

places of peace

These Santa Cruz Mountain retreats offer views that are inward



By Liz Barrett

When you're trapped in the crush of traffic on Highway 1, with stale holiday music blaring incessantly from the radio and carbon monoxide fumes wafting through your windows, remember this: Less than three miles away is an oasis of tranquility surrounded by 10,000 acres of redwoods. Get off of the freeway. Take a deep breath. And give yourself a break.

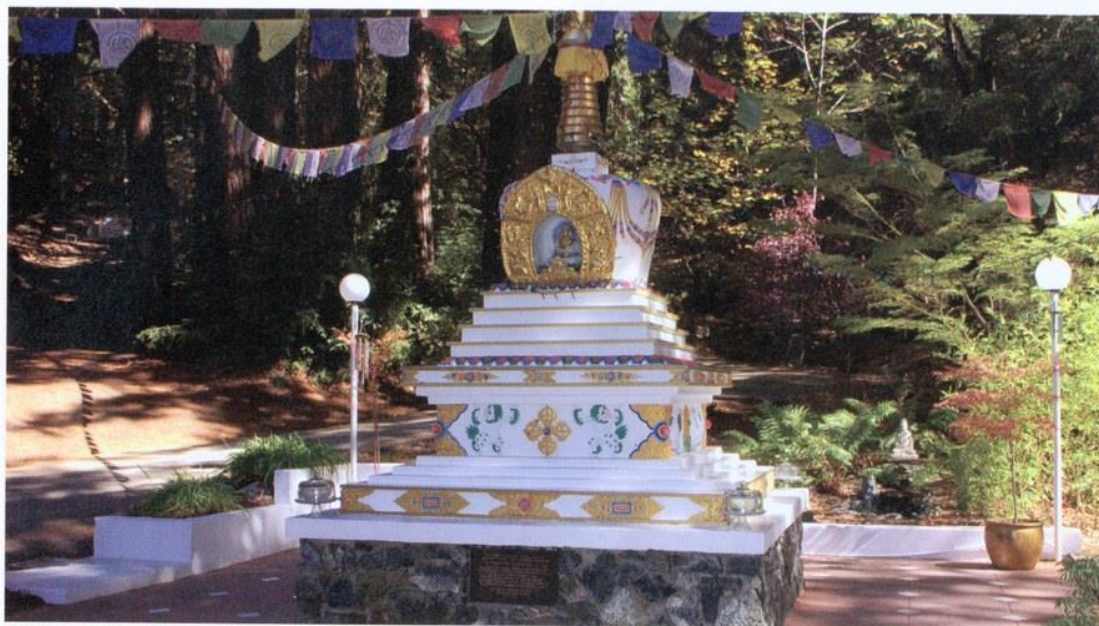
Land of Medicine Buddha, a meditation and retreat center less than 10 minutes from the 41st Avenue exit, is one of many nearby centers that provide space to get away from the madding crowd and find a few moments of peace—not just during the frenzy of the holiday season but all year long. Some of the centers cater to conferences and events, while others offer guided spiritual retreats, individual stays, and a variety of day and weekend classes. All of them welcome visitors.

So take a little break. Head over to Ben Lomond and relax by the old fashioned heater in the Quaker Center's library. Drive up to Mount Madonna and savor a mid-morning chai with a spectacular view of Monterey Bay at Anjaneya's World Café. Or make your way to the Vajrapani Institute in Boulder Creek and listen to the trees. Life is short. Just go

Ferndel Creek is one of the three creeks that wind their way through the 640 acre Mount Herman Conference Grounds.

