

# MOUNTAINS TALKING

WINTER 2018



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Front Cover: *Billy Wynne*

Back Cover: *Greg Clark*

# ENTERING THE TIMELESS

**Karin Ryuku Kempe**



*Thus shall ye think of all this  
fleeting world:  
A star at dawn, a bubble in a  
stream,  
A flash of lightning in a sum-  
mer cloud,  
A flickering lamp, a phan-  
tom, and a dream.*

This final stanza of the Diamond Sutra, one of most profound and subtle of sutras, we have taken as our launching place for the three teishos of this Rohatsu sesshin. This fleeting world – it’s our world, our world of today, as much as the world of the Buddha. Political upheaval, social injustice, the suffering of those experiencing famine, religious persecution, forest fires, hurricanes, violence. The world of rising oceans and rising international tensions. The inner world of despair and hope, of fatigue and commitment, of loving hearts and unfocused anger. All of it fleeting, all of it passing quickly away.

Dogen used similar language when he warned us not to waste our time in idle fantasy or regret: *You have already had the good fortune to be born with a precious (human) body. Do not pass over from the light to the shadow (by pursuing other matters). Now that you know what is the most important thing in Buddhism, how can you be satisfied with the transient world? Our bodies are like dew on the grass, and our lives like a flash of lightning, vanishing in a moment.* Our lives pass like “this!”

Each of us is aware of the arising and falling away of our thoughts, our emotions, our sensations, but as our minds look for a narrative in our shifting experience, we create a sense that *this*, this unique me, *this* is something firm and solid that continues, is constant. This “me” has possessions (a house, a dog), qualities (good at math, bad at spelling), relationships (a partner, sisters, two children).

None of this is false, but is it who I am? At every moment, I am growing, aging, and dying; I will pass away as surely as a leaf falls to be frozen, decay and melt into the earth. Most of us are old enough to have lost someone close to us, at least to experience their illness if we have

not been ill ourselves. Everything, everyone we hold dear passes away in time, including our own bodies, our own minds.

Even closer is this moment right now; each word I speak comes to you, may be taken in or slide off your awareness, and then drifts into silence. While we hear the wind blow and see the sun rise and set, while over days we feel our bodies settle into stillness, all these descriptive phrases are concepts, pictures; our life is really only Now. So when we get caught up in thinking, worrying, reviewing, even trying to correct the past, it’s as if we are walking on the street with our head turned around looking behind us. How can we possibly avoid tripping over our feet, how can we possibly see what is meeting us in the face?

This is not to say that it’s not good from time to time to look clearly at what brought us here, the ways we caused harm to ourselves and others, how our past reveals our tendencies, our unconscious intentions. To see fully in all directions, we look behind from time to time. But in sesshin, this week, we enter what is timeless, this moment.

These past weeks, I have come back over and over to what seems the very heart of the Buddha’s story, the dark night he sat alone. That night is the archetype of sesshin, a powerful metaphor for this week of silent retreat. He had, like us, made his preparations. He ate, he bathed, he prepared his sitting place, and then... he took his seat. In that moment, that moment of taking his seat, he left behind the past, he gave up the future. He left his practice of the past, his companions of the past, his life of the past. He entered a vast new world, the world of right now, a world not clouded by willful fantasies or poignant regrets.

Haven’t each of us spent years, maybe lifetimes, trying to work on and fix our own issues, trying to improve who and what we are? We may call it practice, but isn’t this just redecorating our old house, the house of our own karmic conditioning? As if spinning in place, we imagine that when we get the colors right, change our furniture, then, then we will be ready to practice in a

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*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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# ONE LEG UP ZEN

Francine Campone

This Rohatsu sesshin, I took up the practice of One Leg Up Zen. What is One Leg Up Zen? It begins with falling on the first night of sesshin and seriously messing up an ankle. This unusual form is then practiced throughout the remaining days by sitting upright in a chair, leg straight out in front, foot propped up on a tower of cushions. While unexpected, One Leg Up Zen turns out to be a wonderful way to encounter three everyday koans: pain, interdependence and the splendid mess of daily life.

