

# Walking Mountains

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

*Dear Sangha and Friends,*

As the spring equinox approaches, buds swell, birds arrive, hibernating creatures yawn, and life becomes, well, a little bit noisier. How fitting that we celebrate the creativity among our Sangha members and their families at Sangha Entertainment Day this month. Young and old break out their flutes and guitars, perform skits, recite poetry, and sing to their hearts content. Fingers crossed someone shows up with a tuba this year.

It's as if the month of April itself is dressed in saris and adorned with sweet candies, cookies, and cakes, and then lit with candles and flowers. Oh, Temple Nights. To bow, to sit at one of the many altars is to be reminded of who we truly are. Followed by Jukai, when we strengthen our resolve to practice and realize the Buddhadharma. Please join us.

*—Joan White*



## Life is Cause and Effect by Nowa Crosby

**A**s we live our daily lives, cause and effect, or karma, is something we don't often think about. We tend to believe it's the large things we do and say that affect our karma. But that's not how it works. The last three years alone have made that obvious. Look how much has happened and how much has changed.

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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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One of the biggest and most obvious changes that happened at the Vermont Zen Center is how we now conduct sittings and ceremonies. Many of us thought that Zoom was a temporary tool that would be used only during the pandemic or for special occasions. Instead, it has connected our extended Sangha not only across the Northeast, but across Canada, Costa Rica, Panama, and Europe in ways we could not have foreseen three years ago this month. Every day at the 6 a.m. morning sittings, there are an average of six to fifteen people on Zoom, plus eight to fifteen people in person. That was not possible before the pandemic. Cause and effect.

It's easy to think of cause and effect, karma, as good or bad. Another way to express it would be skillful and unskillful. When we look at it this way, we can see how the details of our life shape our karma. What is essential; who is essential? The great pandemic teacher shows us that all those we pass on the street, in the grocery store, the hardware store, the gas station are essential. Essential workers yes, but essential in how and with whom we interact on a daily basis. Essential to how we live as human beings. In reality little things can have as much

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effect on us and others as the bigger things. How we talk to someone, whether with kindness, indifference, or harsh language, sets off a chain of events in ourselves and others that cannot be foreseen.

Over and over, people have remarked how using Metta (Lovingkindness) practice, has changed their lives. By putting Metta into daily practice and not hanging onto anger, by speaking kindly to a stranger, a family member or friend, people feel better. They can see how their lives are no longer weighted down with negative thoughts and feelings and unskillful actions. People from all kinds of backgrounds who have taken the Metta course have said they have experienced this.

A couple of years ago, my mother called and was very distressed about a family issue that seemed to have no resolution for her. After talking for a while, it became clear that what would be helpful to her was to practice Metta. I offered to do a weekly

one-on-one Metta practice with her and she accepted the offer. What is usually taught as a six-week course turned into a six-month weekly practice that we did together. This had an enormous impact on our relationship, and gave her tools and another outlook that dovetailed into her own existing spiritual beliefs. It gave her a doorway to understand cause and effect in her life and a way to avoid anger and holding onto negative thoughts and unskillful actions. Through the practice of Metta she could put into place more skillful thoughts and actions and reduced the suffering in her life.

What does a kind word, a smile, or restraining ourselves from unnecessary hurtful comments cost us? Nothing, especially if it supplants our old unskillful habits. It is this transformation of our habit patterns that has the most impact on the cause and effect in our daily lives. The impact it has on the lives of others as well as our own is incalculable. —

# Leap by Aylie Baker

The last two summers I lived near the small coastal town of Damariscotta, Maine. Not long after my arrival, my landlord and now dear friend, BB, took me to the river. She wanted to show me the fish.

Damariscotta is located on the ancestral lands of the Wawenok Abenaki. The word Damariscotta, for which the tidal river and adjacent lake are also named, comes from the original name for this area, Madamascontee. It means “a place of an abundance of alewives,” or, “where the fish meet.”

Alewives are small fish, as long as a hand is wide. Their bellies and sides are silver, and their backs are greenish-gray, almost purple in some light. They spend most of their lives in the ocean, moving in large schools up to 100 miles offshore. But each May, just as the serviceberry begins to bloom along roadsides and fields, the alewives come back to the rivers, traveling upstream to spawn in the freshwater lakes and ponds where they were born.

Scientists do not know exactly what calls them back each spring. It might be as simple as the shift in sunlight and the climbing temperature that signals their return. Some say the older, more mature fish



know when it is time. One woman told me it is the snow melting out of the mountains that brings them. Catching the scent of their birthwaters on eddies far out at sea, the alewives turn for shore, finding their way through currents and over shoals back to their natal streams. Whatever it is, come April, a deep longing stirs inside them and they set out for home.