PHOTOGRAPHS MICKEY CARROLL

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Land of Medicine Buddha

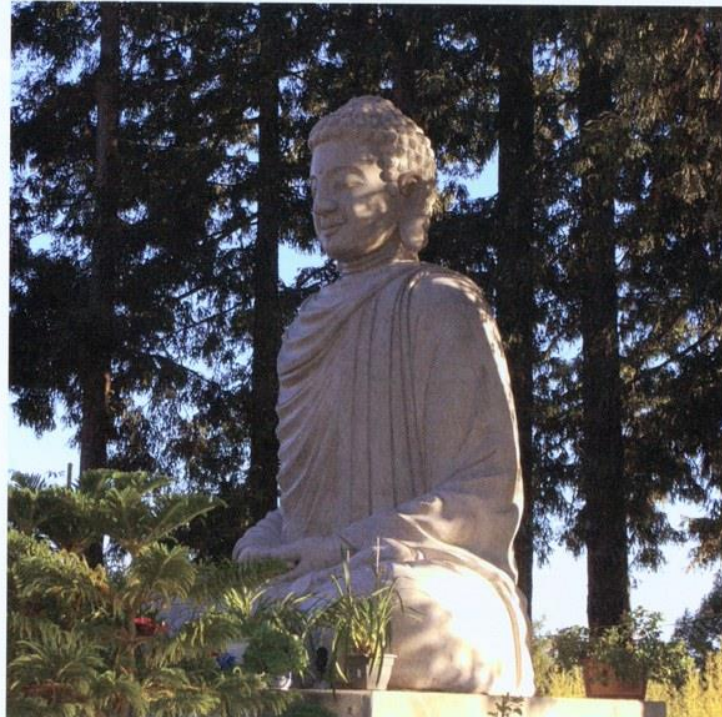
The drive from the freeway to Land of Medicine Buddha is only three miles, but it takes about 10 minutes to get up the narrow, winding road through the redwoods. Each of those minutes puts the stress and noise of everyday life farther behind you.

Standing in front of the huge prayer wheel at the entrance to the 108-acre Soquel retreat center, the freeway feels like a distant galaxy. People aren't running around talking on cell phones. (They can't. There's no signal up there.) Colorful Tibetan prayer flags are suspended between tall trees. Maroon-robed nuns with shaved heads show children how to turn the prayer wheel. Signs point to the meditation hall, dining room, and combination bookstore/gift shop. Hiking trails meander through the trees. The atmosphere is both peaceful and hospitable.

There's a long history of hospitality at this site. Situated next to the 10,000-acre Nisene Marks State Park redwood preserve, it used to be a country inn. Many of the resort amenities remain, including a full-size spring-water swimming pool that serves as the centerpiece of the center's Lotus Spa. There's a sauna with outdoor showers, and massage services are available to residential guests. Guest rooms, which run \$100 a night, are airy, clean, and have private bathrooms. The fresh vegetarian cuisine, prepared for guests by a local chef, is delicious. It's made from seasonal local produce and mostly organic ingredients.

Just being in that environment will lower your blood pressure, but for those who are looking for a more spiritual experience, there

Surrounded by prayer flags, Lama Yeshe's Great Enlightenment Stupa is a focal point of the grounds at Vajrapani Institute in Boulder Creek.



Basked in the afternoon light, a stone Buddah mediates outside Kim Son Meditation Center on Mount Madonna.



The Chapel at St. Clare's Retreat overlooks a beautifully manicured outdoor version of the Stations of the Cross.

are guided meditations and practice days as well as weekend retreats and workshops on special topics. The entire campus is filled with beautiful sacred objects. The main prayer wheel contains 64 billion om mani padme hum mantras, microfilmed from an original script written by the Dalai Lama. The meditation hall houses eight life-size Buddha statues blessed by His Holiness. And the Wish Fulfilling Temple, nestled high among the redwoods, is filled with exquisite, finely detailed Tibetan paintings by a resident artist who studied at the Kopan Monastery in Kathmandu. Lama Zopa Rinpoche called Land of Medicine Buddha, "Disneyland for Enlightenment."

You don't have to be Buddhist to sign up for a retreat or enjoy a visit to the center. In fact, they welcome everyone to stop by to hike in the woods, relax, meditate, or walk your dog (on a leash). They also welcome overnight guests any time rooms are available.

For more information, visit landofmedicinebuddha.org.

Mount Hermon

Mount Hermon is another center that is close to the freeway but feels like a faraway mountain sanctuary. Many people know it for the zip line canopy tours and eco-adventures, but the interdenominational center was the first Christian camp west of the Mississippi, founded in 1905 at what was then the Tuxedo Station on the Alameda-to-Santa-Cruz railroad line. The geography is beautiful, but it kind of feels like a little town. In a way, it

is. Covering an area of about a square mile, Mount Hermon is a census designated area with its own post office and zip code.

