

Nonthinking: The Very Basis
Ken Tetsuzan Morgareidge

A Place of Refuge: Temple Building Project

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# NONTHINKING: THE VERY BASIS

#### Ken Tetsuzan Morgareidge



At the Zen Center of Denver, our zazen instruction to new people emphasizes three things. First to find a stable sitting posture, second to regulate the breath and make it calm, and third to make the mind like a blank sheet of paper. Actually we don't need to worry about the blank mind. If one has a

stable posture and focuses on the breath, that last bit happens of itself.

This morning I thought we could take a look at Case 129, True Dharma Eye, Master Dogen's Three Hundred Koans [D Loori, K Tanahashi, Shambhala, 2005, p. 175]. The case reads:

When Yaoshan was sitting in meditation, a monastic asked, "What do you think about as you sit in steadfast composure?"

Yaoshan said, "I think not-thinking."

The monastic said, "How do you think not-thinking?"

Yaoshan said, "Nonthinking."

This case is taken up by Dogen in a couple of places. One is a reference in Fukanzazengi, A Universal Recommendation for the Practice of Zazen:

At the site of your regular sitting, spread out a thick mat and place a firm round cushion on it. Sit on the cushion in either the Full Lotus of Half Lotus posture. In the Full Lotus posture, you first place your right foot on your left thigh and your left foot on your right thigh. Your robes should be worn loosely and arranged neatly. Then place your right hand on your left leg and your left palm (facing upward) on your right palm, thumb-tips touching lightly. Sit upright, leaning neither left nor right, front nor back. Your ears should be on the same plane as your shoulders and your nose in line with your navel. Your tongue should be placed against the roof of your mouth and your lips and teeth closed firmly. Your eyes should always remain open and you should breathe gently through your nose.

Having adjusted your body in this manner, take a deep breath and exhale fully, sway your body left and right several times, and settle into an immobile sitting posture. Then sit firmly as a rock and think of not-thinking. How do you think of not-thinking? Nonthinking. This is the very basis of zazen.

So, after a minutely precise description of the form: how to sit, cross your legs, etc. he ends with the real heart of the matter: Nonthinking.

The great challenge we face in zazen is thoughts. It is very easy to become obsessed with getting rid of thoughts. There are times of course, when the mind really does quiet down, and we begin to experience the vast stillness that is at the root of our being. But there are other times when we are sitting with our head in a bucket, the thoughts banging around inside like highly energetic ping pong balls.

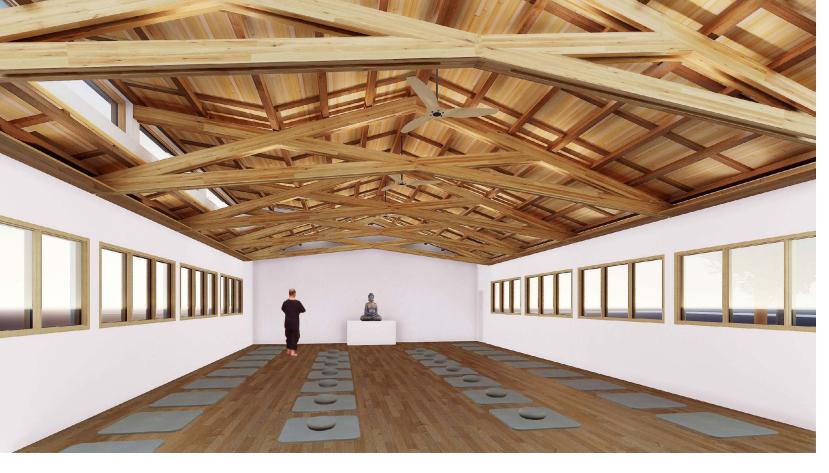
Is one instance thinking and the other nonthinking? No. Thoughts and no-thoughts are both conditions, and conditions are utterly unpredictable and uncontrollable. As Friedrich Nietzsche said, Thoughts arise when they want to, not when we want them to.

