

ZEN BOW

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DECEMBER 1969

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VOL. II, NO. 6

DEATH-REBIRTH-DYING

III. (KARMA AND) REBIRTH

(1)

Introduction

The assertion that nothing precedes birth nor follows death is fairly common, but the fact that it is widely made does not, from a Buddhist standpoint, make it the less absurd. Such an assertion rests on the blind assumption (in its own way an act of faith) that life--of all things in the universe--operates in a vacuum. It asks us to believe that this one phenomenon (the invigoration of supposedly dumb matter) springs out of nowhere and just as miraculously disappears without a trace. Most people who hold such views consider themselves "rational," and yet in this matter of life and death they deny the conservation of matter and energy, one of the essential laws of physics.

Buddhism teaches that life and death present the same continuity which we observe in all other aspects of nature, that the life and death of animate matter is, in each particular instance, merely the seen aspect of an unending stream of cause and effect which, just because it appears to emerge from and sink into the earth at two points, does not the less have an unseen subterranean existence, nor the less appear at other places, in other shapes, and at other times.

This, the second issue of the present series on Death-Dying-Rebirth, breaks with the original order and plan of publication as presented in the introduction to our first issue. There it was noted, "...the discussion of rebirth, like that of death, should precede dying, since the manner of a man's death is inevitably influenced by his convictions on the continuity of life, but the length of the material on rebirth dictated that it be placed last [in the series]."

On more sober reflection the editors have decided that practical instructions to the dying would be better placed last in the series, with two issues on rebirth preceding it. The rebirth aspect of the series is expanded for two reasons; one, it must involve a discussion of karma, since karma and rebirth are so closely interrelated, and, two, there is such an abundance of material available to us on rebirth anyway. The series, DEATH-DYING-REBIRTH, is therefore now expanded to four issues and retitled DEATH-REBIRTH-DYING.

"The mind of the Zen adept is taut—ready like a drawn bow."

The number in parentheses after each quotation is keyed to the References, where the name of the work, the author, and the publisher will be found. ZEN BOW is grateful to the publishers for the use of these quotations.

After all, it is no more surprising to be born
twice than it is to be born once. -Voltaire (1)

...unless we are born again we are not born
at all. Nothing happens for the first time.
-N.O. Brown (2)

I died as mineral and became a plant
I died as plant and rose to animal
I died as animal and I was a man.
Why should I fear? When was I less
by dying? -Rumi (3)

Roshi Yasutani

...In a work by the fifth century Indian patriarch Vasubandhu our life is illustrated as a wave. A wave arises when the energy of the wind passes through water, and that wave by its energy in turn produces the next wave. If there is no resistance or friction, the movement of the wave continues endlessly. This is seen from the law of the conservation of energy, according to which no energy is ever lost. Now, the same energy that created a particular human being will produce a new life in the same way that the energy of one wave produces the next. This energy force does not disappear but goes on to create a succession of lives. Another name for it is karma. Just as the waves on the face of the ocean are different, so each individual is unique. However, in the depths of our nature, in the ocean itself, all individuals are equal to all existences in heaven and earth.

Were they asked about the movement of the water of a wave, most people would say it is horizontal, but actually it is vertical; the only thing that moves horizontally is the energy. Another mistaken notion about a wave is that it arises in a specific place and then disappears. Now, just as many people mistakenly think of a

wave as the movement of one specific area of water, so many believe there is an unchanging substance called 'I,' and that this fixed 'I' continues to exist from yesterday to today, from today to tomorrow...

Were I to stand up and then move a few feet, it would generally be thought that the same person made both movements, but this is not so. The truth is that the person who got up and the one who moved forward are not one and the same. This can be made clearer by comparison with a moving news bulletin. The letters apparently are moving, but as we know, each letter is in fact formed separately by the rapid flashing on and off of lights and there is no movement of the letters...

Many see the moment of what is called death as the termination of a particular life or consciousness; the energy which constituted that individual, they are convinced, is lost forever... Buddhism, however, teaches that our life is created and destroyed from moment to moment and that a new self is continuously being formed.

