



MOUNTAINS TALKING

SPRING 2021

TAKE A STEP

KARIN RYUKU KEMPE

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Front cover: *Geoff Keeton*

Back Cover: *Greg Clark*

TAKE A STEP

KARIN RYUKU KEMPE



Master Shih-shuang (Sekiso Soen) said, "How do you step forward from the top of a hundred-foot pole?"

And another eminent master (Changsha) said:

You who sit on the top of a hundred-foot pole,

Although you have entered the

Way, it is not yet genuine.

Take a step from the top of the pole

And the worlds of the Ten Directions are your total body.

The challenge of the hundred-foot pole is a very striking and well-known one. It is usually seen as a metaphor in our spiritual journey for the ascent to the mountain-top, seeing our morning star and realizing the Way. And it's a reminder that our vow is not to stagnate there but to continue on from the mountain, to meet our practice in the world, to serve and liberate all beings, to recognize that these beings of all directions are after all just us.

This koan is number 46 in *The Gateless Barrier*, and it's really a koan of life, a koan about how we live. It was a favorite of Bernie Glassman's: we step off one hundred-foot pole onto another, and then another, on and on. We are always taking a step; in fact, it's the taking a step which is important, not the landing place, our destination. Even if we realize something, we have to let that go and take another step or it dies. After all, as Shishin Wick Roshi says, "Both before and after awakening are hundred-foot poles. The ground is always shifting; there's no place to rest."

It's true: when we try to hold onto anything, anywhere, we get stuck in that holding on, and then are out of touch with our genuine life, our vibrant life of practice, which continues to flow. And our perspective from the top of that pole is also always a bit skewed by that point of view; it is only as we step pole to pole that we see the whole landscape. You may think, "Well, I am just trying

at least to get up at this one pole, trying to climb this silver mountain Mu that seems so slippery and opaque"; it's only much later that you recognize you already were practicing on top of the pole, as Mu, from the very beginning. Sesshin, zazen, silent sitting, is doing ascending-the-mountain practice. One breath, one count, one Mu, sinking into just this moment now. But this practice is actually no different on the top of the pole or stepping onto the next. It's just our awareness that has shifted.

Of course, it's just an image; please try not to get stuck on it. Instead, let's look at Shih-Shuang's question. What about taking that step? Really, it's about letting go.

I remember some forty years ago when my daughter Ashley, my first child, was in her second year. So many toddlers her age had been walking for months, but she was content, happy and gentle. She liked to look, to smile and play with her hands. And she had no interest in locomotion.

As a doctor, I knew that many developmental markers during the first two years involved motor skills, so I was a bit worried. But she seemed well; she was aware and bright. Finally, one day, when she was eighteen months old, wearing a pair of mustard-colored corduroy overalls, she got up on her feet and she walked without falling. She has walked ever since.

Why that day? What changed? She was able, I imagine, but not ready. And then she was ready. How do we become ready to "climb a mountain of swords with bare feet," to "run over jagged ice," to "jump from the cliff with hands open"? To step off into what we don't know, letting go self-consciousness, self-preoccupation, to be so open that we find ourselves confirmed by the whistle of the kettle or the purr of our cat?

We imagine that this moment is in our control, a conscious decision, something we do. But I wonder: a different way of seeing, of living – is it a matter of effort? Or is it a matter of being ready, receptive? A drop of rain released from a heavy cloud: at what point does it find itself suddenly falling?

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

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

BEARING WITNESS, MOVING FORWARD

BILL HAMAKER

From a talk given at our March 28 zazenkaï.

As we begin this day of sitting together, let us start to settle our minds and begin to open our hearts. Our tender hearts have felt the terrible suffering that has occurred so very close to us, suffering that has been magnified by the pandemic and from all of the losses we have incurred. Take a moment to breathe in and feel what is in your heart, be it sorrow, heaviness, worry or grief. Then gently breathe out and release whatever you are holding there. Do this several times.

