

# MOUNTAINS TALKING

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FALL 2018

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Editor: Joel Tagert

# THE WORK OF TODAY

KARIN RYUKU KEMPE



*A king of Eastern India invited the twenty-seventh patriarch, Prajna Tara, for Buddhist food. The king asked, "Why don't you recite sutras?"*

*Prajna Tara said, "My inhalation does not stay in the world of subject, or in the world of consciousness, my exhalation does not tangle with the world of objects. Still, I am always reciting millions and millions of scrolls of sutras."*

This is a koan that may not be familiar to many of you. It comes early in the Shoyoroku, or Book of Equanimity, and concerns Prajna Tara, who was the twenty-seventh ancestor and the teacher of Bodhidharma. The story is that he was an orphan, and as young man, wandering and begging, he met up with Punyamitra, who asked him, "Do you remember the past?"

Prajna Tara replied, "I remember in the past of a far distant kalpa, I was living with you. You were preaching the Maha Prajna, and I was reciting the deepest sutras. The matter of today responds to ancient causation."

This interaction is yet another koan, part of the Denkoroku, or the Transmission of the Light. I won't say much about it except that, while it is not always the case, it can be that there is a sense of the very ancient, of old karma if you will, when we work together as student and teacher, teacher and student, clarifying the one mind. These encounters transcend our personal stories and reflect underlying affinity.

One of his students once asked Robert Aitken Roshi, "What's new, Roshi?" He replied, "I am not concerned about what's new, but about what is ancient."

There is another important flavor of this story about Prajna Tara that carries over into the koan of today: the underlying sense of reverence and respect that is inherent in a healthy student-teacher relationship. This goes both ways, of course; we bow to each other at the start and end

of each encounter, and we bow to our seats and to each other in the zendo, because our zazen seat and everyone here are also our teachers.

What is a sutra? In Buddhism, sutras are the teachings of the Buddha, with few exceptions, and are often started by the words "Thus have I heard," because they were supposed to be the direct recollection of an oral teaching through an immediate disciple, usually the Buddha's cousin Ananda. Leaving aside historical considerations, sutras in the spiritual sense, therefore, are the expression of the basic truths of our life, and they refer to us personally.

Reciting sutras is thought in some sects to be a way to gain merit, but this is not the teaching of Zen. Bodhidharma wrote:

*If you know that everything comes from the mind, don't become attached. Once attached, you're unaware. But once you see your own nature, the entire Canon [that is, all the sutras and teachings] becomes so much prose. Its thousands of sutras and shastras only amount to a clear mind. Understanding comes in mid-sentence. What use are doctrines? The ultimate Truth is beyond words. Doctrines are words. They're not the Way. The Way is wordless.*

And:

*If you see your nature, you don't need to read sutras or invoke Buddhas. Erudition and knowledge are not only useless but cloud your awareness. Doctrines are only for pointing to the mind. Once you see the mind, why pay attention to doctrines?*

This is one of the core practice admonitions of Zen: that while it can be useful initially to familiarize yourself with the landscape of Buddhism, study itself can become a barrier to realizing Mind directly because it distracts us into mental conceptualization. That is why practices like breath practice, Mu, or "Who is hearing?" are so helpful; they short circuit this tendency, and at a certain point, we become worn out with the frustration of failing to figure out the practice, and start to allow the practice in at a

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# HAVING FAITH, LETTING GO

DENNIS SIENKO

*Following is an excerpt from It's About Zen, a book recently published by ZCD member Dennis Sienko and currently available on Amazon.*

“Five percent sincerity is enough.” – Zen Master Yamada Roshi

Aiken Roshi, an American Zen master, said that “To have Great Faith is to bow and take your seat on your meditation cushion.” What did he mean by that? How is bowing and sitting silently on your meditation cushion doing anything? How is that having Great Faith? What Aiken Roshi was referring to was something beyond ourselves. For as much as you may want to achieve Enlightenment, that Enlightenment you seek is beyond your ego-driven self. What Aitken Roshi was referring to was sitting quietly, doing meditation – without expectations, without any idea of what Enlightenment should or should not be. He is saying, take your seat on your cushion, follow your practice whether that is a breath practice, a koan (Zen practice riddle or inquiry) or just sitting quietly and see what happens. He is asking that we trust the process – to have Faith! The following story illustrates Faith:

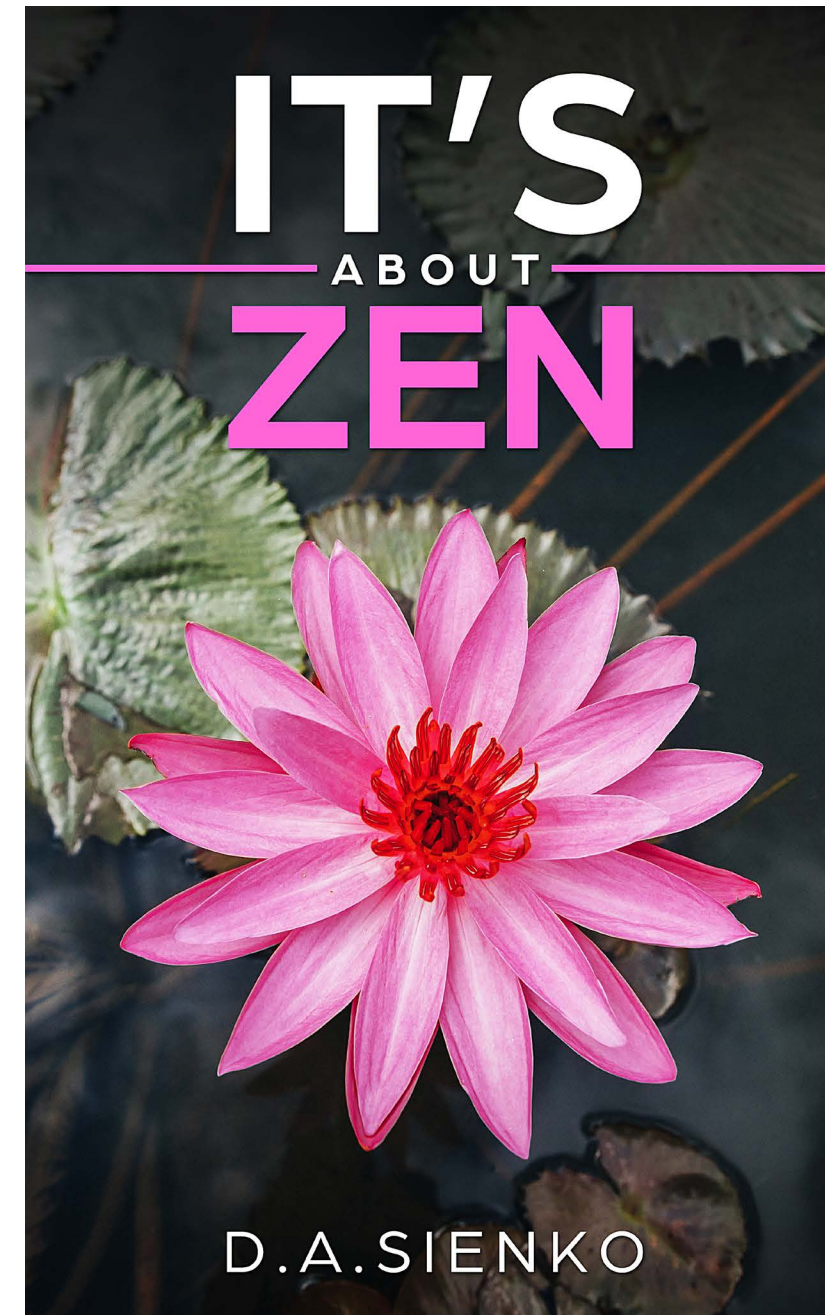
Once there was a monk who was walking along a cliff, when he slipped and fell. Clinging desperately to a branch at the side of the cliff, he looked up and yelled, ‘Oh God, please someone save me.’ Suddenly, God appeared and said, ‘I am here. Simply let go of the branch, and I will catch you.’ The monk thought for a minute, looked down at God, looked back up at his hands holding the branch and yelled, ‘Is there anyone else up there that can help me?!’