In the book by Vasubandhu previously mentioned our life is also compared to the 'continuous sweep of a waterfall.' A waterfall appears to be one great mass of water, but actually it is composed of an infinite number of droplets which are constantly changing according to

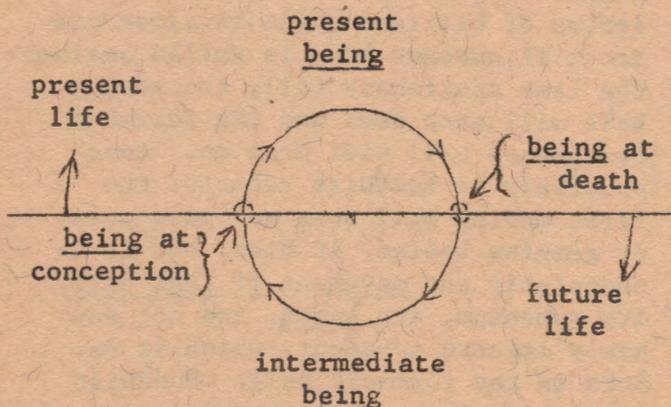
their composition. The name 'water-fall' is simply an arbitrary designation. What we take to be a continuous movement is really a series of fragmentations. So it is with our life: fragmentary moments within an endless continuum. What we call 'myself' is not a fixed substance.

It is important to understand clearly the concept 'birth and death.' Buddhism teaches that there are two types of birth and death. One is ordinary birth and death, i.e., from the moment of our physical birth to the moment of our body's death; the other, momentary birth and death. Most people, not realizing this, think that one and the same person lives continuously from physical birth to death. To correct this misunderstanding let us use the motion picture as an illustration.

We know that the motions of an actor on a movie screen are determined by the movement of the film. Each frame of the film is similar to, yet slightly different from, the next. As the frames are viewed one after another this slight difference causes the actor on the screen to move. The frames change in such rapid succession that it seems as though one person is moving continuously.

Momentary birth and death is exactly like the unrolling of a film; it is a continuous process of creation and destruction. But because we cannot see the momentary changes we conclude it is the same person who continues to exist.

The continuity of life as described by Vasubandhu is shown below:



'Being at conception' refers to the moment of the union of sperm and ovum. We are born, become children, then move on to adulthood and old age. All this is our being in the present. What we experience when we die is our being at death. Needless to say, no one doubts he existed at conception, during his present life, and at death, but many question a continuation of life beyond that. What, then, about the law of the conservation of energy, which asserts that no energy is ever lost? To claim that this tremendous force behind our human activities permanently disappears at the moment of death is like saying that one wave does not produce another.

Again according to Vasubandhu, at the moment of death our life energy is transmitted to an intermediate form of being, and this state, too, is subject to constant change, not unlike our present existence, which is void of a fixed core...

This intermediate state of being is said to be superior to existence on a mundane level in that it has the power, like an electric current, to pass through all obstacles, even being capable of movement which covers hundreds of miles in a moment's time. Intellect, emotion and will, but of a tenuous nature, are said to exist on this level of being. There are even sense organs of a kind...

Now, how is our karma transmitted to this intermediate being at the moment of death? The process is like that of impressing a seal on muddy ground. Our present existence is the seal, our being on an intermediate level the muddy ground. The design carved on the seal is karma. At the moment the seal is impressed on the surface of the ground the design is exactly transposed, and thus all karma is transmitted to this intermediate state of being. This being then continues its momentary life of birth-and-death, as well as ordinary birth-and-death, normally in seven-day periods, waiting for the opportunity to be conceived. This intermediate being is even said to have the myster-

ious power of seeing, feeling and finding its parents-to-be, and to be aware of the sexual intercourse by which it may be conceived. (4)

Bikkshu Sangharakshita

Buddhism teaches rebirth. Not, indeed, in the sense of an unchanging immaterial entity (ātman) transmigrating from one physical body to another, but in a deeper, subtler sense. Just as, in the present existence, a preceding becomes the condition for a succeeding mental state, so in dependence on the last thought-moment of one life arises the first thought-moment of the next, the relation between the two lives, as between the two mental states, being one of causal continuity. The illustration appropriate to the case is not that of a man who changes from one set of clothes to another, the man himself remaining the while unchanged, but rather that of a flame which, in its advance, feeds upon successive bundles of fuel.