The center is basically a venue for group-sponsored conferences and retreats, but anyone can go visit, walk around, and take advantage of the eco-adventure facilities. The well-stocked bookstore/gift shop feels a little more commercial than some other retreat centers, but it's fun to browse. Mount Hermon doesn't accommodate individual retreats,

but events such as concerts are open to the public. The 2013 Christmas celebration features craft boutiques, "twinkle tours" of the redwood canopy under the stars, and a buffet dinner and concert on December 6.

For information about the Christmas concert or to learn more about Mount Hermon, visit mounthermon.org.



Venerable Drimay, a Buddhist Nun, explains the Prayer Wheel to a group of visiting Cub Scouts at The Land of Medicine Buddha in Soquel.



Bathed in the morning shadows, Diane Myers-Lipton, owner of The Sequoia Retreat Center, winds her way through their labyrinth.

St. Clare's Retreat Center

Sitting in the chapel at St. Clare's Retreat Center, the soaring floor-to-ceiling window behind the altar seems to reach all the way past the top of the redwoods to heaven itself. The view alone is enough to make you a believer. And if for some reason it doesn't, spend a few minutes with Sister Thérèse, the spiritual director. She visited the Soquel retreat center as a layperson in 1972 and loved it so much she became a nun the following year.

Sister Thérèse meets the world as it is, with a cheerful sense of humor. That down-to-earth attitude serves her well in directing individual retreats for those who want to spend time alone rather than taking part in an organized group retreat. She is emphatic that you don't have to be Catholic, and promises she'll show you a good time. Of that, there is little doubt. It would be very difficult not to enjoy yourself in such a beautiful setting.

There's something particularly calming about taking a peaceful walk, following crooked hand-made rock steps up into the trees, and coming upon a statue of St. Francis at the top of the little hill. Walking back down and passing a real, live Franciscan friar on the path is even better. The friars, along with other clergy from many orders, direct retreats at St. Clare's. There are day and weekend retreats for men, women, couples, individuals, and mothers and daughters. A weekend retreat, including meals and lodging, is just \$130.

The lodgings have a comforting mid-century feel, which is probably owing to their former incarnation as the Mountain View Ranch Hotel. According to Sister Thérèse, the

buildings need some major repairs, including a new heating system, and a campaign is underway to raise \$250,000 for that. The Sisters of St. Clare have taken vows of poverty, so they are asking their flock to help.

Individuals of all faiths are welcome to sign up for a retreat or stop in for a visit. For more information and a complete retreat schedule, visit stclaresretreatcenter.com.

Pema Osel Ling

Pema Osel Ling is one of the most beautiful spots you could possibly find, high in the Santa Cruz Mountains with amazing views of Monterey Bay, but it seems to function as more of a catering venue than a retreat

center. While groups can rent the Watsonville facility for retreats, the primary use seems to be for weddings. That said, the eco-friendly center does have indoor and outdoor meeting areas, overnight lodging accommodations, scrumptious catering by chef Peter Marti, and a full-size lap pool.

You won't find a schedule of retreats to attend, or overnight accommodations for one person, but there is refuge to be found in a morning or afternoon walk on the premises. Check in with the office when you arrive—it's right next to the main driveway—and let them know you just want to take a quiet walk. Be sure to check out the Stupa and World



Strung between two redwoods, a series of Tibetan prayer flags flutter gently in an afternoon breeze at Vajrapani Institute in Boulder Creek.



Peace Park. And bring your own food, as there is no public café on the premises.

For more information on Pema Osel Ling, visit polmountainretreat.com.

Mount Madonna Center

If you go to Mount Madonna Center to find a little peace of mind, make sure you know ahead of time how to get there. This is one time you don't want to try to find your own way, or you may wind up on roads that seem perfectly fine when you turn onto them, but become impassable as you climb up the mountain. The center's website, which features a bold-faced warning against using online maps or GPS, provides driving directions. Use them.