Now that we are here together, in a safe space, we can begin, without fear, to examine the pain, the discomfort, or whatever arises rather than trying to avoid it or run away from it. It isn't an easy thing to do. But the only way to transcend suffering, the only way to ease its grip on our hearts, is to face it, to acknowledge it, to bear witness to it, unflinchingly. When we are able to move toward it rather than away from it, to accept it and everything else that comes up, moment by moment, breath after breath, then we may begin to realize that suffering, as well as all other phenomena, are transitory and impermanent. Then we can meet anything we encounter with "don't-know mind." We can bear witness to it, and finally let it go.

And when it drops away, what is left? The open, awake awareness that we truly are. The true self that is inviolate and indestructible. The bodhisattva who can step forward and heal this wounded world.



Zen Peacemakers in Boulder.

It doesn't require great, epic feats of bravery and derring do. Yesterday, some of us just sat on the lawn near the Boulder Public Library and tolled a bell for each human being lost nearby to senseless gun violence. Some of us may serve homeless people a meal. Some may decide to run for political office. Some may chant sutras and sit zazen every day. Whatever action that comes out of your bearing witness here in our sacred silence today, perform that action selflessly, with an open and loving heart. Do this work today and every day for the sake of the victims in Atlanta and Boulder; do it in the name of those who are suffering from racism, injustice and inequality; do it for those who can't, because of their oppressive circumstances, do it themselves. This is our bodhisattva path.



@laliprolix

Yesica Mirambeaux, "The Smell of Burnt Almonds"

EMBODIED ZEN, EMBODIED TEA

GREG FELLMAN

“Mr. Duffy lived a short distance from his body.” With that simple statement, James Joyce, in his masterpiece *Ulysses*, succinctly describes a man who struggles with being embodied, a man not fully present in his body or in the moment. This is a statement I can easily relate to in my life, having lived for many years “a short distance from [my] body.” Luckily for me I discovered the practices of tai chi, Zen, and tea. They all have helped me to fully arrive in my body, to be more intimate with life.

My journey to this point has taken decades. Toward the end of high school I was playing for the last time in my piano teacher’s annual student recital. My fellow students and I sat in a row in the audience waiting for our turn to play. Being the most senior student, I was the final performer.

After the recital, I was talking to another student who had sat a couple seats away from me. She asked me how nervous I had been. “Not very,” I said. “Really?” she replied. “Because you looked extremely nervous.”

I was surprised by this. I had not been conscious of much nervousness. I’m sure she was right, but I hadn’t noticed what must have been shallow breathing, fidgeting, cracking of knuckles, and other telltale signs of nerves I likely displayed. I had very poor awareness of my body, my bodily sensations, and my emotions, living primarily in my head. I felt like Luke Skywalker, guilty of Zen master Yoda’s accusation of not paying attention: “Never his mind on where he was, what he was doing.”

Things started changing years later when I discovered the practice of *taijiquan* (tai chi). Learning to gently move my limbs, to relax my muscles, to breathe into my *dantian*, all of this helped. And yet after a few years of practice I felt I was still missing something. I felt I was performing tai chi mechanically and analytically, thinking about it too much rather than feeling into the form. Or sometimes not thinking about it at all, my mind a million miles away as my body performed the routine in a rote manner. The peace of mind I had hoped would come as a result was still nowhere to be found as my monkey mind continued to run rampant.

I decided to give meditation a try at a local Zen center with which I was familiar. I thought zazen would be a useful tool to help with my tai chi. Little did I know it would be-

come the bedrock of my life and would infuse itself into every aspect of my being. Finally, I had found the way directly into my body and into the present moment. Embodiment. Through round after round of zazen, I learned to pay attention, to cultivate a focused mind, to quiet the stream of thoughts that flowed through my head, and to savor the present moment, all of which are vital aspects of tea ceremony.

In his “Vow for Awakening,” a chant often recited at Zen centers, Da Hui tells us, “This very body, the body of Buddha.” We do not separate from our bodies in order to reach enlightenment. It is with this very body, with its pains, its problems, its idiosyncrasies, and its ultimate



failing that we realize the way. And it is with this very body that we serve tea. When the mind starts quieting down we come face to face with this body, and when we become one with the physical body, our mind quiets down.

Through my burgeoning Zen practice, I began to understand my physical being in ways I never had, or rarely had, primarily by experiencing it directly rather than thinking about it. I got in touch with the direct and subtle sensations moment by moment. This allowed me to finally land in my body, to not live a short distance away. Naturally this enhanced my tai chi and it has certainly played a crucial role in my ongoing tea practice. Through zazen one can get to a place where the eyes see and the ears hear. When that happens, the tea serves me.

