

MOUNTAINS TALKING

SPRING 2018



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Front and Back Covers: *Geoff Keeton*

Mountains Talking is the quarterly newsletter of the Zen Center of Denver, a Buddhist sangha offering authentic Zen practice and training. For more information, contact:

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THE VIRTUE OF NOT UNDERSTANDING

Ken Tetsuzan Morgareidge



At the beginning of a sesshin, a student comes into dokusan and the teacher asks, "Why are you here?" The student replies, "Roshi, I want to deepen my understanding." Well, that might be a good reply or it might not. What kind of understanding is the student looking for?

There are many different kinds of understanding. There is scientific understanding, ethical/psychological understanding, political understanding, theological or religious understanding, cosmological understanding. All these are about the world of time, space and karma. All are about seeking, finding out something that is outside yourself. And all are tied to cause and effect.

There is nothing inherently wrong with such understanding. It is the vehicle of our functioning in the world of time, space and karma, delusive wisdom. But if we attach to it as the only way, we are in trouble.

One can spend lifetimes seeking this understanding and remain trapped in samsara, the wheel of birth and death. I fear that these days too many of us are infected with the disease of understanding. We read, we study, we hear teisho, we work on koans. We go to sittings, zazen-kai, sesshin. Occasionally we have flashes, real insights into the great matter. But almost instantly we start thinking, "Ah, so that's what it is all about, that's the real truth of the matter. Now I've got it!" The discursive mind is incredibly patient and it becomes more and more subtle with practice. You see, it is practicing as well; it practices getting around our zazen.

What kind of understanding will we have when the light of the world fades in death? That's the real question. Are we spending so much energy trying to acquire worldly knowledge and understanding, something that is so temporary? The hardest thing to do, especially in this culture, is to let go of the desire to understand, to know. There is so much information now at our fingertips at the click of a mouse, so much understanding. We want

to explore all the ins and outs of every phenomena, all the causes of every effect and every effect that stems from a cause.

This understanding is about control. We love the illusion of control. Our knowledge, our understanding, being in control, is how we define and preserve the separate ego/self. In our practice it is necessary always to look at our zazen closely. Are we really letting go of everything or are we still in very subtle ways trying to figure stuff out? Are we looking for the great truth that is beyond understanding, beyond words and thoughts? Or are we just trying to look for understanding as a temporary pacifier?

Case #59 from *The True Dharma Eye: Zen Master Dogen's Three Hundred Koans*, "Huineng Doesn't Understand":

Zen master Dajian Huineng of Mount Caoxi was once asked by a monastic, "Who has grasped the significance of Huangmei?"

Huineng said, "Those who understand the Buddhadharma have it."

The monastic said, "Do you have it, Master?"

Huineng said, "No, I do not have it."

The monastic said, "How come you don't have it?"

Huineng said, "Because I don't understand the Buddhadharma."

The two personages referred to in this case are Huineng, the Sixth Chinese Ancestor of Chan (638-713), and Huangmei, the Fifth Ancestor (601-674), who transmitted the Dharma to Huineng as described by Huineng in his autobiography. After receiving transmission, Huineng spent many years in seclusion before emerging to teach. But now here he is, the abbot of Mount Caoxi. And he is questioned by one of those unsung heroes of the Dharma, the anonymous monastic.

He asks Huineng, "Who has grasped the significance of Huangmei?" Who has grasped the true teachings

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TEMPLE VIEWS

We are pleased to share these new renderings of our temple-to-be, courtesy of our architects at Semple Brown Design. As we come closer to the start of construction, we continue to refine the vision of the building and its interior and exterior spaces.

While we had hoped to begin construction sometime in April, there have been some minor delays due to unexpected building requirements by the city, in particular issues with how the earth on the property is graded, which will now require the addition of a front porch to accommodate (see picture, right). We still hope, however, to begin construction this spring.



Vishnu's Couch

It's no small feat to balance on your side,
reclining on your thousand headed serpent
couch, a lotus sprouting from your navel,
head propped on your palm, two fingers gripping
the big toe, one leg stretched up as if
to show off your supreme divinity,
how casually you dream this fathomless
universe into reality.

Does your beloved Lakshmi ever ask
you to consider making a few changes—
to lighten up the cosmic drama just a bit?
Does she, for instance, wonder why you send
those avatars to wake us from our dream,
when waking from a dream is but a dream?

