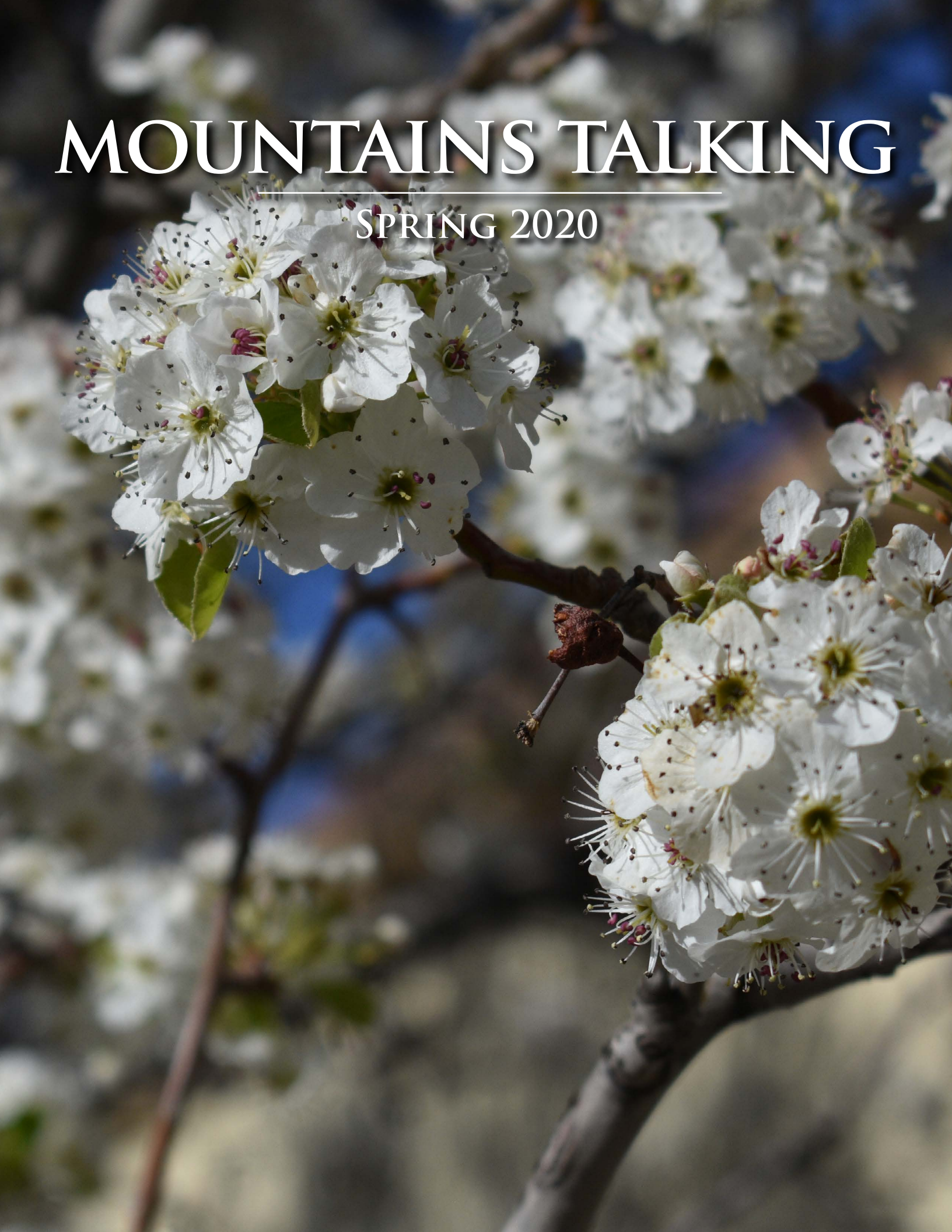


# MOUNTAINS TALKING

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SPRING 2020





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Front Cover: *Greg Clark*

Back Cover: *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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Editor: Joel Tagert

# STAY RIGHT WHERE YOU ARE

PEGGY METTA SHEEHAN



Case 5 in the *Wu-men kuan*:

*Hsiang-yen said, "It's as though you were up in a tree, hanging from a branch by your teeth. Your hands can't grasp a branch and your feet can't touch one. Someone appears beneath the tree and asks, 'What's the meaning of Bodhidharma*

*coming from the West?'* If you do not answer, you fail the questioner and evade your responsibility. If you do answer, you lose your life. What do you do?"