Wu De, tea master and founder of the Global Tea Hut, in talking about the benefits of seed plantings versus cuttings in tea plants, often discusses how a seed grows the all-important taproot, reaching down deep into the earth for its nutrients and sustenance. A cutting, on the other hand, grows shallow roots, keeping close to the surface. Zen practice allows us to grow a taproot allowing our whole being to be fed by the wisdom of the earth, to be supported in our life and in our tea.

When serving tea, we should use our whole body, and if we are not well-rooted and present in our body, our guests will feel it. In tai chi, one of the basic practices is that if I want to push with my right hand, I need to root firmly with the left foot. Qi then rises from that foot, crosses over and is expressed through the hand. The same is true in tea ceremony. Like a tea tree grown from a seed, we should be well-rooted, tapping in to the deep reserves of the earth so that qi is expressed through our fingers as we pour the water into the pot and as we serve the bowls to our guests.

Another essential quality of tea ceremony is illustrated in Case 42 of the *Denkoroku*, *The Transmission of the Lamp*. Master Kuanxi asked monk Ryozan while pointing to his rakusu (a garment worn by monks signifying their commitment to the Buddhist path), “What is under this?” Ryozan was speechless. Master Kuanxi said to Ryozan, “You ask me this.” Ryozan asked him, “What is under this?” Master Kuanxi answered, “Intimacy.” When we are more embodied, our capacity for intimacy grows. If I am in my head and my head is taking me miles away, I can’t very well feel intimate with whomever or whatever

I am with at that moment.

It is always remarkable to me after attending sesshin how intimate I feel with all those I have sat with despite the fact we have remained in silence the entire time. One might think conversation is needed to foster intimacy, but having had these experiences I know that silence and presence are truly prerequisites. It is an intimacy beyond words, and it is the same sense of intimacy that can occur during tea ceremony. When we sit quietly, fully embodied, and brew the tea and serve the tea with an open heart, this fosters intimacy, both with the tea and with each other. When we look our guest in the eye and smile with our whole being as we offer them a bowl, that moment is true Zen-infused intimacy.

In February of 2020 I had the chance to attend Wu De’s Tea and Meditation retreat at Esalen Institute, just before everything started shutting down due to the pandemic. There we learned and practiced the leaves in a bowl ceremony. One day we broke into small groups to practice the ceremony, and my group had the good fortune of having Wu De supervise us. After I finished my ceremony he kindly complimented it, saying I must have been practicing prior to the retreat. The truth was, although I had done other tea ceremonies before, that was the first leaves in a bowl ceremony I had performed. Any grace demonstrated by me in that ceremony that led to his praise was really just the essence of Zen and tai chi flowing through me.

I know I have much to learn. There still are many times when my monkey mind takes me far away from my body. But with my commitment to Zen, tai chi, and a daily tea practice, my presence and my stability in embodiment grows. Zen is my heart, tai chi my movement, and tea my offering. ☸

A version of this article was originally published in the Zen and Tea issue of Global Tea Hut, a monthly periodical on Cha Dao or the Way of Tea.



Bowing Mountain

When standing mountain folds, bows down,
the lower back lets go. Shoulders soften,
release a flood of mental toxins
from your upper body through your crown,
the residue of daily news,
the litany of failures and resentments,
wishful thinking, clutter, disappointments,
the stench of hatred, lies, and worn out views.

Can your two feet, supported by the earth,
accept their burden, help this planet grieve,
bear her orb of sorrow, let her breathe?
Can you truly bow to Earth,
let go of fear, delusion, greed,
help restore the balance, plant a seed?

– *John W. Steele*

Kanadeva's Flapping Wings

Hiking high in the Park of Parks.
The world is silent --
Even the breath
is muffled in gentle snow.
From across the valley
(within the clouds)
A trail of Canada Geese
Fly slowly through the air
The world stops
Words cannot follow
Kanadeva flies in the clouds.