At an altitude of 1,893 feet, the summit is far from the highest in the Santa Cruz Mountains, but it feels like the top of the world when you're looking down at Monterey Bay from the deck next to Anjaneya's World Café. Add a delicious chai tea with a couple

of samosas and you'll swear you're in heaven. Look away from the ocean, and you might see an entire family of deer leisurely nibbling on the meadow grass.

Just footsteps away is the Sankat Mochan Hanuman Temple, built for Baba Hari Dass, a silent monk from northern India. Dass, or Babaji as he is known by his students, has not spoken since 1952. The resident monk communicates by writing on a small whiteboard. So many people come to the temple to see him on Saturdays that you now have to make reservations to get in. But there is nothing to stop you from seeing the beautiful building and hearing the peaceful sounds of temple bells.

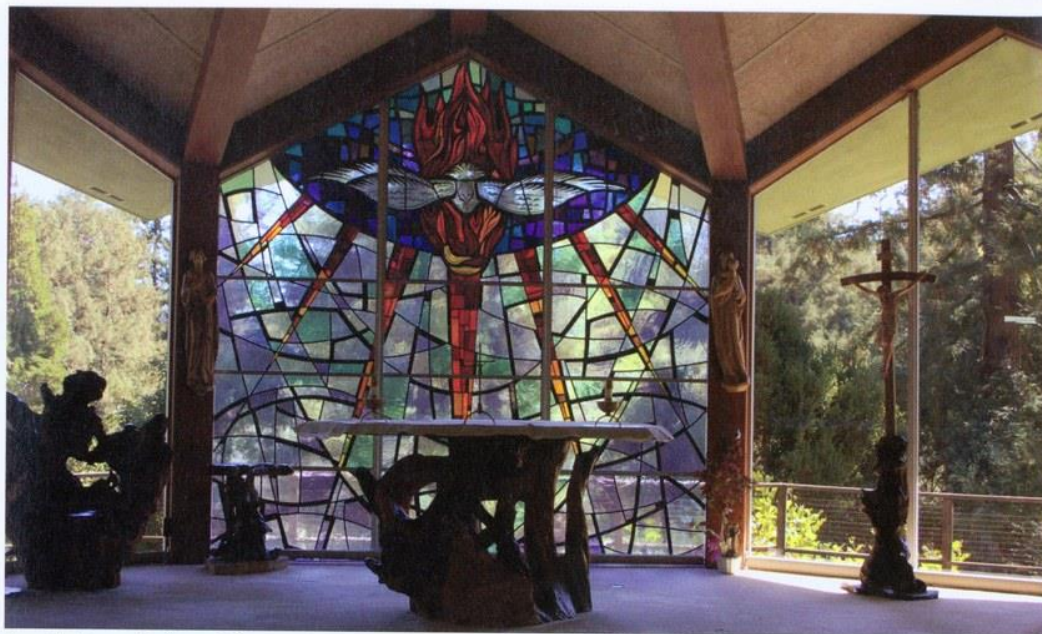
Stroll through the area and you will see many delightful things—statues of Ganesh and other deities, trees with swings, a lion fountain, a koi pond, a lake for swimming and canoeing, a hot tub surrounded by madrones, an organic garden, a bookstore/gift shop, and more. There's even a spa, Kaya Kalpa Wellness

Center, where you can get Ayurvedic, Swedish, and Shiatsu massage and other bodywork treatments.

Mount Madonna offers a wide variety of classes and retreats all year long. Themes range from humor for health and self-discovery to writing, living in gratitude, and many yoga and meditation practices. Anyone can sign up online. Individuals are always welcome to take personal retreats at the center. Rates include all meals, and range from about \$50 to \$150 per day, depending on the type of lodging you select.

You don't have to commit to a retreat to take classes at Mount Madonna. Free yoga classes are offered every Saturday morning (7:30 to 9:30) and most other mornings as well. The Saturday class includes the basics of Ashtanga Yoga as taught by Baba Hari Dass:

(Top) An expansive view of the San Lorenzo Valley from the ridge at The Sequoia Retreat Center in Ben Lomond.



