



MOUNTAINS TALKING

FALL 2021

WHO HEARS?

KARIN RYUKU KEMPE

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Front and back covers: *Geoff Keeton*

WHO HEARS?

KARIN RYUKU KEMPE



A few months ago, I listened to an NPR podcast, *Invisibilia*, which described work in what is now called sound ecology by Bernie Krause. For years, he had been the sound man for rock bands, but left that and started to record and study sounds in nature, what we could call the soundscape.

At first to him the patterns he heard and recorded appeared random. But over time he began to hear a coordination of the sounds made by different species in natural habitats, particular to that place and its inhabitants. When the recordings were translated into a visual format, it looked to him like the score of an orchestra.

With another scientist, he developed what they called the acoustic niche hypothesis: that over millennia different species evolved to make sounds in different rhythms and pitches so as not to get in each other's way, a kind of cooperation in the soundscape, which can actually be seen if the sound recording is studied visually in spectroscopy. Even insects do not interfere with wolves or frogs or birds. And when there is interference, the whole ecosystem is damaged.

The problem is that with the growing impact of human activity and our mechanization of sound, whether the roar of a jet or the buzz of a chainsaw, that orchestration has been disrupted. We humans do not coordinate with the naturally interactive soundscape and so contribute to the destruction of the ecological balance. Very few places on earth are actually silent now, just as few are truly dark, unaffected by artificial light.

While we are part of nature, we human beings act as if we are separate from it, and we are harming our home planet, in all the ways you already know. We all do this. Any remedy, of course, starts with the most basic of shifts: to become aware, to be more attentive, to be quiet, to be still and to listen. To listen is fundamental to our survival, and it's a skill we need to relearn to even notice what happens around us. While I am going to talk today about

the practice of listening, in sitting and in our daily experience, I hope you recognize that what I am talking about doesn't just touch our spiritual experience, but is critical to the survival of our world.

Our relationship to sound is very intimate. I have so many memories which are sound memories; I am sure you all do. The unique sound of a voice, even one not heard for years but instantly recognizable. The creak of the very tall eucalyptus trees where I used to walk while on retreat with Toni Packer in northern California. A memory from visiting Aitken Roshi at Kaimu: we drove to a nearby neighborhood where an invasive species of frog had overcome all other species. Their collective sound at night was overwhelming, so loud it seemed your bones were chirping. The memory of the clicking sound made by dolphins under water or the deep distant boom of whales. The sound of our partner breathing in the night or the even closer sound of our own blood pulsing, our own outbreath. And I feel that I heard that full orchestration walking years ago through original rain forest in Costa Rica, a rich landscape of infinitely varied sounds entering from all directions: rain dripping, the screech of monkeys, rustling of human footsteps, the sinking of stones in mud.

This intimacy is the fruit of our direct physical experience of sound. We receive it, feel it in our bodies, before thought and often unmediated by thought – just our raw perception and then perhaps an image, a label, a naming: “That’s a bird,” or a plane, or a broken glass. But that initial experience is first and closest. So then, it’s possible to practice letting that processing action in the mind be less powerful than our direct experience, to not let any label or image be so sticky that it takes over as most important. Maybe that is why it’s not uncommon in our tradition for sound to be the sense experience that opens the mind, whether it’s the sound of a pebble striking bamboo for Hsiang-Yen, or the temple bell for Wumen or Hakuin.

Whole-body listening has been an opening practice for me too. The way I was taught to do it was to become completely still with my complete body-mind open and

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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:

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NEW ONLINE OFFERINGS

Over the past year and a half, we have all become more reliant on online activities and communication. While we continue to hope that Covid case rates will soon subside, for now they remain stubbornly high, and it's become very clear that we do not really know how the pandemic will proceed. Online practice offers a readily accessible way for individuals concerned with their safety to participate, and of course for many is simply more convenient. This being the case, we continue to work hard to develop our online offerings and the infrastructure needed to facilitate them, including our website and the audio-video setup in the zendo. This represents a new and increasingly important direction for our sangha.

