

Walking Mountains

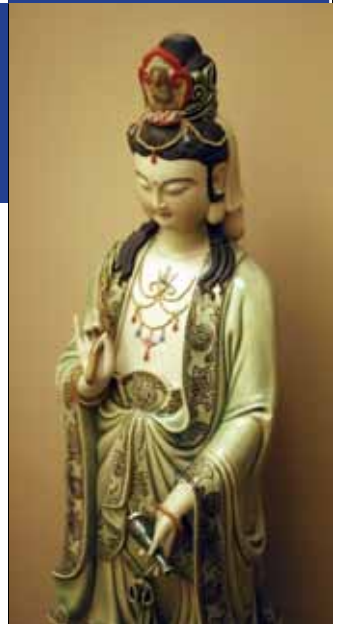
"The green mountains are always walking"—*Daokai*

Dear Sangha and Friends,

A new year and with the light returning, so does the energy at the Center. Right away, the January calendar is chock full. How fitting to begin with the Annual Sangha Meeting where significant decisions about budget and projects are made, not to mention the potluck that follows. Remember, this is your Center, and everyone's input is needed. Then, in the first ceremony of the year, we pay homage to Kannon—a gesture of gratitude for her unceasing compassion. This is quickly followed by a 2-day retreat.

In February, Zen Center members will be going to India for pilgrimage, and therefore the Center will be closed from February 6 through the 29th and reopening on March 1. And March brings another burst of energy and events. Please join us.

—Joan White



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Self-Doubt by Josh Kelman



A burning question down through the ages for aspiring Zen students, including some who became well-known Zen Masters, has been, "Why if we are fundamentally perfect Buddhas, do we act like anything but?" Asian Zen students, growing up in a Buddhist culture imbued with a belief in the truth of our inner perfection, inherited a faith in their own perfection which helped drive this passionate inquiry. Many of us, not having this fundamental faith to the same degree, turn this question into self-doubt. So that, looking at our shortcomings, we see ourselves as just not being made of the right stuff.

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MISSION

The Vermont Zen Center's mission is to create a peaceful and inviting environment to support those who seek wisdom, compassion, joy and equanimity within a Buddhist context. The two-fold practice of the Center is to overcome the causes of suffering through spiritual development and to alleviate the world's suffering through outreach activities and the cultivation of a caring attitude to the earth.

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Or that this work is somehow too tough for us. Others may have the necessary inner fortitude, but we do not. We may even have some insight into this view being the sly voice of ego. But it still sticks to us and can lead us astray.

Our practice has tools to address this. From the Buddha, we are told not to accept his words at face value but only if it appeals to our reason. So, we must find it a reasonable proposition that we and all beings are fundamentally flawless. One place to look is at our own teacher and at Zen Masters of old and how they conducted themselves. Embodying selfless lives of wisdom and compassion, they, without exception, claim to be nothing special. That they are at root no better or worse than any of us. They have just done the work, travelled further down the path, and sloughed off a lot more ego-based habits than we have. Central to their deep understanding is that each one of us can discover our essential nature. To see the character and wisdom of these highly developed flesh and blood human beings is therefore to accept that we are not unlike them.

It can be extremely disappointing to be tricked by the same habits, over and over and seem not to have the awareness or the moral courage to overcome them. Welcome to the club. This is so common among Zen students that we can use it as proof that we are indeed on the right track. That our practice is actually bearing the

“It can be extremely disappointing to be tricked by the same habits, over and over and seem not to have the awareness or the moral courage to overcome them.”

same fruit as did those who preceded us. Bitter though this fruit may be, it itself is evidence of progress. And like our Dharma ancestors, past and present, we are on track to gradually move past these sticky habits as our awareness grows.

Zen practice is indeed the practice of awareness. Awareness being both a byproduct of practice and practice itself. As zazen sharpens our focus and our commitment to following the precepts identifies how we really ought to live, we inevitably see actions, beliefs and habit patterns, previously unnoticed, that fall short. The good news is that by seeing them, we can work on them. The difficult part is that the tricky ego will slip in and deem these habit patterns too deeply embedded to overcome or, worse, permanent character flaws. We can remind ourselves that this belief is counter to the teachings. We are not taught that this work is easy. We are taught that we are all fully capable of doing it.

Roshi Martin, in his book, *A Zen Life of Buddha*, tells us that even on the eve of his great enlightenment, the Buddha himself experienced self-doubt in the form of wily Mara speaking through his inner voice. It was the recognition of his lifetimes

of selfless activity that finally deemed the Buddha “worthy.” And central to his great enlightenment was seeing that intrinsically, all living beings were Buddhas, endowed with wisdom and virtue. Just as the Buddha was able to dismiss Mara, his whisperer of self-doubt, we can know that in doubting ourselves, we are doubting the central wisdom of Buddhism. Can we really prove the Buddha wrong?