– *Geoff Keeton*



Mu takes the skate

Mu is skating down the street
 Mu is blading, mannnn
 Mu is gliding
 down the sidewalk and crinkling eyes and saying hola to the infant con cabeza de puro rizo
 and Mu is looking through her eyes and smiling back at herself above Mu-mask-skin
 as Mu sails alongside the easy traffic

and Mu is soaring into and through more of Mu
 and looking into your eyes and out of mine
 is only more of you and more of Mu

— Yesica Mirambeaux

Continued from p. 3

We carry the idea that we need to find the right technique, that we do not know how to let go, despite lots of evidence to the contrary, that it's somehow a big step, this giant step into the unknown. But we already are used to falling. At night we fall into sleep. And it's been said that the upright walk of human beings is really a series of controlled falls. We lean slightly forward, start to fall, and are caught by our foot meeting the ground as we straighten up and find again our balance. When we walk very slowly, during kinhin, we can feel this in action, the way we let go and then rebalance. So, trust is already there: trust that we can fall and that we will be supported and find our balance again and then again. We don't even think about it unless we are injured.

And don't we fall into the future, which has just become our present? Our *now* itself is a constant falling, falling into the unknown of this moment, again and again.

Still, I sense an extra awareness at this particular time of uncertainty, as we start to emerge from the isolation of this pandemic. There are deep shifts in our way of being. Some of have been isolated for a year and have seen very very few other people, except through media like Zoom or TV. Trips to the grocery store or walks have been planned and careful, and many of us have been banished from those closest to us. Some of us lost loved ones without being able to say goodbye in person, or even to hold a memorial with our family.

So, as we start to come out into the world, like a groundhog blinking after the long winter, we wonder, am I changed? Will my sense of ease come back? Will I find a way to be comfortable again around people I don't know? Will I be able to pass an unmasked person without noticing the fear reaction in my body, the withdrawal? Will I really be able to travel? Go back to work or to school? So much is unknown. Our ground feels as uncertain as moving air, constantly shifting.

I would like to read the words of Nainoa Thompson, a modern-day man of Polynesian descent who has been rediscovering the art and science of wayfaring, the use of the stars and moon for long-distance voyages in open ocean. I am indebted to Michael Kieran Roshi from the Honolulu Diamond Sangha for this story. It's thought that the Hawaiian islands were first settled as early as 400 CE, when Polynesian peoples from the Marquesas Islands

sailed some 2000 miles in large doubled-hulled canoes, with a later migration from Tahiti. Nainoa Thompson studied and did his first trip on the *Hokule'a* canoe with a master navigator from Micronesia, and then was the wayfinder for two subsequent voyages from Hawaii to Tahiti. In 1980, he was responsible for the first time and the safety of the crew was in his hands.

In an interview, he told it like this:

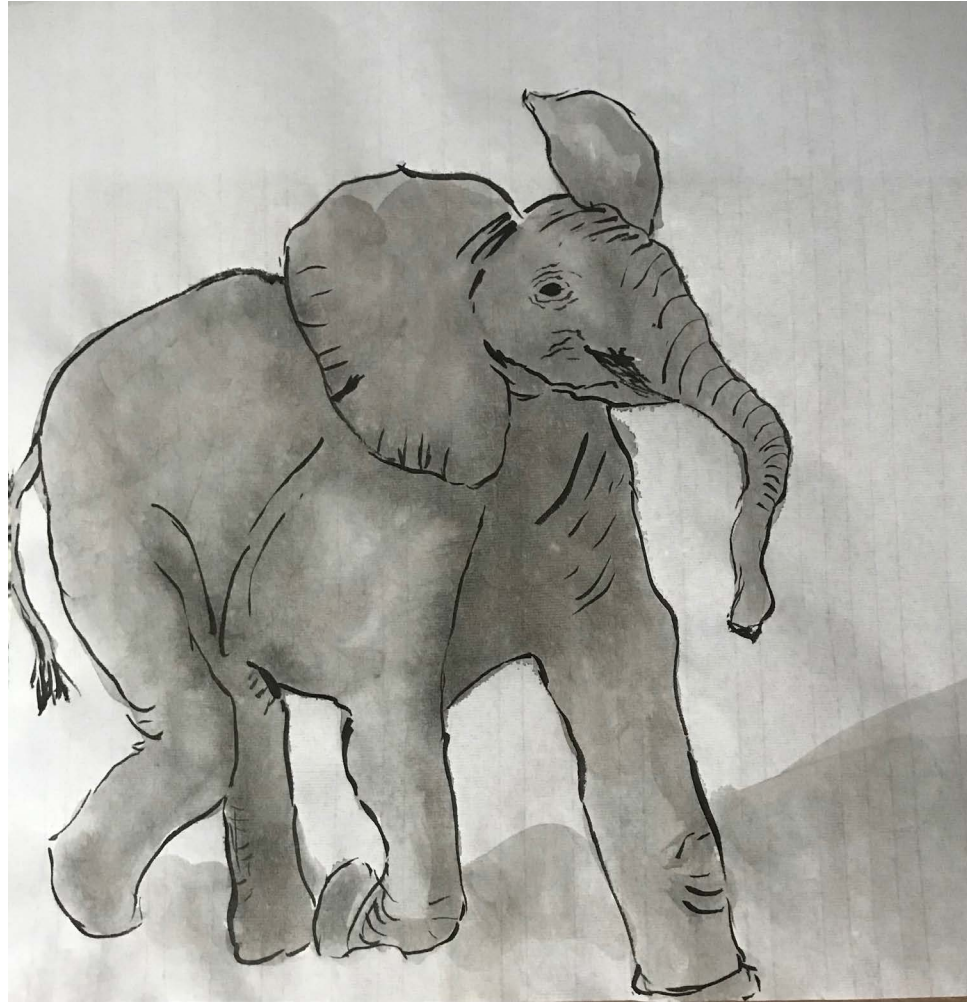
There was intense media pressure. I had to appear confident, but inside I was very much afraid.

The part of the trip I dreaded the most was the doldrums (a patch of ocean with unstable wind and visibility). I had no confidence that I could get through it. I thought that I could only accurately navigate if I had visual celestial clues and that when I got into the doldrums there would be a hundred percent cloud cover, and I would be blind. And that's what happened.

When we arrived in the doldrums, the sky was black. It was solid rain. The wind was switching around. The wind was blowing at about twenty-five knots, and we were moving fast... The guys steering the canoe were looking for direction and that increased the pressure, especially because it was my first voyage as navigator. I couldn't tell the steersmen where to steer. I was very, very tense. To prevent fatigue, you cannot allow yourself to get physically tense, but I couldn't stop feeling tense. I was so exhausted that I backed up against the rail to rest.

Then something happened that allowed me to understand where the moon was, without seeing it. When I gave up fighting to find the moon with my eyes, I settled down. I suddenly felt this warmth come over me and I knew where the moon was. The sky was so black, I couldn't see the moon, but I could feel where it was.

From the feeling of warmth and the image of the moon came a strong sense of confidence. I knew where to go. I directed the canoe on a new course and then, just for a moment, there was a hole in the clouds and the light of the moon shone through — just where I expected it to be. I can't explain it, but that was one of the most precious moments in all my sailing experience. I realized there was some deep connection I was making, something very deep inside my abilities and my senses that goes beyond the analytical, beyond seeing with my eyes. I cannot explain what this is from a scientific point of view. But it happened. And now I seek out these experiences. I don't always have them. I have to



Painting by Joyce McLaren

aware of anything that feels like progress. The light may be hidden but is still there guiding us, and our own true nature functions without our knowing it. And sometimes, it seems all we can do is just take another step and then another, to trust our direction, which seems so random. And from time to time, the clouds do part and we catch a glimpse.

I don't know if any of you remember Phillipe Petit, the French aerialist who in 1974, at the age of 24, snuck into one of the twin towers of the World Trade Center with his accomplices and in the early morning took a step onto the thick wire 1,350 feet above ground and started to walk on the cable to the other tower.

He remembers vividly the moment when he had one foot on the building and one on the wire. And then

he took just one step onto the wire, and then another. A photograph very early in his walk shows his beatific smile. He found himself so comfortable that he walked a total of eight times back and forth.

The point was never to reach the other side, but to live his more-than-1000% life walking on the wire high in the air. He began to play, and lay down in the middle of the wire to watch the sky and a bird hovering just overhead. At another point he lifted a hand from his balancing pole to salute and wave to those watching so far below. It is still breathtaking for me to see these beautiful photographs taken by his friends.