I have read that pain is inevitable, suffering optional. The latter half of the saying is great in theory, but how does it happen? On the first day, especially, pain was unavoidable. The only option I had was to meet it head on. What I noticed is that pain is not a thing. Instead, at one moment, it was a link of heat radiating up from the ankle. Then that faded and there was a sensation of tightness on the instep. Then that faded, only to be followed by a prickling sensation in parts of the skin. Then that faded. In every moment, there was not pain, just a series of sensations that flickered like the shadows of the wind-blown trees on the wall.

The second koan, interdependence, was especially challenging for me. I am stubbornly independent and felt ashamed of my need to be taken care of. The teacher, sesshin leaders, fellows in the sangha, staff at SMC

were endlessly compassionate. The tanto and jisha took care to get me first aid. The tanto set up the tower of cushions for my leg and shared her wisdom and skill to sit as comfortably as possible. Sensei, too, offered both Dharma teaching and medical advice. My fellow sitters shared ice packs, helped with the chair and pillows and, most important, lent a strong and steady arm for the climb up and down the hill to meals. I, in turn, took up extra space, made noise with the tap of the cane, and added tasks to the leaders' already busy list. And yet, I was met with kindness and caring at every turn and felt embarrassed by it. And so I encountered the suffering that arises from the delusion of a separate self.

I first heard the phrase "a splendid mess" in a talk by Roshi John Daido Loori. It resonated for me then and that resonance deepened as the sesshin progressed. One Leg Up Zen may look peculiar: one foot on the ground, one hovering in the air. Yet, I found that this is the nature of Zen practice – one is neither here nor there and yet in both at once. As we sat, there was sun and snow, cold and heat, sore ankles, knees and backs and plenty of ice packs to soothe them. The wind blew, people sneezed, bells rang. We were served hot kale, cold salad, warm cookies. Trees moved, rocky peaks rose solid and still. The Dharma exists in every bit of this. Nothing is excluded. How wonderful!



Photo by Ken Morgareidge



# THE TREASURE-MOON OF SESSHIN

Joel Tagert

I always intend, at the conclusion of sesshin, to write a great deal about it, but once I'm home I find that words, especially after the fact, are wholly inadequate. It is precisely in its immediacy that sesshin draws its power, in the utter clarity of perception, sensory, mental and spiritual. There is a true sense of grandeur to it, especially in such a tremendous setting as Shambhala Mountain Center. The wonder of the world is there every time you step outside, into a landscape that seems ever new, changing with each day and hour.

The first two days were unexpectedly warm for December, the fields and slopes free of snow, like a last outflung drop of summer upon our grateful faces. But by Monday the temperature dropped precipitously, accompanied by light snow and the persistent, gusting wind remembered so well from previous years. By Wednesday and Thursday the rocky outcroppings and peaks, seen from the stupa, rose from a white sea of snow-flecked mist, mysterious as a Chinese painting; and the wind pressed and pulled at one's protective layers, hissing, whooshing and occasionally howling down from the heights. Yet by Friday the warmth returned, as if to ease us back into the world.

Those were the days. Nights, which fall early this

time of year, were ruled by the moon and stars. The former was full on Sunday night, shining powerfully as the wind began to pick up and the cold came on. The next morning those of us in the seasonal dorm at Shotoke Lodge trekked to the zendo in a suddenly wintry, uncompromising landscape:

*How fickle the moon!  
Rising, he croons to clear skies;  
Setting, howls with snow!*

The final night of sesshin, I stopped and sat on a bench outside the lodge for a long time, head resting against a wooden window frame, eyes tilted toward the sky. The moon had not yet risen, and the sky stood replete with stars, with stars upon stars shining forth from infinite textured depths of darkness. Vast emptiness indeed!

