

A Place to Center in Austria

by Vanja Palmers

Puregg is the name of a small farm in the Austrian Alps, located at 1,300 m. (approx. 4,000 feet). In the 16th century, it was the highest year-round lived-in residence in all of the archdiocese of Salzburg. Thus have I heard.

Today, Puregg is a year-round meditation center that is officially named, "Ecumenical House of Silence," reflecting the open spirit of our sitting practice and the backgrounds of its founders:

Brother David Steindl-Rast, O.S.B.
and myself, Vanja Palmers.

Brother David is a Benedictine

monk with a longstanding relationship with Buddhism, Zen, and the Zen Center of San Francisco, while I grew up as a Catholic, lived at the Zen Center for ten years, was ordained by Zentatsu Richard Baker Roshi and received Dharma Transmission from Kobun Chino Roshi.

When we started remodelling the barn in 1989, Paul Discoe and his wife Gloria were in charge of the work and the practice. Ever since then people have felt supported and welcome in the harmonious simplicity of the zendo with its beautiful, sturdy tans. For starting the original garden and establishing the daily practice, we are greatly indebted to Günter Illner and Kosho Richard Ng, the second generation of caretakers/directors. Following them was Edgar Arnold, who had also received training at the Zen Center in San Francisco. Edgar helped create the financial viability of Puregg by scheduling retreat programs, and he was assisted by Volker Beck, as well as his wife. For the last two years Pepi Sinegger has been in charge. The first local person in this role, Pepi radiates the joy and warmth characteristic to genuine practice, which is much-needed on the long, cold and dark winter nights. Her efforts are supported by Dieter and Elisabeth.





Puregg, in the Austrian Alps

The core group of residents usually consists of three to four, often joined by short term guests. Every two to three weeks, a sesshin or other special event is scheduled. These have been lead by various teachers, among them: Thich Nhat Hanh and Sister Phuong, Aya Khema, Brother David, Kobun Chino, Tomoe Katagiri, Fumon Nakagawa, Ermin Döll, Claude Durix, Ed Brown and Patti Sullivan, Paul Discoe, Dokko-An Kuwahara, Stan White, and myself. We are deeply grateful for their guidance and encouragement.

The daily schedule includes four to five periods of zazen, service, soji (cleaning), meals, study, work, and breaks. If you happen to be in Europe and get homesick for Zen Center, please feel free to come by and refresh yourself. The local language spoken is German, but it is not unusual to have a dinner conversation going on in English as well.

For many, Puregg has become a true haven or home. We have had Jukai and Tokudo ceremonies (lay and priest ordinations), and several local sitting groups have evolved, the grandchildren of Zen Center, one could say. So I wish to offer my thanks and gratitude to all of our Dharma sisters and brothers on the other shore.

For those of you who remember us from way back when: Lorly, my wife, is well. Simone, our daughter, who spent her first two years (including pregnancy) at Tassajara, is in her last year of high school. She has a mindboggling capacity to discuss the subject of boys with her girlfriends, especially on the phone, and has just caused her mom a minor nervous breakdown by cutting her beautiful long hair and bleaching the sad remains straw-white. As for myself, I am still pretty restless but lazy. Animal rights and meditation seem to be the two main themes that occupy



me. Still I roam the mountains a lot: in the summer with my goats and in the winter on skis, snowshoes and snowboard. Also, I'm still a student and practitioner of Go, a fascinating ancient Oriental board game.

I miss you all and the sincere spirit of practice I found at Zen Center, and hope to visit my home temple one of these days. Until then, a deep bow and Thank You.

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*Puregg's
caretakers:
from left,
Günter Illner,
Pepi Sinegger,
Edgar Arnold,
Vanja Palmers,
Kosho Richard Ng,
Zen student Joni,
and Paul Discoe*