This is not to diminish the importance of in-person practice, which offers an immediacy, ease and warmth that some may find challenging to discover over a computer screen. Our teachers and leadership remain committed to offering in-person practice within the necessary bounds of our Covid guidelines (including in-person dokusan with Karin Ryuku Roshi and Peggy Metta Roshi on Tuesday evenings and Thursday mornings).

Daily Meditation

Beginning Oct. 1, we are happy to offer a considerably expanded schedule of daily meditation on Zoom. Online participants can now join most of our daily sittings, including morning zazen every weekday from 6:30 a.m. – 7:30 a.m., evening zazen on Tuesdays and Thursdays from 7:00 p.m. – 8:40 p.m., and most Sunday mornings from 8:00 a.m. – 10:00 a.m. Please check our calendar for exact dates and times.

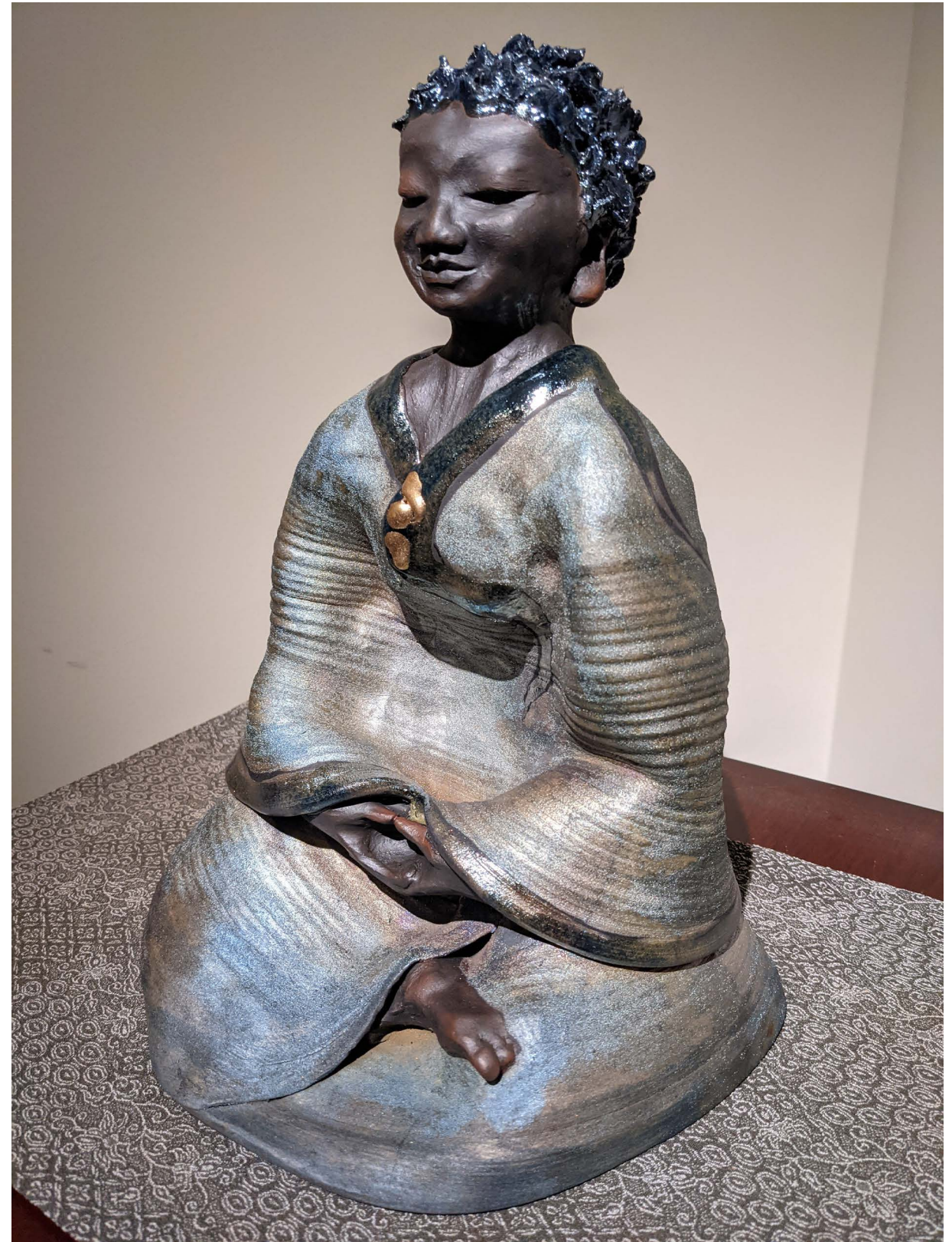
For those seeking in-person practice, we now offer garden zazen Monday-Wednesday mornings (transitioning to the main zendo in November or as needed if the weather is inclement), and zazen in our main zendo Thursday mornings, Tuesday and Thursday evenings, and Sunday mornings. Friday mornings for now will remain online only. Please register in advance via the relevant event page if you wish to attend in person.