I suspect and hope that we can relate to this koan quite intimately right now. Many of our fellow beings are hanging by a breath to their lives. Many are without jobs, frightened for the future, and many are without enough food and supplies. All of us feel a deep concern, caring and grief. We are indeed together hanging from a branch by our teeth. We are united in a vast field of uncertainty and unknowing. Can you sense it, recognize it, and stay right there?

"What's the meaning of Bodhidharma coming from the West?" What is the meaning of this virus? Of my life? Of love and loss? What is it? Where is it? What should I do? Where should I turn? *Stay* right where you are! And you will see. There is nothing hidden and nowhere to go. *Do* what is right in front of you and only that.

Make yourself available to the gentle recognition of what is True, always true: the clang of the dishes, the smell of rice, steam hitting your face, sore knuckles as you wash your hands again and again. Each time the only time, each time inviting you to let go of your life, your hopes and dreams. For if you do not, you fail the questioner and evade your responsibility! It is your responsibility to stay. How wonderful! Hold your seat, look deeply and stay. Please stay for the benefit of all beings. And find right there an unfathomable mystery, a gift that opens and unfolds.

It is your responsibility to stay and to respond. In so

doing you may lose your life. What do you do? What are you willing to give your life for or to? Health care workers are pretty clear about this. Sure, there may be times of doubt, of overwhelm and fear, even outrage and anger, but there is an unwavering dedication to something larger. This, too, we share.

Be still and listen. Do not fail the questioner. Step into your very life, as it is. Call your neighbors, sew face masks, appreciate your morning tea and the hot water that comes out of the shower head, laugh as your dog rolls in the grass, let your breath be taken by colors of spring popping forth, carefully clean your home and tenderly place your hand on your own heart while listening to news. Give up your life in each and every moment and you will have no regrets whether hanging or falling. ☸



Photo by Erick Prieto



# THE WHOLE UNIVERSE IS MEDICINE

KARIN RYUKU KEMPE

In the Vimalakirti sutra, the great layman Vimalakirti transformed his house into an empty room and lay upon a solitary invalid's couch. The Buddha asked Manjusri, the bodhisattva of wisdom, to visit him. Although a myriad of goddesses and gods, bodhisattvas and disciples all accompanied Manjusri, they were all able to fit in this empty room as Manjusri met Vimalakirti.

*Manjushri asked:  
"This illness of yours – can you endure it? Is the treatment perhaps not making it worse rather than better? Good layperson, what is the cause of this illness? How long will it continue? And how can it be alleviated?"*

*Vimalakirti replied:  
"Manjushri, this illness of mine comes from ignorance and clinging and the thirst for existence. Because all living beings are sick, therefore I am sick. It will last as long as do the sicknesses of all living beings. If all living beings were free from sickness, I also would not be sick."*

Because all living beings are sick, therefore I am sick. Never in my lifetime, in our lifetime, has this been so obvious. Our earth has been also sick for some time, overrun by the stress of our growth, consumption and self-centeredness. We are not separate from our earth and all beings, all the myriad things, and so their distress is ours. The virus which is ravaging so many is also part of our natural connection. We will all meet it eventually, and it will become part of us for better or worse. The declining health of our economy also is a challenge we all will share for many years to come. We are together in this.