But by the time I woke the next (and final) morning, the moon was again showing its silver face; and though it was a waning wedge of its former self, still it was bright enough to cast clear shadows through the woods:

*A leafless sapling's  
moonlit shadow on the path:  
black veins of the earth.*



# MOUNTAINS AND RIVERS WALKING

Greg Clark

The 2017 Rohatsu sesshin was incredibly moving and filled with insight for me. The leaders and teachers helped create a sesshin that carried the participants. I found myself struggling a bit to surrender and ease myself into the flow, but once I did, the sesshin took over. Another key element for me was the other participants. Many times I would come into the zendo and there would be several leaders and participants already sitting, which made the invitation to sit and calm myself that much more inviting.

I have a back condition that makes sitting multiple rounds very uncomfortable. The tanto (Cathy Wright) did her usual amazing job assisting me with my posture or other accommodations to help ease the discomfort so I could, using her instructions, “Sit like a mountain.” We got my posture and accommodations all sorted out by about the second full day (Monday).

The other key ingredient for me that made this sesshin so powerful was the beautiful setting at Shambhala Mountain Center. One thing that really helps me manage my back is movement. I went on hikes most

days to get outside, enjoy the scenery, move my back and to practice. My teacher, Karin Sensei, reminded me that kinhin and walking practice are powerful ways to stay in my practice. During one teisho another teacher reminded us of Dogen’s *Mountains and Rivers Walking Sutra*:

*The mountains and waters of the immediate present are the manifestation of the path of the ancient Buddhas. Because they are the self before the emergence of signs, they are the penetrating liberation of immediate actuality. By the height and breadth of the qualities of the mountains, the virtue of riding the clouds is always mastered from the mountains and the subtle work of following the wind as a rule penetrates through to liberation from the mountains. The green mountains are forever walking. A stone woman bears a child by night. If one doubts the walking of the mountains, one doesn't even yet know one's own walking.*

I’ve connected with nature fully for my entire life (most of it pre-Zen) and this passage particularly resonates with me. I’m nobody’s photographer of choice, but I wanted to share a few pictures with you to share my love and connection of the outdoors with you (see photo opposite and on back cover).

The mountains and rivers are talking to us all the time, and when we take the time to listen, what we hear is profound.

Softer than rain outside my window in summer,  
I’ve heard it in the snowy woods.  
Quieter than surf  
Or the murmur of wings.  
Is it the molecules spinning, spinning?  
Or the friction of us sliding past time?  
How easily it gets covered by other sounds.  
How quickly it disappears when I start thinking.  
Wait! Wait! There it is again...  
Do I hear singing?

– Fred Becker

## Just Sitting

A blue shadow sits on the snow.  
A white sun sits on the sky.  
A serene Buddha sits on the altar.  
A wild ox sits on the mat.

– *George Mathews*

## Savasana

Laid to rest face up with eyelids closed,  
the senses tortoise inward, listen, probe.  
The jaw, throat, tongue, forehead and cheeks go slack.  
Tension drains away. The eyeballs sink  
into their sockets. Ear-drums chime the high-pitched  
roar of blood-gorged veins. The sound of wind,  
a barking dog, stir up thoughts that dance  
and twirl, roll out their evanescent dreams.

Seen through, both dream and dreamer break their chains.  
The ribcage rises, falls with each new breath.  
Heartbeats throb through countless births and deaths.  
When mind and body drop away  
when 'I' is lost, gone silent, vast,  
when no one's there to ask... what remains?

– *John Steele*



Photo by Billy Wynne

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different way, then we will be truly ready to let go, ready take a step. This was the path of the Buddha for years, as he tried this practice or that, tried to deny his body and manipulate his state of mind. Fixing particular circumstances is an inherently dualistic approach, and he found himself unable to experience the truth of his own being.

It's like that for us too. Each time you take your cushion, each time you take a breath, each time you find your Mu, can it be completely new, fresh, free? Can you open all the windows, all the doors, let the walls become transparent, even crumble? Entering into breath, into Mu, into sound is what opens this moment. And this moment is where we find the rawness, the vulnerability of doubt, of not-knowing who or what we are.