We recite Zen Master Haikuin’s words, “From the beginning all beings are Buddha.” That pretty much says it all. We are Buddhas, but have such deeply rooted beliefs and habit patterns to the contrary that the idea can seem fantastical. It is only by developing solid faith that we can fully take these words in. That the living examples of teachers down through the ages speak to this truth. That the fundamental discovery of the Buddha was this truth. That everything that draws us to this Path and says to us that we can do better speaks to this truth. Self-doubt is simply the last gasp of a desperate ego trying to assert itself when, in fact, there is no ego and nothing to assert itself into. There’s just us Buddhas. —

Friendliness by Joan White

them — their gifts, hard work, success, and yes, their struggles. We become more aware of what each other carries. It has the power to displace jealousy, impatience, and anger, whether of the present

moment or historical. We have all experienced that simple friendly gesture that turns long-standing negative feelings towards someone around, and the difficult person becomes a friend.

At the Zen Center we are witness to friendliness in myriad ways. The greeter at the front door on Sunday mornings; someone meeting a new member to help them get settled for the evening sitting. And we are also recipients. Sometimes it's a simple bump to the elbow or a wink of the eye, but there's also sage advice and wise words. It's friendliness that helps us to pull off a yard sale that earns \$9,000 plus. Just think about working together to decorate our temple for the Hungry Ghost Ceremony, Temple

Nights, and New Year's Eve. Costa Rican breakfast on Friday mornings.

Friendliness is also the thread that runs through the Term Student Program. We see each other more and interact more because of our sitting and work commitments at the Center. Laughing together, hearing about takuhatsu experiences and missteps. And it is friendliness that creates a safe place to share our shortcomings with commitments and the precepts at Tuesday evening meetings and private ones with precept buddies.

Without limits, our friendliness spills out the doors of the Center into the greater community. When neighbors see us on the roadside picking up trash; dropping off food from the garden at the food shelf; buying plants and exchanging garden tips at Red Wagon, Horsford, and Claussen's nurseries; participating on local boards, and volunteering, we're extending our hand of friendship and people feel it, and want to join in. They chat with us, laugh with us, work with us, and a bond is formed and grows, creating a safer community. It is this capacity to create a safe place that is the greatest power of friendliness. When we practice it together with mindfulness it becomes the root of peace itself. Friendliness—a simple vessel holding kind words, kind gestures. —

When our Dharma brother, Dharman, spoke of Metta Bhavana, he would often use the word friendly, which always struck me. On the face of it, such a simple word, a simple idea that is often taken for granted, but when experienced, runs deep. And in a fast-paced world where communication is governed largely by social media, and even our most heartfelt messages are reduced to a text, the value of friendliness has grown exponentially. Think of it: how visible we feel when someone makes eye contact, calls on the telephone, takes the time to listen. When we are friendly, we not only acknowledge another person's presence, but also share with

Friday Tico Breakfast by Ramiro Barrantes



No one seems to remember exactly why it started, but for about ten years on Fridays, we have had a Costa Rican breakfast at the Center. Everyone in the Sangha is invited.

It started small: members in residence started making it, and occasionally people staying at the Center joined us. It's relatively easy to do, and it scales up well. Most importantly, everyone really likes it! At first it was a small group, but then we thought: why not formally invite the Sangha to join us? And we did.

Costa Ricans are culturally very hospitable. Given the long and close connection between

the Vermont Zen Center and Casa Zen, sharing Costa Rican food with Sangha members is a natural way to socialize and get to know each other better.

The timing for tico breakfast seemed to naturally fall on Friday, providing an end and a celebration of the week. The members in residence get trained on some part of the breakfast, or if people have some particular expertise or inclination, that comes into play as well.

A typical Costa Rican breakfast consists of Gallo Pinto (a dish of seasoned rice and beans to which the traditional Salsa Lizano is added),

eggs, tortillas, fruit, and other delicious things, including Costa Rican coffee. Aside from that and tortillas—which we buy instead of making these days—we also include Pico de Gallo (Costa Rican salsa), plantains, and tropical fruit such as mangoes. We used to include avocados but stopped due to the negative environmental impact caused by their mass production. What we do and how we do it depends on the quantity and expertise of the residents. If, for example, we happen to have an experienced Costa Rican cook, we get the treat of having other special dishes.

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Right after the morning sitting, a team—mostly consisting of residents—prepares the meal. We consider this an extension of morning zazen, so we prepare the food and do the cooking as silently and mindfully as possible. During the gardening season, non-residents who participated in the sitting usually work in the Zen Center gardens. Then at 7:45 a.m., we come together to eat and socialize. Afterwards there is cleanup.