But that is one face of our life today. Master Yunmen said: "Medicine and sickness mutually correspond to each

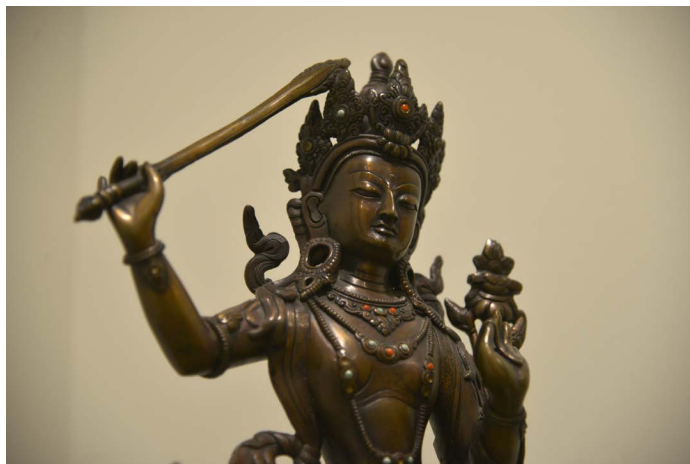
other. The whole universe is medicine." Vimalakirti lay on his couch sick and yet at the same time was completely healthy, whole and complete, manifesting in that moment as a fever chill, a dry cough, a pain in the chest and a great fatigue.

All the unseen forces working to help us continue to live together, our neighbors going to the store for us, our doctors working long hours, even our politicians struggling to get supplies and equipment and financial support, are helping us to heal. And all of our individual efforts, even if it's staying home so that we delay our own need, also are helping us to heal. And the earth too is breathing again, the waters clearing, the fish

returning. When we sit together and touch that original place of quiet, when we hold our Mu, even through clouds of uncertainty and confusion, we take care of the one who is not sick, has never been sick.

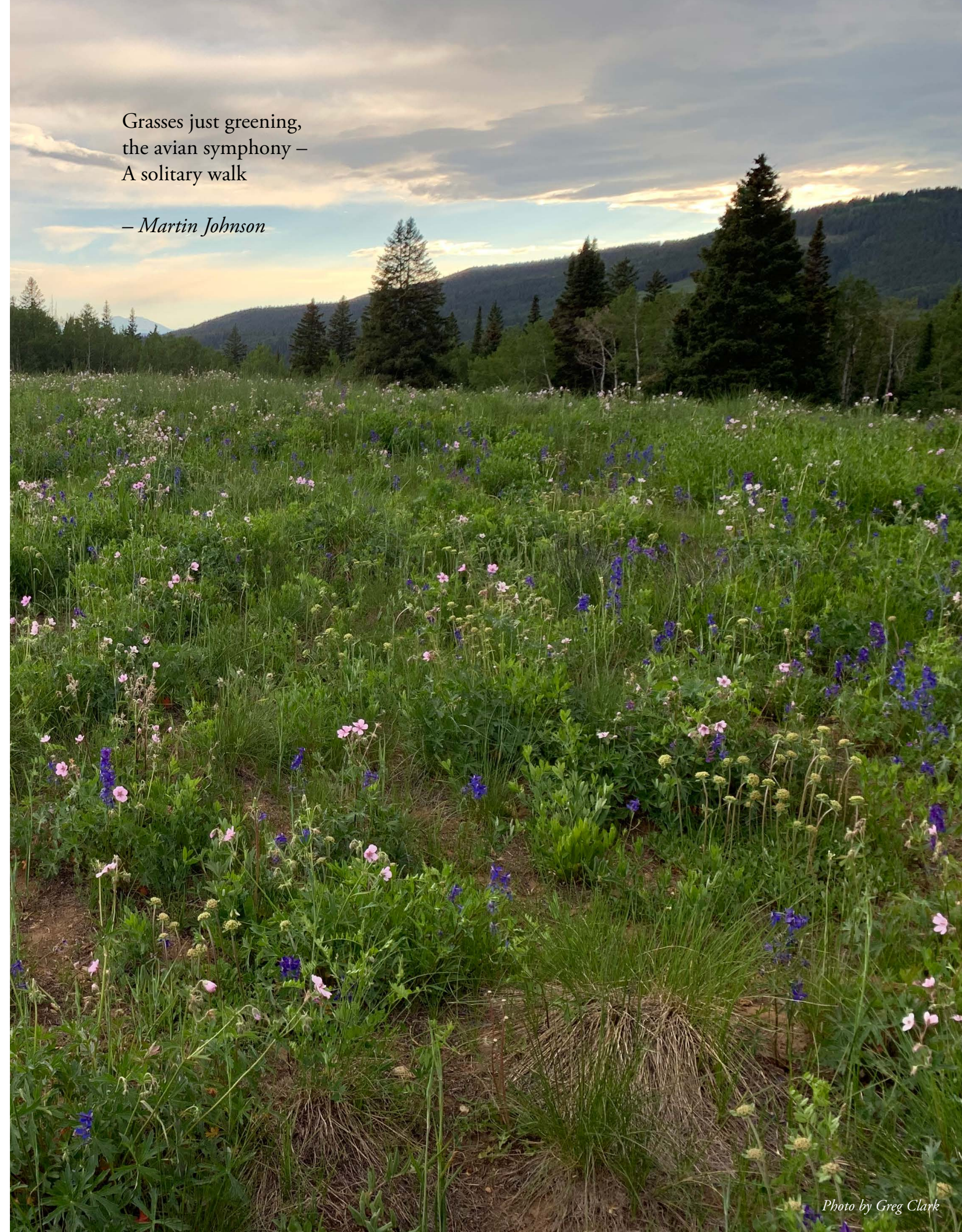
Master Yunmen said: "Medicine and sickness mutually correspond to each other. The whole universe is medicine." But then he asked us: "Where do you find the self?" Can you find your self in the openness of not knowing, settling into that groundlessness which is each day? In being open to "What is this?" In the crocuses, yellow and purple, one block away? In the light reflecting off water in your glass? In one breath at a time? In every aspect of our experience as medicine, even doubt, uncertainty, fear, discouragement?

