

## ITP and the California Fires

By Tim Vermeulen, ITPI Intern

The warm embrace of the California sun was welcoming after having left behind a chilly wind-swept Amsterdam. I took off my layers and made my way to downtown San Francisco thinking the heat was probably usual this time a year. It was October, the leaves were changing, and the landscape looked barren. Peering out the window of the BART, I was wondering what my visit here would reveal.



I had travelled all the way to San Francisco to learn about different therapeutic approaches to well-being. In particular, I wanted to immerse myself in a practice called ITP. I was inspired by its integral approach, which to me was a necessary challenge to the pervading western dichotomy between mind and body. Moreover, it was apparent that ITP as a practice was inseparable from its community, and this was something I had begun to cherish over the years of visiting religious, agricultural and indigenous communities around the world. Yet, of all the communities I had visited, the ITP community was a little different. Simply put, I had never before experienced such a readiness to invite someone new into the circle and with such warm-heartedness. Many members offered a living space in their homes. It was heart-warming to say the least, and I was, and am, ever grateful.

About three days after my arrival, I woke up at Rachael Feigenbaum's place early in the morning, wondering if this thick mist was what everyone was taking about when they said "San Francisco fog." I was still getting over my jetlag, and in a groggy state hoisted myself to the side of the bed. With a deep sigh I readied myself for the day when I noticed the smell of burning wood. I imagined that it was probably due to a nearby fire. I got out of bed to prepare myself for my journey to Pam's home, as all roads ITP lead, inevitably, to Pam. Once there, I would learn more about ITP and help out if I could. As Pam pulled up, Rachael and I made our way outside to greet her when she told us about the wildfires. The following few days were met with confusion and worry, but the Kata provided a much-needed source for grounding.

Unfortunately, the winds picked up and suddenly it became apparent that many would lose their homes and livelihoods. Everyone's mind turned to friends and family, calling to see if they were safe, to find out where the fires were headed next, to hope memories and cherished moments wouldn't turn to ash. Everyone I met was close to the fires, and if not physically, they knew someone who was. Could any practice in such circumstances penetrate deep enough to provide stability?

Despite the abysmal air quality, in both Falkirk Cultural Center and in the Aikido of Tamalpais dojo, people continued to come and practice. I was surprised at how many showed up and it was a testament to the dedication of ITP practitioners. It goes without saying that the fire was an obvious

topic in group sharing. Some expressed having difficulty maintaining the practice on their own, given the circumstances, but also that the community provided stability and a sense of rootedness. Nevertheless, here they were, practicing. And as people continued to share, a shift in focus occurred, one that moved beyond the fire. It was as if a collective acknowledgement and expression of sorrow led to a sigh of relief, perhaps even a temporary act of surrender to everything that was happening.

This shift was embodied by movement and the LET exercises were a clear example of this. There was an uninterrupted flow, but more importantly, I saw a room full of smiles. It is not surprising then, that the closing group share was centered on the theme of gratitude. To me, this pointed toward the incredible power of community and practice. It was one of the members of the ITP group, Dusty, who put it most poignantly. He described how the ITP community acted as an anchor, allowing him to practice more, and the more he practiced the more this instilled balance, regardless of how close the fires were to his home.

Without the support of others in times of need, there is perhaps little practice or stability to speak of. Yet, it is both practice and community that inspire great transformation. Specifically, we need a practice that allows for vulnerability, openness and expression on all levels; a practice that fosters love and stability, the very same I have been speaking of, the kind that is ready to invite a stranger into the group, with loving-embrace. With so many left without a home in the wake of the devastation, and with so much work left to be done, I hope the power of community and practice find its way to everyone, like it found me.