



MOUNTAINS TALKING

FALL 2020

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Front Cover: *Stacey McConlogue*

Back Cover: *Geoff Keeton*

MIRACULOUS POWER

CATHY WRIGHT

Three monks went to call on Master Jingshan. On the way they met a woman whom they asked, "Which way is the road to Jingshan?" She said, "Right straight ahead." One of the monks said, "The river is deep—can we cross it or not?" The tea lady said, "It doesn't wet the feet." Another monk asked, "The rice on the upper bank is so good, while the rice on the lower bank is so weak." The tea lady said, "It's all been eaten by mud crabs." He then continued, "The grain is quite fragrant." The tea lady gave one more response: "It has no smell." The monk was now interested, and said, "Where do you live?" The tea lady said, "I am just right here."

The case continues: *When the three monks got to her shop, the woman prepared a pot of tea and brought three cups. She said to them, "Oh monks, let those of you with miraculous powers drink tea." As the three looked at each other, she said, "Watch this decrepit old woman show her own miraculous power." She picked up the cups, poured the tea and went out.*

What on earth is she getting at? What miraculous power did she display?

Koans do not indicate endings. Koans do not give any secrets away. Koans also do not hide any secrets. In fact, they do not hide one single thing. We are left to inquire on our own.

Did the tea lady pour the tea on the table? Maybe. Did she pour tea on the three monks? Maybe. Did she pour tea in the cups? (And out the door she went!) Maybe. Did she simply stand up, lesson taught, and go on about her business?

We go back to the story and look again at her responses to the monks' questions. The question: Which is the road to Jingshan? Notice your experience to the tea lady's responses: *Right straight ahead. It doesn't get wet. It's all been eaten by mud crabs. It has no smell. I am just*

right here. And her final teaching: *Watch this decrepit old woman show her own miraculous power.*

Students of Zen rely on the longstanding tradition of Zen and Zen training to not settle for the intellectual grasp of experience, but champion the sudden dropping away of questions and the questioner, until all that remains is simply what is left over. But how hard we work to see that what we see can limit the view, while in the same moment clarify it.



Tricky stuff. But remember, the Self does not drop the Self. And yet, the self can be dropped. Remember this: the self can be dropped.

Do not settle for intellectually understanding that slavery in this country is wrong and has been going on for 400 years.

If you are white-skinned, do not settle for intellectually understanding that oppression of people of color is wrong. The suffering of black lives is becoming clearer and clearer and deserves more than this. It deserves the hungry-ghost story in the introductory koan collection.

If you deny this, check your viewpoint at Buddha's door. Listen and let some one else's suffering wake you to a reality you cannot relate to. But the pain is so great—it is bursting through chains of silence—that at the minimum we can meet it with horror and respect for those speaking out.

We can start with intellectually grasping for footing in these times of anger and protesting. We can educate ourselves through documentaries, books and firsthand stories of people who have been oppressed and enslaved. If this does not make your blood boil, I ask you to question your viewing seat. You may live miles apart from a black person or born years ahead of a slavery plantation,

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Zen Center of Denver
1856 S. Columbine Street
Denver, CO 80210
303-455-1500
office@zencenterofdenver.org

Find us on the web at www.zencenterofdenver.org
And on Facebook at www.facebook.com/zencenterofdenver

Editor: Joel Tagert

NEW COVID-19 GUIDELINES

As we head into the fall and winter season, Colorado and Denver are seeing sharp rises in COVID-19 cases and hospitalizations. As testing has increased across Colorado, so has the number of positive test results, currently at 6.4% and rising, clearly above the 5% danger signal. Denver's rate is over 7%, with new cases over 2,800 in a recent two week period, and case rates of 385 per 100,000 people. The Colorado COVID-19 Modeling group reports that 1 in every 292 Coloradans are currently infectious. (Denver is one of the counties with higher rate of spread.) They note that the window to improve transmission control is over the next several weeks.

Recently, both Governor Polis and Mayor Hancock have instituted new measures to limit spread and warned that if we don't quickly get a handle on the situation, our hospitals could soon run out of capacity to treat critical care patients. The City of Denver has been moved by the Colorado State back to a Safer at Home Level 3, and officials have warned we may soon move into Stay at Home orders if our collective behavior doesn't change enough to reverse the trend. We are facing a looming COVID-19 wave this winter, here and across the nation. New executive orders at both the State and City levels now limit informal gatherings and expand situations where face coverings must be worn outdoors. Face coverings must be worn indoors in public settings, including places of worship, and outside whenever social distance from non-household members can't be maintained or while waiting for transportation. Colorado has limited the gatherings to 10 people from at most 2 households, while Denver has additionally limited such gatherings to 5 people max. Denver may fine organizations up to \$999 if they don't enforce these laws.

