

Walking Mountains

“The green mountains are always walking” – Daokai

Dear Sangha and Friends,

I don't know about you, but for me my “blind animal instinct” kicks in this time of year and it manifests as an impulse to hibernate. Mostly, I just want to pull the covers over my head until the sun wakens me. So I find myself recounting Zen Master Wu Men's poem:

Hundreds of flowers in spring, the moon in autumn,
A cool breeze in summer and snow in winter;
If your mind is not clouded with unnecessary things,
No season is too much for you.

With the season of ceremonies upon us, there's work to be done. We begin December honoring the Buddha's Enlightenment with a ceremony followed by the Rohatsu sesshin. We then move into the New Year's Eve ceremony and, in January, the ceremony honoring Kannon, the Bodhisattva of Compassion.

It's an abundance of ceremonies and, yes, preparation. And all of our work (not to mention our participation in the ceremony itself) is an offering, whether we are cleaning bathrooms or altars. The energy from our work spills out the door of the Center into the world at a time of year and world cycle when it is greatly needed. Our practice on the mat, chanting, workdays, and ceremonies truly help relieve the suffering of all sentient beings. Please join us.

– Joan White

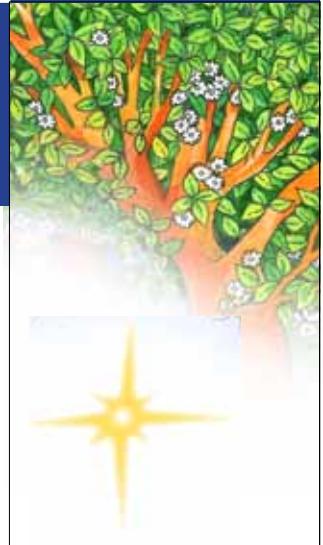


After Sesshin

by Steve Brittain

In March of this year, the New York Times published an editorial commenting on and supporting statements that Pope Francis had made about giving. This brief quotation gets to the heart of the Pope's comments:

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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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It's this: Give them the money, and don't worry about it.....Then he posed a greater challenge. He said the way of giving is as important as the gift. You should not simply drop a bill into a cup and walk away. You must stop, look the person in the eyes, and touch his or her hands.

The reason is to preserve dignity, to see another person not as a pathology or a social condition, but as a human, with a life whose value is equal to your own.

At the time I was strongly moved by this editorial, in part because it was good to see a relatively staid and important publication such as the Times highlighting an essential issue of ethics and practice, but more because it made me feel both motivated and uncomfortable. How many times have I walked by someone on the street who was holding out a hand in request and felt that I did not want to look them in the face, even if I did give them some money?

The memory of this article and this personal challenge came back during the course of the teishos and discussion at the recent Jataka sesshin. Sensei Martin powerfully, skillfully, and beautifully brought us into the heart of humanity, and, indeed, of Zen. This was always grounded in the non-dual, interconnected nature of existence, and a reminder not to be constricted by our usual ego-defined perceptions and self-

“ I also realized that the reason you look at and touch the person you are giving to is not primarily to preserve their dignity. You do it simply to see him or her and to connect with a fellow creature from whom you are not fundamentally separate. ”

conceptions. In particular, it was his description of a brief encounter with an unpretentious, attentive, and helpful woman at a rest stop on the New York Thruway that brought back, “You must stop, look the person in the eyes, and touch his or her hands.”

And so on Friday afternoon, I went to Rutland to do some errands after sesshin. As I was walking along with a cup of cappuccino in one hand and some cleaning solution for my glasses in the other, I saw a fellow standing at the end of the block. He was dressed in rag-tag clothes and had a small sign hanging from his neck that said: “Winter is coming, please help with a motel room.” My route was down the other side

of the street. I briefly thought that I could cross over now and bypass him or I could walk by him and cross over later. I briefly thought of the Dharma discussions at the Center. I knew I would give him some money, but I didn’t know anything else.

As I approached, he looked over at me. There we were, face to face, eye to eye. I stopped, took out my wallet to get some money, and said, “At least for the moment, standing here, it is not too bad.” I handed it to him. He was missing several of his front teeth. He said, “Thank you. My name is James.” He held out his hand and I shook it. “Mine is Steve,” I said.