A rustic altar and a beautiful stained glass backdrop create an inspiring setting at St. Clares Retreat's Chapel near Soquel.

philosophy and practice of purifications, breathing practices, basic postures, and relaxation and meditation techniques. The class schedule is online.

There's so much to see and do at Mount Madonna Center that you couldn't possibly squeeze it into a day. One visit makes you want to return again and again.

For more information about Mount Madonna Center, visit mountmadonna.org.

To make temple reservations, visit hanumanfellowship.org.

Kim Son Meditation Center

Just down the road from Mount Madonna Center is Tu Viện Kim Sơn, a Vietnamese Buddhist monastery and meditation center founded by the Venerable Thich Tinh Tu. It's currently undergoing a lot of construction, but is worth visiting just to see the huge Buddha statue and the many beautiful sacred objects in the meditation hall.

All are welcome to visit Kim Son. Everyone speaks Vietnamese, but the monks and nuns usually enjoy an opportunity to practice their English and always are very helpful. When popular Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh teaches there, headsets with English translations are often available. He travels with a delegation of monks and nuns from six U.S. and European monasteries. In late October of this year, he offered a Day of Mindfulness called, "Nourishing Great Togetherness." In keeping with the Vietnamese tradition, events at Kim Son are free and include meals. Donations are

always accepted—many followers are very generous—but are never required.

If you visit Kim Son, make sure you walk around to the back of the main building and check out the amazing little gift shop filled with singing bowls, figurines, wrist and neck malas, prayer flags, candies, and many other lovely items, all very reasonably priced. The proceeds support the center's many activities and programs.

Quaker Center

Arrive at the rustic Quaker Center on a chilly Ben Lomond morning, and you'll be welcomed into the cozy library by a sign on the door: "Always open. Please come in." That's a sign you'll never see in downtown Santa Cruz. Instantly, your shoulders relax and the concerns of everyday life seem to lighten. Inside, warmth radiates from an old fashioned, free-standing heater, and comfy couches and easy chairs beg you to sit for awhile.

There are no swimming pools or statues at the Quaker Center. The natural beauty of the redwood forest needs no decoration. But well-used children's play equipment announces by its very presence that the retreat center is family-friendly. Situated on 80 acres in the heart of the redwoods, the facility offers a year-round schedule of retreats with a variety of themes, from parenting, social justice, or Quaker mystics to the annual music and dance retreat in December.

There are two large group lodges fairly close to the main road, but the two individual

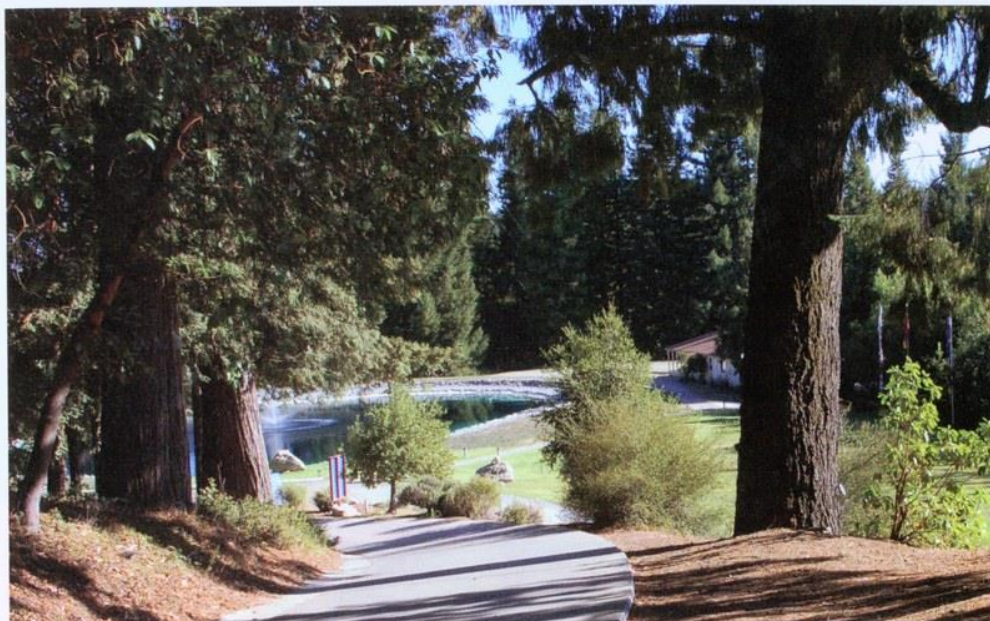
cottages are a bit of a hike up the hill. All retreats are self-service, which means individuals and groups are responsible for providing their own meals. Many groups hire a cook/caterer, but individuals who wish to stay for a night, a week, or longer must purchase and prepare their own food. All of the lodgings have full kitchens and in the Quaker tradition are simple, comfortable, and modestly priced.

