It is rare to get Tibetan Buddhist teachings from a pure lineage, from an American, someone who speaks our language and knows our culture. This lineage contains teachings which have been passed down, teacher to student, since the time of the Buddha."

"A spiritual retreat is an ancient concept but something very difficult to accomplish in our modern day," said Crouse. "We don't make time for retreat and therefore have few opportunities for spiritual renewal. Yet we expect things to simply work out well in our lives and in our world. We need to take time to be quiet and ask ourselves what is the real point of living."

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Lindsay Crouse, an Academy-Award nominated actress

In addition to the Buddhist teachings, Erica Giovannazo, a teacher of vinyasa yoga and Tibetan heart yoga, will offer classes.

"Tibetan heart yoga is a style new to the United States, but was secretly practiced by the dalai lamas," Crouse said. "It promotes the physical health of the heart and works specifically to open the heart. It is simple to do, and quite powerful."

Smith's teacher is Geshe Michael Roach, a Princeton graduate, who was the first American to earn a geshe degree in a Tibetan monastery in India, reflecting 20 years of study.

"Brian is his protégé," said Crouse. She explained that the cornerstone of the workshop is the ancient teachings of "emptiness" which relates to the nature of reality.

But the term "emptiness" is not meant in its usual dictionary meaning.

"The Buddhist concept of emptiness does not mean 'nothing.' For Buddhists, 'emptiness' is a concept that reveals the distinction between what we perceive as reality and what is actually there," said Crouse. "Understanding the way the world works helps us to realize why it is so important to have compassion."

"The single source of human happiness is taking care of others, according to the teachings. The Dalai Lama seeks to teach that "the purpose of life is to develop the warm heart."

CROUSE: Buddhist retreat comes to Windhover

"The reason I organized the retreat was to bring my extraordinary teacher to Cape Ann because I know there are numbers of people here and in Boston who are interested in Buddhist teachings," she said. "Brian combines serious scholarship with fun, humor, personal insight and great conviction." The retreat is not intended to be a silent retreat, but one for learning.

"I thought people could benefit from his teaching. I know there are people whose lives could be transformed by the subject of the workshop," she said.

This is the first of what Crouse hopes will be annual retreats. Gloucester's Jane Deering is among those who will attend.

"I'm so curious about the whole concept of emptiness and the idea of meditation," said Deering. "The beautiful surroundings of Windhover are an ideal location with a peaceful and pastoral setting."

The meditation retreat is titled "Meditations on Emptiness: Using Wisdom Achieves Happiness."

"The subject might sound dry, but it's not. It's vital to everyone's well-being. The idea of emptiness is a unique concept that holds a key to eliminating your own suffering. But this information you don't get in self-help books," said Crouse. "I've never heard of anything as elegant and extraordinary as this Buddhist concept of emptiness. It is perhaps Buddhism's unique contribution to the world. And to understand it you need a guide."

She is attracted to the universalism of Buddhism.

"It is not an exclusive club. It has something to offer everyone at all levels," she said. "Buddhism is dynamic and has captured the interests of Americans.

Even our quantum physics validate ideas the Buddha taught 2,500 years ago. The Dalai Lama visits MIT yearly to dialogue with modern scientists."

The vitality of Buddhism, Crouse said, also comes from its philosophy of personal responsibility. "This is so exciting at a time in the world when we often feel so powerless. Its emphasis on compassion holds a key to personal happiness and peace. I am studying it and teaching it now, and it continues to open spiritual doorways," she said.

Crouse's best-known roles came in the movies "Places in the Heart," for which she was nominated for best supporting actress, "All the President's Men," "Slap Shot," "The Verdict," "Iceman," "House of Games," "The Indian in the Cupboard," and "Prefontaine."

She also made regular appearances on television series, including "Hill Street Blues," "Buffy the Vampire Slayer," "Providence," and "Dragnet."

Christian Lundberg, also of Gloucester, wants to take advantage of a unique opportunity in her hometown.

"For me, the retreat affords a dedicated time and space to learn more about Buddhist teachings, which hold many important truths, as do many religions," she said. "It's also an opportunity to learn from accomplished teachers. I'm interested in understanding more about the world I live in. We can benefit from all the opportunities that present themselves to us."

**Windhover is located at 257 Granite St., Rockport.
For more information on the retreat, e-mail inquiries
can be made at lcrouse-office1@earthlink.net
or call (978) 282-4998**