Nonthinking is not a condition, it is a practice which is independent of thought, no-thought, all feelings, and sensations. It is that which leaps clear of all conditions.

Thinking is the delusive activity of the mind, the following of thoughts as they lead you down the garden path, or around the world in eighty minutes. We have all had to struggle with that. Not-thinking is suppression, quietude, blankness. But that's not it either. If that were the case, you could just fall asleep or drink or drug yourself into a stupor.

Robert Aitken says that the mind produces thoughts the way the pancreas produces digestive juices. That is its natural function, its nature. But if we chase after them we feed the delusive mind. And if we try to suppress them, beat them down, we also feed it, and in doing either we wear ourselves out, trying to meet some preconceived notion of wisdom or serenity.

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# A PLACE OF REFUGE

#### TEMPLE BUILDING PROJECT

As summer reaches its height, we have made great progress in planning our new temple at 1856 S. Columbine Street, working with Semple Brown Design to hone floor plans and develop conceptual renderings of the exterior and interior of the building. We have now also engaged Spectrum General Contractors, a company with an established reputation for quality construction.

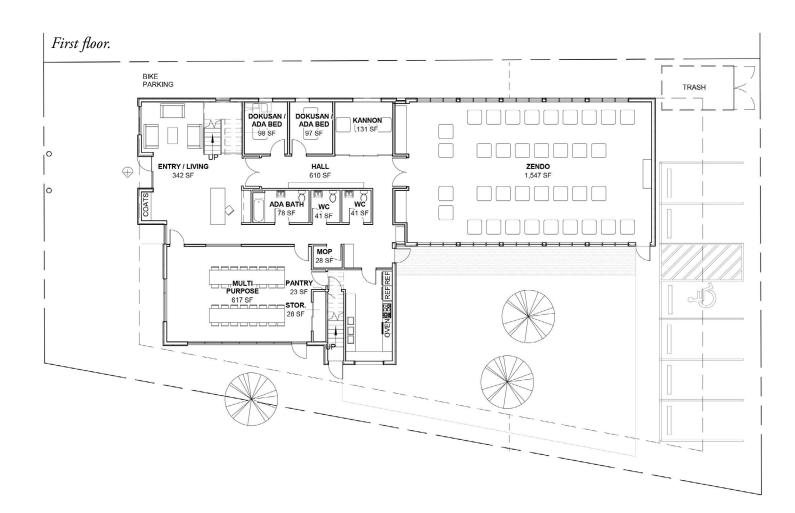
At the heart of our practice is zazen, and so naturally the heart of our new building will be the zendo, or meditation hall. The zendo will be a spacious 1500 square feet, with seating for 36-50 participants in a regular configuration. It will be a beautiful, serene hall with glowing wood floors and gentle lighting, capable also of accommodating secondary activities such as classes, weddings and the like.

Other core spaces found on the first floor include a multipurpose dining room or large classroom, a Kannon room for intimate devotional practice, multiple dokusan rooms (for one-on-one instruction with the teachers), a foyer, living room with space for socializing, kitchen and bathrooms.

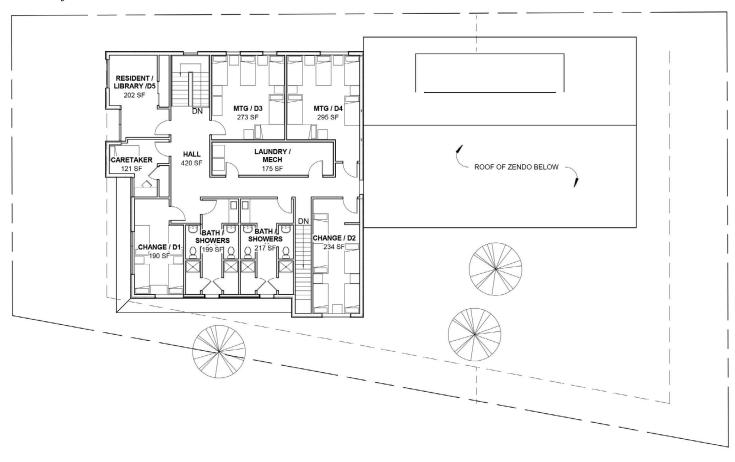
Second-floor spaces include a library, mixed-use meeting rooms/space for retreat participants, additional showers and bathrooms, a caretaker bedroom and rooms for storage and mechanical necessities.

