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Walking Mountains

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

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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.

Dear Sangha and Friends,

They are called the *dog days*. And it sure is easy to take up residence in a hammock in the shade somewhere with a cold glass of lemonade or iced tea, but then the thoughts roll in and the mood changes. The mat calls. The garden calls. All those weeds—metaphorically speaking, and of course, the pesky ones in the pathway, those making a home in the middle of a gorgeous gloriosa daisy, and don't miss that vine climbing into the rhododendron we just planted. You know the sort.

One might also volunteer to help the Center get ready for the annual yard sale. A humongous task calling for all kinds of labor and skills—sorting clothing, pricing items, hauling furniture, and more. It is the most important fundraiser of the year for the Zen Center, and it's a lot of work and loads of fun to pull it off. People come from near and far to this event. Some say they plan their vacation to include it! Please join us.

–Joan White

Lovingkindness Retreat by Laurence Doody

This winter, the Vermont Zen Center held its first Lovingkindness retreat, a two-day non-residential intensive devoted to the practice of metta. Also known as Lovingkindness, metta is the practice of cultivating goodwill toward oneself and others. By the end of the cold February weekend, a common reflection had emerged among the nineteen participants: the retreat felt both timely and needed, not only personally, but in relation to the world we are living in.

In current United States culture, many of us live amid steady messages of comparison, striving, and insufficiency. Advertising and the American Dream narrative often tie personal worth to produc-

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tivity, financial success, and what we are able to acquire. Social media can turn comparison into a daily habit, measuring our lives against ideals that are curated, fictional, exclusionary, and harmful. Even altruism and activism can become entangled with the same message when we are met daily by overwhelming news of suffering, conflict, and instability—generating the feeling that there is always more we should be doing. The message underneath can become familiar: who we are, as we are, is not enough.

The practice of Lovingkindness asks something different from ourselves and from the culture around us. It asks us to turn toward goodwill, a foundational desire for happiness and well-being, before we feel improved, corrected, or worthy. It offers a way to respond to our own suffering and the suffering of the world without adding more anger, fear, or despair to it.

Each day of the retreat opened with a recitation of the Metta Sutta. A traditional story about that teaching begins with monks sent by the Buddha to practice in a forest grove, where they were frightened by tree deities who wanted them to leave. When the monks returned to the Buddha for guidance, he gave them the Metta Sutta. Radiating lovingkindness, they returned to the grove, and the deities became protective of them.

“The practice of Lovingkindness asks something different from ourselves and from the culture around us. It asks us to turn toward goodwill, a foundational desire for happiness and well-being, before we feel improved, corrected, or worthy.”

The story frames metta not as passive kindness, but as a disciplined response to fear and hostility. When the monks asked to sit in retreat in another location, they did not receive a teaching that removed them from difficulty; they received a practice for meeting that difficulty directly. The teaching is clear: the practice of metta can offer the power to transform not only ourselves but the world around us.

Led by Heather Kelman and Nōwa Crosby, the retreat focused on exploring metta intensively. Participants were guided through simple phrases: may I be happy, may I be well, may I be free from harm, may I have ease of well-being. These phrases formed a framework for cultivating Lovingkindness as the practice moved through the traditional stages, beginning with oneself and gradually extending outward: to a benefactor, to a dear friend, someone neutral, someone with whom we have difficulty, and finally all beings. Alongside this structure, participants were invited to develop their own ways of generating and radiating Metta.

After each stage, the group gathered for discussion in the reception room. This offered a rare opportunity to hear how others were working with their practice. One practitioner reframed the phrases from “May I be happy, may I be well” to “I am happy, I am well,” which resonated with them. Another found that picturing themselves happy helped generate the warm feeling of metta.

By the close of the retreat, many participants named the discussion time as part of what made the retreat so valuable. There was appreciation for the chance to move through the stages together, working with the practice and reflecting on the difficulties of each stage in community. Participants shared that they felt deeply held in this space, without the expectation

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Aging by Josh Kelman

When the young, pampered future Buddha first saw the inevitability of old age, sickness, and death, he was shocked to see the fragility and fleeting nature of physical existence. Deeply shaken, this experience propelled his search for the fundamental nature of all existence. All of us who practice have experienced at least some of this and recognize, however dimly, that a life led based on simply serving ourselves is unsatisfying at best. We have all been sick. We will all die. And we all hope to live to old age, warts and all.