Last July, the Zen Center of Denver (ZCD) adopted a policy of requiring mask use at all times on the zendo property, indoors and out. We've recently stopped the group porch sitting and—considering the state of the



epidemic—won't be starting sitting services inside the zendo for the foreseeable future. We are continuing our Vigil Practice and volunteer temple maintenance activities, keeping within the new City household and participant size limits. Since Joel Tagert, ZCD staff and temple keeper, lives at the zendo, he counts as one household when he is present with others. Please use Signupgenius for scheduling Vigil Practice. Please contact Joel if you are planning to come to the zendo for chores or other zendo business so that we can manage numbers of people and households present.

Stopping the spread of COVID-19 will take the cooperation of everyone in our community. Only together can we beat this destructive and persistent virus. Let's also be sure to take care of ourselves and each other in these stressful times. We have a robust online roster of ZCD practice and activities. Please join in!

PERFECT AS YOU ARE

KIM JACKSON

For those of you who don't know me, my name is Kim Jackson. I previously practiced medicine as a family doctor, but I am no longer able to because of my disabilities. I currently volunteer doing disability rights work, and am also working in public health on the efforts to deal with the pandemic. I've had a bit of a crazy journey, but I wanted to share my story with you, and some of the things I've learned along the way.

I graduated medical school in 2008, and was doing additional post-graduate training in Pueblo, CO, to become board-certified in family medicine. In my third year of training, I started having issues with fatigue. I felt like I didn't have enough energy to make it through grocery shopping, let alone a day of practicing medicine. When I forgot the word "pharmacy" while seeing a patient, I knew something was wrong and I needed to take time off. One month turned into three months turned into more. It became difficult for me to climb stairs, and as my walking got harder I needed a wheelchair to get around. I didn't know what was wrong with me yet, but even with rest I wasn't getting better.

Becoming a doctor had been a focus my whole life and part of my identity, who I saw myself as. As my condition progressed it became apparent that I would likely never practice medicine again. It felt like that part of myself had been torn away from me. Along with grieving the loss of being able to practice medicine, I was also grieving with each loss of function as my symptoms slowly became worse.

Around this time, I had been reading a book by Eckhart Tolle where he went through a meditation on dying and feeling the part of us that continued on beyond death. As I sat with it, for whatever reason, in that moment it clicked. I could see my body within the whole, and our connection with each other and to every thing. I felt such bliss that I stayed up most of the night, afraid that I might lose the insight as quickly as it had come.

My perception of the world had changed, and for me there was no going back. I was also reading Suzuki Roshi's book *Zen Mind, Beginners Mind*, and realized that Zen was a spiritual practice that would help me understand

and cultivate what I had seen. I found the Zen Center, and after meeting with the teachers decided to become a formal student of Ken Sensei.

With my developing meditation practice, I noticed I would often get caught up in the running monologue in my head as my brain kept yammering away. I had lived my life believing if I was thinking something, there must be truth in it and I should pay attention. I saw that I was experiencing the world around me based on thoughts, creating mini-stories to explain why everything happened the way it did. "He said this because he doesn't like me and thinks I'm a bad person." "She said that because she's a jerk and doesn't care about what I am saying." "I achieved this because I worked hard my whole life. I made this happen." Living with the continuous loss of having a progressive illness, "I can't do this anymore." And the ever pernicious thought, "If I could just be happier than I'd be happy and everything would be better."

I began to see my thoughts as a part of this reality but not reality itself. With practicing meditation, the running commentary was still there, but thoughts started to become just thoughts, and it became easier to let them go. "There's that thought again," as Pema Chodron said in her book *Getting Unstuck*. The thought "I need to be happier" was suffering, *dukkha*, too. In trying to pursue happiness, I was making myself less happy. When my thoughts turn to "I can't do this," I practice compassion for myself, and use it as a reminder that it's hard living with so many health issues. I am doing the best I can (and a pretty good job at that).