Many considerations factored into our exterior design, including a desire to acknowledge our roots in Japanese Zen temple architecture while embracing a more modern form that will fit into the largely residential University neighborhood. Modest, warm and welcoming, this 7,000-square-foot building will comprise two stories on the western side, with a single-story zendo on the east. With Prairie Park immediately to the south, those windows will look out to a pleasant stretch of grassland, or to an enclosed Zen garden adjacent the zendo.

With luck, the demolition of the small house on the property (which has unfortunately been delayed for some time, due to a variety of unforeseen obstacles) will be finished shortly, and we will be ready to begin construction as soon as fundraising, preparation of construction documents and building schedule allow.



Second floor.



View from Prairie Park.



# A THOUSAND HANDS, BUILDING A TEMPLE

The fundraising committee has been very busy in the last few months, preparing printed materials (including trifold and magazine-style brochures, and thank-you cards for donors), mailing pledge cards, readying our Colorado Gives web page, and of course, contacting donors directly. We have already been remarkably successful, raising \$398,000 of our projected \$877,000 need, and things look promising for the remainder. To those who have already given generously, our deepest thanks!

As our fundraising drive for our new temple continues, we will be taking photos of our donors' hands in the dhyana mudra, which we use in zazen. Each of these individuals contributed generously to the project, allowing their understanding to manifest concretely in the world, for the benefit of all. Join hands with us, and together we'll create something wonderful!























### ZEN PEACEMAKERS IN ACTION

Karin Ryuku Sensei recently has promoted important new efforts for local activism under the umbrella of the transnational Zen Peacemakers, Intl. She has described the evolution of the ZPI under Bernie Glassman, who trained at Zen Center of Los Angeles with Maezumi Roshi. To confront profound personal and historical issues, he started conducting meditation retreats at Birkenau-Auschwitz in Poland (which Karin attended). Glassman also founded Greyston Bakery in

the Bronx, New York, to provide employment for low-income people and to extend dharma practice into the community. His successful new enterprises evolved with the development of a Zen Peacemakers organization.

Karin has explained the Three Tenets of the Zen Peacemakers as formulated by Bernie Glassman, namely 1)

not-knowing, 2) bearing witness and 3) taking action. Bernie's dharma heir Shishin Wick Roshi (a teacher of Karin Sensei), and Shishin's dharma heir Gyodo Paul Agostinelli are both helping to develop the Colorado ZPI group, as is Grant Fuku Couch Sensei, who has worked with ZPI nationally and internationally for years. Meetings have been held in Denver and Boulder for interested Zen sangha members.

Recent activities of Denver members include effective preparation of a meal at Judi's House (1741 N. Gaylord St.) for grieving families on May 25. With Billy Wynne as organizer, Connie Lane, Amy Strickland and Nancy Peters supported 20-30 bereaved family members and counseling staff working through the months after tragic losses of their loved ones. After the early weeks of shock from a death, the family members receive sustaining emotional support and companionship to cope with their new lives.

ZPI members worked at Metro Caring on June 14 to assist the food bank and nutrition education center. Karin Sensei, Jim Long, Mike Tabor, Nancy Peters and Bob Knott participated. Founded by a consortium of local churches, Metro Caring has built a new facility near

St. Joseph's Hospital at 18th and Downing. Our team received an informative overview tour before assisting in the food access area. We helped move food from docks to pallets and shelves for distribution to low-income clients of the food bank. There are nutrition-education and gardening classes as well as useful supports like bus passes and state ID assistance. It was great to learn from the immigrant staff about their lives and new directions, and it was agreed that we would like to work with this

organization on an ongoing basis. There will be an additional work afternoon at Metro Caring on Friday, Aug. 4.