Hybrid Zazenkai and Sesshin

While we have been holding online zazenkai and sesshin throughout the last year and a half, our September weekend sesshin marked our first true hybrid sesshin, with some participants practicing and staying in person at the Center, and others practicing entirely from home. We continue to work on our audio/video setup in the main zendo, and hopefully will be able to iron out any kinks in the coming weeks and months. Both our November weekend sesshin and our December Rohatsu sesshin will be offered in a hybrid format. Those interested in attending our Rohatsu sesshin may also note that we have shifted the dates to Dec. 3-10, beginning the evening of Friday, Dec. 3, and ending around noon on Friday, Dec. 10. This will free up the second weekend for participants, rather than having sesshin occupy two weekends, hopefully making it easier to join in this vital practice in the midst of our busy lay lives.

Daisan and Dokusan Appointments

ZCD members should note that as of Oct. 1, we are no longer using Signupgenius to make online dokusan appointments, instead making them directly via our website. To make an appointment, just log in, go to Member Home (link in the top right corner), and click Dokusan/Daisan Appointments. The process should be quite intuitive from there; if you have any questions, please contact the office.



We are honored to add this beautiful ceramic raku figure to our shrine room, made by Anita Feng (Jeong Ji), guiding teacher at Blue Heron Zen Community.

BEYOND WHY AND WHY NOT

DENNIS SIENKO

The Gateless Barrier, Case 16:

Yunmen said, "The world is vast and wide. Why do you put on your seven-piece robe at the sound of the bell?"

Wumen's commentary:

All you Zen students, training in the Way, it is urgent that you avoid pursuing sounds and clinging to forms. You may realize the Way on hearing sounds and clinging to forms – that's natural. But don't you know that true Zen students ride sounds and enclose forms? They see everything clearly, moment by moment and handle each and everything deftly, action after action.

But even so, tell me, does the sound come to the ear or does the ear go to the sound? Even if both sound and silence are forgotten, what do you say at such a point? If you listen with your ear, you cannot realize it. If you hear with your eye, you are intimate at last.

Wumen's verse:

*With realization, all things are one family,
Without realization, all things are separate and different.*

*Without realization, all things are one family,
With realization, all things are separated and different.*

