

Buddhist monk comes to Cape Ann for 4-day primer on happiness

By Gail McCarthy - Staff Writer

Brian Smith, also known to many locals as Lama Marut, will return to town tomorrow from the West Coast to bring a message of happiness to Cape Ann.

Smith, who will be part of a third annual retreat at Windhover in August, said he wanted to make this extra trip in December to support what has become a regular group of residents studying the practice of Buddhism. Tomorrow night through Friday, he will speak at 7 p.m. each day at the Rockport Community House. But Smith's teachings are not only for Buddhists.

Paul McPherson, a Gloucester cabinetmaker who attended the summer retreat, applauded Smith's ability to teach how to find happiness in life and to do so with a sense of humor.

"I'm not a Buddhist, and I probably never will be. But this is about learning," he said. "Lama Marut is a great teacher, like that one college professor who was so good that you learned so much in a class you may not have been interested in, but because the teacher was so dynamic, you got a lot out of it."

McPherson found that Smith's American roots helped him in reaching out to those who want to hear his message.

"Since he is a Buddhist brought up in this culture, there is no need for an interpreter. He can explain very clearly his lesson versus when you go through an interpreter, say with a Vietnamese monk. So much of it gets lost in translation," he said.

Smith, a retired professor in comparative religion from Columbia University and the University of California, said it is unusual to see such a grass-roots group like the one here on Cape Ann.

"It's rare to see that kind of self-motivation and interest. I'm quite grateful they have taken such effort to put into practice what we've tried to convey to them," Smith said during a telephone interview from California.



Brian Smith

"They started a regular study group trying to get people to think about how they can change their lives and not wait for the next big lecturer to come through their town. I want to meet with the group and bring new material to bear."

But he wanted to encourage anyone interested to drop in at the Rockport Community House, whether for one evening or all four.

"I know this time of year is busy with so much else going on," Smith said.

The talks are part of a series of courses, called "Dharma Essentials." Dharma means spirituality.

"We're not interested in converting people to Buddhism, and we don't want to keep people at arm's length with foreign and exotic terms," he said. "My understanding of Buddhism is that it is not one religion compared to other religions. But like all religions, there is a spiritual practice, and all such practices have a common core. We'll be talking about what is the common core to any spiritual practice, whether Buddhist, Christian, Jew or other.. The idea is to develop a meditation practice in your life. Prayer is a type of meditation."

The Buddhist monk said the point is to teach people the tools to be happy in their lives.

"We can't help others if we are unhappy and anxious, and depressed that all we can think about is ourselves. But if you are happy, you can begin to turn your attention to others," he said.

Phil Salzman, a Gloucester resident who has helped organize the local group, said the members did not expect the lama to return until August.

RETREAT: Fans relate to American-born Buddhist monk

"We're all excited and we want to make this wonderful opportunity available to other people.

This is not a closed group and we're not proselytizing. These teachings are here for everyone," he said. "With this group we have now we're all learning together and that's how community gets built. We study and meditate and share that experience.

It's not about everyone becoming a Tibetan Buddhist. It's about learning from the teachings and incorporating these teachings into our lives the best way we can, and it's different for everyone."

IF YOU GO

What: Public teachings by Lama Marut, a Tibetan Buddhist monk, on applied meditation and "Dharma Essentials"

Where: Rockport Community House at 58 Broadway in Rockport

When: Tomorrow to Friday at 7 p.m.

For more information, call Phil Salzman at 978-283-3543.