There was a ZPI retreat practice day at Willow Farm in Hygiene, CO, west of Longmont, on Sat. July 8. This included sitting and walking meditation, a work period (samu), a talk on the Three Tenets by Shishin Wick Roshi, and council

training with practice led by Grant Fuku Couch Sensei.

Further actions included our commitment of five volunteers to new housing production at a Habitat for Humanity project on Saturday, July 15, from 7:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. in southwest Denver. Ken Morgareidge Sensei, Amy Strickland, The Vo, Fred Becker, and Bob Knott installed windows while becoming acquainted with low-income prospective residents who helped to build their own townhouses.

A Street Retreat will be conducted Aug. 31 - Sept. 3. Trained leaders will support participants in living on the streets for three days and nights. The group will meditate together, share in council, go on begging rounds, walk across town, check in at a local soup kitchen and otherwise experience homeless life with Sensei Joshin Brian Byrnes.

Please contact Bill Wright regarding the Street Retreat or Bob Knott about Metro Caring (Aug. 4) and see https://www.meetup.com/Zen-Peacemakers-Order-Colorado/ if you have interest or questions.

– Bob Knott

## ROHATSU SESSHIN 2017

The Zen Center of Denver's Rohatsu sesshin will be returning to Shambala Mountain Center for a third year, this year from December 2-9, with a partial attendance option from December 2 to Wednesday, December 6, at noon. As before, our three teachers, Peggy Metta Sheehan, Karin Ryuku Kempe and Ken Tetsuzan Morgareidge, will jointly conduct the sesshin.

Those who have attended in the past have reflected on many positive aspects of taking our practice to this beautiful mountain retreat surrounded by meadows, trees, rocks, ravens and deer, wind and snow. Because SMC is a Buddhist facility, our values and practices are welcomed and shared, and our practice needs are met in the meditation hall, various lodging choices, and in the dining hall, where delicious vegetarian and vegan meal options are offered.

As in 2016, the sesshin will extend eight days, seven nights, from Saturday to Saturday. The basic fee is \$64.25 per person per day for members, which includes all meals, lodging in the seasonal dorm, and a facility fee, making a total cost of \$449.75 for members and \$519.75 for non-members. Lodging upgrades are available at additional cost, as described below.

Seasonal dorms are about a ten-minute walk from the meditation hall. Bathrooms are in the dorms, but showers are in a different building. Twin-sized, foam mattresses are on sleeping platforms, and participants bring their own pillows, linen, blankets and towels. There is one dorm for men and one for women, and each can accommodate fifteen people. (\$59.25/night figured in the cost as above)

**Lodge dorms** are in the same building as the meditation hall, with single beds with regular mattresses; pillows, linen, blankets and towels are provided (as in all of the following options). Bathrooms and showers are shared. There is one dorm for men and one for women, sleeping seven people each. (\$81.75/night)

**Lodge doubles** are for two participants who want to share a room. Sign up with the name of the person you are sharing with, or indicate if you want a roommate assigned (by availability). Full-sized beds, shared bathrooms and showers in lodge. (\$87.75/night)

**Monk rooms** are private rooms with full-sized beds, shared bathroom and showers. (\$125.25/night)



**Lodge singles** are private rooms with full or queensized beds, private bathrooms/showers. (\$156.75/night)

The teachers and Board of Directors want to enthusiastically encourage all members to experience sesshin, and limited resources should not be a hindrance to any member who wants to attend. A request for a subsidy can be made confidentially to your teacher of choice. The application has been emailed to members and is posted on the ZCD website. Shambala's meditation hall seats a maximum of 35 participants. The deadline for the application, with a \$50 deposit, is September 22; the deposit will become nonrefundable after September 29.

– Merilee Schultheiss



# ROCKY MOUNTAIN ECODHARMA RETREAT CENTER IS FOR ALL OF US

#### **Nancy Peters**

Having already reserved a space at the newly opened Rocky Mountain Ecodharma Retreat Center (RMERC) for our summer sesshin next June, our Zen Center will be the first organization to hold a retreat there once RMERC reopens after extensive renovation work through the winter.

