

Walking Mountains

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

Dear Sangha and Friends,

If you have a few moments to go down behind the Zen Center and stand on the bridge over the LaPlatte River, take some time to do so, seasonally if possible. There is nothing like watching the same river over time: its slow trickle in summer, the headlong rush in spring and fall, and the thoroughgoing manner with which it maneuvers ice jams in the winter. And though we cannot readily see the impact it has on the landscape (except for after storms like Irene), things change. Just as we do with our practice. The New Year is another bend in the river as it meanders toward something we cannot see.

How fitting that on the heels of making our New Year resolutions, the Kannon ceremony takes place at the Zen Center. Just when we might be faltering or dwelling in doubt, along comes Kannon to buoy us up and help us to reinvigorate our commitments. We sit on the mat, chant, prostrate 108 times—ending with the Four Vows, a standing bow to the Buddha, another bow to each other—a river of practitioners flowing from the Buddha to us and beyond.

— *Joan White*

CEREMONY: Mystery and Wisdom

by **Kelly Story**

Not long before the Hungry Ghost ceremony, we were preparing for Halloween celebrations at my small home child care. Doing web research around the origins of Halloween, I came across the ritual of Samhain (summer’s end) which was a time in the Celtic tradition where folks believed the veil between the human and spirit realm was thin. To guard themselves during this time from fearsome spirits,

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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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villagers built huge bonfires and did other things to call the gods forward to protect them.

This caused me to reflect that for much of human history, people of diverse religious traditions and cultural backgrounds have relied on ceremonies as a way to make sense of the world and of realms that they have, perhaps, glimpsed, but never fully seen. Fire, drumming, elaborate masks and costumes, chanting and prayer, celebration, communal feasts, and more have all been used to connect with other worlds and other parts of human consciousness.

Everything that happens in a ceremony helps us go beyond our rational consciousness to deeper levels of truth and understanding. When we penetrate these truths in our own minds we help open the way for others: our loved ones, and beings in less visible realms. Everything we do in a ceremony – concentrating our minds, chanting, opening our hearts and prayers – does, in fact, aid those who are suffering, whether they are visible or not.

At Great Jukai, Sangha members spend many weeks creating the six realms of existence as depicted in the Tibetan Wheel of Life. Music, sound, masks, paper maché beings, photographs, lights, smells, videos and many other creative props are used to reflect both the suffering and joy of beings in the realms of hell, hungry ghost, animal, human, titan, and devas.

After traversing these realms in the Great Jukai ceremony, we enter the Buddha Hall and begin to chant. At first, our chants are directed to the beings in those realms that we have just passed through, many of whom have experienced terrible suffering.

“ My sons ... were very moved by the images and sounds they experienced as they walked through the realms. They learned more about Buddhism than I could ever teach them by explanations. ”

But before long, we realize that we are also chanting for ourselves with the longing to penetrate those habit patterns that have kept us locked in painful actions and states of existence for a long time.

A ceremonial fire is lit, and as we sit quietly together, we watch the ordained members of the Sangha place each klesa paper that we carried through the realms into the fire. The zendo is thick with a feeling of concentration and devotion. Greed, anger, and ignorance – the root of all suffering – is burned to ashes.

The day after the ceremony, my son Ian, who participated, wanted to know all about the Wheel of Life – what the different parts meant, how we end up in a particular realm, how we get out of certain realms. Both of my sons, Ian and Jonan, were very moved by the images and sounds they experienced as they walked through the realms. They learned more about Buddhism than I could ever teach them by explanations.

The opportunity to be a part of the mystery and wisdom offered through ceremony is one that I feel very grateful for. Thank you to everyone who has made such efforts at all of the Zen Center ceremonies to keep this ancient spiritual tradition alive. —



Great Jukai: Creating the Realms



The Hell Realm by Ti'an Callery

Every year in the Jukai ceremony we renew our Buddhist commitments. Every four years, during Great Jukai, we pass through the six realms of existence prior to taking the precepts. The first, and lowest, realm we enter is Hell. Not surprisingly, with its torment, misery and pain, no Sangha members volunteered to build the Hell realm.

Knowing that someone would have to do it, and knowing that Kathy Clarke always has great ideas, I spoke with her and we agreed to work together on this realm. I didn't know where to begin, but Kathy had ideas, starting with, "Black, all black!"

Kathy soon began making pottery figures whose faces reflected the grief and sorrow of this bleak,

pain-filled realm and which were to be placed in the blackened hall of the basement of the Sangha building. Kevin Clayton offered to make two CDs with screaming, wailing and disturbing noises. On the Friday before the ceremony, Sergio joined us and the next day Jim Berg and other members came to help. Although we were creating Hell, we also felt deep gratitude for Sangha friends.

