

Walking Mountains

“The green mountains are always walking” –*Daokai*

Dear Sangha and Friends,

Stick season. Trees strip down to their bare bones, squirrels gather the fallen leaves for nest building, and the buds for next year’s growth swell. The music of songbirds a memory now as they have moved on to warmer climes, leaving us with the crow’s strident call breaking across the fields. Autumn’s musky sweet scent accented with the smell of burning wood fills the air. It’s an entirely different landscape, reminding us of impermanence.

As the Term Student Program winds down and ends, we’re grateful for this practice and how it helps us to weather the changes life deals us. Gratitude that we share with our Dharma brothers and sisters, and the world, culminating in our Thanksgiving Ceremony. Please join us.

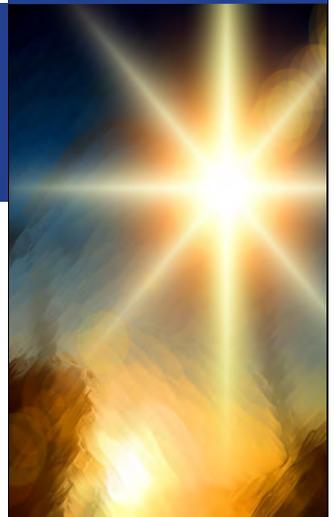
–*Joan White*

Gratitude by Josh Berger



After moving to Massachusetts recently, it is wonderful to now be within driving distance of the Vermont Zen Center and to have the opportunity to work and train with fellow Sangha members in person. As a longtime member living outside of Vermont, I have been amazed by the efforts and kindness of Roshi and the Sangha in making sittings and events at the Center available to members remotely. The ability to remain connected to Sangha in this way has been a lifeline. During the early years of the pandemic, I was living and

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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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working alone in Florida, and while others may not have been physically present, by remaining connected with Sangha remotely, I found this time to be both fulfilling and meaningful. The level of care, not to mention technical ingenuity, in providing the chance to join the Sangha over Zoom for sittings and ceremonies has been an incredible effort to behold. The efforts of Sangha to make this possible, and in such a seamless and beautiful manner, is one for which I am very grateful. Over the years, there have been the inevitable changes in life, including change of living location, seeing others over Zoom or in person, and recently a pandemic, and yet practice and Sangha has always been there as a true refuge.

The Term Student program is another reminder of what can be accomplished in supporting one another in practice. During the Term Student program, practice commitments are made before other program participants, and each year I find commitments which I had once found aspirational become possible through the support of Sangha. As one personal case in point, given my strong night owl tendencies, if you told certain friends and family that I was getting up daily before 6:00 A.M. for morning sittings during a work week, I do not know if they would believe

you. Yet I find myself able to wake for the morning sittings during Term Student, and feel energized and grateful in doing so all because of the support of Sangha. The Term Student is an indelible reminder of how much one can accomplish, and how fortunate I feel in being able to practice with Sangha. The experience of the Term Student program is like being buoyed by a wave of shared effort—leaving one with a sense of joy and gratitude.

While modern-day technology has allowed us to remain more connected virtually, in ways for which I am very much grateful, attending retreats and events at the Center in person has felt both essential and nourishing. One such occasion presented itself recently in being able to volunteer at the annual Yard, Craft, and Bake Sale. This afforded me the opportunity to witness firsthand just how much work and shared effort goes into organizing such an event. The work involved in collecting contributions, organizing items for sale, and preparing for the yard sale—over the course of weeks—in addition to arranging everything on the day of the event

was a valuable lesson in shared effort and the selfless generosity of Sangha. On the day of the yard sale, the front lawn of the Center was filled with canopies with spots for furniture, delicious baked goods, appliances of all sorts and kinds, and artwork, amongst many other treasures, all of which had been arranged early in the day for the morning shoppers. Upon arrival, there were tasks to be completed and I felt so thankful to be able to make whatever small contribution I could to the day's efforts. As the day continued, being able to also speak with Dharma brothers and sisters, greeting shoppers, meeting family of Sangha members, and trying my hand working in the furniture section was a true joy. Being so deeply grateful to Sangha, the opportunity to express this gratitude by working with Dharma brothers and sisters is one for which I am so very thankful.