In July I had the privilege of being able to learn about RMERC by spending three days there. The first weekend's activities—consisting of indoor and outdoor meditation periods, silent hikes, and talks about the new center—were led by Johann Robbins, a Buddhist Vipassana/Insight Meditation teacher and the center's cofounder, director and cheerleader-in-chief.

I learned that a group of dedicated Buddhist visionaries, led and inspired by Robbins and Boulder-based Buddhist writer and activist David Loy—who through Impermanent Sangha have been leading outdoor meditation hike/retreats for years together—formed a non-profit organization that two months ago used donations plus an interest-free loan to purchase the property from the Christian Science church for just \$375,000. The rock-bottom price was due largely to the fact that when

Hazel Schmoll, the famous Colorado educator, biologist and lobbyist, bequeathed the land to her church, her will stipulated that the property could only be resold to a nonprofit, and that it could never be developed but must remain in its unspoiled state. Conservation easements administered through the Nature Conservancy further ensure that the original wildness of the land will forever be preserved.

Offering 180 acres of pristine land a few miles from the Indian Peaks Wilderness and adjacent to the Arapahoe National Forest, just a 40-minute drive northwest of Boulder, RMERC is an excellent location for our summer outdoor sessin, now that our beloved Blue Mountain site is no longer available. There's a lodge that will provide a zendo, dokusan rooms, kitchen, dining area, and space to sleep up to 28 participants, along with campsites for those who choose to sleep outside—not to mention hiking trails, a creek whose symphonic medley invites you to "enter here," and a balcony overlooking mountain views that will take your breath away.

RMERC a place where we can breathe in "mu" and tread lightly on the land that the spruce trees, wild-

flowers, mountains, elk, moose, hummingbirds, flies, mountain lions, and black bears call home—even while unflinchingly confronting and acknowledging the deep injustices and suffering that the conquest of this land inflicted upon the original indigenous inhabitants, whose bones are buried beneath the soil where we walk in kinhin.

As stated on its website, RMERC's mission is to be "a low cost home for spiritual practice, with an emphasis on practice in nature. We are a supportive place for deep practice, a place for meditation, retreats, workshops and Ecodharma; a place for learning from nature, teachers and other participants, and a place for discovering ourselves in a wild environment."

Writes Loy, RMERC "brings Buddhism and Dharma back into the natural world where they originated, and fosters the clarity and compassion needed to better address the ecological crisis and its related social justice issues. We call this Ecodharma."

Similarly, Robbins suggests that this center provides practitioners an opportunity "to experience your consciousness in a different way; realizing you are not separate from the natural world, and to be nourished and healed by that connection. To spend time in silence simply being, with inner and outer nature, in a beauty and wildness that humans cannot create, and the absolute need we have to be a part of that. And to share that experience with others of like mind and intention. To be, learn, teach, share, practice, and act; while being held by the earth and the sun."

They expect to host both group and solo silent meditation retreats, for varying lengths of time, and welcome all spiritual practice traditions. They are further committed to providing "low cost retreats that are offered in the spirit of generosity."

RMERC also seeks to recognize the privilege that a history of domination and conquest have conferred on European Americans at the expense of people of color, and which is at the core of deep national and international injustices and inequities today. RMERC leaders are committed to encouraging "retreats for underserved communities including people of color, veterans, youth, and other groups who have historically borne or will bear the brunt of ecological and socio-economic devastation," as well as ecodharma workshops and retreats for activists.

More, the center's leaders want this to be a place where activists and spiritual practitioners come together to explore the true meaning of "ecodharma" and to express dharma in action by working to alleviate the root causes of the suffering and injustices in our world today.