Popular expositions of the Dharma, including discourses attributed to the Buddha, do indeed sometimes make use of such terms as ātman and punarjanna; but they are employed only by way of an accommodation to conventional modes of expression and are certainly not to be taken literally and made the starting-point for a series of deductions about Buddhism. Advanced expositions make use of a more precise terminology. Instead of ātman they speak of citta-santāna or psyche-continuum (sometimes simply santāna), while punarbhava, 'again-becoming,' replaces punarjanna, 'rebirth.'

To say that, at death, the psychical life ceases with that of the body is one extreme view; to say that any psychical element, such as an immortal soul, survives death unchanged is the other. Here, as elsewhere, Buddhism follows the Middle Path, teaching that the 'being' of one life is neither exactly the same as, nor completely different from, the 'being' of another life. Though consenting to speak in terms of rebirth, it precludes misunder-

standing by pointing out that there is no one who is reborn. (5)

Douglas Burns, M.D.

Rebirth is the continuation of a process, rather than the transfer of a substance. If we light a match and with the match light a candle, the process of combustion in the match is carried over to the candle. Is the flame in the candle the same flame or a different one than the one in the match? We can say both yes it is or no it is not. Likewise the Buddha said that when one dies it is not quite correct to say that same person will live again, nor is it correct to say that he will not live again. The truth lies between these two extremes. Or again we can illustrate the problem in this way: A four year old child grows up to become a forty year old adult. Though by name it is the same person at either age, in essence the two are totally different personalities in both mind and body. What is it that persists from the four year old to the forty year old? Very little if anything. Or what is it that persists from the fertilized ovum in the mother's uterus to the child? The younger being is a process which interacts with the world around it to eventually evolve into the other. In similar manner when a person dies, the mental conditions set up by the terminating personality carry on producing effects in a future personality. (6)

Ananda Coomaraswamy

...Or, again, we could not offer a better illustration, if a modern instance be permitted, than that of a series of billiard balls in close contact: if another ball is rolled against the last stationary ball, the moving ball will stop dead and the foremost stationary ball will move on. Here precisely is Buddhist rebirth: the first moving ball does not pass over, it remains behind, it dies; but it is undeniably the movement of that ball, its momentum, its kamma, and not any newly created movement, which is reborn in the foremost ball. Buddhist rebirth is the endless transmission of

such an impulse through an endless series of forms; Buddhist salvation is the coming to understand that the forms, the billiard balls, are compound structures subject to decay, and that nothing is transmitted but an impulse, a vis a tergo, dependent on the heaping up of the past. It is a man's character, and not a self, that goes on... (7)

Narāda Mahāthera

It is kamma that conditions rebirth. Past kamma conditions the present birth; and present kamma, in combination with past kamma, conditions the future. The present is the offspring of the past, and becomes, in turn, the parent of the future. (8)

* * * *

The Pāli term kamma (Sanskrit-karma) literally means action or doing. Any kind of intentional action whether mental, verbal, or physical is regarded as kamma. It covers all that is included in the phrase "thought, word and deed." Generally speaking, all good and bad actions constitute kamma. In its ultimate sense kamma means all moral and immoral volition. Involuntary, unintentional or unconscious actions, though technically deeds, do not constitute kamma, because volition, the most important factor in determining kamma, is absent. (9)

* * * *

The Buddha showed that this inequality among people is due not only to heredity, environment, "nature and nurture," but also to kamma, the result of our own past actions and our present doing. We ourselves are responsible for our own happiness and misery. We create our own heavens. We create our own hells. We are the architects of our fate. (9)

* * * *

The Buddha, for instance, inherited, like every other person, the reproductive cells and genes from his parents. But physically, morally, and intellectually there was none comparable to him in his long line of royal ancestors.

In the Buddha's own words, he belonged not to the royal lineage, but to that of the Ariyan Buddhas. He was certainly a superman, an extraordinary creation of his own kamma. (9)

* * * *

Kamma does not necessarily mean past actions. It embraces both past and present deeds. Hence, in one sense, we are the result of what we were; we will not absolutely be the result of what we are. The present is no doubt the offspring of the past and is the parent of the future, but the present is not always a true index of either the past or the future; so complex is the working of kamma.

It is this doctrine of kamma that the mother teaches her child when she says: 'Be good and you will be happy and we will love you; but if you are bad, you will be unhappy and we will not love you.'