We worked together to fill the first room people would enter on their journey through the realms with branches and dead leaves strewn about. Yamaraja, with his mirror showing our past deeds, was set in place. The hall walls were covered with black paper and hung with Kathy's drawings of anguished faces. We placed the grim heads, lit by small lights, in alcoves along the hall. At the end of the long hall there were strips of white paper blown by a fan representing the cold hells.

As people walked through this realm of desolation, at the very end they turned a corner and there, thankfully, encountered a figure of Kannon, the Bodhisattva of Compassion, showing the way out of Hell. —

Hungry Ghost Realm by Jim Kahle

It's fair to say that much of our Zen practice is a solitary undertaking. Working on the Hungry Ghost realm was an opportunity to work on practice with members of the Center in a different way.

We were all in general agreement as to what it was we were trying to demonstrate. There were some individual differences, however, in exactly how the realm should be portrayed. There was a "less is more" orientation versus "more is more." As a rabid



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and long time sports fan, I wanted to show how the world of sports can segue into the realm of Hungry Ghosts. Emily pointed out to me that even though she could understand my vision, her experience of watching a sporting event was much different than mine (apparently she is more mature than I am, at least in this area). We were able to reach a consensus on this as well as all other areas of differing opinions.

We were all able to work with each other in an honest, but respectful manner. We came up with a presentation that honored everyone's perspective and that we could all be proud of.

Much of the suffering in the realm of Hungry Ghosts stems from an inability to see past one's own selfish needs and cravings. For the most part, we were able to avoid this pitfall as we worked together on this project. —

The Animal Realm by Glenn Story



My experience with this and previous great Jukai ceremonies is that it becomes the focus of my life for several days. In this process I become profoundly connected to the realm I am working on. Norm, Ramiro, Kelly and I got

together one night at our house and made plans for how we would depict the animal realm. After that meeting, any free moment in my life was for the creation of that vision.

We see the animal world everyday – we are like them yet we are not. We create a world separate from them. At Great Jukai we try to step into their world and experience their life. To experience the out-of-doors indoors gives the animal realm an other-worldly feel.

In the Zen Center dining room we created a beaver pond. Moving further into the realm, we encounter a bobcat that sustains itself by killing smaller animals. Fear for survival is palpable in the room. Around the corner there is the sound of a car bearing down on those who might be crushed under its wheels. On the road, crows feed on a recent victim. Now there are gunshots and the silhouette of the most feared predator: man. As we leave the realm we are reminded of the beauty of the animal realm in a video of whales breaching the waves. —

The Human Realm by Heather Kelman

The pain and shock of a newborn entering this world, the incessant sound of a clock ticking the minutes of our lives away, delusion, suffering, death. The human realm echoed with impermanence. Working in the human realm was a powerful experience.

Hearing the cries of a newly born baby, over and over again, as our looped .wav file played on and on was surprisingly stressful. One could sense the shock the baby was experiencing upon entering this world. This is what people were first greeted with as they entered the human realm. The huge poster of the naked newborn held aloft was a stark reminder of our fragile life here on earth. As we moved along, the sounds of a lullaby and a beautiful nursery lulled the pain of birth, but upon entering the living room we were greeted with the pounding, unrelenting tick tick tick of our life clock. All is not so pretty here. We forget. The young people hanging out on their bean bags with their iPhones and Xboxes showed us how painfully separated we are from our true selves. Wasted youth. And the clock ticks on.



Scenes of various human forms appear on a wall: great thinkers, starving children, happy married couples, desolation, joy, mothers, happy children, Himalayan nomads, spiritual leaders. Then to glance across the room and see old

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age shriveling in a wheelchair, arthritic and full of pain. Old age grasps our youth and wrings it dry. This human realm is hard indeed. Another glance has death in view. A corpse laid out in a funeral room. Impermanence hits us hard.

But there is a way as the Buddha taught, and we end our

The Titan Realm by Josh Kelman

To create a realm we must know that realm. As humans we spend time in all the realm/mind states, fighting titans among them. And we live in a culture that holds the qualities of the fighting titan in high esteem so there is plenty of material to work with.

From the beginning, our group had fun being fighting titans. Threatening to grab territory from the humans, jealously name calling the devas and sneering at everyone else, we settled into our belligerent selves.

We had a good mix of talents; from construction to audio-visual to artistic. The work divided itself up and we had a plan. The long sonocore tube from Great Jukais past became a tree. Miraculously it grew bark, branches and fruit that hung tantalizingly over the deva realm. An archer from cyber space was planted with his arrow aimed at the heavens.

A general in a war room, looking aged and a bit drunk, presides over vast armies and a nuclear button. With the sweep of a hand thousands go into battle. Sound of bugle, clenched teeth, the smell of death, glory, and collateral

The Deva Realm by Alison Gardner

Heryl, Louise, Mitra, Manju and I created the Deva realm for Great Jukai this year. It was an absolute pleasure that seemed to spill over into my life. From the initial meeting of reviewing past pictures, mapping our ideas and discussing what, from our homes, we could bring, through several days of working together and then, before we knew it, taking it down-- it had such a special excitement. We weren't just building this realm, we were, however fleetingly, Devas!