It is hard for us to trust, have faith, and very difficult to let go. We are vulnerable. At times we have been let down by others, disappointed, and maybe even betrayed. At times we mentally ache, get down on ourselves and get discouraged. Almost everyone who walks a spiritual path will experience some form of fear. Initially, we may be afraid of what family and friends will think of our spiritual interests. We may be afraid of our spiritual teacher, the teachings, certain practices, or going on a spiritual retreat. Later, we may develop a fear of finding out something

about ourselves we don't want to know. We may also become afraid of such things as impermanence, death, or even God. Our lack of faith, like the monk hanging from the cliff, is due to fear. Instead of opening, we contract. When confronted with crises or pain we usually fear the worst. The vulnerable self we are trying to protect is an illusion, a house built of sand that will not stand. However, love is fear's worst enemy. Having faith and a desire to know the Truth will produce in you a love that will enable you to conquer your fears. We must learn to love everything that surrounds us. To look upon everything as a brotherhood and a sisterhood and be grateful for each breath.

In Zen, they say we are people living in a dream-state, clinging to bushes and grasses. Some people put all their faith in books and words. They feel if they read enough books, dissect enough philosophical points and/or analyze enough spiritual teachings they will find answers to their questions, and to some degree they might. However, at some point you must put down the scholarly learnings and take the leap of Faith. As an example, once there was a well-known philosopher and scholar who devoted himself to the study of Zen for many years. After studying with a Zen master, he finally attained Enlightenment. Upon having a clear understanding, he took all his books to the Zen courtyard and burned them. He literally burnt away all his previously held thoughts and ideas. He realized there was ultimately nothing to learn.

Another ancient Zen student, Kyogen, was very smart and had an intellectual understanding of Buddhism. One day his teacher asked him, “What is your own original face before your parents were born?” This famous Zen koan was one Kyogen could not answer, even though he searched through all his books and through all his notes. He completely lost confidence in himself and felt that he was beyond saving, but he did not give up. Kyogen went and made himself a hut to pass the rest of his days away. He felt lonely and unworthy and had given up all hope of realizing anything. However, an unceasing inner search continued in his heart. Then one day Kyogen happened to be cleaning in the garden, when a small pebble was caught in his broom, flew through the air and hit a nearby bamboo stalk. TOCK! At that instant Kyogen



realized great Enlightenment. He turned to his hut and lit incense and then prostrated himself. He prostrated himself in gratitude. Kyogen tried, he never gave up, he kept in his heart an undying search for the Truth. He kept his mind focused on the task before him. Would he have heard that “Tock!” if he had his iPhone headset on, listening to music while sweeping? All that is required, all you need to do is try your best, but you must take that initial step forward.

There is an anonymous Indian proverb that states,

“When we take one step toward God, God takes seven steps toward us.” However, there is another version which says it much more accurately: “When a person takes one step toward God, God takes more steps toward that person than there are sands in the world of time.” The pure in heart are people whose trust and faith exceed their fears. They are people who trust from their heart even though problems arise and even though their minds drift here and there. They are people driven by an internal urge who continue to come back to their practice simply because there is no other solution. The pure in heart have Faith they are already Buddha and are already fully Enlightened. They enjoy the stillness that comes with meditation. They meditate without expectations. They meditate not just for themselves but for all sentient beings.

Practice Guide:

You may not have practiced meditation or any other spiritual practice for fifteen or twenty years, but none of that matters. No matter how late in life you start your spiritual search, no matter how unworthy you think you are, there are forces and factors beyond your understanding at work. What matters is that you have Faith. Hold to your faith, hold to your love and your practice will blossom. Empty yourself and allow the Universe to fill you. Experience the Love that is the Universe. A Universe that accepts you for who you are, as you are. Let go of your fears, be kind to yourself, open your heart, yield to the 10,000 things and let all that is be. Have Faith what you are essentially doing, by sitting quietly on your meditation cushion, is telling the Universe you are here. Like the monk in this chapter you must let go. Let go of all your concepts, philosophical discussions and ideas. Let everything fall away and just have Faith. Take the leap off the cliff into the abyss. Trust in a process that is ongoing, a process that is active twenty-four hours a day, whether you are actively engaged in it or not.