Our practice is independent of causes and conditions, and yet lives as we meet them. The best medicine. ☸



Grasses just greening,  
the avian symphony –  
A solitary walk

– Martin Johnson





# THE MOST EXTRAORDINARY THING

KEN TETSUZAN MORGAREIDGE

*A monk asked Baizhang, "What's the most extraordinary thing?"*

*Baizhang said, "Sitting alone on this sublime peak."*

*The monk bowed, whereupon Baizhang hit him.*

– *Blue Cliff Record, Case 26*

To misquote Thomas Paine: These are the times that try our souls.

Nothing like this has happened before, not in American history, not in the history of the entire world. Why? The world has become one through electronic communications, the internet, and mass air travel.

For the very first time it can be said of the whole world, "We are all in this together." And yet, paradoxically, many feel more isolated and alone. How do we deal with this as citizens and as a sangha? Where is our practice in a time of fear and scarcity? It's really very simple. It doesn't require any great insight to respond with common human decency. The opposite of fear is courage. The opposite of scarcity is generosity.

We have, willy-nilly, been thrown into a virtual cyber-universe. But that doesn't mean it can't be real. After all, the human mind creates its own virtual reality all the time. And if we truly understand our virtual realities, we can make good use of them, for in the end, even they are nothing but the Truth itself. It's all in how you look at it.

I've seen news stories of young people banding together to offer food and transport to the elderly. We have young people in our sangha, and we have older people. Most of us have computers and smart phones. There are many of us in this sangha who will be financially strapped from loss of jobs and income. There those who are at high risk because of age and underlying health conditions.

Let us be sensitive to Baizhang's blow. Moving off

the 100-foot pole and reaching out, making contact has never been easier. Let's not be shy in offering help or in asking for help. On the internet there is no "social distancing."

When Baizhang says, "I sit alone," he is expressing this great truth: He is All-in-All. Each of us is All-in-All. Alone, we nonetheless sit, stand and walk with each other.