First a little background on Yunmen. Yunmen founded the Yunmen school, one of the five major schools of Chan (Chan is Chinese for Zen). The Yunmen school flourished into the early Song Dynasty, which lasted from 960 - 1279. Yunmen himself was born in a small village southwest of Shanghai around 864. After studying Chan for a while, Yunmen went to Muzhou's temple to seek further instruction. Master Muzhou would listen as people approached the door to his dokusan room. When they got to the door, he immediately would yell out, "Speak!" When the monks would hesitate, stammer or waffle, Muzhou would slam the door shut on them. When Yunmen went to see Muzhou, Yunmen too had the door slammed shut on him. However, exhibiting his desire to understand the Way, Yunmen returned to seek guidance from Muzhou, but once again had the door

slammed shut on him. Mustering the courage, and showing even greater resiliency, Yunmen returned a third time to see Muzhou. This time Muzhou grabbed him by the collar and shouted, "Speak, Speak!" Once again, Yunmen froze. Muzhou started to throw Yunmen out of the room. However, this time, Yunmen summoned the courage from deep within – a courage beyond understanding that is freely available to all – and stuck his leg in the door just as it was being slammed shut. The heavy door broke Yunmen's leg, and he screamed in agony and was immediately enlightened.

When you stub your toe on a table leg, or touch a hot pan while cooking, do you think before yelling "ouch" or whatever cuss words come to mind? This is Zen: being in the moment, accepting the world as it is, accepting ourselves for who we are.

As a side note, I would be wary if I was a student and Karin or Peggy Roshi, and they decided to install heavy doors to the dokusan rooms.

Yunmen said, "The world is vast and wide. Why do you put on your seven-piece robe at the sound of the bell?"

What does he mean, the world is vast and wide? Can we feel a part of this universe? Can we let our thoughts go and throw ourselves away, so we no longer cling to this small and separate self, but can merge with a universe that is vast and wide?

Why do you put on your seven-piece robe at the sound of the bell? Why do you come to this half-day zazen? Why do you join on Zoom to listen to this talk? What drives you?

For that matter, why do you get up when the alarm sounds? Why do you get married, raise a family, have a life partner? Why do you do anything in life? Who are we really? What is the journey of this human life?

It reminds me of a legendary Harvard philosophy professor who for the final exam wrote "Why?" on the blackboard and left the room. One student wrote "Because" in his exam book, and another wrote "Why not?"



Geoff Keeton

Can we get beyond the why, beyond the because, beyond the why not, and just be?

When walking, simply walk; when bowing, simply bow; when eating, simply eat. Can we trust our practice and not cling to anything? Let this Mu be everything in this moment. Let us be empty and open. Let go of thoughts and ideas – good, bad, correct, incorrect. Even while in this temple, we tend to do things a certain way. However, when you absorb yourself completely when walking or bowing, standing or sitting, setting up the altar, arranging your cushions after the rounds – that is when you are doing it correctly.

On the surface Zen appears to be a simple practice: just breathe and count your breaths from one to ten. However, to break free of the mind road you must concentrate. When counting your breath, count just One. Don't worry about two or three. Breathe out that "One" with utmost concentration. When working on Mu, become Mu. Master Wumen, who wrote the commentary and verse to this koan, supposedly worked on Mu for six years before he realized it. Afterwards, he provided these instructions for students working on Mu: "Make your whole body a mass of doubt, and with your 360 bones and joints and your 84,000 hair follicles, *concentrate* on

this one word 'Mu.' Day and night, keep digging into it."

Some Zen students will say they put on their seven-piece robe at the sound of the bell to get enlightened. They say enlightenment will free us from suffering, but what exactly does that mean? Does that mean we never experience death? Heartache? Personal loss? That we never get sick? Can we really get enlightenment? As Hakuin's "Song of Zazen" says in this morning's reading, "Like one in water crying 'I thirst.'"

At the sound of the bell, why do you put on your seven-piece robe? Why does Yunmen thrust his leg into the doorway, while the heavy door is being slammed shut? What was driving him? Dig deep and find what is driving you.

All you Zen students, training in the Way, it is urgent that you avoid pursuing sounds and clinging to forms. You may realize the Way on hearing sounds and clinging to forms – that's natural.