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deeper level. We let the practice do us.

Are chanting and other religious observances like prostrations useless too? Well no, they are like any other activity – doorways if done with a whole-hearted letting go. But if we get caught by the idea that we are gaining merit or polishing or purifying ourselves, if these practices are corrupted by a thought of getting something, then we are using them to avoid confronting the reality of this moment, in which we do not really have any fixed substance. We can use anything, anything, to make a self.

*A king of Eastern India invited the twenty-seventh Patriarch, Prajna Tara, for Buddhist food. The king asked, “Why don’t you recite sutras?”*

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Probably the king invited the holy man, hoping for some private instruction, maybe to increase his spiritual cache. Really it was just an invitation for a meal, and the king’s expectation was not met by Prajna Tara. And yet, Prajna Tara did teach and share the dharma. Shishin Wick Roshi points out:

*This is a prescription for all our dis-ease. Breathe in without attaching to internals, breathe out without attaching to externals. When we do that we manifest clear, unclouded vision. But if we add anything to that simple practice, it becomes something else entirely. To learn simple breathing in and breathing out takes steady years of meditation. Breath in and do not create a false self, breath out and don’t perturb the world or be perturbed by the world- the ultimate meaning of the holy truth is revealed.*

Simply to breathe with full awareness and without attaching to internal mental states or external activity: Isn’t that the basis of our practice? The reason breath practice is such a great initial practice and anchor for our awareness is that our breath is always in the present moment, always available, always with us. It’s an important body practice, a way to come into the body, to move away from abstract thought and unify body and mind.

And while we don’t practice manipulating the breath as in some other traditions, as you become familiar with breath practice over time, it naturally becomes quiet, deep, centered low in the body, the region of the hara

(lower abdomen). There is a very clear link between our breath, its rhythmic quality, and our degree of activation through the sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous systems. Our level of stress changes our breathing, and the reverse is also true. As we slow our breathing and make it regular, we modify our response to the fears and irritations that arise in meditation. In a very real way, we can breathe into them and through them. Each breath that you meet, holding nothing extra, brings it home, makes it personal. Each breath is new, helping you to start over when your mind wanders into dreams of past or future.

Arnold Bennett wrote:

*The chief beauty about time is that you cannot waste it in advance. The next year, the next day, the next hour are lying ready for you, as perfect, as unspoiled, as if you had never wasted or misapplied a single moment in all your life. ... You can turn over a new leaf every hour if you choose.*

If your practice is Mu, then your breath is anchored in Mu. If it’s sound, then it’s the receiving of sounds without attaching or naming any of them. If it’s shikantaza, then it’s receiving all internal and external states without clinging to any. It is the meaning of acceptance as well as of renunciation, of letting things be as they are, letting them be at rest. It is also the deepest meaning of all the sutras, which simply reflect your own life as it is.

When you vow to refrain from defaming the Three Treasures (Buddha, Dharma and Sangha), to cherish and uphold them, you are committing to cherish and uphold your own life, your own body and mind. Most of us know how to take care of our bodies, but do we do it? We also know how to take care of the mind, but do we do it? When we lift a cup of tea, it’s the same: take care of it. Whatever you do, take care of it.

If you find yourself getting caught up in negative self-talk or other harmful states, can you simply come back to your breath? Take care of each breath, one at a time. When you come back to your Mu, it’s the same: take care of it. This is the sacred in our tradition. I love the quote from Daido Looi we just used in our Jukai ceremony:

*To see the secular as a hindrance to practice is to only know that in the secular nothing is sacred; it is not yet realizing that in sacredness, nothing is secular. Realize the precepts as your own body and mind and realize sacredness.*

## Standing Mountain

What would it take to be a standing mountain, soft body centered over sentient feet, inhale your arches, pelvic floor and heart up through your crown, exhale your sacrum down? What would it take to be a conscious mountain, feet together, balanced, toes spread wide, breath and spine aligned, as if along a golden thread suspended from your crown?

What would it take to be a sparkling mountain, glaciers trickling into ice green lakes, cascades, ravines, rainbow glinted creeks— an effervescent presence, grand, pristine, a human mountain, one hundred billion nerve cells all lit up, doing what it takes?