Try not to make Mu about something else any more than you would make breathing about something else. An in-breath is breathing in, an out-breath is... just

letting it go. Mu resists any attempt to mutate it into another form. Can Mu be Mu without adding anything extra? Mu, Mu. Be a single Mu, a single breath, one sound; don't let any thoughts that arise, no matter how important they may seem to be, take you away. Sound is simply sound, not tethered to images or words.

Yamada Roshi wrote: *People often tell me that although they have participated in many intensive meditation retreats and seem to have progressed in their practice, they find it impossible to take the final step.*

This is very true; we very quickly get used to a particular progression in sesshin, a way of working with our own fatigue, our uncertainty, our pain, familiar landmarks. We may go to sesshin over and over to reach and then hang out in a place which is comfortable for us, biding our time. Quiet, peaceful, settled. But have we really taken our seat in the way that the Buddha did that night under the stars with this vow: "Though only

my skin, sinews and bones remain and my blood and flesh dry up and wither away, yet never from this seat will I stir until I have attained full Enlightenment." At what point do we recognize that we have made our own internal vow to not get up – which means to not give up – until we see for ourselves?

Yamada continues: *Although there is nothing to be afraid of, [people] are afraid in spite of themselves, wondering what might happen next, fearing that perhaps their awareness of themselves will be destroyed. Here is the dividing line between success and failure. You must summon up a reckless resolve to break through, no matter what, and throw yourself away.*

"Reckless resolve" doesn't mean irresponsible or crazy; it just means being so absorbed in Mu, in sound, in breath that cares for anything else are set aside. Because that is why you are here. Your own internal dialogue may chatter in the distance, but it's not a concern. You no longer care how you are doing or what will or won't happen. Just "throw yourself away"; let go, let go. Throw yourself away by fully being Mu, being sound, being breath, whether or not you have faith in the path, whether or not you have faith in yourself, faith in your teacher or even in Zen. Those doubting thoughts may arise over and over, but practice in the midst of them. Hold your Buddha seat with nothing in reserve, no conditions, no hopes – simply not moving away from your seat of practice.

Pema Chödrön tells this story: *One evening Milarepa [who at the time was meditating in a cave in solitude] returned to his cave after gathering firewood, only to find it filled with demons. They were cooking his food, reading his books, sleeping in his bed. They had taken over the joint. He knew about nonduality of self and other, but he still didn't quite know how to get these guys out of his cave. Even though he had the sense that they were just a projection of his own mind—all the unwanted parts of himself—he didn't know how to get rid of them. So first he taught them the dharma. He sat on this seat that was higher than they were and said things to them about how we are all one. He talked about compassion and shunyata and how poison is medicine. Nothing happened. The demons were still there. Then he lost his patience and got angry and ran at them. They just laughed at him. Finally, he gave up and just sat down on the floor, saying, "I'm not going away and it looks like you're not either, so let's just live here together." At that point, all of them left except one. Milarepa said, "Oh, this one is particularly vicious." (We all know that one. Some-*

*times we have lots of them like that. Sometimes we feel that's all we've got.) He didn't know what to do, so he surrendered himself even further. He walked over and put himself right into the mouth of the demon and said, "Just eat me up if you want to." Then that demon left too.*

Milarepa threw himself away, let everything go. He put himself right in the mouth of it. Yamada Roshi said: *When you break through, you realize great life. I have never heard of anyone who died from practicing mu. Remember that great determination is the deciding factor. When deep faith, unbounded practice, and great determination are present, there is in fact already no self; our entire bodies are just mu. When self and mu have truly become one, then mu suddenly appears and we finally come face to face with our original selves.*

In the Buddha's one long night of meditation, he encountered his demons, all manner of mental states, fantasies sensual and frightening, as well self-doubt and criticism. The classical myth embodies these energies as the torments that the demon Mara created to tempt and unseat him, but this Mara is not outside us at all. Each of us creates our own Mara; each of us knows well the clouding of our mind by energies of desire, rejection or the deadness of indifference. Each of us hears the voice of our inner critic, the voice of our own self-doubt, sometimes loud, sometimes whispering, knowing just where to jab us.