It all sparkled: the lovely dining table set with crystal, silver and gold-rimmed plates complete with a dessert table and classical music in the background to the beautiful hanging Deva figures leading the way to the opulent room with a luxurious chaise lounge, beautiful saris and lace gracefully draped, stuffed cushions, and elegant paintings along with tasty treats.

But, in addition to the splendor, Kannon played the

tour of this realm with a woman seated in meditation. She has grasped the truth and is on the path of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. She has found that there is a way to liberation. Svaha! ———



damage. On film, medieval knights marching through time, morph into tanks and aircraft. A series of pictures honor our love of weapons through the ages. From detailed artwork on swords and shields to sleek drones operated from ten thousand miles away we pay homage to greed and conflict. Grainy black and white film footage of Hitler, Stalin and Mussolini was hard to view for very long. At this juncture our fighting titan playacting could not be sustained. To think that the world once venerated people like this. To think that it still does.

Great Jukai over, the realm is taken down – where have the fighting titans gone? Not far. ———



melody of impermanence on a lute, a warning that aesthetic beauty and enjoyment, seductive as it is, does not last. At the same time, the open doors to the Buddha Hall and the sound of the Kannon chant beckoned, reminding us of the longing for our true home – calling us back to practice and the renewal of our vows. Yet, this time there seemed more joy and beauty! ———



Special Ceremony Honoring Kannon

**On Sunday, January
22 from 9–11:30 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 Rinzaï-style chanting of the Kanzeon in Japanese. A few notes about the ceremony:

DEDICATION— Everyone is invited to dedicate the merit of this ceremony to whomever they wish. There will be an altar for photos and names of those to whom the ceremony is being dedicated.

HOME ALTAR FIGURES— There will be a special altar for Kannon figures from your home altars. Important: Please bring them to the Center on the workday prior to the ceremony.

WORKDAY— On **Saturday, January 21 at 10 a.m.** there will be a work period to prepare for the ceremony. Please join us if you can.

DONATION— As a concrete expression of compassion, please bring to the ceremony *a monetary donation which will be given to COTS. Please note that checks should be made out to the Zen Center so that we can send COTS one check from the Sangha as a whole.*

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. —

*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.*



JANUARY 2012

SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY
1 ZC Closed	2	3 Chanting	4	5 Sensei in Costa Rica	6	7 [Redacted]
8 Taped Teisho	9	10	11	12 Chanting	13	14 CR Jukai
Costa Rica 5-Day Jataka Tale Sesshin with Rafe Martin						
15 Taped Teisho	16	17 Jorge Solano Memorial Service	18	19	20	21 Workday
22 KANNON CEREMONY	23 ZC Closed	24	25	26 Sitting & Set up	27	28 Workshop Sesshin Deadline
29 Sitting & Workday	30	31	Princeton's Religious Life Council in Residence 1/29-2/3			

Annual Meeting

Sunday, February 5, 9:30-11:30 a.m.

Please come to our *Annual Sangha Meeting* to help plan for the upcoming year. We will discuss the finances of the Center, next year's schedule, and more. Your input is essential and valued. Come and help with the decisions and direction of the Center.

The meeting will be followed by a pot-luck lunch. Your family is cordially invited to join us at 11:30.



Annual Meeting Agenda

- 2012 Projects
- 2011 Financial Report
- 2012 Preliminary Budget
- Committee Review – reports from the following committees: *Ceremony, Kitchen, Housekeeping, Library, Outdoor, Newsletter, Family, Prison Outreach, Hunger Banquet*
- Casa Zen Report
- Miscellaneous

Help Host the 2012 Religious Life Council Retreat

This year, the Zen Center will once again open its doors to a group of college students from diverse faiths, all members of Princeton's Religious Life Council (RLC), for their annual intercession retreat. They will arrive on the evening of **Sunday, January 29** and will be leaving on the morning of **Friday, February 3**. This is the fourth time we have hosted the RLC.

The retreat serves as a way to incorporate new members into the Religious Life Council. Students share their spiritual autobiographies, spend an afternoon doing volunteer work and take time for reflection, conversation and questions. They also have a lot of fun, and eat as only college kids can eat.

Because we will be preparing and serving three meals a day plus snacks to the students, we could really use some help in the kitchen and around the Center. **Any time you can volunteer before, during, and after the retreat would be greatly appreciated.** Sign-up sheets will be posted on the ZC bulletin board. If you're here for a meal, please feel free to join the group and meet the students. Morning and evening sittings will continue as scheduled throughout the retreat. However, the Thursday evening sitting will be a special RLC/VZC event which we sincerely hope you can attend.

Please lend a hand if you can to make the students feel welcome! —



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* *The winter river;*
Down it comes floating
Flowers offered to Buddha.
-Buson

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