This aspect of RMERC was brought home to me by Zen priest, boundless, in-motion sangha leader and RMERC board member Kritee Kanko, who conducted the zazenkai I attended during my second weekend at RMERC. In her essay Whiteness and Privilege in Eco-Dharma: How Should We Confront Them Compassionately?, Kritee writes, "It is not hard to see that at least some of the institutional drivers that militantly keep poor people poor, disenfranchised and in the most polluted environments are the same drivers that lead to exploitation and plundering of mother Earth within and outside this country. The sense of duality and separateness that makes us (both as individuals and institutions) objectify nature, other human and non-human species also makes us materialistic and causes both environmental and social-justice problems.... We need true Eco-Dharma communities that look at both our inner (psycho-spiritual) and outer (institutional, corporate and political) greed...."

Finally, while at RMERC I learned about the additional \$200,000 and "sweat equity" required for the septic system, insulation, water and other infrastructure improvements that will allow the 80-year old lodge, cabin and barn to host the many spiritual practitioners and activists who are already lining up to reserve a spot for their retreats, programs and events. Which brings me to the question: Who does RMERC belong to?

As Robbins continually reminded us all, RMERC doesn't belong to him and the board members—it belongs to all of us for whom it was created, who see the great need for such a center, believe in its potential, and plan to use it in the future. RMERC is counting on all of us to actively support it, through our financial donations, if we're able, by volunteering to work on the many land and building restoration projects, and in whatever other ways each of us may be inspired to become involved.

So then, RMERC belongs to me, and to you.

To learn more about getting involved with your REMERC, go to rmerc.org, or email info@rmerc.org.

So what is this nonthinking? It is the non-following of thoughts. They arise, they may hang around a bit, and then they pass away. Sounds, sights, smells, sensations all arise and pass away. Nothing lasts. Thoughts are the same, but somehow we associate thoughts with an ongoing entity called the self.

The other place Dogen refers to this koan is in his essay, the Gimlet (or needle) of Zazen [Adapted from "The Art of Just Sitting", D Loori, Wisdom 2002, p. 25]. About Yaoshan he writes:

Although he is not alone in this steadfast sitting, Yaoshan's words are singular: He is thinking of not-thinking. Nonthinking [expresses] his very skin, flesh, bones and

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marrow of thinking and the very skin, flesh, bones and marrow of not-thinking.

This nonthinking is the very skin, flesh, bones, and marrow of our zazen. Zazen is independent of conditions. Nonthinking is nothing other than the realization of impermanence. It is a total non-attachment to anything, and total acceptance of the moment. Our very being, our Buddha nature is this impermanence.

permanence.

But if this self is nothing but a construct, if I am my ever-changing thoughts, it's pretty obvious that I change from one moment to the next like shadows on water. If all we are is the sum total of all thoughts and sensations at any given moment, how can there be any fixed self? Thinking is an attempt to freeze reality into fixed forms, a kind of permanence. Not-thinking is trying to go blank, another kind of

There is rather humorous story about Abraham Lincoln's ax. A certain gentleman was driving through a rural part of Illinois, and he came to a small town. He wanted to buy a snack and he happened upon an old, traditional general store; the kind with the high pressed tin ceiling, a counter along one side and various commodities in barrels. He bought a couple of candy bars and as he was paying for them saw an ax mounted on pegs on the wall behind the counter. It was obviously

very well cared for, so he remarked to the proprietor, "That's a nice looking ax you have." The proprietor said, "Oh yes, that ax belonged to Abraham Lincoln." "Oh my goodness," said the visitor, "It must be priceless! Shouldn't it be in a museum or something?" The proprietor said, "Oh no, I couldn't give it up. It's a great ax. I've had three new handles and two new heads put to it, and it's still the best ax I've ever owned."

Well, it's pretty obvious that the concept of Abe Lincoln's ax far outlived the reality. And what about us? Does our concept of ourselves go on and on regardless of the reality of change? I'm in my 70s and the aging process has forced me to give up a lot of notions about who or what I am. But it gets more and more subtle.