— *John Steele*



Photo by Geoff Keeton

SUMMER SESSHIN

Picture a rustic three-story lodge perched on a mountain at 8500 feet, with a sweeping view of the Continental Divide fronted by alpine meadows and spruce forest, home to deer, elk, moose, bear and beaver. This is the Rocky Mountain Ecodharma Retreat Center, and from June 12-17, the Zen Center of Denver will be the first Buddhist group to hold an extended sesshin in this newly renovated space.

As stated on its website, “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 inextricably related social justice issues. We call this Ecodharma ... Our mission is to provide 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.”

As with our Rohatsu sesshin at Shambala Mountain, all three ZCD teachers will give teishos and offer dokusan during this summer sesshin. In addition to meditation practice in the zendo, participants will have the opportunity to practice samu activities such as cleaning the lodge and practice areas, and assisting the tenzo in preparation of our own meals. Most participants will be lodged indoors in single- or double-occupancy rooms on the second and third floors, with the option for a limited number of people to sleep in tents on designated areas of the property.

The sesshin fee is \$300 for members and \$350 for non-members, including all lodging and meals. Full attendance is required. The deadline for application and deposit is May 6. For more information or to obtain a sesshin application, please contact the office.

— Merilee Schultheiss

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of your predecessor and all of the Buddhas and great ancestors? It’s another way of putting the question of questions. But do you see the trap that this monastic has already fallen into? What is there to grasp? Daido Looi asks, “Once you grasp it, what do you have?” Can you pluck the moon’s reflection out of the water? But Huineng has a rather more subtle way to deal with this person. “Those who understand the Buddhadharma have it.”

The monastic asks, “Do you have it, Master?” The fish climbs onto the hook. Does the dog have Buddha nature or not? What is this having? Women says, “A little bit of has or has not, and body is lost, life is lost.” Huineng plays the hooked fish. “No, I do not have it.” Even as Zhaozhou tells his monastic, “Mu,” no.

One can imagine the puzzlement. “How come you don’t have it?” What? You’re the Zen master here; what do you mean you don’t have it? Daido comments, “He hasn’t realized yet that the ground beneath his feet is about to disappear.”

And Huineng yanks out the rug. “Because I don’t understand the Buddhadharma.” I don’t understand. No, I don’t waste my time and energy on “understanding.” If this questioner had been on the ball, he might have pursued the matter: “How do you not understand? Show me this not-understanding.”

In the commentary on Case #6 in the *Blue Cliff Record*, Yuanwu writes:

Hsiang Lin [later an heir] served as Yun Men’s attendant for eighteen years; whenever Yun Men dealt with him, he would just call out, “Attendant Yuan!” Yuan would answer, “Yes?” Yun Men would say, “What is it?” It went on like this for eighteen years, when one day Hsiang Lin finally awakened. He said, “I understand.” Yun Men told him, “From now on I won’t call you any more.”

Xianglin understands. Huineng doesn’t understand. Is Xianglin’s understanding different from Huineng’s not understanding?

Biyanlu Case #1, “Bodhidharma’s ‘I don’t know,’” reads in part:

Emperor Wu of Liang asked the Great Master Bodhidharma, “What is the first principle of the holy teaching?”

Bodhidharma said, “Emptiness without holiness.”

The Emperor said, “Who is standing before me?”

Bodhidharma replied, “I don’t know.”

The Emperor did not understand.

Time and again a monastic (or an emperor) seeks to understand, to find an answer, hopes for a lecture that clears up everything. And time and again the master yanks their illusory reality out from under them.

But be careful here.

Anyone can say, “I don’t understand” or “I don’t know.” Huineng’s “I don’t understand” and Bodhidharma’s “I don’t know” are profound religious insights. But you come to such an insight only through long and intense practice and searching. Coming from a sophomore philosophy major, or a beginning Zen student for that matter, it smacks more of a cheerful, nihilistic complacency.

How is it that Huineng does not understand? The one whom we call Huineng might understand. The Huineng who is beyond names and forms does not understand, cannot understand, must not understand. Buddhadharma is formless; your understanding must also be formless. You yourself must be formless.

Women’s commentary on Case #9 in the *Wumenguan*:

I approve the old barbarian’s realization, but I don’t approve his understanding. When an ordinary man realizes he is a sage. A sage if he understands is an ordinary man.

The more you try to understand, the more you tinker with your practice, the farther away you get.