Is it possible just to watch the play of whatever forms appear, true or not true, appealing or not, like the northern lights on the horizon? To be still and silent, breath by breath, is to sit as the Buddha did, letting storms, voices, and fantastic images die down as you return to Mu, to the breath, to sound. As you come back, you are touching the earth as the Buddha did for confirmation, letting that touch make intimate your intention, your aspiration. You touch the earth and touch your own practice, again and then again, and you find that your Mu is wherever you look and hear and feel. You find it in the early morning sky, in the steam of tea, even while you sleep. You find it in this flowing transient world of "a flash of lightning in a summer cloud, a flickering lamp, a phantom, and a dream." This living world, our own flowing mindscapes are it too, constantly being born and dying away, to rise again.

The great master Chao-chou told his students: "A clay Buddha does not pass through water; a wooden Buddha does not pass through fire; a metal Buddha does

not pass through a furnace.” And then he added, “The true Buddha sits in the house.” The clay Buddha, the wooden Buddha, the metal Buddha – are they different than the true Buddha? In this transient fleeting world, what does the true Buddha look like? Each of us really is born and really does die. We don’t live as if we believe it, but it is true. This 67-year-old woman does not, cannot “pass through” even a minute of her life.

A stanza from the female Chan master Baochi:

*A mud Buddha does not pass through water;  
Thoroughly merged, nothing left incomplete.  
If you wash your face with water, your face will shine.  
If you drink your tea, your lips will be moist.*

In an instant, early morning starlight replaced a man who looked up at the sky. That light may have traveled over unimaginable time and space, but in that moment, the only moment in which any of us lives, time and space were demolished. In that moment, where was the true Buddha? A bubble in the stream, a flash of lightning – are they not each complete and indestructible?

Muso Soseki was a Rinzai master, poet and designer of temple gardens who lived 1275-1351. One time, he sat under a tree for many hours as the sun set and darkness came. Finally, he rose and began to make his way back along the path in the dark to his bed. Stumbling, he reached for the wall... but there was no wall, only falling into empty space. And a loud laugh as the darkness of night was crushed.

*Year after year  
I dug in the earth  
looking for the blue of heaven  
only to feel  
the pile of dirt  
choking me  
until once in the dead of night  
I tripped on a broken brick  
and kicked it into the air  
and saw that without a thought  
I had smashed the bones  
of the empty sky*

Night grew darker and still the Buddha sat. He was a failed monk, and in his failure a door opened, a chance to leave behind the habits of fruitless practice he had held to so diligently. Each moment was new; he was finding his way. In the dark, impossible to see the landmarks of a tree, just to hear the rustling of leaves over-

head, a few stars through the branches. The tiny noises of night insects and small animals, anonymous, freely and naturally going about their private business. The smell of straw, the slight chill after midnight, the utter blackness. Impossible to know time, waves of dullness or boredom, of anxiety and fear, of disgust and desire and hope. Images, sensations, random words and elaborate fantasies enter, appearing huge and noisy, the demons of the mind, subsiding in the spaciousness of a quiet mind without edges. Probably at some point, the dead state comes, that desert where all is extinguished, all hope and all feeling. And yet, continuing to sit in awareness, entering every open mouth. Maybe a clear stillness, wide open, without any sense of the personal, peaceful and calm. Through all of these states, the Buddha sat, receiving each but not holding to any.

Like the Buddha, you breathe in and out, sit, get up to walk or go to the bathroom, walk up the hill to eat and lie down to rest. No matter what appears before you, no matter what your condition of body or mind, you sit like the Buddha in the not-knowing darkness. Let doubt and worry go. Trust in each moment, in each Mu, in each breath. Let sound come through you, let whatever you see enter and leave. Be like a little child, direct and straightforward, touching the earth in confirmation.