The fish swim up the river in bursts, arriving like a pulse with each rising tide. At first they come in small groups and later, as the days progress, in schools of several hundred or more. Looking down on them from a bridge or a boat, it is almost impossible to track a single fish. It is as if some quivering whale-being is making its way up the channel. Without colliding, the alewives weave and dart in and out around one another, moving to-

gether as one shimmering body-mind.

I'll never forget those first weeks. It seemed as if the whole community had come out to greet the fish. Families gathered on the bridge and alongside the newly restored fish ladder. Hundreds of gulls kept watch from the roof of the small church. Blue herons and kingfishers, ospreys, bald and golden eagles, all circled the bay, ready to receive them.

During the height of the spawn, I would stop by on my way home from work to sit by the fish ladder and see them come in. Over and over I watched the alewives fling themselves onwards, every muscle bent on reaching home. Even with the ladder, not every leap was successful, and often it took many repeat attempts to reach the next pool. Yet they showed no

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## Temple Nights

Temple Nights, on **Tuesday, April 4** and **Thursday, April 6**, are two special evenings set aside for people of all ages to sit informally before beautiful altars honoring Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. They take the place of regular sittings and **begin at 6:30 p.m. and end at 8:30 p.m.** with a special chanting service and circumambulation.

Anyone who has been to a Temple Night can attest to the strength of concentration that builds up throughout the evening. The sari-covered altars are beautifully decorated. Seated upon them, the figures not only remind us who we really are, they also help us express gratitude to and reverence for those who have transmitted the Dharma.

You will find Temple Night inspiring and invigorating. It is surely one of the most beautiful stops on the journey to our True Home. Please join us virtually.

All are welcome: [www.vermontzen.org/ceremony\\_templenight.html](http://www.vermontzen.org/ceremony_templenight.html) —

## Entering the Buddha's Family *Spring Jukai Ceremony*

On **Sunday, April 9**, we commemorate the Buddha's "real" birthday with a Jukai Ceremony which starts at **9:00 a.m.** with a half hour informal sitting. The ceremony is hybrid. Please register online whether you are attending in person or via Zoom at [www.vermontzen.org/ceremony\\_jukai.html](http://www.vermontzen.org/ceremony_jukai.html)

Our Center has two Jukai ceremonies each year, one in April and one in November. It is customary to take Jukai as often as possible. Each time you participate, your resolve to practice

and realize the Buddhadharm grows stronger.

During the ceremony, participants take part in a repentance ceremony, then take the Three Refuges, the Three General Resolutions, and the Ten Cardinal Precepts.

Jukai also entails making an anonymous monetary donation to the teacher, called an incense offering. This traditional gift represents the practitioner's desire to support the teacher's work in propagating Buddhism.

Jukai is one of the most solemn rituals we observe at the



Center, so please be sure to wear a clean and pressed robe if you have one. If not, please wear dark, solid-colored clothing.

*Children of all ages are especially welcome to come to spring Jukai, which honors the birth of Shakyamuni Buddha. —*

# Reverence

We walk the polished floors and pale halls of the new museum, admiring the figures: Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, Asuras and Arhats, magisterial beings venerated for millennia in caves, in temples and in monasteries.

Now isolated, learnedly labeled, confined in glass.

A deep rumbling resonates through the room. Two young men in rough trousers, wool shirts, fur-lined vests, kneel before Kannon. Tousled heads bent, they send their chant eddying around the figure.

We bow our heads.  
The Bodhisattva, embraced in sound,  
is carried home.

—Nathalie Sorensen



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sign of discouragement. So single-minded in their goal, nothing perturbed them. Not failure, not even the swarm of predators.

Initially it was the alewives' determination and persistence that captured my attention. The more I visited, however, the more I came to marvel at what was happening all around them. The return of the alewives each spring unlocks a whole cascade of life.

The ospreys and eagles—almost non-existent in my childhood due to the spray of DDT—are back. Alewives are an essential food source for these birds. It turns out the osprey chicks hatch just as the alewives begin arriving and the eagle chicks hatch just as the spawn nears peak. Cod and haddock, once abundant in Gulf of Maine waters

before overfishing, are also starting to recover.

Even the forests and waters benefit. The bodies of fish who perish offer back nutrients to the trees and plant life. Lakes and ponds with healthy alewife populations are cleaner; the alewives help to absorb runoff phosphorus from residential use and ferry it back out to sea.

One afternoon I crossed paths with a woman who was visiting with her young sons. "What I love most about this time is how they push through together," she told me. "It's easier to jump up when they all go



for it at once." She was right. Together they seemed to generate a kind of counter-current, building collective momentum to push together upstream.

As she spoke I found myself picturing the Vermont Zen Center during a sesshin. Sitting together, eating together, walking and working alongside one another, there's a momentum that builds—a palpable sense that we are being carried along by a force greater than any one of us, generated by the power of our combined effort. With single-minded focus, what changes might we unlock as our practice spills out into the world? It begins with all of us, one shimmering body-mind, taking that great leap home. —

# Work Periods: Practice in Action

by Meredith Markow

Work periods are practice in action. Cleaning, organizing, recycling and beautifying are an integral part of our community. In a recent recorded teisho, we heard Roshi speak from Philip Yampolsky's translation of Zen Master Hakuin's selected writings, referring to the *quietistic* aspect of practice as opposed to *active* practice in which he placed much emphasis. When we work, we not only show up for the Center, we show up for each other and ourselves.

