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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,

This time of year all one has to do is pause somewhere in the gardens at the Center to observe the chipmunks scurrying back and forth mouths chock full of sunflower seeds, acorns, and the like. Restless hibernators, they wake periodically to eat from their larder. They work hard, getting ready for the winter ahead.

We too, are busy at the Center laying our many garden beds to rest and preparing for ceremony season, which provides us with ample opportunities to take refuge in the Three Treasures—Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. Renewing our vows in the Jukai Ceremony, giving thanks at Thanksgiving, tossing sutras in the Buddha's Enlightenment Ceremony, joining the worldwide Sangha during the Rohatsu Sesshin, and ringing in the New Year with repentance and resolve further strengthens our practice. Our efforts spill into the world around us, lighting the dark days of winter.

–Joan White

The Kitchen at Sesshin by Meredith Markow

During sesshin when we join together to recite the meal chants, we are reminded that "This meal is the labor of countless beings." What is their toil that we are asked to remember? Is it planting the food? Harvesting it? Milking the cows? Tending to the upkeep and functioning of farms? Are we acknowledging the insects that aerate the soil or the cows that fertilize it? The pollinators? What about those

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who package, ship, and distribute the food, or the employees at the grocery store involved in stocking our shelves and managing the customers? There are many who drive trucks, navigate ships, and fly airplanes to transport our food. We can consider, as well, those who oversee the regulatory frameworks to manage food safety. Thousands in numerous interconnected systems are involved in producing and delivering the food we eat, and all of this happens even before it arrives at our Center. Then once it does, a marvelous communal interweaving of kitchen tasks takes place to ensure that we are well nourished during sesshin.

Like the gears of a clock, where one turn of a cog moves another, each kitchen task necessarily leads to the next. As soon as we click the button to submit our sesshin application, the process is set in motion. We are added to the count of participants, which determines how much food will be purchased. The kitchen is cleaned and organized in anticipation of receiving the peppers, bulk oats, mirin, tofu, miso, and yogurt that are being ordered, carefully selected, counted and brought back to the Center. Our food is unpacked, washed, sorted, and put in its proper place for the seven-day kitchen clockwork that is to follow. Kitchen work tasks are assigned, creating a web of jobs that fit together seamlessly, as do the gears in a fine timepiece.

“Like the gears of a clock, where one turn of a cog moves another, each kitchen task necessarily leads to the next. . As soon as we click the button to submit our sesshin application, the process is set in motion.”

Once we finish eating our sesshin meals, having taken only what we can eat and eating all that we have taken, we clean our plates, wrap our dish sets, and we leave the table. One meal may be finished, but preparation for the next begins immediately. The meal cooks check the tables to see what remains, so that nothing is wasted. The waiters come to clear the tables, handing the serving dishes to those who scrape them clean and store the leftovers. While that is happening, the dishwashers are at the ready to methodically wash and dry the dishes and put them away, steering around the activity at the cooking stations. While the kitchen hums in silent motion, the breakfast cooks chop walnuts and soak prunes, the lunch cooks open cans of butternut squash and wash apples, the dinner cooks marinate tofu and julienne cut the carrots, as the salad cooks clean and chop celery and peppers. The door opens, and in comes a delivery of freshly folded kitchen towels while the soiled ones are taken out to be laundered. The door opens a second time, and the garbage and recycling is taken away. Once again, the door opens, and fresh bananas are dropped off, all demonstrating that the work that takes place within the kitchen is supported by the work that takes place outside of it.

Those who are preparing the food need to do so with a certain cadence, so that cooking surfaces are cleared in time for the next meal to be set up. The center island counters are cleaned, and without skipping a beat, the trays, bowls, silverware, napkins, trivets and ladles are counted and placed. During rest periods, the dishwashers are emptied and the kitchen floor is mopped, and while we are in the zendo or in

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The Training Program by Sylvia Fagin

This year I was fortunate to participate in what is possibly my favorite week of the year at the Center. Every year towards the end of July, the Center hosts a residential training program. For five days, trainees immerse themselves in the discipline of all aspects of traditional Zen training. It's a little bit like living in a monastery for a week. The title "training program" does beg the question: training for what? For the activities that have for centuries made up Zen training, sure; but also, and surely more importantly, for training the mind to notice, really notice, each moment.

Each day, the 20 trainees started our day in the zendo in zazen, along with the residents and others who come for the regular morning sitting. Knowing that the day starts on the cushion was a great relief for me; at home, try as I may, it doesn't always happen. During the training program, it always happens. On the cushion, grounded in practice, the day begins. Trainees receive dokusan every morning and participate in the daily chanting service.

Throughout the week, we rotate through jobs in three areas: kitchen, house, and garden. We cook, clean, weed, and tackle special projects in silence, as work practice demands. We learn—or learn again—how truly focusing on the task at hand, without talking or socializing, really changes doing into practicing. I did learn some new skills, like how to make breakfast meals. I practiced some skills I thought I had mastered but clearly had not, like cleaning incense pots. Over and over, I had the opportunity to see the impact of my words and actions upon others—and have my not-always-skillful attempts received with grace and kindness by Sangha siblings.