When I have negative ideas about a person or group of people, I try to catch the thoughts before acting on them. As we are all connected, talking ill of others was really about my own shortcomings and believing I was separate from others. If someone had those thoughts about me I would want to be treated with love and understanding, even if there was some truth to them. If I act on a thought before seeing it, I practice compassion for myself and remember it isn't about perfection. When I slip, I do what I can to repair the situation, and try again the next time a thought comes up. Apologizing for my

own deficits was not weakness; it is recognition of our shared humanity. We are all imperfect beings; none of us is without fault.

When I see the fallibility of others, I must look to find those faults in myself. Only then can I have true compassion for the many beings, and see that we are the same. Compassion is a choice and a practice. What's more, I could transform my own pain and grief by seeing that others experienced the same. I now work to only compliment other people, especially when I feel like putting them down or judging them. It's just as easy to say something nice as it is to say something mean. I decided to love everyone, and my life began to change. The more love I give, the more I get.

Working with a teacher and koan practice has helped me focus on and get at some of these nuances of my new understanding. It also encourages me continue to sit zazen. I've found that my deeper insights almost never happen while I am meditating or in dokusan, though. It's more that, by continuing this practice, I will have insights when I am going about my everyday life.

About a year into my practice, I was sitting in my parents' garage and a mosquito was buzzing around me. My first instinct was to kill it, but thinking about connectedness and the gift of being alive, I decided to let it be. As I was watching, it landed on the fender of my mom's van and I remembered what Ken Sensei had said to me a few hours before: "Forget the self." Suddenly, I could feel and almost see how the van, the mosquito, the garage, the ten thousand things and myself were all one.

"Kim" exists because I have this body in this moment, and at the same time Kim is made of everything and every moment. The two are inseparable; one could not be without the other. Kim is also a construct like numbers, colors, time, and so many names we use to discuss the world around us. All of it random and connected and beautiful. I felt awe at the wonder of it. Why are things the way they are? Why did I take the stuff I saw as fixed or serious as I did? Why am I alive in this moment here and now? I don't know. I approached my health with the same curiosity. How much could my body and mind take? The constant loss of having a slowly progressive illness became part of the flow of life, karma. Again, my perception of the world was different, but nothing had really changed.

As my health problems continued, I lost the ability

to eat as my stomach slowly became paralyzed. I needed a feeding tube in my intestines to bypass my stomach so my body could get sustenance. Then the feeding tube stopped working as my intestines became paralyzed. I had a permanent IV placed through which I now receive all my nutrition. Unfortunately, the IV frequently gets infected, in part because of the sugars, proteins, and fats that make up the nutrition. I lost the ability to speak, and required major neck surgery to get my voice back and also stop my legs from continuing to get weaker.

My partner, Carrie Ann, had similar disabilities. Her and I were in and out of the hospital, more than once at the same time, but not necessarily in the same hospital. Then, in February 2019, Carrie Ann went into cardiac arrest while at home. After getting a pulse back, they brought her to the hospital I was already in, as I was having gallbladder problems. The cardiac arrest had lasted too long, and Carrie Ann passed away a few days later. I was devastated as I grieved the loss of the love of my life.

Then, in September 2019, my potassium unknowingly got so low while I was in the hospital that the day after I was discharged I started having heart rhythm problems. I passed out at home and again in the ambulance on the way back to the ER. I remember describing to the resident physician about what was going on, when I passed out again. I woke up a short while later, and suddenly there were a number of people in my room, crowded around my bed in a flurry of activity. I asked one of the nurses what had happened, and was told my heart had stopped. They had to do CPR and shock me to get it started again. Not knowing what to say about something like that, I said, "Oh," and before they left thanked all of the people in the room for the work they do. I was only dead for a few minutes, and was lucky I didn't end up with permanent damage.

Carrie Ann's death taught me so much about dying. One minute she was there, and the next not. In sitting with the feelings of loss I thought about how connected we all were, and what that meant when one died. I realized that, though her body was gone, Carrie Ann was a part of everything, and a part of me. She still existed in the mountains, trees, clouds, flowers, animals, people, everything. Though I miss her dearly, I find refuge in the stillness that connects us all—living, dead, and the people who have yet to come.