Sometimes one may be a sage, at other times an ordinary person. They are not mutually exclusive. Dogen said that one who advances in the way is an ordinary person. If I realize without understanding, I cannot function, I cannot teach. If I understand without realizing, I spout lies. But even the most profound insight, the deepest “understanding,” is not to be attached to. Whatever the insight, it is only a signpost pointing to continued practice and realization.

Daian (1347-1403, an early Ming dynasty teacher) said:

Here I have no Buddha Dharma that can be explained and no Zen path that can be studied. You must utterly abandon all that you have had explained to you and all that you have studied at various Zen centers. Let there be nothing you hold inside you and nothing you depend on outside—then nothing will stop you from being an utterly unconstrained patch-robed monk.

At just such a time you must go on to recognize that there is a road of personal transformation.

Nothing inside, nothing outside. And yet there is a road of personal transformation: our practice happens in time and space. In time and space we practice the enlightenment that is beyond time and space. That which you seek is closer than your own eyeballs. It is in your sitting itself, it is your sitting itself. There is nowhere else to look, nothing else to know or to be.

Zhaozhou said, “Originally I intended to practice to help save others; Who would have suspected that instead I would become an idiot?” A chair does not understand a chair; it doesn’t need to. A robin does not understand a robin; it has no need to. The body does not understand the body. Mu doesn’t understand Mu; zazen does not understand zazen.

It is only this discursive, scheming and dreaming mind that seeks and grasps at the illusory understanding of things, concepts, notions, in the world of time and space. The more you try to understand, the more you tinker with your practice, the farther away you get.

The discursive mind is a chimera, flitting from one thing to another moment by moment. The body is a slow-burning fire, gone in a matter of a few years. Where is that which does not change, does not die because it is unborn? Seeking and grasping will never reach it. It can

only be reached by letting go.

But that is not easy. My understanding, my knowledge, is who I am. We applaud the person who knows, who understands. The words “I don’t know” or “I don’t understand” are looked upon as a confession of weakness or incompetence. It can be embarrassing, even frightening. Because to let go of all that is a kind of dying, dying of the separate, illusory self, which is so precious to us.

And yet all that knowing is actually a barrier. It is the smoked glass in front of your face through which you see only dimly if at all. You must be willing to leap into the abyss of not-knowing. Not just once, but again and again and again. Whatever you know, understand or think you do, continue. Continue the letting go.

Here’s a capping verse:

Not understanding, I breathe in and breathe out.

Not understanding, the bell rings and I get up and do kinhin.

Not understanding, I pick up a cup and drink tea.

Not understanding, the sun shines, the wind blows and birds sing.

When was understanding ever necessary?

Together with all beings, we realize the Way. ☸

Gassho Corner

Special thanks to Merilee Schultheiss, who is coordinating our upcoming sesshin at Rocky Mountain Ecodharma Retreat Center. Thanks also to the other members of the sesshin and zazen committee, Bill Hamaker, Bob Knott and Nancy Peters, who continue to help with the arrangements for our “floating zendo.”

Thanks are also due our treasurer, Geoff Keeton, and Greg Clark, who have been helping the office with some tax issues of late. Gassho!

Summer Zazen

This summer we will return to Willow Farm for zazen on July 1 with Karin Ryuku Sensei; on Aug. 5 with Ken Tetsuzan Sensei; and Sept. 23 with Peggy Metta Sensei teaching. Look for postings on Signupgenius.com to save your spot, not only in the zendo, but also for lunch under the trees with the goats and samu in the garden!

Calendar Highlights

April 15 - Teisho by Ken Sensei

April 21 - Introductory Seminar

April 22 - Teisho by Karin Sensei

April 26 - Beginners’ Night

April 29 - Zazen with Peggy Sensei at Santosha Yoga

May 6 - Sangha Meeting

May 13 - Kannon Ceremony

May 15 - Beginners’ Night at Mayu Sanctuary

May 20 - Teisho by Ken Sensei

May 24 - Talk and Discussion

June 3 - Jukai

June 10 - Chanting Service

June 12-17 - Sesshin at Rocky Mountain Ecodharma Retreat Center

June 24 - Clouds and Water meeting at Mayu Sanctuary



Photo by Jeff Black

Jukai

Our congratulations to Bill Wright (above right), who undertook the ceremony of Jukai on Feb. 11 with Ken Tetsuzan Morgareidge Sensei. We wish him all the best as he continues to deepen his vows and practice on the Buddha Way.

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.

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 gkeoft@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.

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