Finally, recall the story of the Sultan's Ring: A great sultan commanded his court magician to create a magic spell that would turn sorrow into joy and joy into sorrow. So after much thought, the magician created a simple gold ring on which were inscribed the words: "*In time, this too shall pass.*" ❄️



Photo by Greg Clark

# HOW TO EAT A BOWL OF SOUP

FRANCINE CAMPONE

You may be thinking, "I've eaten hundreds, maybe thousands of bowls of soup in my lifetime. Why should I need instructions?" At the start of oryoki, we chant, "This meal is the labor of countless beings / Let us remember their toil." Yet, how many of us take the time to remember the seeds, the earth, the sun, wind and rain, the countless hands required to plant, harvest, clean, purchase and cook this one bowl of soup? Our empty stomachs beckon, taste buds stimulated by the smells of cooking. We are ready to eat then get on to the next thing, whether it is rest, work or sitting still. It is easy to forget that this bowl of soup is itself the dharma, that eating a bowl of soup is practice. I invite you to practice this way of eating soup.

Sit with the soup in front of you.

Look at the soup: the ambient light reflecting on the surface, liquids swirling as the soup settles, colored flecks of vegetables.

Take a deep breath and place your attention at the tip of your nose.

Inhale the fragrance of the soup.

Place your hands firmly around the contours of the bowl.

Notice how the bowl is warmed from the inside out.

Place your attention on your hands.

Let your hands experience the texture of the bowl: rough clay or smooth plastic, warm wood or cool ceramic.

Pick up your spoon.

Notice the weight and balance of it in your hand.

Look at the curve of the bowl and handle.

Lower your spoon to the surface of the soup.

Attend to the way the spoon disturbs the settled surface, perhaps releasing new fragrances or a cloud of steam.

Bring a spoonful of soup to your lips.

Inhale again, as your nose experiences the seasonings and the fragrance of each ingredient.

Place the spoonful of soup in your mouth.

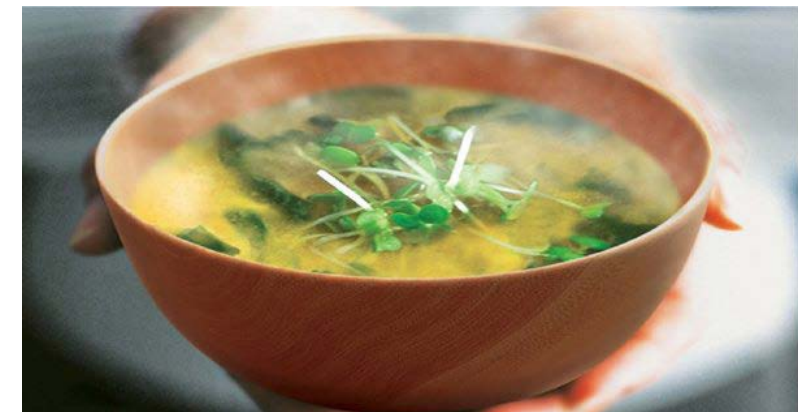
Feel it on your tongue, the back of your throat.

Notice the textures, the flavors as you chew.

Attend to the tastes, singly and together.

Swallow.

Feel the warmth as the soup makes its way to your stomach.



Inhale and notice the after-taste, the feeling left on your tongue.

Exhale.

Begin again.

Formal Japanese tea ceremonies invite moment-to-moment attention to every aspect of making and drinking tea, from viewing and appreciating the qualities of the tea bowl to the arc of the water poured from the bamboo ladle. It is not necessary to have a teahouse, complete with *tokonoma* and *tatami* mats, in order to bring careful attention to our lives. All we need is a spoon and a bowl of soup. ❄️





Photo by Fred Becker

## **Bridge**

What kind of bridge would you prefer to be?  
Would you rise above the Bosphorus,  
join East to West? Would you span Indra's Net,  
link distant stars, cross the cosmic sea?