Individuals are welcome to visit any time, but call two months in advance to arrange a stay in one of the individual cottages (a two-night minimum stay is required). Personal retreats are self-directed, and might include time for reading, writing, study, meditation, or just relaxing. You don't have to be a Quaker, as long as you are in harmony with their values of integrity, simplicity, equality, peace, and respect.

It's a lovely place to hike, walk the stone labyrinth, or just sit and read in the library. Have breakfast or lunch at a café in Ben Lomond and then go up the hill for a bit of solitude. The redwood forest is beautiful but the hilly terrain can be challenging for some. For more information about the Quaker Center, visit quakercenter.org.

The Sequoia Retreat Center

You know a place is serene if Type-A Silicon Valley executives go there to unplug. Cell phone coverage is great at The Sequoia Retreat Center and the spacious cabins are normally set up with Wi-Fi, but proprietor Diane Myers-Lipton unplugs everything and



A secluded road winds down a hillside the center of the picturesque grounds at Pema Osel Ling near Corralitos,

collects mobile devices when high-tech execs come to the Ben Lomond sanctuary for an electronic detox.

The Sequoia is just up the road from the rustic Quaker Center, but it's a completely different environment. Here you'll find spectacular architecture, world class artwork, and paved roads that wind their way up to sweeping vistas. You might think that's purely a function of money, but it's not. One of the most stunning buildings, Las Alas de Las Aguilas (Wings of the Eagle), features sky-high cathedral beam ceilings and is illuminated by sunlight that washes through the floor-to-ceiling windows. It was built in the 1970s, not by a high-priced construction company but barn-raising style. The 100 people who built it each signed their names to the stones they placed in the massive fireplace. Somehow it feels fitting that such a building be surrounded by the tallest living species on earth.

People were willing to do all that work because The Sequoia hosted groups from all over the world who were working together to try to create peaceful solutions to seemingly intractable problems. These seminars included groups from Israel and Palestine who met here and came up with a document to be used in peace negotiations.

Peace and unity are central themes at The Sequoia. Today it often comes in the form of weddings and tech-free weekends, but many other groups hold conferences and retreats. All of these are essentially private

events, so you can't sign up to attend. The Sequoia cannot accommodate individual guests, but you may be able to stop by for a peaceful walk if you call in advance. For more

information about The Sequoia Retreat Center, visit sequoiaretreatcenter.com.



A Pujari takes part in an Aarti or Ceremony of Lights at the Sankat Mochan temple at Mount Madonna Center.

Vajrapani Institute

The road to Boulder Creek's Vajrapani Institute gets pretty rugged in spots, making you wonder when the four-wheel drive is going to kick in. You keep chugging up the hill with no sign of civilization in sight, and then, just when you think for sure you're lost, you see a small sign telling you there's another mile or so to go. (The Google maps people obviously didn't drive up that far.) Finally, the redwood canopy recedes, the sun shines through, and you see strings of brightly colored Tibetan prayer flags tied to the trees, welcoming you to the Vajrapani Institute for Wisdom Culture. One student said, "As we drove into Vajrapani, I felt like I was embraced by God. There could be no better welcome."