If you want to come, the only thing we request is a donation of five dollars, and also that, unless you are really not able to, you help with the cleanup. This is also done in silence and is just as important as the planning and preparing. Most of the residents are on a tight schedule and given that during the breakfast we socialize, having an efficient cleanup supports everyone's ability to get to work on time and get on with their day.

The tico breakfast has provided a space for connection between old members, new members, trial members, and guests. We have heard many stories, and shared a lot of experiences, and a couple of times a year we might have a dance or two at the end. So, sometime, if you feel like it, come and eat with us! —



Wearing their long cinnamon robes, Nieves and Nathalie sit in a small walled garden filled with flowers: hibiscus, celosia, orchid, heliconia. Blue and green hummingbirds dart about their tidy terrace. Nieves has set out her sewing machine. Nathalie stitches by hand.

Together they make zafus, solid round cushions for the zendo, their sitting hall in Casa Zen. They do not speak, work in companionable silence, tuned to each other, the birds, the spicy fragrance.

Heads bent to their purpose, their quiet reaches out to the coffee trees next door, to the bustling city beyond their wall, and to the volcano on the far horizon spewing plumes of smoke into the clouds.

—Nathalie Sorensen

Ramiro's recipe for Gallo Pinto is on the Zen Center's website at www.vermontzen.org/recipes.html

Upcoming Courses at the Vermont Zen Center

www.vermontzen.org/courses.html

Haiku Poetry

January 6

Through close readings of Japanese poets, participants learn the essential elements of traditional haiku and gain an understanding of the interaction between spiritual practice and poetry, as well as an appreciation of the deeper meaning of haiku. More information and registration on the Zen Center's website.

Intro to Zen

January 13

During the half-day schedule of talks, question periods, demonstrations, and guided meditation, participants are introduced to the body-mind disciplines of Zen Buddhism. More information and registration on the Zen Center's website.

Chaat Cooking

February 3

Chaat are the savory-spicy-tangy snack foods enjoyed in India. They are delicious and addictive. Learn how to make them with the careful instruction of Manju Selinger. More information and registration on the Zen Center's website.

The Buddha's Parinirvana—In India

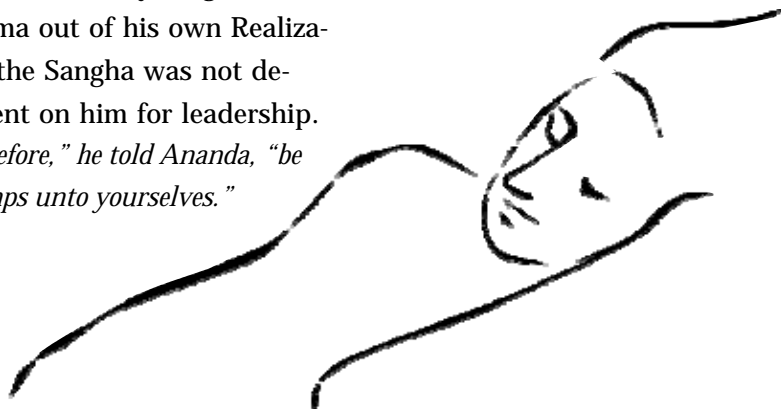
For 45 years the Buddha, after attaining Perfect Enlightenment, preached the Dharma to all who would listen, devoting himself to the welfare of all living beings. But in his 80th year, during the seclusion of the rainy season, he suddenly fell ill. Feeling that his time, though near, had not yet arrived, he entered a deep samadhi to free himself of the disease. Emerging from his meditation he said:

This body has become worn-out and is like an old cart which can only be kept rolling along with great difficulty. My time to be set free from the bonds of becoming, as a chick which

on hatching finally breaks free of its shell, will be in three months.

He reminded Ananda that although his bodily journey was nearing fulfillment, each person was to continue to work at his own Enlightenment. He said that since he only taught the Dharma out of his own Realization, the Sangha was not dependent on him for leadership. "Therefore," he told Ananda, "be ye lamps unto yourselves."

On **Thursday, February 15** (or possibly the following day), those who are on pilgrimage in India will be in Kushinagar, the site of the Buddha's Parinirvana, to commemorate the Buddha's final departure from the realm of birth and death.



Special Ceremony Honoring the Bodhisattva Kannon

On Sunday, January 21 from 9:00 a.m.

to 11:30 a.m. we will pay homage to Kannon, the Bodhisattva of Compassion. This bodhisattva, so beloved in Mahayana countries, is the embodiment of tender compassion. Through this ceremony, we thank Kannon for her unceasing help.