Carry the living to their death?  
Transport the dead to be reborn  
in heaven, hell, on earth? Connect  
this birth and death to what comes next?

On your back, knees bent, feet pulled in close,  
lift your spine and pelvis to the sky.  
Roll your shoulders under, arch up higher.  
Make space for ships to sail beneath your tailbone.

Would you cross the deep dark sea, alone,  
knowing you will crumble, stone by stone?

— *John Steele*





Photo by Geoff Keeton

# ZEN IN THE CRUCIBLE

JOEL TAGERT

The banging of the old pipes  
Brings me right home  
With its careless tempo.  
The birds join in with their chatter.  
My son's footfalls thump overhead.

How wonderful it is  
To have no choice  
But to listen.

Opening my eyes  
The sill below my basement window  
Is covered with shadows and dust.  
Small twigs and light specs  
Seem quite comfortable where they are.  
My gaze traverses the landscape  
Climbing up and down its miniature terrain.  
There's much afoot right here.

The banging pipes are back.  
The birds chirp their reminders.  
My son is cackling.  
The moment explodes like a one-note symphony  
And then it's gone.

—Billy Wynne

We will be, are being, transformed by the pandemic. Culture, government, economics, technology and even religion are being shaped and reshaped. We are in the crucible now, everything fluid in the flames.

Our Buddha Sangha too is being molded – and we are helping mold it. No doubt we will face challenges in the months and years to come, and we should be prepared to adapt, to respond quickly to difficult situations and move in new directions. Already our online video conferences present a significant change and opportunity. While I have mixed feelings about sitting zazen facing a computer screen, the daily opportunity to connect and converse in a meaningful way with sangha members and friends outside of our immediate geographic area represents a real opening of our sangha. The Lotus in the Flame is unfolding, inviting anyone anywhere to join us on this Middle Way.

I see tremendous potential, also, in the various study groups, clubs, classes and meetings we are now offering online alongside our core schedule of zazen, teisho, dokusan and Dharma discussions. Mirroring and expanding our pre-existing committee system, these include groups for women, ecodharma, recovery from drugs and alcohol, arts and crafts, yoga and tenzo practice. In each, we investigate some aspect of practice as it relates to our specific circumstances and interests. This helps personalize the Dharma, and, perhaps as importantly, strengthens and deepens our sangha relationships by encouraging conversation in smaller groups. We begin to relate to each other as more than just faces in the zendo, and develop real friendships. I think it's hard to overstate the importance of these friendships with fellow practitioners. As the Buddha said (and as I remember Danan Roshi quoting over and over), "It is the whole of this holy life, this friendship, companionship, and association with the good."

We have also added new tools for communication, like our listserv and web forum on groups.io. I was cheered this morning to read five or six haiku from different members, and we have begun to share Dharma-related articles and videos to inform and educate each other, forming our own small social network. Our

teachers are offering dokusan via video conference and phone as well, facilitating our Dharma practice no matter our location (or contagion!). And many are reaching out via an old technology newly rediscovered: the ordinary phone call. It's strange, but in many ways I actually feel closer to many sangha members, family and friends than I did before, both because the simple act of reaching out is an affirmation of connection, and because one-on-one conversations again help deepen relationships. Perhaps there's someone you've been meaning to call. Don't hesitate! The odds are good they're at home and starved for conversation.

In supporting each other, we should recognize the very personal challenges many of us face. Some have suffered directly, falling ill with what is likely the coronavirus; others have had to quarantine themselves from their own families. Several sangha members have already lost their jobs or been forced to shut down their businesses, unable to afford rent, especially with the outlook going forward so uncertain. We should consider how to strengthen ties not only spiritual and social, but economic and, yes, political. With unemployment near all-time highs, poverty, homelessness and hunger are sure to follow. What are we prepared to do to assist those in need? How can we organize ourselves to advocate more effectively for a just and equitable society?