Age and experience are great teachers. Without getting any smarter, we learn the truth of what is meant by "time flies like an arrow" and that we must use our time wisely or we will regret it. The mistakes of our youth seem so clear (and perhaps embarrassing) in retrospect. Finally, it seems, we can get to work with fewer hindrances.

This is certainly true to a point. But Mara, that demonic inner voice telling us to quit resisting ego, is skilled at changing tactics as circumstances dictate. Our aging body gives Mara fresh ammunition. "Take it easy," Mara might say. "You have done plenty already and you really need your rest." Mara, like any demagogue, takes a bit of truth and twists it to its own devices.

If we are fortunate, as we age, family and career responsibilities diminish and we have more time to devote to the key Zen practice fundamentals: daily sittings, dokusan, ceremonies, work periods, and sesshin. It also becomes less likely that attachment to achievement—so commonly found in career and family—will infect our practice such that we are obsessed with seeing progress and silently compare ourselves to Dharma siblings. Much as we prepare to let go of this body, we see that practice is letting go as opposed to getting ahead. As we look back and see that so much we held dear in this life was ephemeral, we likewise realize that any notions we may have had of being seen as heroic or wise or compassionate are just so much stink.

Then there is the actual day-to-day experience of aging. Pain may be ephemeral, but it still hurts. As our body gradually breaks down, we find ourselves having conversations my father used to call organ recitals. All our youthful smirks and eye rolling as we listened to the injury and illness stories our elders told, come karmically full circle as we stand in their shoes. Our aches and pains and illnesses test us. Mara is always there telling us that we're innocent victims deserving of escape or bitterness. It's not fun. And it is not separate from practice. Where once nervous energy screamed to get up off the sitting mat, now body aches do the same. Treating our aging body properly but not as an excuse to forgo effort becomes our new koan.

One thinks of Roshi Kapleau's last years debilitated with Parkinson's disease, fully accepting his karma without complaint. Our own teacher conducts seven-day sesshin with

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Spring Sangha Gardening Weekend

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that difficulties had to be resolved quickly or that metta had to feel a certain way.

The shared space of the retreat offered a chance to be supported by Sangha and to recognize that we struggle together: in the universal wish to be happy and free from suffering, and in the effort to put our whole hearts into practice even when it does not come easily. In a culture that so often teaches comparison, shame, and separation, practicing Metta, especially in community, feels quietly radical and deeply necessary for our time. Perhaps that is why so many participants expressed the hope that this retreat would be offered again.

The next Lovingkindness Retreat has not yet been scheduled, but will take place during the first half of 2027.

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two-hour dokusans three times a day with a septuagenarian body and thanks us!

Then there is brain function. Roshi Robert Aitken told a story in his early nineties of a woman who came up to him gushing that he was still sharp as a tack. He said that he wanted to properly thank her but could not remember her name. Memory loss is pretty individual. There are nonagenarians who are sharp as a tack. For many of us, though, there is deterioration and it most often manifests in language and memory. It is embarrassing to forget a word or name in conversation. Some say word games help. But the greatest comfort I find is knowing experienced practitioners who appear quite comfortable in their aging and who seem to just shrug their shoulders and deal with these maladies as simply a part of life.

Aging brings us closer to death, and we can no longer delude ourselves into thinking that it is too far away to be concerned about. Fear of death has been a spur to practice from the very beginning. Embracing the teachings of karma and rebirth gives us some genuine understanding of death as simply a place marker for a change in form. Yet there does remain some unease, at least for many of us, about just exactly how this most personal experience will play out. Practice, at least in my own experience, has muted this fear, but also heightened the need to meet death with as much practice under my belt as possible, if not full enlightenment. It is hard to look at all the painful circumstances in the world and not be concerned about what our own future karma will bear. And this is in addition to taking responsibility for the suffering of all beings as we have vowed to do. So once again we find that, at any age, wherever we turn, even before we ask the question, practice is the answer.

Training Program Sunday, 7/26 through Friday, 7/31

For five days this summer, we will have a residential Training Program. Training Programs are a way to experience the discipline of Zen training through total immersion, similar to living in a monastery. During the Program, trainees live at the Center and participate in all aspects of traditional Zen training. A core element of the Training Program is learning how to bring Zen practice into everyday life.

The Training Program begins on **Sunday, July 26 at 9:00 am.** and ends on **Friday, July 31**after lunch. It's important to note that the Training Program begins **Sunday morning.** Local trainees can arrive at the Center in time for the morning sitting. Out-of-town trainees should arrive at the Center by Saturday evening.