In short kamma is the law of cause and effect in the ethical realm. (9)

* * * *

For a being to be born here a being must die somewhere. The birth of a being--which strictly means the arising of the Aggregates, or psycho-physical phenomena, in the present life--corresponds to the death of a being in a past life; just as in conventional terms the rising of the sun in one place means the setting of the sun in another. This enigmatic statement may be better understood by imagining life as a wave and not as a straight line. Birth and death are only two phases of the same process. Birth precedes death, and death, on the other hand, precedes birth. This constant succession of birth and death in connection with each individual life-flux constitutes what is technically known as samsāra--re-current wandering. (8)

* * * *

There also are some extraordinary persons, especially children who, according to the laws of association, spontaneously develop the memory of their past births and remember frag-

ments of their previous lives. A single such well-attested respectable case is in itself sufficient evidence for a discerning student to believe in a past birth. 'Pythagoras is said to have distinctly remembered a shield in a Grecian temple as having been carried by him in a previous incarnation at the siege of Troy.' Somehow or other these wonderful children lose that memory later, as is the case with many infant prodigies. (8)

Francis Story

Much misunderstanding of the Buddhist doctrine of rebirth has been caused in the West by the use of the words 'reincarnation,' 'transmigration' and 'soul.'

...'Soul' is an ambiguous term that has never been clearly defined in Western religious thought; but it is generally taken to mean the sum total of an individual personality, an enduring ego-entity that exists more or less independently of the physical body and survives it after death. The 'soul' is considered to be the personality-factor which distinguishes one individual from another, and is supposed to consist of the elements of consciousness, mind, character and all that goes to make up the psychic, immaterial side of a human being. (10)

* * * *

The Buddha categorically denied the existence of a 'soul' in the sense defined above. Buddhism recognizes the fact that all conditioned and compounded phenomena are impermanent, and this alone makes the existence of such a 'soul' impossible. (10)

* * * *

What then is the 'identity' between a person in one life and the 'same' person in another which justifies the use of the word 'rebirth?' The answer is that it is purely a serial relationship--an 'identity' of a certain kind which can only be described in terms of a causal continuum. (10)

* * * *

Buddhism teaches that one of the most important, if not the most important,

functions of the mind is that of will-ing. Under this aspect the mind is called 'cetana,' which denotes its capacity for willed intention. And cetana, the Buddha declared, is kamma (volitional action). The will to act is followed by the action; action in its turn is followed by result. Thought is therefore a creative act. It was from this that Schopenhauer derived the central theme of his 'Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung,' which makes will the dominating factor in the universe. The creative act of thought may be good or bad, but whichever it may be, it can only produce results of a like nature to the causes it originates. The moral principle of the universe is a scientific law. (10)

* * * *

I have mentioned higher and lower forms of rebirth, but it is with human rebirth that we are mainly concerned in this discussion. Precisely how is human rebirth accomplished? The answer is that the thought-force is attracted to the physical conditions of human procreation which will enable it to re-manifest and thus give expression to its craving-potential. The released energy in some way operates on and through the combination of male and female generative cells on much the same principle as that of the electric current working on the filaments in the lamp to produce light. The blind creative power of the craving-potential then adapts and develops them, moulding the structure of their growth in such a way as to make it serve its purpose within the limitations it carries with it in its kamma. In this it is also restricted, of course, by the general characteristics of the racial group and other distinctive categories to which the parents belong, but even within this limiting frame-work there are still infinite variations of physical and mental characteristics to be developed by the influence of the past kamma. To infer that all Chinamen are alike, only because what is most noticeable to us is the manner in which they differ from ourselves, is as absurd as to say that all Englishmen or all Russians are alike. (10)

Questions of King Milinda
to the Venerable Nāgasena

"Venerable Nāgasena," asked the King, "why are men not all alike, but some short-lived and some long, some sickly and some healthy, some ugly and some handsome, some weak and some strong, some poor and some rich, some base and some noble, some stupid and some clever?"

"Why, your Majesty," replied the Elder, "are not all plants alike, but some astringent, some salty, some pungent, some sour, and some sweet?"

"I suppose, your Reverence, because they come from different seeds."

"And so it is with men! They are not alike because of different karmas. As Lord Buddha said... 'Beings each have their own karma. They are...born through karma, they become members of tribes and families through karma, each is ruled by karma, it is karma that divides them into high and low.'"