My own death taught me a lot, too. In the moment I



Geoff Keeton

felt I was going to pass out, I never had the thought "I'm dying." Even with the heart rhythm problems that were going on, I knew my heart could stop but never expected it. In an instant, I had died, and in what felt like an instant later I had woken up, when in reality it had been minutes. Our lives are just that, an instant—one moment after another in a flow we call karma. I realized if I hadn't come back, I would have never known I existed. However, death is not the end, it's transformation. It doesn't mean that nothing matters; in fact it taught me that everything matters. Our actions are like making ripples in a gigantic pond. They travel across and affect the entire pond once created, even if the cause, us, is no more. My heart has stopped twice more since then, and each time has helped reinforce what I felt after the first. Everything comes and goes and changes form, including us.

When it comes to disability, you never think it's going to be you until it is. Disability is a natural part of life, and if we live long enough we all will experience loss of function as our body ages. When the question of "Why me?" arises, I answer by seeing that it's because I was gifted with this body and this time on earth. I am grateful for my disabilities, because of the experiences I've had. My

curiosity about my life and my body helps me through as well, and I am learning to be more present with the ups and downs. I try to focus on what I have in this moment as much as I can, and not on what I have lost or what I have been through.

Life isn't about trying to be happy all the time. Sadness and grief still arise, but accepting this moment means accepting those feelings too. Instead of wishing grief and sadness away, I try sitting with and really feeling them. I found by embracing both, I could move through the feelings more quickly and thoroughly. By doing so I generally feel more content about my situation and the world around me.

I draw strength from the Zen community, the disability community, and humanity - my Sangha. We are all painting with the brush called life, co-creating the world around us, muses writing stories about the reality in front of us. You are stronger than you know, and can withstand things you never thought possible. In this moment, you are perfect just the way you are, and I love you with all my being. I am so grateful to share this journey with you, and hope that we all continue to practice. ☸

OUR ANNUS MIRABILIS

JIM LONG

Sometimes I think we want to join with Queen Elizabeth's lament of a decade ago and call this our *annus horribilis*—our horrible year. But to do so would miss the point of our zazen. I recall case 6 of the *Blue Cliff Record*:

Yun-men introduced his subject by saying, "I don't ask you about the fifteenth of the month. Come, give a phrase about after the fifteenth."

And he himself responded, "Every day is a good day."

This is another good day, a day of practice together. A day in which we intentionally place our very being in this moment, this place, by being attentive to, becoming one with, each breath. And through our practice our tendency to lament is transformed with each healing moment.

In his volume on the basics of Zen practice, Ruben Habito, a former Jesuit priest and renowned Zen teacher, expands on, as he titles it, Healing Breath. He describes the very nature of our zazen as a healing process; our concentration pushes us to be one with our center, to a place of wholeness, fully present here and now. He provides many helpful pointers to support practice, but one seems particularly apt for us today, relating to silencing of the mind. He tells a story of the late Fr. Hugo Enomya-Lasalle, a Jesuit and one of the first Christians to go deeply into Zen under our great-grandfather in the Dharma, Koun Yamada Roshi. In the Zen retreats he directed in Europe and Japan, Fr. Lasalle repeatedly told practitioners to deal with stray thoughts "as Mt. Fuji would deal with the clouds that come its way. Just as the mountain is in no way affected by passing clouds, remain here unmoved and unperturbed."

Unmoved and unperturbed, even by this year of pandemic, last week's calamity, or this morning's broken teacup. Through our practice we come back to the familiarity of daily life, but with a vital difference: we now are able to see through the delusions of the self that separates us from what seems repellent in our world and that prevented us from seeing things as they are. We sit in the joy of harmony with our true nature and with the world, letting separateness and "I" drop away. We experience

healing as we open to the ordinariness and miracle of this and every day, con-centered with all beings.

I recall the words of Mary Oliver's poem "Praying":

*It doesn't have to be
the blue iris, it could be
weeds in a vacant lot, or a few
small stones; just pay attention, then patch*

*a few words together and don't try
to make them elaborate, this isn't
a contest but the doorway*

*into thanks, and a silence in which
another voice may speak.*

So we say a few words, or two, or ooooooneeeee, or none, and open the doorway of our practice into a silence in which the voice of Truth may speak. And we can recall these words from another Oliver poem, "The Buddha's Last Instruction":

*"Make of yourself a light"
said the Buddha,
before he died.
I think of this every morning
as the east begins
to tear off its many clouds
of darkness, to send up the first
signal—a white fan
streaked with pink and violet,
even green.*

So, we make of ourselves a light in the dimness of this morning and tear off the clouds of darkness with our healing breath, erect and strong. We see it—really see it all: the awesome power and beauty of nature, the heroism of firefighters and other first responders and medical personnel, the justice echoing from the voices of peaceful marchers, the compassion of those around us who wear masks and distance themselves. When we really see it, it is not our *annus horribilis*; it is our *annus mirabilis*, our miraculous year. ☸





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or even have worked during the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s, but we must know that if a koan is as alive today as it was in sixth-century China, then so is the oppression of the black life alive today as it was four hundred years ago. It's right here. Go straight on, right here, now.