More information at:

www.vermontzen.org/training_programs.html

Upcoming Courses at the Vermont Zen Center

www.vermontzen.org/courses.html

Haiku Poetry

Saturday, July 11

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.

Punjabi Indian Meal

Saturday, July 18

Learn how to prepare a delicious and authentic Punjabi vegetarian Indian meal in the Vermont Zen Center's spacious kitchen. Manju Selinger will guide you through the process of preparing the meal, which all will enjoy for lunch. Limited enrollment. **Manju's courses fill quickly**! More information and registration on the Zen Center's website.

Intro to Zen

Saturday, July 25

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.

Water Baby Ceremony– Remembering Lost Children

On **Sunday, August 30**, the Zen Center will hold a Water Baby Ceremony after a one hour sitting with a short talk.

The Water Baby Ceremony is a Buddhist service for adults who have lost an infant or young child through still birth or early death, have lost a fetus through miscarriage or abortion, or have lost a child of any age, in any way. It is also appropriate for people who wish to remember a child who has passed, even if it is not their own, to attend this ceremony.

Jizo Bodhisattva presides over the Water Baby Ceremony. He is considered to be the protector of women, children, travelers, the helpless, and the needy. In Japan, there are thousands of Water Baby shrines. Often many figures are placed together in a garden or on a mountainside.

For this ceremony we will gather in the dining room after the sitting. The ceremony itself takes place in the Jizo garden, weather permitting. Everyone is asked to bring some scraps of fabric (red, with or without pattern, is the traditional color, but you may bring other bright colors) as well as scissors, needle, and thread. The Center will provide these items for those who don't have them. In silence, working together, each of us will sew a small, simple garment such as an apron, cape, bib, or hat which will be placed on one of the many Jizo figures at the Center. The garment represents the being we are remembering, and thus commemorates a death and rebirth, a passing from one form of life to another. Those who wish may also write the name of the child or a verse on a piece of paper which will be placed between the rocks in the Jizo garden.

While we work in silence, anyone may speak about his or her experience of loss. When we have finished sewing, we will carry the figures to the Jizo garden where we will chant the Prajna Paramita, the Kannon Sutra, and the Sutra of Jizo Bodhisattva, followed by a special Eko to return the merit of the ceremony to the children. Each person or couple will then offer incense and put their garments on a figure.

Participants are welcome to stay after the ceremony to talk or just sit quietly. This ceremony is not limited to members of our Center. However, everyone who comes should participate. While many people who attend do so to mourn for a personal loss, it is also appropriate to come if you wish to mourn for children not individually known to you—for example, children who have died from starvation or through violence. Such disasters touch us all, even if we have never met those who died. This is the only ceremony at the Center where we ask that you not bring young children. *Om Ka Ka Kabi Sam Ma E Sowa Ka*

Ceremony Workday

Please come to the workday on **Saturday, August 29 at 9 am** to help set up the dining room and prepare the Jizo garden for the Water Baby Ceremony on Sunday**.** The work period will last an hour or two depending on the number of people who can lend a hand. *Thank you!*

Annual Yard Sale

Saturday, August 22

This year our **Annual Yard & Bake Sale** will be on **Saturday, August 22.** Once again, we will have a **Craft Sale** running concurrently with the yard sale. This is a week later than we have held the sale in past years. The thought was to give us a bit of time after the August sesshin before plunging into the considerable work involved in setting up the sale.

Donations may be left in the basement common room anytime **after the August sesshin**. This is a wonderful fund-raiser for the Center—the only event that is held specifically for the benefit of the VZC—and it is also a great way to clean out your unwanted, unused, and unneeded stuff. Whatever is left at the end of the event goes to Goodwill and similar organizations.

Zen Center Summer Events

July

- Haiku Workshop
- Indian Cooking Course
- Sangha Picnic
- Intro to Zen Workshop
- Training Program

August

- 7-Day Sesshin
- Gardening Course
- Roshi Kapleau Teisho
- Yard Sale Workdays
- Yard Sale
- Water Baby Ceremony

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"The peony was as big as this,"
Says the little girl,
Opening her arms.
—Issa

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If you have time over the next several months to help with mowing, weed whacking, or gardening, please contact Jhana, Jim, or Nowa.

Thank you for helping to keep our land beautiful and welcoming.