After a half hour of zazen, we begin a series of rounds of sitting, bowing, chanting, and circumambulating. We chant the *Kannon Sutra* in English and Japanese a total of 108 times, recite the *Mantra of Kanzeon* (“Praise to Kannon Bodhisattva”) 108 times, and chant the *Lotus Sutra Scripture of Kanzeon Bodhisattva*, and the *Dharani of Avalokitesvara* three times each.

By the end of the ceremony, we will have made 108 prostrations. Even if you are unable to do prostrations, you can still participate by making standing or partial bows. Members and their families, as well as friends of the Center and non-members are all invited. Anyone who

wishes to pay homage to Kannon Bodhisattva is most welcome to attend.

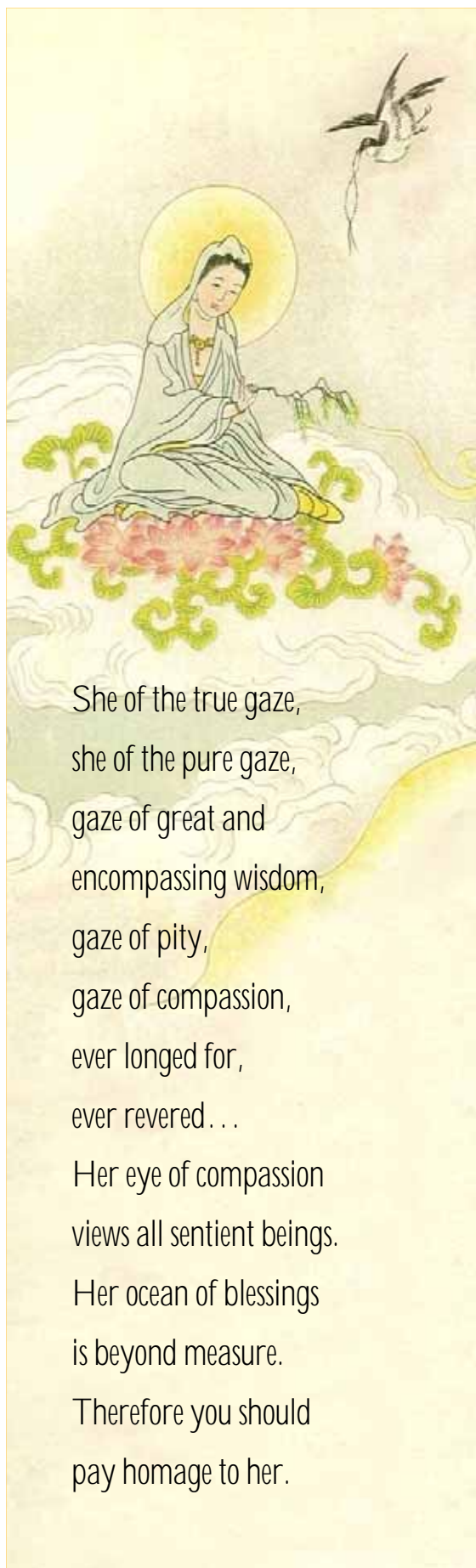
In addition to the bowing, there will be circumambulations, incense offerings, special readings, and a vigorous Rinzai-style chanting of the Kanzeon in Japanese. A few notes about the ceremony:

DEDICATION—You are welcome to dedicate the merit of this ceremony to whomever you wish. There will be a table for the names of those to whom you are dedicating the ceremony.

DONATION—As a concrete expression of compassion, please submit **a monetary donation** which will be given to COTS (Committee on Temporary Shelter). **Please note that checks should be made out to the Zen Center so that we can send COTS one check**

The celebration of Kannon Day affords us a way to express our boundless gratitude to the Bodhisattva of Compassion for her ceaseless, wondrous help. We hope you will join us on this special day.

More information: www.vermontzen.org/ceremony_kannonday.html



She of the true gaze,
she of the pure gaze,
gaze of great and
encompassing wisdom,
gaze of pity,
gaze of compassion,
ever longed for,
ever revered. . .

Her eye of compassion
views all sentient beings.
Her ocean of blessings
is beyond measure.
Therefore you should
pay homage to her.



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*The winter moon:
 A temple without a gate, —
 How high the sky!
 —Buson*

Annual Meeting—Sunday, January 14

The Sangha is invited to participate in our Annual Meeting to help plan for the year ahead. We will discuss the Center’s finances, the year’s schedule, courses, special events, and more. Your input is essential and valued. Please come and help with the decisions and direction of the Center. A link to the meeting will be on the member page. A pot luck lunch follows the meeting. Please bring some vegetarian food to share.

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Annual Meeting Agenda

- 2024 Projects
- 2023 Financial Report
- 2024 Preliminary Budget
- Committee Review and more