— John Steele

When we start to become aware in all aspects of our lives, the smallest actions become huge and mysterious: the twisting of a door knob, the lifting of one foot and then the next. Ordinary life does fit the absolute like a box and its lid; they are indivisible. Not attaching to internals, not tangling with the world of objects, means that no matter what mental formations arise – thoughts, feelings, memories, sensations, even very powerful states – we allow them in, feel them in the body, but refrain from internal commentary or dialogue. We cultivate stillness and let them be at rest, unhooking from our personal narrative. Once we know that we can be with uncomfortable thoughts and feelings, we experience the freedom of no longer being driven by them; a huge burden drops away.

To recite millions and millions of scrolls of sutras is surely the work of a lifetime. How is it possible? A big change happens in our practice and our life when we start to see that practice is not about the time we spend sitting in a traditional zazen position, but about how we live each moment of our lives, about being aware and awake in each breath – in recognizing that in the sacred, in the reciting of sutras, there is nothing secular.

Can you cut an apple and really be there? Can you change the toilet paper and just do that completely, not also planning something else? The same goes for waiting in your car to get gas, or doing any of the other myriad supposedly minor activities that make up our days. I say “supposedly” because nothing really is minor; nothing is insignificant from the point of view of awareness. I know of practitioners who have come to awakening seeing a fly buzzing in front of them, hearing the sound of air pass through the nostril of the person in front of them, seeing a flock of geese lift up into the air, or seeing everything drop away as they reached for a doorknob. The phrase used by Robert Aitken is that anything can light your dharma candle. But all depends on our willingness, our readiness to be lit.

So Prajna Tara points to the endless dharma gates that are our lives, the millions of scrolls of sutras that

comprise our straightening our shoes at the door, or brushing our teeth in the morning, or walking the dog. Really this is so very encouraging, because it means that we are not dependent on a particular setting or circumstance, but can truly practice wherever we are and however we find ourselves. It means that our life does not have to be corrected or improved, that we do not have to be fixed.

Prajna Tara, on meeting his teacher, had a memory of practicing with him in the distant past. He remembered his teacher preaching the highest wisdom and he himself was reciting sutras even then. About this he said, “The matter of today responds to ancient causation.” Each of us is here out of karmic affinity. It’s not a matter of compulsion or fate, but of our natural and deep inclinations. As we become more attuned to recognizing our own deep affinities, they become even easier to see and certainly easier to trust.

**Once we know that we can be with uncomfortable thoughts and feelings, we experience the freedom of no longer being driven by them.**

Here is the verse that goes with this koan about Prajna Tara:

*The moonlight, reflecting to the bottom of the pond, is clear in the void;*

*The waves of the sea that swell to the heavens are completely pure.*

*Even if you acknowledge that this is it, after straining it many times;*

*The empty white is fully accomplished after discriminating consciousness minutely,*

*In a broad and generous state of mind.*

The ten thousand things, and you yourself, are essentially pure and clear. Even if we glimpse this once or more, we confirm it, we practice it, we make it real in our lives over and over, cultivating a broad and generous state of mind. That is our work of today. ☸

## Comings and Goings

We first welcome Stacey McConlogue, who comes to us by way of the Honolulu Diamond Sangha, where she practiced for many years. Stacey is retired from a career in public health, is married with one grown son, and enjoys photography.

Also Entering the Gate is Duane Gabel. Duane works as a software developer, is married with four children, and likes travel, hiking, bicycling, and playing music. Welcome Duane!

Lastly we welcome Ginger Moran, who is retired, and who is new to practice. She enjoys cooking, sewing and gardening. We look forward to getting to know her.

Longtime member and photographer Jeff Black is moving to Taos, New Mexico, to enjoy his retirement and investigate some of the Zen temples further south. We wish him the best, and trust he’ll come for a visit soon!