As I walked down the street toward my car, I realized that what began as a tale of giving was not really about that. I also realized that the reason you look at and touch the person you are giving to is not primarily to preserve their dignity. You do it simply to see him or her and to connect with a fellow creature from whom you are not fundamentally separate. In return, she or he can touch you. This really was a tale about my encounter with a bodhisattva. He gave me his attention, his name, his hand. —



Book Review: *Lincoln in the Bardo*

by Eric Berger

In the late 1860's a photographer claimed he could take photographs of the deceased. In one picture, Mary Todd Lincoln, the widow of the late President, sits with the ghost of her husband standing behind her, his hands comfortingly placed on her shoulders as he kindly looks down. It's like viewing a dream within a dream: Lincoln is a ghost, while his wife still lives; yet she now is a ghost and also was one appearing as an image in a photograph. Meanwhile another "ghost," so to speak, looks at the images of them both. Past and present, separate yet inextricably mixed.

For me, this conjured reflections on George Saunders' new book, *Lincoln in the Bardo*, for which he was recently awarded the Man Booker prize. Like the old photograph, this tale presents mystery and the ineffable while at the same time offering teachings for our lives today.

Mr. Saunders is a Buddhist and there is much that will be recognized by Dharma practitioners in this story, especially regarding karma. Like a parable or a Jataka tale, it conveys much without being didactic.

There is a blend of history and the workings of imagination in this book. Sadly, Willie Lincoln contracted typhoid fever and passed away at a young age in the White House. Mary and Abe Lincoln were shattered with grief. After his entombment, Lincoln went to visit his son several times, weeping and grieving, as loved ones do today. Lincoln quietly holds his dead son with sadness and quiet dignity, while ghosts who do and do not wish to leave the graveyard look on.

Do we recognize something here about ghosts in the human realm?

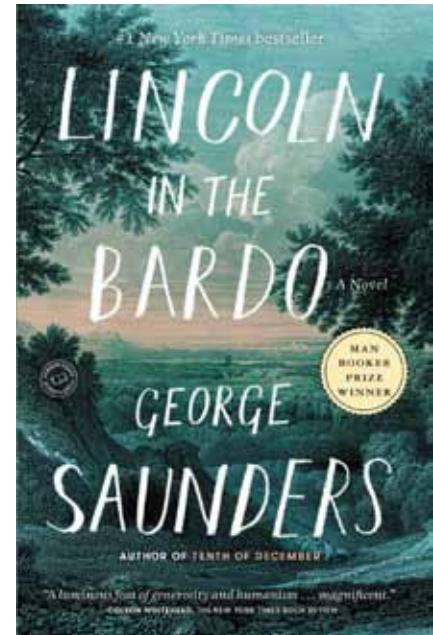
What keeps these ghosts stuck in their coffins, their "sick boxes" as they call them, unable to see the plain fact of their death and predicament? What keeps us stuck? Like humans, as they were in their past life, these spirits form clans, friendships, and rivalries. They have tendencies, habits, and cravings and, as we see in the story, they are trapped by conditions based on past thoughts and deeds.

One ghost rises from his grave horizontally, head pointed in the direction of past business dealings and craved conquests. Like a compass needle moved by the force of a magnetic field, he pivots around in many directions, pointing here and there to the me-oriented intentions and actions of his past life. Who did this to him? What about those conquests? Can he get out?

Yet, these spirits have an intuition, a glimmer of understanding that this place is not one for child-ghosts like Willie or, in the end, even them. They want him to move along. To where? But Willie sees his father and longs to stay with him, to talk once again with his dad. It's heart-rending, but also a trap. Can the more benevolent spirits help him to move on? They can't do it for him, only Willie can do it for himself.

There are helpers. There are always helpers. But is the heart open to benevolence and grace? Angels appear in the graveyard.