Zen has always said: Do not stop here. Be here, but do not stop here. Do not settle for the hundred-foot pole of no eyes and ears. Do not settle for the silence of the mat practice.

Since when did Zen, Buddha, Buddhism, ever pay lip service to division? Never.

Do not settle for the mindful eating of rice gruel. It is a great start on the road to Jingshan, but it is not Jingshan. Do not settle for washing our bowls after eating. Do not settle for keeping the kitchen floor clean and the ants away. Continue and keep going.

Jingshan is neither far nor not far, nor can we get our feet wet crossing the bridge and walking the road. But until we search for its path and summit, through action and silence, these words belong in the garbage.

We meet another wise tea lady in case 31 of the Mumonkan. In this case, the tea lady is ruthless. She teaches in her way, and Joshu teaches in his way. But do we learn? How hard it is to peck out from the layers of protection we have built around our hearts. Let's see how this koan helps us step forward, keep going, and not be stuck.

A student of Joshu's asked an old woman, "Which way to Mount Gotai?"

She said, "Go straight on."

After the monk had taken three to five steps, she said, "He may look like a fine monk, but he too goes off like that, like all the rest."

Another monk, hearing of this, went to Joshu and told him what had happened. Joshu said, "Wait a bit. I'll go and investigate the old woman for you."

The next day off he went and asked the same question and got the same reply. On returning, Joshu announced to his assembly, "I've seen through the old woman of Mount Gotai for you."

Mount Gotai is a real location in the high mountains of China, and is home to more than three hundred wooden temples. Mount Gotai takes effort to get to. Mount Gotai is arriving at some place special. If someone would tell us that tremendous effort is what is needed to get to Mount Gotai, some of us would sit longer and all day and all year thinking that more effort will get us there. And some of us would not bother, forget it and take up another practice.

What did the old woman say when prompted for directions? She said, "Go straight on."

Today, with the protests against injustice mounting, she may have done more than say it; she may have screamed it: "Get your knee off my neck!"

In Zen, the phrase "Go straight on" can be accompanied by a sudden drop of the self. If dropping the self seems like a strange phrase, this is not a bad thing. Some Zen language, like "dropping the self," may clarify an experience one has, and you can check this out in dokusan with your teacher.

When the old woman says, "Go straight on," when George Floyd says, "I can't breathe," are they the same thing? What do you say?

The case continues with the monk taking the old woman's advice, and he walks on. She lets him get three to five steps away and chuckles, "You may look like a fine monk, but you go off like all the rest." Would you go off, like all the rest? What would you do?

No one can say what another can do or should do, but we do it all time. It takes a huge amount of restraining oneself from one's own conditioning to pull back at a time when we want to strike forward with our opinion and launch an attack.

But we can do it. Our practice makes available compassion, for ourselves and for the other person, if we put out the effort on the mat, as well as in person. We get courage from each other by sitting all morning together, courage to not physically move and thus see how our mind moves.

The monk walked off like all the rest. Joshu goes to pay the old woman a visit and ask the same question as the young monk. He, too walks off like all the rest, and he, too gets, the same answer.



KEN TETSUZAN ROSHI RETIRES

Ken Tetsuzan Morgareidge, one of our three spiritual directors (alongside Peggy Metta Sheehan and Karin Ryuku Kempe), recently announced his retirement as spiritual director. We offer our heartfelt thanks for his many years of service and teaching, and wish him the best as he enjoys his retirement, “like a dragon who has reached the water, or a tiger who reclines on the mountainside.” His letter to the sangha follows.

Dear Sangha,

This is to let everybody know that as of October 31st I will be retiring as a spiritual director of the Zen Center of Denver.