> This morning I was silent for a while; now I'm talking. I was sitting over there, now I'm here. I get a haircut, I change clothes, I take a shower, I sit, I stand, I walk, I speak or I am silent. I am still or I am active. All these are just a few of the myriad characteristics that make me up and they are never the same from one instant to the next. All we are is a collection of characteristics, and if any of those characteristics change, what has become of us?

And if there is no enduring self, is there anything that endures? Does anything have a self? Is there anything beyond this phantasmagoric show of light and sound and touch etc.? Non-thinking itself is that show, if viewed properly.

We hear about things like emptiness and we start looking for something other, something outside of our everyday experience, a void, a darkness, a vast chasm, rather like a cosmic construction site. But emptiness is just another construct, an abstraction. Zen is not about abstractions. To say that this (object, paper, mat etc.) is empty is true. It has no existence or self apart from everything else. To say that everything is empty of any self is true. But as soon as you look for emptiness as some sort of entity apart from form, our direct experience, you have lost it.

Nanquan said to the young Zhaozhou: "The Tao does not belong to knowing or not knowing. Knowing is delusion; not knowing is blankness. If you truly reach the genuine Tao, you will find it as vast and boundless as outer space."

Yes, even the most mundane object is vast and boundless. The Buddha on the altar, the candles, a garbage can, a piece of dog poop. All vast and boundless.

Here are some lines by Hongzhi [from "The Acupuncture Needle of Zazen" in Cultivating the Empty Field, TD Leighton, Yi Wu, transl. North Point, 1991, p. 39]:

Knowing without touching things, This knowledge is infinitely subtle. Illuminating without encountering objects, This illumination is innately miraculous.

There is no discriminated thing to touch, no separate object to illuminate. How would we make distinctions? We sit and think of not thinking. How? Nonthinking, the letting go every moment. We let go; we are the letting go. Even as we are, each of us, the ever-changing here and now: the infinite here, the eternal now.

Together with all beings, we realize the Way.

#### Gassho Corner

Special thanks to the fundraising committee, including Peggy Sheehan Sensei, Karin Kempe Sensei, Jeff Black, Connie Lane, Francine Campone, Judy Mazarin, Billy Wynne, and Lois and Fred Becker, who have put forth great effort in rousing the support we need.

Thanks also to David Lee, who has pursued the demolition of the house on Columbine through one obstacle after another.

And of course to the many members and friends of the Center who have contributed so generously to the building project. Nine bows!

# Save the Date: Summer Sesshin 2018 at RMERC

Our summer sesshin will held next year from June 12-17 at the Rocky Mountain Ecodharma Retreat Center (see article, p. 8). There is no fee structure as yet, but based on what we've seen and heard it will be affordable, with the option to tent on the meadow or stay in the lodge dormitory rooms. We are excited to be the first sangha booked for a retreat after improvements are made to enclose a zendo space and update the kitchen, where we will be cooking for ourselves.

## In the Marketplace

In the Marketplace allows ZCD members to reach fellow sangha members with business, for-sale or want ads. If you would like to place an ad in our next issue, email office@ zencenterofdenver.org.

*INFERENCE* by Joel Tagert. When the body of a genetically engineered boy is discovered in a Seattle alley, it's up to detectives Tom Mueller and Jackie Khleang to crack the case – with or without the AIs they've come to rely upon. Look for the debut novel today on Amazon.

Zabutons for sale: 36x36, memory-foam core surrounded by cotton batting and a removable, washable black cover that is zippered. \$70 each. Contact becky\_wethington@ icloud.com.

Photography by Geoff Keeton: Family pictures and portraits, picture editing, or if you wanted to combine a picture and Zen saying or koan together I can do that as well. Contact gkeeoft@gmail.com or 720-227-2997.

Synergy Photographics: Commercial Photography, Graphic and Web Site Design, Full Color Printed Products from Postcards to Posters. Low minimum quantities available at very competitive rates. Contact Jeff Black at 303-757-1866, synergyphotographics@gmail.com.

Jason Polk, LCSW, LAC. Helping couples and individuals get along better. Couple therapy & individual therapy. See Paramitacounseling.com or email jason@paramitacounseling.com.