## Calendar Highlights

- Sunday, Oct. 14 - Teisho by Cathy Wright
- Sunday, Oct. 21 - Dharma discussion
- Tuesday, Oct. 23 - Beginners’ night (Mayu)
- Sunday, Nov. 4 - Sangha meeting
- \* Sunday, Nov. 11 - Zazenkai with Karin Sensei (Santosha Yoga)
- Thursday, Nov. 15 - Beginners’ night
- Sunday, Nov. 18 - Talk on the Precepts
- Sunday, Nov. 25 - Precepts Renewal Ceremony
- Dec. 2 - 9 - Rohatsu sesshin at Shambhala Mountain Center (ZCD closed)
- Sunday, Dec. 16 - Jukai Ceremony
- Dec. 23 - Jan. 4 - Winter break (ZCD closed)

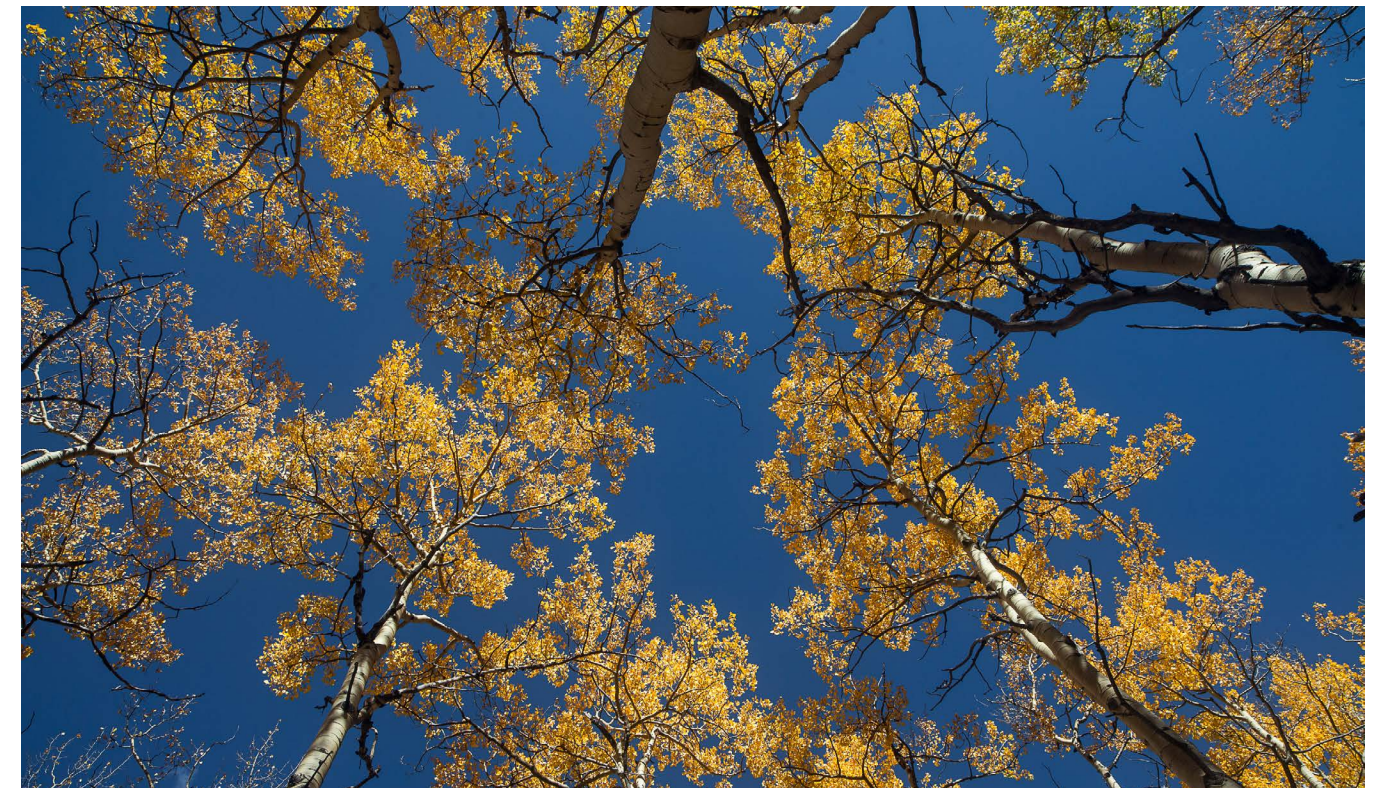


Photo: Geoff Keeton



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