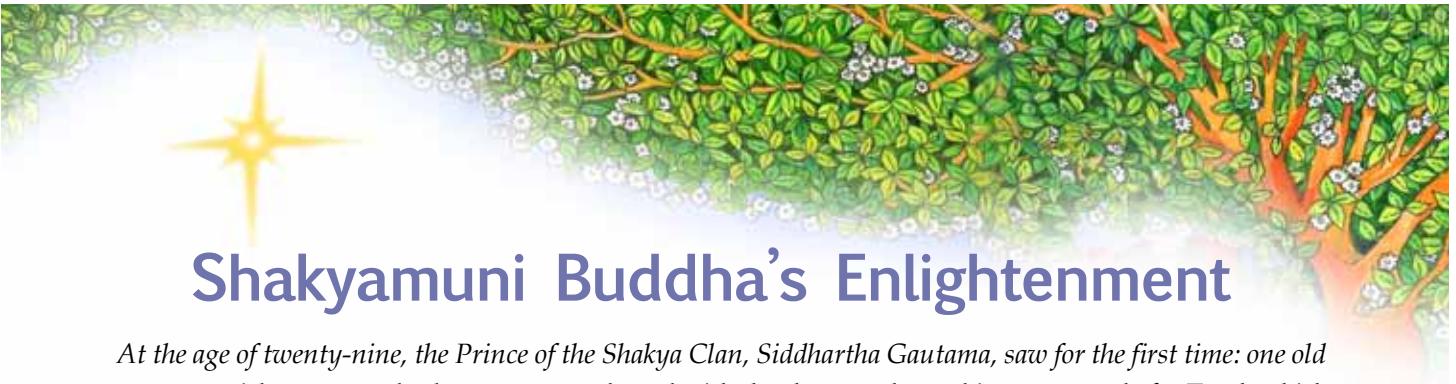
"At one moment, the angels stepping en masse back into a ray of moonlight to impress me with



their collective radiance, I glanced up and saw...a remarkable tableau of suffering: dozens of us frozen in misery: cowed, crawling, wincing before the travails of the particularized onslaught each was undergoing."

The Buddha said that there were some beings for whom the Dharma appeared as poison, including beings in the realm of Hungry Ghosts. There are always helpers, but in the graveyard the angels are often seen as threats. Threats to the notions, habits, and preconceived boundaries clung to by ghosts. The ghosts, any ghost, can leave, can move on. Many don't, held back by illusory thoughts and conceptions; ghosts within ghosts, with ghosts, perhaps, reading the story.

Some ghosts move on in a thunderclap. What are the conditions for release? Why do some see while others don't? And why are they trapped in the first place? See the Four Noble Truths. The good news: even ghosts can be loving and kind, looking and acting beyond themselves, helping and caring, offering themselves for the sake of others. —



Shakyamuni Buddha's Enlightenment

At the age of twenty-nine, the Prince of the Shakya Clan, Siddhartha Gautama, saw for the first time: one old man, one sick man, one dead man, one monk, and with that he was plunged into a struggle for Truth which was to continue until Buddhahood itself had been attained.

The ceremony of Shakyamuni Buddha's Enlightenment will take place at the Center on **Thursday, December 7, at 7:30 p.m.** Since the ceremony this year is not during sesshin, children are welcome to attend.

The Buddha's Enlightenment Ceremony commemorates Shakyamuni Buddha's spiritual realization and opening of the Way. His experience, the culmination of years of intense effort, came after seven days of deep medita-

tion when he saw the morning star.

The ceremony begins with an account of the Buddha's Enlightenment, followed by chanting and a symbolic reading of all the sutras. Please join us for this special event. —

Home Purification Ceremonies

Entering 2018 With a Contented Home

Buddhists love cleanliness and orderliness both in their temples and their minds. Therefore, it is no surprise that the traditional preparation for the New Year is to thoroughly clean one's home. Surfaces are dusted, closets straightened, drawers cleaned, everything put in order. To welcome the New Year, many people set up special altars throughout their homes with candles, incense, and greenery.

Once the cleaning is complete, you can arrange to have Sangha members come to your house to perform a **Home Purification Ceremony**. Through this ceremony, all the unseen pollutants of greed, anger, and ignorance are ritually driven away. It is a spiritual cleansing, which complements the physical one. Since our environment is an extension of ourselves,



by cleaning it we, too, are purified. The ceremony consists of chanting, prostrations, and a circumambulation throughout the house with doors open and lights shining. At every altar incense is offered and candles are lit while the *Sho Sai Myo* is chanted. You

can actually feel your house responding happily, and you, too, will feel renewed. It is a wonderful way to enter the New Year, with body, mind and home cleansed and purified. To participate, please sign up at the Center. —

New Year's Eve Ceremony 2017-2018

On Sunday evening, December 31, the Center will celebrate the beginning of the New Year with zazen, repentance, chanting, the Precepts, and a prayer for peace. Chanting and silence—with a bit of Buddhist bedlam at midnight—is a truly wonderful way to welcome the New Year. Friends and family are cordially invited to come to this ceremony; non-sitters can wait out the zazen portions in the living room or bring a chair into the zendo.