Zen Master Dogen said, “Continuous practice, day after day, is the most appropriate way of expressing gratitude.” I am so fortunate and grateful to be able to walk this path with Sangha.

Sesshin by Josh Kelman

Sesshin is a key element of Zen training and a core activity at our Center. While it is not for the faint of heart, it does stiffen our resolve so that we find we can accomplish much more than we ever imagined. We emerge from sesshin centered, energized, and resolved to integrate the fruits of this experience into our daily lives. And sesshin is nothing if not an experience. We may go through a roller coaster of mind states and emotions, most of them unwelcome. But we manage to summon the energy to get past what at root are ephemeral attachments and to deepen our practice. This is the strongest zazen we will ever do.

Sesshin has its roots in the rainy season retreats during the time of the Buddha. And ever since then, students of the Dharma have participated in periods of seclusion for communal intensive zazen. It has been said that a seven-day sesshin could be the equivalent of an entire year of daily practice. If we feel that we have wasted time dithering about getting serious with our practice, sesshin can make up for a lot.

In *The Three Pillars of Zen*, Roshi Kapleau says, “The purpose of sesshin ... is to enable one to collect and unify one’s normally scattered mind in order to focus it like a powerful telescope inward in order to discover one’s true Self-nature.” We have so many distractions day to day that our zazen concentration can seem to be continually starting and stopping. At sesshin, our concentration,

whether we recognize it or not, steadily sharpens. And so, as distractions fade, we enter our practice deeper and deeper. We do not do this alone: a zendo filled with Dharma brothers and sisters pooling energy and rowing together toward the far shore.

Most of sesshin is in fact zazen. Round after round. A continual returning to our practice as demons of the mind fight to distract us. And for many of us, our practice becomes a life raft to escape these demons. Do our knees hurt? Are we reliving some ridiculous personal history? Are we upset at something or other? None of this stuff is fun, certainly not wallowing in it. The one escape is into our practice. And the more insidious the ways the demons find to distract us, the more energy we pour into our practice. And so it goes, for three, four or seven days of sesshin. Every time we

look up, we lose focus, and must bore in again.

In addition to zazen (with dokusan three times a day), sesshin has periods of work, rest, teisho, meals, and chanting. These are opportunities to stay within our practice while active. Listening to teisho by just listening. Entering the work fully. Just chanting and, perhaps, occasionally feeling the chanting as never before. As the sesshin energy builds, I am amazed to find, in the work periods in particular, a fluidity, a calm energy, and gratitude in the simplest tasks.

I speak from my own personal experience and karmic tendencies. I have spoken with others who find sesshin a wholly joyful experience. I bow to them. But our perception of this experience is ultimately irrelevant. We are all responding from our true nature and doing the work of liberating all beings.





Fast for a World Harvest

In this month of abundance, it is sobering to remember that millions of people are hungry all the time. Taking our vows seriously means opening our eyes and hearts to this suffering and resolving to offer help where it is needed.

On **Thursday evening, November 3** we will commemorate the Oxfam Fast for a World Harvest. For this ceremony, **the Center will match all donations received**, which will be sent to Oxfam America.

Participants are encouraged to fast in whatever way they are able and contribute the money they

would have spent on food to Oxfam. Of course, you are free to give as generously as you wish.

The (hybrid) ceremony will take place during the evening sitting. All are welcome. Masks are required.

Please remember to bring a vegetarian boxed or canned food offering as well as a monetary donation. We hope you can attend! —

Jukai: Entering the Buddha's Way

Sunday, November 6, at 9:30 A.M., will be a **Jukai Ceremony** to formalize our commitment to the Buddha's Way. There will be a sitting beforehand, starting at 9:00 A.M.