"Very good, your Reverence!" (11)

* * * *

Said the king: "Venerable Nāgasena, is the person who is reborn the same person, or a different person?"

Said the Elder: "He is neither the same person nor a different person."

"Give me an illustration."

..."Suppose, great king, some man or other were to light a lamp. Would that lamp burn all night long?"

"Yes, Venerable Sir, it would burn all night long."

"Well, great king, is the flame that burns in the first watch the same as the flame that burns in the middle watch?"

"No indeed, Venerable Sir."

"Is the flame that burns in the middle watch the same as the flame that burns in the last watch?"

"No indeed, Venerable Sir."

"Well, great king, was the lamp one thing in the first watch, something different in the middle watch, and something still different in the last watch?"

"No indeed, Venerable Sir. The lamp was only the cause of the flame that burned all night long."

"Precisely so, great king, there is an uninterrupted succession of mental and physical states. One state ceases to exist and another comes to exist. The succession is such that there is, as it were, none that precedes, none that follows. Thus it is neither that same person nor yet a different person which goes to the final summation of consciousness." (12)

Shakyamuni Buddha

We are the heirs of our actions. (9)

* * * *

I declare, O Bhikkhus, that volition is kamma. Having willed, one acts by body, speech, and thought. (9)

* * * *

All living beings have actions (karma) as their own, their inheritance, their congenital cause, their kinsman, their refuge. It is karma that differentiates beings into low and high states. (9)

* * * *

If you want to know the past (cause), look at your present life. If you want to know the future (effect of your action), look at your present (cause). (4)

* * * *

O monks, if any one says that a man must reap according to his deeds, in that case, O monks, there is no religious life, nor is any opportunity afforded for the entire extinction of misery. But if any one says that the reward a man reaps accords with his deeds, in that case there is a religious life, and opportunity is afforded for the entire extinction of misery.

Take the case, O monks, of an individual who does some slight deed of wickedness which brings him to a hellish existence; or, again, O monks, take the case of another individual who does

the same slight deed of wickedness and expiates it in the present life, though it may be in a way which appears to him not slight but grievous.

What kind of individual, O monks, is he whose slight deed of wickedness brings him to a hellish existence?--Whenever, O monks, an individual is not proficient in the management of his body, is not proficient in the precepts, is not proficient in concentration, is not proficient in wisdom, is limited and bounded and abides in what is finite and evil: such an individual, O monks, is he whose slight deed of wickedness brings him to a hellish realm.

What kind of individual, O monks, is he who does the same slight deed of wickedness and expiates it in the present life, though it may be in a way which appears to him not slight but grievous? --Whenever, O monks, an individual is proficient in the management of his body, is proficient in the precepts, is proficient in concentration, is proficient in wisdom, and is not limited, nor bounded, and abides in the universal: such an individual, O monks, is he who does the same slight deed of wickedness, and expiates it in the present life, though it may be in a way which appears to him not slight but grievous...

Take, O monks, the case of one who is cast into prison for a half-penny, for a penny, or for a hundred pence; or, again, O monks, take the case of one who is not cast into prison for a half-penny, for a penny, or for a hundred pence.

Who, O monks, is cast into prison for a half-penny, for a penny, or for a hundred pence?

Whenever, O monks, any one is poor, needy, and indigent he is cast into prison for a half-penny, for a penny, or for a hundred pence.

Who, O monks, is not cast into prison for a half-penny, for a penny, or for a hundred pence?

Whenever, O monks, any one is rich, wealthy, and affluent he is not cast into prison for a half-penny, for a penny, or for a hundred pence.

In exactly the same way take the case of an individual who does some slight deed of wickedness which brings him to misery; or, again, O monks, take the case of another individual who does the same slight deed of wickedness and expiates it in the present life, though it may be in a way which appears to him not slight but grievous.