During our work periods, we make good use of our hands, hearts and heads learning new skills to be our best selves, and as a result, we stand in service to the world. When we complete a job assignment, we successfully set intentions that are organized and

clear. In doing so, we are aided in finding the will to follow through in doing noble deeds in service to others. When we shine a counter-top or polish an offering dish, we are brightening our heart's capacity for generosity and compassion. When we organize a drawer, we practice being still and uncluttered within ourselves, a prerequisite to being able to think with true discernment. By cleaning, we take responsibility for any messes that we have made, sometimes even tending to those others have made, as well. And when we recycle, we bring to bear what we have experienced, even the mistakes, striving not to waste or burden others with them. In short, when we clean, organize, beautify, and recycle we leave no trace, and also, we make the world better than we found it.

There is also something collectively energizing and supportive when we work together. Just as we offer something to one another when we sit together in silence, our efforts during work periods are buoyed when we each contribute to the task at hand. One aspect of the Term Student Program that is hard for me to commit to is takuhatsu. I can get discouraged

by judgmental thoughts that I bring to the task when I am picking up trash. I can lose sight of not only the practicality of the work, but also of the symbolic aspect of it representing Buddhist monks collecting food in a begging bowl during their daily almsround.

During the program this past year, I was away in New Hampshire for a week. On one occasion when I was driving, I saw a large group of people picking up trash on the side of the road. There were signs posted to please drive carefully while volunteers were working to beautify New Hampshire. There it was in plain sight—takuhatsu in action, in community. It inspired me to keep a trash bag in my car, to stop analyzing the job, and to just do it. I was encouraged and energized by the example of the collective.

While it may seem ordinary doing simple, everyday tasks, there is also something beautiful in it when we do it together. If you listen with fine-tuned ears, you can almost hear an orchestra of sorts playing during our Sangha work periods. It's not background music, nor is it accompaniment. It

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## March Courses

### Lovingkindness Wednesday, March 1

Learn the ancient Buddhist meditation leading to the development of unconditional lovingkindness and friendliness.

A six-week course on Wednesday evenings starts March 1, lead by Zen priest Nowa Crosby and Lay priest Heather Kelman.

Register online at the Zen Center's website:  
[www.vermontzen.org/lovingkindness.html](http://www.vermontzen.org/lovingkindness.html)

### Introduction to Zen Saturday, March 4

Conducted by Roshi Sunyana Graef and her students, Workshops are a practical and authentic introduction of the practice of Zen Buddhism. During the half-day schedule of talks, question periods, demonstrations, and guided meditation, participants are introduced to the body-mind disciplines of Zen Buddhism.

This is the second of five Introduction to Zen Workshops that will be held this year. Register online at the Zen Center's website:  
[www.vermontzen.org/worshops.html](http://www.vermontzen.org/worshops.html)

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is the music generated by the work itself. Each section is vital to the collective piece that is being composed, filling the spaces of our Center as we each play our individual instruments in harmony with the others. There's the percussive rhythm of the cutting and chopping, and the opening and closing of cupboard doors keeping a steady cadence. The droning hum of vacuums like woodwinds help to carry the melody. Our string section can be heard with the collective bowing of broom handles, irons and dust cloths creating the sound of a community with purpose; unified and well-orchestrated.

I am reminded of an excerpt from Marge Piercy's poem, *To be of use*:

*The work of the world is common as mud.  
Botched, it smears the hands, crumbles to dust.  
But the thing worth doing well done  
has a shape that satisfies, clean and evident.*

We understand what it is to move in that common rhythm, and we submerge in the task. Even though the work of the world is "as common as mud," when we do it together in harmony, it is symphonic. The many benefits of work periods, practice in action, reverberate within and beyond us in very real ways. —

### Upcoming Work Periods

**TEMPLE NIGHT WORKDAYS** are on Thursday, March 30, Saturday, April 1, and Sunday, April 2.

**JUKAI WORKDAY** is on Saturday, April 8.



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## Sangha Entertainment

Time to dust off your instruments, bring out the games, loosen the vocal chords, brush up on your Tango—it's Sangha Entertainment day on **SUNDAY, MARCH 12**, and all acts are welcome.



Your family and friends are invited to a hybrid morning event of music, fun, and games. Kelly Story is the coordinator for this event; please give her a call if you want to perform. If you'd just like to sit in the audience, that's fine too. The entertainment begins at **10 a.m.**

Hope to see you there! More information online:

[www.vermontzen.org/events\\_entertainment.html](http://www.vermontzen.org/events_entertainment.html)