But above all, this is a time to return to the practice of zazen. Many have compared quarantine to sesshin, and this is apt in many ways. Our ordinary activities are suspended, and we are left facing the bare question: What is all this? What is our purpose? How can we end suffering?

Our own sangha is called the Lotus in the Flame, calling to mind that we practice in the midst of anguish and difficulties, no matter the time or place. Yet this pure Mind shines radiantly in utmost darkness; from the fires of the forge, a Buddha emerges. ☸



# PRACTICE ONLINE WITH US

We know you are keeping up with the rapidly changing landscape of the COVID-19 pandemic. We all know that our collective actions now may assist in slowing the spread of the virus and thereby save lives. We are therefore closing the Zen Center of Denver for in-person gatherings at least through May. We urge you all to take wise precautions appropriate for your age and risk and to get advice from your doctors and reputable sources; that is wisdom practice. Remember too the importance of opening our hearts and helping, as you are able, those in need; that is compassion practice. While we may not meet in person, we can be face to face online or by phone and continue to support each other through appropriate actions and generosity of spirit.

We are currently hard at work setting up practice opportunities online, in particular via Zoom, which we are using to do zazen together, listen to talks and join discussions. This is a rapidly evolving process, and we appreciate your patience as we learn alongside you how best to use these online tools.

Currently we have scheduled a number of practice events on Zoom. Click on the link to join the meeting at the scheduled time; you will have to install the app to join. Note that your microphone will be automatically muted when you enter the meeting, and will be unmuted by the moderator when it is time for discussion. Newcomers should note as well that we do not currently offer beginning instruction during our regular sittings, and zazen is practiced in silence; so you may wish to first try a Wednesday beginners' night by way of getting situated.

As a final note, due to restrictions on gatherings, we will not be having an in-person sesshin as originally planned for early June. However, we are investigating options for an online sesshin around that time; please check our website in the coming weeks for more info.

**Sunday morning practice, 8:30 – 10:00 a.m.:** One 25-minute round of zazen followed by a teisho (Dharma talk), discussion or other practice events.

Join URL: <https://zoom.us/j/709842848>

**Tuesday evening zazen, 7:00 – 8:30 p.m.** (with Karin Ryuku Roshi and and Peggy Metta Roshi): One 25-min-

ute round of zazen followed by a short talk and a discussion of a Dharma topic.

Join URL: <https://zoom.us/j/755342097>

**Wednesday morning zazen, 6:30 – 7:30 a.m.:** Two 25-minute rounds of zazen with chanting.

Join URL: <https://zoom.us/j/210841482>

**Thursday evening zazen, 7:00 – 8:30 p.m.** (with Ken Tetsuzan Roshi):

Join URL: <https://zoom.us/j/842918593>

**Friday morning zazen, 6:30 – 7:30 a.m.:** Two 25-minute rounds of zazen with chanting.

Join URL: <https://zoom.us/j/731958716>

**Beginners' instruction, select Wednesdays, 6:00 – 7:00 p.m.:** Recommended for anyone new to Zen meditation, our beginners' nights include brief instruction in how to practice seated meditation (zazen), followed by one 25-minute round of meditation and a discussion period. Please check the calendar for exact dates.

Join URL: <https://zoom.us/j/676228908>

**Vinyasa flow yoga, each Monday 5:15 – 6:15 p.m.:** This level 1 class focuses on finding proper alignment in basic yoga asanas (poses) to develop stability, strength, balance and awareness within the ceaseless flow of the breath. All are welcome. Instructor: Joel Tagert (RYT 200).