For the New Year's Ceremony, bring some type of noisemaker with you, such as a kazoo, harmonica, recorder, or drum. Part of the ceremony is a noise-making kinhin to “drive out the demons.” We will also read the (unsigned) resolutions of ceremony participants. Write these resolutions down and place them in the resolution bowl when you arrive. This year we will be ringing the Temple Bell 108 times during the evening. The schedule for New Year's Eve is as follows:



8-9:30	<i>Formal zazen with kinhin. Ringing of Temple Bell begins.</i>
9:30	<i>Repentance ceremony followed by a tea break.</i>
10:30	<i>Formal zazen. Reading of resolutions. Purification of Altars.</i>
11:50	<i>Driving out of Demons Circumambulation: Chanting and noise making.</i>
Midnight	<i>Cacophony, ending with “Happy New Year! May Peace Prevail on Earth!”</i>
12:01	<i>Moment of silence. Chanting: Prajna Paramita. Abbreviated Jukai Ceremony.</i>
12:20	<i>Candle-lighting Ceremony. New Year's Prayer. Refreshments.</i>

Please come—**members are welcome to bring family and children.** The kids can sleep in the bedrooms until the circumambulation or take part in all the ceremonies if they wish. **Non-member adults** (no children, please) are also cordially invited. If you are coming from a distance and need to spend the night, you are welcome to stay at the Center; just let us know ahead of time. Many different things happen throughout the evening, so it is helpful to know who is coming. You can sign up on the sheet on the bulletin board or, if you live out of town, give a call. We hope you will join us!

Hunger Banquet 2017

Ninety-three people attended this year's Hunger Banquet for the benefit of Oxfam America, the Chittenden Emergency Food Shelf, and the Shelburne Emergency Food Shelf. We raised **\$11,000** thanks to the generosity of the many donors and attendees who eagerly placed bids on the 58 silent auction items as well as the beautiful raffle basket donated by Trader Joe's. Thank you to all who contributed to this event—local business, food purveyors, members and friends of the Center. It was our most successful ever!



2018 SESSHINS, RETREATS, and TRAINING PROGRAMS			
DATES	DURATION/ACTIVITY	LOCATION	DEADLINE
February 1-4	3-day Sesshin + all day	Costa Rica	
February 23-25	2-day Retreat	Vermont	February 9
April 14-21	7-day Sesshin	Vermont	March 17
April 24-29	5-day Training Program	Costa Rica	
May 30-June 3	4-day Garden Intensive	Vermont	N/A
June 9-16	7-day Sesshin	Costa Rica	
July 22-27	5-day Training Program	Vermont	N/A
July 28-August 4	7-day Sesshin	Vermont	July 7
August 26-31	5-day Sesshin	Costa Rica	
September 6-9	3-day Sangha Weekend	Vermont	N/A
October 4-7	3-day Sesshin	Costa Rica	
October 12-19	7-day Jataka Sesshin	Vermont	September 21
December 1-8	7-day Rohatsu Sesshin	Vermont	November 17
December 12-15	3-day Retreat	Costa Rica	

December 2017

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
					1	2
				Costa Rica 3-Day Retreat (11/29-12/2)		
3 Sesshin Set-up	4 AM ZAZEN MON-FRI Finding Your Seat Meeting	5 PM ZAZEN Sesshin Set-up	6	7 PM ZAZEN The Buddha's Enlightenment Ceremony	8	9 Sesshin
10	11	12	13	14	15	16
Vermont 7-Day Rohatsu Sesshin 12/9-16 VZC CLOSED DURING SESSHIN						
17	18	19	20	21	22	23
ZC CLOSED FOR THE HOLIDAYS (12/17-26)						
24 ZC CLOSED New Year's Eve Ceremony	25 ZC CLOSED	26	27	28	29	30
New Year's Eve Ceremony Workdays—No Formal Sittings						



Workdays for New Year's Eve

Wednesday, December 27, through Saturday, December 30, will be devoted to cleaning our temple in preparation for the New Year. Altars are set up throughout the Center, the house is cleaned from top to bottom, and everything is refreshed for the coming year. There will be no formal sittings during that time, though members are welcome to sit whenever they wish.

If you can spare an hour or two or help any time during the week, it would be greatly appreciated. With our temple cleaned and purified, we will usher in the New Year.

WINTER ADVISORY

As cold weather approaches, please keep in mind that if there is a storm watch, heavy snowfall, or dangerous driving conditions on the day of a sitting, teisho or ceremony, please call the Center before setting out as the sitting might be canceled. In any event, it's best not to venture forth if you feel the roads are unsafe.



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Come now! I will sleep;

New Year's Day

Is a thing of the morrow.

- Buson



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Wishing you
a Happy,
Healthy,
and Peaceful
New Year!