O monks, if any one were to say that a man must reap according to his deeds, in that case there is no religious life, nor is any opportunity afforded for the entire extinction of misery. But if any one says that the reward a man reaps accords with his deeds, in that case, O monks, there is a religious life, and opportunity is afforded for the entire extinction of misery. (13)

* * * *

Where three are found in combination, then a germ of life is planted. If mother and father come together, but it is not the mother's period and the 'being-to-be-born' is not present, then no germ of life is planted. If mother and father come together, and it is the mother's period but the 'being-to-be-born' is not present, then again no germ of life is planted. If mother and father come together and it is the mother's period, and the 'being-to-be-born' is also present, then by the conjunction of these three a germ of life is there planted... (8)

* * * *

The beings who will be born in the highest form of the highest grade (i.e., Buddhahood) are those, whoever they may be, who wish to be born in that country and cherish the threefold thought whereby they are at once destined to be born there. What is the threefold thought, you may ask. First, the True Thought; second, the Deep Believing Thought; third, the Desire to be born in that Pure Land by bringing one's own stock of merit to maturity. Those who have this threefold thought in perfection shall most assuredly be born into that country.

There are also three classes of beings who are able to be born in that

country. First, those who are possessed of a compassionate mind, who do no injury to any beings, and accomplish all virtuous actions according to Buddha's precepts; second, those who study and recite the Sutras of the Mahayana doctrine, for instance, the Vaipulya Sutras; third, those who practice the sixfold remembrance. These three classes of beings who wish to be born in that country by bringing their respective stocks of merit to maturity will become destined to be born there if they have accomplished any of those meritorious deeds for one day or even for seven days. (14)

Sitting Cushions

The Center will soon begin sewing sitting cushions and mats to fill its own needs and those of its members and anyone else practicing zazen. If you are interested in a set or in any of the individual cushions, please fill out and return the form below. Although it may be some time before the cushions are finished and available, your prompt response will help us make a realistic estimate of material needs and costs. We will inform you soon of the progress of this project.

The round cushions and the support cushions are stuffed with kapok, the sitting mat is stuffed with cotton batting. Please check which you prefer (a corresponding adjustment in your contribution will be made).

Please address correspondence to the attention of 'Cushion Project,' at the Center. Thank you.

Name _____
Address _____

- ____ Round cushions:
stuffed (); unstuffed ()
____ Rectangular support cushions:
stuffed (); unstuffed ()
____ Sitting mats:
stuffed (); unstuffed ()
____ Complete sets (all three of the above):
stuffed (); unstuffed ()

Zen Training Program

This summer's Zen Training Program for non-members is well under way at the Center. Nearly 40 people come here each day of the week except Sunday. Their daily activities include 4½ hours guided zazen and two additional 45 minute periods of unguided sitting.

The Program is under the guidance of Philip Kapleau and each day's 6½ hours of manual labor under the supervision of the resident monastic staff. Breakfast, lunch and a light, informal supper are provided.

There are two sides to the Training Program here. Primarily, it gives Philip Kapleau a chance to observe the readiness of prospective Center members for the duties of membership and for the rigors of sesshin. It also allows participants to get a small taste of Zen training and to see just how serious they actually are about Zen practice.

Secondarily, the Program provides a work force for reconstruction of our main building which was gutted by fire on October 4, 1968. One would be making a mistake of course to separate the manual labor done here from "Zen training" since the crucible of daily life is what reveals the true strength of our Zen practice. Manual work becomes therefore the necessary expression of our work in the zendo. It is moving zazen.

Finally, we should add that the Zen Training Program in Rochester will in all likelihood not stop when the house at 7 Arnold Park is completed. The Board of Directors is presently considering the purchase of another house on Arnold Park which will serve as both a guest house for visiting speakers and as rented quarters for interested members. The difficulty here, as always, is financial, but it is hoped that this will work itself out. For now, the house at 7 Arnold Park is within 2 or 3 months of completion as practically all of the Center's activities now function out of their new quarters, with the single exception of the kitchen.

Rebuilding and Dedication

The rebuilding of the fire-gutted Zen Center is nearly finished and it will be dedicated on August 28-29, 1970. There will be guest speakers and various activities fitting to the occasion.

Formal invitations will be sent at a later date to members and friends of the Center, and a schedule of events will appear in a future issue of ZEN BOW.

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ZEN BOW is published every other month by the Zen Meditation Center of Rochester, 7 Arnold Park, Rochester, New York 14607. Advisor: Philip Kapleau. Editor: Paterson Simons. Staff: Joy Hill, Suzanne Meyers, Marce Wilcove. Subscription rate: \$3.00 a year.