

Meet the monks of the Columbia River Gorge

Forest-dwelling monks preserve obscure tradition

By **BRADLEY W. PARKS**
Oregon Public Broadcasting

A small house and a few huts sit at the end of a potholed gravel road in the Columbia River Gorge. Trails wind through the forest past trees and rocks covered in electric green moss.

Mountain bikers occasionally zoom up and down the forested trails. A ranching family lives next door.

Serene and secluded, this place is unfathomably quiet.

It's perfect for the forest-dwelling Buddhist monks who call it home. Their hermitage is far enough removed for the monks to practice in solitude.

But it remains close to town. It has to. The monks are alms mendicants. That is, they eat only what they're freely given.

The monks cannot ask for food or store excess. They cannot possess or use money. They cannot farm.

This tradition puts the monks of the Gorge among an extremely limited few in North America.

"We live dependent on the support of people offering, out of a sense of goodwill or inspiration, the necessities of daily life," said Ajahn Sudanto, abbot of the Pacific Hermitage in White Salmon, Washington.

It's a lot to ask of any community — especially in a country where monasticism (i.e. monks and nuns) isn't very visible.

Jill Davis regularly contributes food to the monks on alms round. She said they bring a "sense of goodness" to White Salmon. The monks offer the community free weekly meditation at the yoga center in town and Buddhist teachings to anyone who seeks them.

For about eight years, this small hermitage has found the support it needs to survive in the Gorge. And that's largely because its supporters see benefits in return.

"It's remarkable that White Salmon has this group of people and something that's really established," Davis said. "It feels really comforting to me."

On a warm Tuesday in May, sun knocked aggressively at the forest canopy, beckoning Sudanto and the monks of the Columbia River Gorge. It was before 7 a.m. Mother Nature had just turned the volume on.

Clad in orange robes, three monks padded across the wooden deck down to a well-swept forest trail in silence, single file. They carried

big steel bowls wrapped in crocheted.

The monks walked into town to collect food from lay supporters, as they do every morning. This alms round is how they obtain their one daily meal, which must be consumed between dawn and noon.

"It's not just a game or an empty ritual," Sudanto said. "In some sense, we're walking our talk."

The rules are part of the Thai forest tradition, which the monks follow. It's an expression of Theravada Buddhism with a heavy focus on disciplined meditation as a path to enlightenment.

The Thai forest tradition champions spiritual wandering and renunciation of material possessions and worldly



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From left, Tan Sampanno, Ajahn Kassapo and Ajahn Sudanto make their morning alms round through White Salmon.

pursuits.

Their belief is that "all avoidable human suffering is caused by mental defilements, and that these defilements can

be completely avoided by a systematic education of body, speech and mind," according to texts distributed by monks of this tradition.

Rules are designed to help monks eliminate stresses, desires or "defilements."

So they get help from outsiders. Colleen Regalbuto helps coordinate food offerings for the monks in White Salmon. On alms round each morning, the monks' stops are predetermined, so they have some sense of security.

If people don't give, the monks don't eat.

Regalbuto said she thinks the monastery's survival speaks to the generosity of White Salmon.

"I think it's just inspiring for people to see these people who focus their lives on cultivating compassion and kindness ... who exist to lead a life of contemplation and service," she said.

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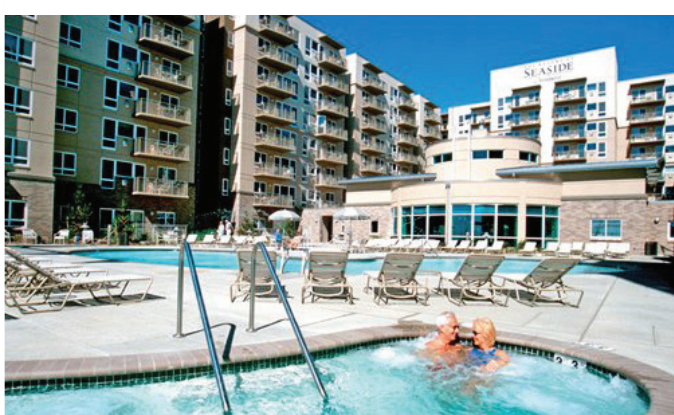


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