Jukai is the single most significant ceremony for a Zen Buddhist, since it expresses one's resolve to uphold the moral principles of the Buddha's Way. Zen Master Dogen said, "The Buddhas and Patriarchs have all stated that receiving the precepts is the first step to entering the Way." And Zen Master Basui called the precepts, "a shortcut for entering the Buddha gate."

Taking part in this ceremony means you have formally entered the Way of the Buddha.

Because the Precepts are difficult to keep, it is inevitable that they will be violated from time to time. Each time they are broken, one has fallen from the Buddha's Way in a sense. For this reason, and because repeatedly taking them fortifies one's resolve to uphold the vows, it is customary to take part in Jukai as often as possible. Each time you do so, your desire to practice and actualize the Buddha-dharma grows stronger.

During the ceremony, participants take part in a repentance ceremony, and then take the Three Refuges, the Three General Resolutions, and the Ten Cardinal Precepts. Jukai also entails making a monetary donation to the teacher, called an in-



cense offering. This traditional gift represents the practitioner's desire to support the teacher's work in propagating Buddhism, and it is always made anonymously.

Jukai is one of the most solemn rituals we observe at the Center, so please wear a clean and pressed robe if you have one. If not, wear dark, solid-colored clothing or, better yet, borrow a robe from the Center. It is also customary to bathe before receiving Jukai and to clean one's living quarters as well.

Please join us for this important ceremony. —

Thanksgiving Ceremony: Expressing Gratitude



A Ceremony of Thanksgiving will be held on **Sunday, November 13 at 9:30 A.M.**, after a short sitting. Family members of all ages are welcome to attend this special hybrid ceremony. The sitting begins at the usual time of 9:00 A.M.

During our annual Thanksgiving ceremony, we make food offerings, read words of gratitude, chant, offer incense, circumambulate, and end with a special gatha of gratitude. —

New Book

A highly recommended new book from Roshi Rafe Martin: *A Zen Life of Buddha*, is now available from the Sumeru Press. For more information, contact the press directly at info@sumeru-books.com or order from online booksellers.



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 8, during the evening sitting.** The ceremony this year is not during sesshin, so all 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 meditation 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 either virtually or in person. —

New Year's Eve Ceremony 2022-2023



On Saturday 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 join us via Zoom for this virtual ceremony which will take place at the Zen Center.

For the New Year's Ceremony, have 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. The schedule for New Year's Eve is below.

We hope you will join us for this hybrid event. More information as well as registration is online at www.vermontzen.org/ceremony_newyears.html

- 9:00 P.M. *Formal zazen with kinhin.*
- 10:30 P.M. *Repentance ceremony followed by break.*
- 11:15 P.M. *Formal zazen. Reading of resolutions.*
- 11:45 P.M. *Purification of Altars.*
- 11:50 P.M. *Driving out of Demons Circumambulation: Chanting & noise making.*
- Midnight *Cacophony, ending with —
“Happy New Year! May Peace Prevail on Earth!”*
- 12:01 A.M. *Moment of silence. Chanting: Prajna Paramita. Abbreviated Jukai Ceremony.*
- 12:20 A.M. *Candle-lighting Ceremony. New Year's Prayer.*

Home Purification Ceremony

Entering 2023 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 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 wonder-



ful way to enter the New Year, with body, mind and home cleansed and purified.

Please contact the Zen Center at info@vermontzen.org for the full service. —

Temple Cleaning for New Year's Eve



Monday, December 26 through Friday, December 30, will be devoted to cleaning our temple in preparation for the New Year. Altars are set up throughout the Center, the buildings are cleaned from top to bottom, and everything is refreshed for the coming year. There will be no formal sittings during that time.

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. —



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*With what voice
 And what song would you
 sing, spider,
 In this autumn breeze?
 -Basho*



Term Student News

For the past few weeks, sittings, both in person and virtual, have been full and there has been a corresponding increase in energy throughout the Center. Term Student Program 3, the longest program ends on **Tuesday, November 15**, with a special ceremony. Family members are cordially invited to attend, as are all Sangha members. We hope you will come to celebrate the end of the successful intensification of practice by the 38 participants in this year's three programs.



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