And keep going. The Buddha did not give up in the middle of the night but sat on. He allowed his search to become hopeless and without any goal. Still he sat and sat. In the endless night, he did not hear the invitation of rustling leaves, the soft voice of the wind, the tug of his beating heart, the song of rumbling earth or singing moon. He heard none of these invitations until the light of a star replaced him and shook him loose from the dream of the world he had always known. The Korean poet Ko Un put it, “Wow! You recognized me!” Wow! We are shining!

Hold to your tree of practice until something shakes you loose, and then let go as naturally as a leaf falling through the air.

Together with all beings, we realize the Way. ☸

## Making Our Temple Dream a Reality

As this amazing year ends, we want to express our gratitude to all of you who have contributed in funds, time and ideas to maintain our practice together and work towards our new temple home. We have wonderful news to share: We are very close to fully funding the largest phase of our project and are just waiting for our final project cost estimates for a more accurate accounting. We are folding in our initial landscaping plan for the site and will be submitting our plans to the city in the next few weeks; it may take up to three months to resolve permit issues and we hope to break ground April 2018. Going into next year, we plan to have sangha circle meetings once a quarter to update all of you on the details of interior work (including kitchen), our contemplative garden and so forth.

Here are some details:

A total of 96 people have contributed, 49 from the community and 46 from our sangha. All in all in 2017 we have raised \$746,359, which includes \$194,425 on Colorado Gives day, an additional matching donation of \$180,000 and our portion of the Colorado Gives incentive (\$16,418!). We were in the top 30 organizations raising funds through Colorado Gives. This is absolutely amazing for a small independent religious organization. And it means that our temple dream will be a reality. In about 15 months we will move into a new practice home, beautifully designed for our needs!

Thank you, thank you, thank you!

– Karin, Ken and Peggy

## Gassho Corner

Thanks to all our sesshin leaders, including tanto Cathy Wright, jisha Greg Fellman, jiki Laura Menzer and anja Brian Meadows, as well as our teachers, Ken, Karin and Peggy senseis. We also thank the staff at Shambhala Mountain Center for once again welcoming us to their beautiful environs and preparing many nurturing meals for thirty-seven hungry participants.

## Entering the Gate

We first welcome Mark Tasker, who has been practicing with us for some time, and has been invaluable as part of our building committee, since he worked for many years as an owners’ representative. Welcome Mark, and thanks!

Also new is Tara Regan, who comes to us by way of Great Heartland Buddhist Temple of Toledo, Ohio. She works as a contract QA engineer and enjoys painting, swimming, hiking and ice carving. Welcome Tara!

Lastly we welcome Christine Baier, who has been a fixture at our Tuesday evening sittings for some time now. Christine is a graduate of the theater program at the Juilliard School and is a practitioner of Jin Shin Jyutsu, a form of therapeutic acupressure.

## Zazenkai and Sesshin in 2018

Our zazenkai and sesshin committee has been quite busy, and has managed to set dates for our upcoming all-day sittings and weeklong sesshins right through the fall. Mark your calendars now!

**Jan. 28** - Zazenkai at Santosha Yoga with Peggy Sensei

**Feb. 25** - Zazenkai at Santosha Yoga with Ken Sensei

**March 25** - Zazenkai at Santosha Yoga with Karin Sensei

**April 29** - Zazenkai at Santosha Yoga (teacher TBA)

**June 12 - 17** - Summer sesshin with Ken, Karin and Peggy senseis at Rocky Mountain Ecodharma Retreat Center

**July 1** - Zazenkai at Willow Farm

**Aug. 5** - Zazenkai at Willow Farm

**Sept. 23** - Zazenkai at Willow Farm

**Dec. 1 - 8** - Rohatsu sesshin at Shambhala



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