But as it turned out, his difficulty was not in being the man on the wire, but in taking the step off the wire. He had skill but not wisdom. He did not know how to step into the subsequent aspects of his life with that same grace, but struggled to manage his sudden fame, his

closest relationships and the maturing of his life, as the walk became a memory. Even so, the beauty of what he did still inspires me.

And I wonder, as we do our walking practice this weekend, each time we lift our foot to take a step, can it be with that same completeness? Can we put our whole life on the line, absorbed and yet joyful and natural? After all, each of us walks our own wire, fine as the edge of a knife, constantly starting to tip into daydreams, sleep or random thoughts, catching ourselves and rebalancing, regaining our life of oneness. The important step is always the step we take now.

About that hundred foot pole, Master Changsha said, "You who sit on the top of a hundred-foot pole, although you have entered the Way, it is not yet genuine. Take a step from the top of the pole, and the worlds of the Ten Directions are your total body." At some point, the dream of our life dissolves and we take a step into a different direction, a different way of being. It's the slightest and yet the most crucial shift, into a world that does not come from an idea of me or myself. Rather we find ourselves confirmed, recognized by the breeze on our face, the taste of water or the sound of a high bell. And in that confirmation, we discover ourselves brand new, and yet totally familiar. Then to remain genuine, we come forth, we let it function. The key to that shift is Changsha's phrase, "the worlds of the Ten Directions are your total body."

Dogen wrote that "To carry the self forward and realize the ten thousand things is delusion. That the ten thousand things advance and realize the self is enlightenment." As we let ourselves be emptied, the world enters through our sense doors and we experience directly the teaching of the blue sky and hear the dharma of a creaking floor. Because we step into what we already are, it's sometimes called the backwards step. And yet even in that step, everything is already at rest, still and silent.

Dogen plays with this too. "Taking a step forward or backward at the top of a hundred foot pole, with a single mind, turn your face and transform your self... When practicing, move forward one step, move backward each step, abide with each step. The top of the pole is exactly where all people settle the body and establish their life." Each step is already complete. Your life of freedom is already here. Be at home in whatever you do.

One time, a student asked Master Changsha, "What is my mind?" And Changsha said, "All worlds of the ten

directions." (That means right here – it's in front of you now.) And the student said, "If that's so, then there is no particular place where my body is manifested." Changsha said, "It is the place where your body is manifested." The student said, "What is a place where it's manifested?" Changsha said, "The great ocean vast and deep." The student said, "I don't understand." Changsha said, "Dragons and fish frolic freely leaping off and diving."

Maybe he should have just shaken him. Here. Your foot meeting the floor, your hand lifting the glass, the blink of your eye: as close, even closer than that. The green of the pine outside is your green. The silky black coat of your dog, your white fluffy cat, is your silky coat. It is exactly this place, nothing vague or abstract about it.

Changsha also said, "Pervading all worlds in the ten directions is your own brilliant light. All worlds in the ten directions are within your own light. And throughout all worlds in the ten directions, there is not a being that is not you..." And another time, when a monk asked, "What is the great way?" Changsha replied, "It doesn't exclude you."

The worlds of the ten directions are your total body. No matter where you go or what you do, you cannot help but meet yourself. This is as true for a beginner as for an experienced practitioner, but can we recognize it? Although we are here, we are also alive. So take a step. You are the wayfarer for your own journey; let the next step take you.

Together with all beings we realize the Way. ☸

be in the right frame of mind and beyond that, internally, I have to be able to enter into a kind of spiritual realm. I don't want to analyze these experiences too much. I don't think there's an explanation for them. There are certain levels of navigation that are realms of the spirit.

Our practice is an activity that engages both body and mind, but fundamentally, it is a practice of our spirit, that undivided intuitive aspect of us we can't name, but know is more than our body or our mind. No word is right for this. But we all have this, we know, because somehow we are here. It's an underlying sense, maybe very faint, of our own north star, that intention without words that sets our direction, that keeps us coming back even when we get lost in our own doldrums, that wasteland of gray heaviness where we can no longer see our path forward.

