

A Phenomenon in the Heartlands

By BARBARA FORD

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Whatever it is that they want — less anger, more peace of mind, clarity, happiness, optimism — young men and women are finding it here.

It is shortly after 7:00 a.m. As today's meeting gets under way, young men and women in Army fatigues (required attire on base) sign in at the door of the Fellowship Building and take their seats while district members conduct morning gongyo. The doors open continuously as more people arrive. The gathering swells until, by 8:00 a.m., there are no empty seats. There are 137 guests.

A phenomenon is taking place at Fort Leonard Wood, a U.S. Army base two hours from either Branson, Mo., or St. Louis, where Army basic training takes place in six-week intervals.

For the last year, members of Fort Leonard Wood District and Waynesville District, part of St. Louis Headquarters, have been meeting every Sunday at 7:00 a.m. in the Fellowship Building on the base.

Brent Oberholtzer, Fort Leonard Wood District leader and also a sergeant stationed there, explained that the combined districts have been placing a weekly announcement of their Sunday meeting in a couple local newspapers. The original intention was to inform SGI-USA members who might be among new privates arriving at the base that there are activities nearby.

But, as the weeks went by, more and more young men and women came to the Sunday meeting to find out about Buddhism, and many started chanting. When they returned to their barracks, they told their friends until, one Sunday, the doors kept opening as more and more privates took seats. There were 100 guests that day.

By the end of the first six-week period of basic training, just before graduation, there were 240 guests.

As today's meeting progresses, Mr. Oberholtzer invites people to share their experiences. Private Joel Haq, who has been chanting for six weeks, says, "When I chant, I ask a question and get an answer."

A few others shyly stand up to say that chanting has cleared their minds, made them less angry, and so on. "I feel peace of mind," says one private.

After the meeting, several privates gather to continue sharing their experiences.

Private David Barrow, who has been chanting for four weeks: "I improved my temper, gained peace of mind, and can carry on a conversation without getting mad."

Private Jeremy Higgins says that he has learned much; that he can focus, and his attitude is better. He has been getting perfect scores in testing, and he feels good about himself after chanting only a few weeks.

The experiences are all similar — less anger, more peace of mind, clarity, happiness, feelings of optimism.

Mr. Oberholtzer says: "There were many Sundays that no one came, but we [continued]. The key is the philosophy of Buddhism and the warmth that we bring from the SGI-USA; and chanting to introduce people to Buddhism, as many people as possible.

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