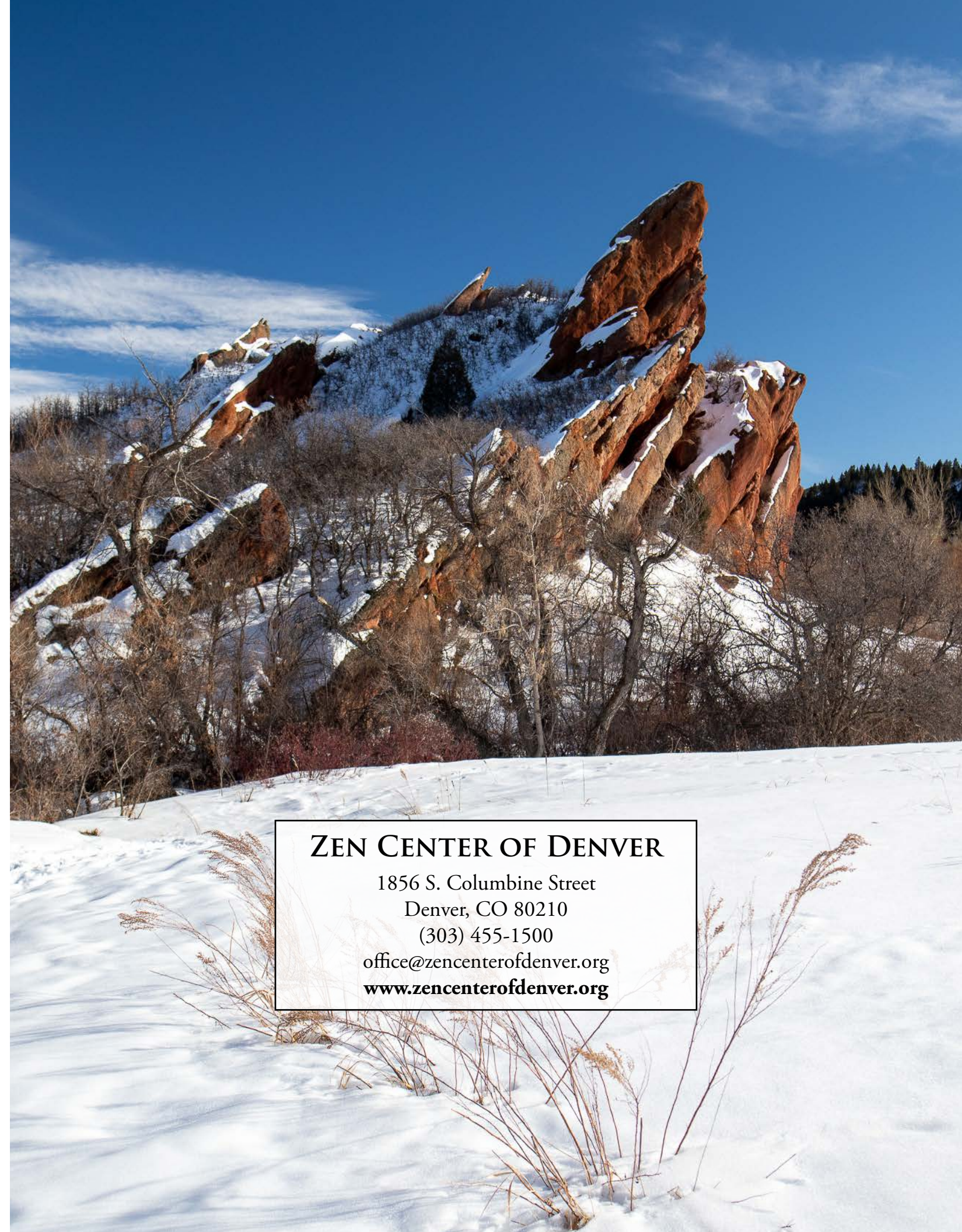
Join URL: <https://zoom.us/j/615606164>

**Buddhist Recovery Group, each Monday 7:00 – 8:30 p.m.:** One round of meditation followed by a group discussion supporting recovery from drugs and alcohol. Please note that this is not an AA meeting. All are welcome.

Join URL: <https://zoom.us/j/466508801>

**Ecodharma study group, every other Wednesday, 7:00 – 8:30 p.m.** A group to investigate Buddhism and deep ecology. Next meeting: May 6.

Join URL: <https://zoom.us/j/694372269>



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