Even in those times when we feel stuck and lost, somehow the journey continues, even though we are not

NOTES ON THE MAT

Spring Planning

Spring has arrived, and this year seems to bring with it a special sense of renewal, with Covid-19 vaccinations well under way and an end to the pandemic seemingly in sight.

In this regard, results of our recent member survey (opposite) are encouraging. With 66 members responding, 68% indicated they are already fully vaccinated, with the remainder indicating they are all in the process of being vaccinated.

Of course, that doesn't mean we're home free *quite* yet. Case rates in Colorado remain fairly high, so we may have to exercise our patience and continue our Zoom-Zen a while longer. There remain many questions regarding how to proceed as the Center moves toward reopening for in-person events, which we will be discussing at upcoming Board meetings and elsewhere. In the meantime, we do expect to begin offering outdoor zazen for members in our Zen garden as soon as the weather warms. Lastly, it is perhaps worth noting that we currently still plan to offer our June sesshin via Zoom.

Website Updates

Sharp eyes will notice some changes to our website, in style, content and functionality. For technical reasons, we have moved to a new web host and a new, more flexible WordPress theme, which we expect will allow us to considerably expand the site's functionality in the future. For now, the biggest change is to our calendar, which is more legible than before and allows live Zoom links in the Upcoming Events sidebar. In the near future, we expect to also add tools to manage memberships, add members-only content, offer event registration and signups directly (as opposed to third-party platforms like Signupgenius), and more.

Some areas of the website may still need to be updated, and many small details likewise will require some attention. Thank you for your patience as we continue to grow our site, and we hope you enjoy the new look.

CALENDAR HIGHLIGHTS

April 25: Teisho by Karin Ryuku Kempe

May 8: Intro to Zen seminar

May 9: Kannon Ceremony

May 16: Zazenkai with Dharma talk by Dennis Sienko

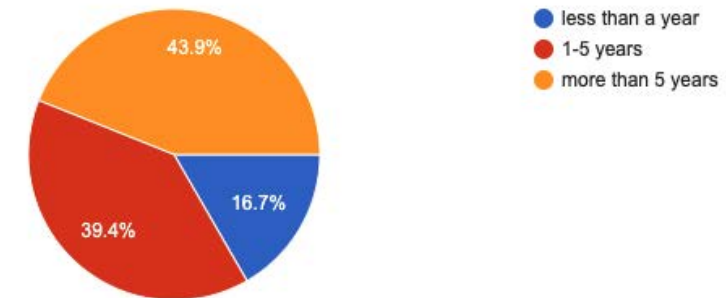
June 13: Sangha meeting

June 15-20: Summer sesshin (online)

June 27 - July 4: Center closed for summer break

I have been a ZCD member for:

66 responses



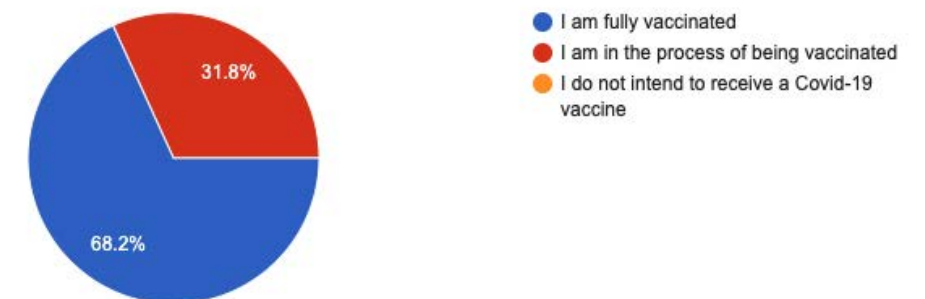
I live in:

66 responses



Regarding the Covid-19 vaccine:

66 responses



A large flock of birds, likely geese or cranes, is captured in flight against a dramatic sunset sky. The birds are silhouetted against the warm, orange and yellow light of the setting sun, creating a sense of movement and natural beauty. The sky transitions from a deep orange near the horizon to a darker, blueish-purple at the top.

ZEN CENTER OF DENVER

1856 S. Columbine Street

Denver, CO 80210

(303) 455-1500

office@zencenterofdenver.org

www.zencenterofdenver.org