Each day, we stop our work for a period of zazen before lunch, and we finish our work day with a short chanting service in the Buddha Hall. After supper, we end the day with different practice-focused sessions: zazen, a group discussion about the principle of Dana, and an Entering the Way talk by a Dharma sibling who shared her path to practice with honesty, vulnerability and humor. No matter where we were or what we were doing, practice was always close at hand.

At breakfast and supper, and at other informal times, we had the opportunity to talk casually with each other, getting to know folks we'd only seen on zoom, sharing our paths to practice, and watching videos of many adorable grandchildren. This is perhaps one of the most special parts of the training program: the chance to both practice in silence and talk with our Sangha mates. We bring our 'real' lives to practice, and we bring practice to our life as we really live it, with meals to prepare, dirty dishes to wash, laundry to fold, and personal conversations to navigate. We get to really see ourselves, and be seen by others, held and holding each other with compassion and gratitude.

We have this moment. The training program helps us learn how to make every moment, every task, into practice, supported by the wisdom, example, and never-failing help of our Sangha.

Jukai: Entering the Buddha's Way

Sunday, November 9, at 9:00 AM we will have a sitting followed by the **Jukai Ceremony** to formalize our commitment to the Buddha's Way.

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 Bassui 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 Buddhadharma 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 incense 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.

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the dokusan line, our three meals are set up by our waiters and cooks. 'Round the clock, the kitchen is at work to nourish our bodies, so that we can nourish our spirits in continuous practice.

After the day's concluding ritual, we await evening refreshments in preparation for yaza. The counter light is turned on overhead welcoming us to partake; however, preparations for that snack too began earlier in the day. Even though we may rest, the kitchen does not. We sip our tea and eat our crackers, while the bran muffin batter sits patiently in muffin tins in the walk-in waiting to be baked in the morning. At breakfast, we'll recite, "We take this food to attain the Buddha Way," serve ourselves, pass the hungry ghost dishes, and gratefully, gratefully take a bite.

Thanksgiving Ceremony: Expressing Gratitude

A **Ceremony of Thanksgiving** will be held on **Sunday, November 16 at 9:30 A.M.**, after a short sitting. Family members of all ages are welcome to attend this special ceremony. The sitting begins at the usual time of 9:00 AM.

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. At the end of the ceremony all are invited for refreshments. Pies are welcome!

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 4, during the evening sitting.** The ceremony this year is not during Rohatsu 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 2025-2026

On Wednesday 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 for this 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 and Noisemaking*
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 2026 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 wonderful 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

Saturday, December 27 through Tuesday, 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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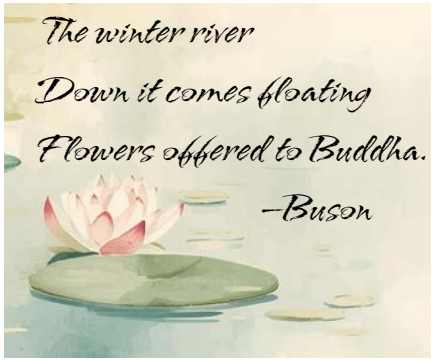

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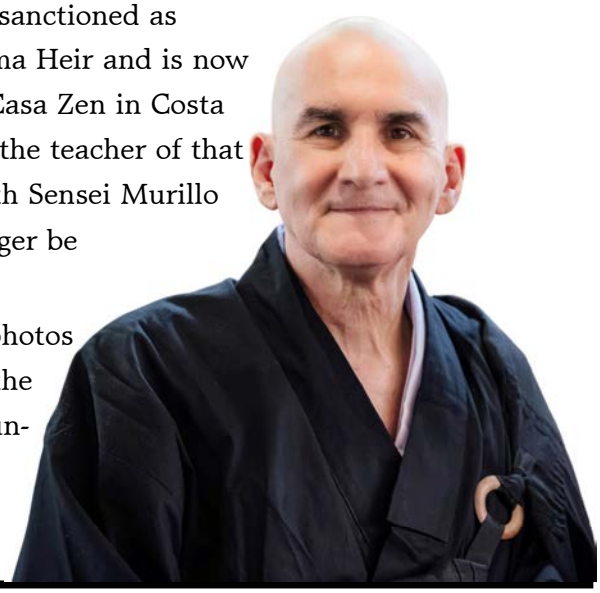
New Teacher in the Lineage

On Sunday, November 2, the Venerable Bodhi Murillo was sanctioned as Roshi Graef's second Dharma Heir and is now the teacher (Sensei) at the Casa Zen in Costa Rica. Roshi Graef has been the teacher of that Sangha since 1988, but with Sensei Murillo taking over, she will no longer be traveling there.

More information and photos of the ceremony will be in the next issue of "Walking Mountains."