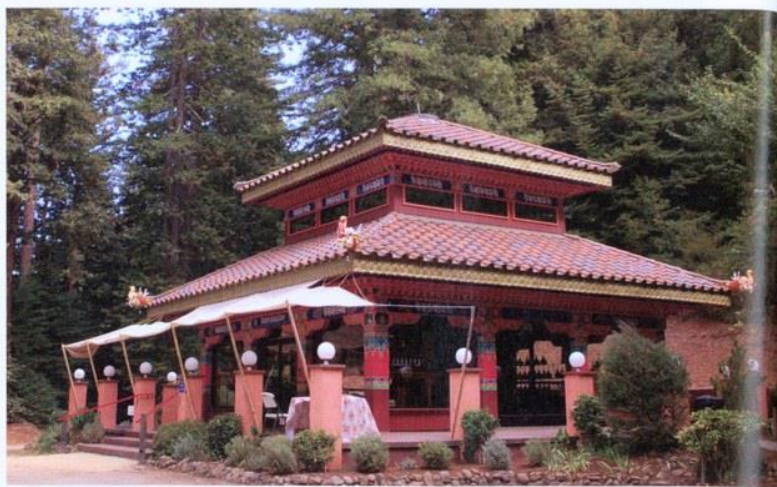
The land and buildings here have been blessed by many holy people over the years, including the Dalai Lama. There are statues and stupas and flags everywhere you look. The brilliant colors, gold leaf, and elaborate thangka paintings are stunning, especially next to the brilliant blue sky and tall redwoods. Inside the main hall, a busy kitchen crew prepares for the next meal. Upstairs, a weekend retreat winds to a close. There's a lot going on, yet the place feels serene and calm.

The Vajrapani Institute is truly a contemplative center. Its entire focus is on transforming spiritual teachings into practical experience. A year-long schedule of courses and retreats are open to the public; financial assistance is available to those who need it. There are introductory, intermediate, and advanced programs, involving varying levels of silence. Some programs are silent only during meditation practice, while others may involve half-day or full silence.

This place is blissfully quiet. Up the hill where the seven private retreat cabins are located, it is so quiet you can hear the prayer flags gently fluttering high above your head. Wind chimes tinkle in the distance like a tiny



A wooden statue of Quan Am Nghin Mat Nghin Tay (who was given a 1000 arms to reach out to the poor) at Kim Son Meditation Center.



The Wish Fulfilling Temple is located on the highest point of land at the Land of Medicine Buddha.



The silent meditation cottage at the Quaker Center.

symphony, and every step you take makes a lovely, deliberate crunch as your shoe touches the leaves on the ground. You notice everything more when it's silent. Even the views seem more intense. That must be great for the private retreatants, who shower in a wooden bath house with open-air windows overlooking the entire valley.

You don't have to be a Buddhist to attend a retreat at the Vajrapani Institute. Individuals are welcome to stop by for a visit. It's not easy to get to, but it is an exceptional place to walk around, enjoy the silence, and take refuge in the redwoods. For more information, visit vajrapani.org. ♦

FIND YOUR SOLITUDE

Land of Medicine Buddha

5800 Prescott Road, Soquel, CA 95073
(831) 462-8383 • www.landofmedicinebuddha.org

Mount Hermon

37 Conference Drive, Felton, CA 95018
(831) 335-4466 • www.mounthermon.org

St. Clare's Retreat Center

381 Laurel Glen Road, Soquel, CA 95073
(831) 423-8093 • www.stclaresretreatcenter.com

Pema Osel Ling

2013 Eureka Canyon Road, Corralitos, CA 95076
(831) 761-6270 • www.polmountainretreat.com

Mount Madonna Center

445 Summit Road, Watsonville, CA 95076
(408) 846-4064 • www.mountmadonna.org

Kim Son Meditation Center

574 Summit Road, Watsonville, CA 95076
(408) 848-1541

Quaker Center

1000 Hubbard Gulch Road, Ben Lomond, CA 95005
(831) 336-8333 • www.quakercenter.org

The Sequoia Retreat Center

11445 Alba Road, Ben Lomond, CA 9500
(831) 336-5060 • www.sequoiaretreatcenter.com

Vajrapani Institute

19950 Kings Creek Rd, Boulder Creek, CA 95006
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