There are a number of reasons for this, including advancing age (I turn 80 on Oct. 31). Also there has been considerable tension within the sangha regarding my presence and communications, and I feel that this is a good time to step back, hoping that we can all move on with a good will.

I will continue a limited teaching schedule (Thursday evenings), and I will of course continue to work in dokusan with my formal students as well as anyone who has been working with me regularly.

I want to express my deepest gratitude to the sangha and to my fellow teachers, Peggy and Karin. It has been a privilege to be a part of this sangha and to see it grow, mature and establish a beautiful temple as a refuge for all who wish to explore the Dharma.

I look forward to a future in which we can all continue to practice together in harmony.

Yours in the Dharma

Ken Tetsuzan Morgareidge

OPENING OUR HEARTS FOR THE HOLIDAYS

Come explore practices to support welcoming in the chaos and beauty of the holidays during these challenging times with an open heart. We will explore practices – for on the cushion and in daily life – to help cultivate kindness, gratitude, joy and equanimity.

This online mindfulness workshop will be held via Zoom on Saturday, Nov. 21, from 9:00 a.m. – 12:00 p.m., and will be led by Jean Leonard, a licensed psychologist and a Certified MSC teacher in private practice in Louisville, Colorado. The suggested donation is \$35 ZCD members or \$50/non-members (please make donations via Paypal to jeanleonardphd@gmail.com and include a note with your donation indicating that it is for the workshop). To register or for more information, please email office@zencenterofdenver.org.

AT-HOME ROHATSU SESSHIN DEC. 8-13

We invite you to join us for five days of Zen practice conducted via Zoom Dec. 8-13. We will begin at 9 a.m. on Tuesday, Dec. 8, and end around 10:30 a.m. on Sunday, Dec. 13. All three teachers will offer dokusan each day via separate signups. Registration is via [Signup-genius.com](https://signup-genius.com); the deadline for signups is Friday, Dec. 4. If you have not previously attended sesshin with the ZCD, please contact the office for an application.

The suggested donation for the sesshin is \$35/day or \$175 total for members, or \$50/day, \$250 total for non-members. Of course, we recognize that these are difficult economic circumstances for many, and you are welcome to donate at whatever level you consider appropriate. See you on the mat (and on the screen)!

What is the old woman teaching? Can you show this?

Joshu is not puzzled like the younger monk. Joshu is clear and bright, steals into the enemy’s tent and sees through the old woman. He is able to go back to his assembly and announce, “I have seen through the old woman for you.”

Scratching our heads, we let the questions work on us. Siting still, the koan appears now and again, and then we wander into a story or into our breath. Sit another round and let go of the koan and the mind that wants to answer the questions. Sit and pretend you no longer care about koans, or moving or not moving, and sit until the pretending is not longer pretending. Something takes over, the self is dropped. Mount Gotai has seen us.

The case concludes with the commentary and the verse:

The old woman knew how to sit still in her tent and plan the campaign. Yet she is not aware of the bandit stealing into the tent. Old Joshu was clever enough to steal into the enemy’s camp and menace the fortress but he wasn’t a real general. Pondering over the matter, we must say that they both had their faults. Tell me now, what was Joshu’s insight into the old woman?

The verse:

The question is the same each time.

The answer, too, is the same.

Sand in the rice,

Thorns in the mud.

Do you have a question? Mine is: How do I live well? And the answer is becoming the same each time: By loving well.

In great gratitude for the seventy years of people, mostly women black and white, for carrying the torch of having the right to vote available to all women, I bow.

May we always be students of the Way. May we all show up and fight our own conditioning before pointing fingers in blame. May we have the courage to apologize. May we sit in deep silence until it overtakes us. And may we stand tall in the world of activity until it overtakes us.


And what is the miraculous power of the tea lady?

She is pouring –

– pouring, pouring, pouring, without stopping –

– into tea cups, into the streets, into the zendos, into the hospitals and police stations, and into stories of black skins suffering for four hundred years –

– her compassion. ☸

A weathered tree stump stands in a field of dry grass and autumn leaves. The stump is the central focus, showing deep textures and a mix of grey, brown, and tan colors. The background is a soft-focus landscape with dry grass and some autumn-colored leaves in shades of orange and red.

ZEN CENTER OF DENVER

1856 S. Columbine Street
Denver, CO 80210
(303) 455-1500

office@zencenterofdenver.org
www.zencenterofdenver.org