Seeing a beautiful sunset while at the beach. Watching an athlete win a gold medal and seeing their tears of joy. Listening to the sound of a bird, the locust at night or the wind in the trees. We have this experience of embracing, of feeling a part of it. We can when we let go, even

for a moment, realize we do not exist in isolation. In that moment both awareness and its object become empty. When we experience things as they are that is natural and freely available. Do not pursue these sounds. Do not add to the sights and sounds, just be in the moment. Entering into and being your breath, being Mu. Try not to make Mu about something else any more than you would make breathing about something else. Being absorbed in your practice is what opens your heart to the world you are a part of.

But don't you know that true Zen students ride sounds and enclose forms? They see everything clearly, moment by moment and handle each and everything deftly, action after action.

A shout in the zendo ("Katsu!"). The shout comes, and we jump. We are pulled into the relationship with it. We had pulled apart from the world, the sound brings us right back. The caw of the crow, the sound of the bell to end the round. There should be no judgement, pleasant or unpleasant. Just be aware. Allow the shout, the noise from others rustling about, be not an invasion, but something more fluid. Sound is simply sound. Be so absorbed that cares for anything else are set aside. Ride the sound in the moment. As it is this moment, this is riding sounds.

But even so, tell me, does the sound come to the ear or does the ear go to the sound? Even if both sound and silence are forgotten, what do you say at such a point? If you listen with your ear, you cannot realize it. If you hear with your eye, you are intimate at last.

Close the eyes then open them. Does the object come to the eye or the eye to the object? Listen to rain, bouncing off rooftops or the sound of thunder. If we relax and open to the sense of hearing. When we completely dissolve, we can't point to one sense. When the person who does that disappears, then the ringing of a bell, the smell of freshly brewed coffee or the taste of an orange can bring about the kind of oneness from which we have never been apart. One indeed sees with one's ears and hears with one's eyes. What do you say at such a point?

Wumen's verse:

*With realization, all things are one family,
Without realization, all things are separate and different.
Without realization, all things are one family,*

With realization, all things are separated and different.

We need to learn to go beyond the bifurcating mind. We need to experience life as it is in the moment. We need to work on our breath practice, work on Mu, work on a particular koan. I encourage you to settle into every form, plunge in and discover its limitlessness. With realization we see that all things are One.

Without realization, all things are separate and different. Yes, unfortunately that is how we live our lives. We see different races, different religions, different sexes, and somehow believe ourselves to be apart and in a lot of cases superior. We must learn to be a sangha. We must see people as people. We must nourish and not destroy our planet and the myriad of lifeforms that exist with us. We must learn to desire enlightenment for the benefit of all sentient beings.

Without realization, all things are One. Whether we realize it or not, the world is as it is. We need to find that place where there is not one speck of separation. Whatever comes to us, we become and not a single hair can be inserted between ourselves and another. Zazen is the act of forgetting the self in the act of uniting with something that we have always been a part of. On your cushion, Mu breathes quietly. Mu is this world, and there is no chasing after thoughts or adding to what comes though the five senses. Hearing the bell to end the round, allow the forgotten self to come forth, allow it to stand and put one foot in front of the other as you do kinhin.

With realization, all things are separated and different.

You are who you are, unique. Allow your heart to open and your true self to come forward. Be compassionate to others for all things are separated and different.

Put on your seven-piece robe and let doubts and worries go. In this vast and wide universe, what is your journey? What is your intention? What choices will you make for the benefit of all sentient beings?

In the Christian Bible, Jesus said, "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." Be like a child, direct and straightforward. Trust as a child trusts. Trust in each moment, in each Mu, in each breath. Let sound come through you, let whatever you see enter and leave. Be like the Buddha you are and simply touch the earth in confirmation of your true self. ☸



David van Buskirk, "Samadhi."



Listen

Listen to the river-rock percussion tones. Who hears
the water-dervish swirling over stones? Who hears?

Tibetan prayer flags slap a fence pole,
soprano through the malleus bones. Who hears?

Kids on skateboards grind across a bridge.
A mallard quacks to her young clones. Who hears?

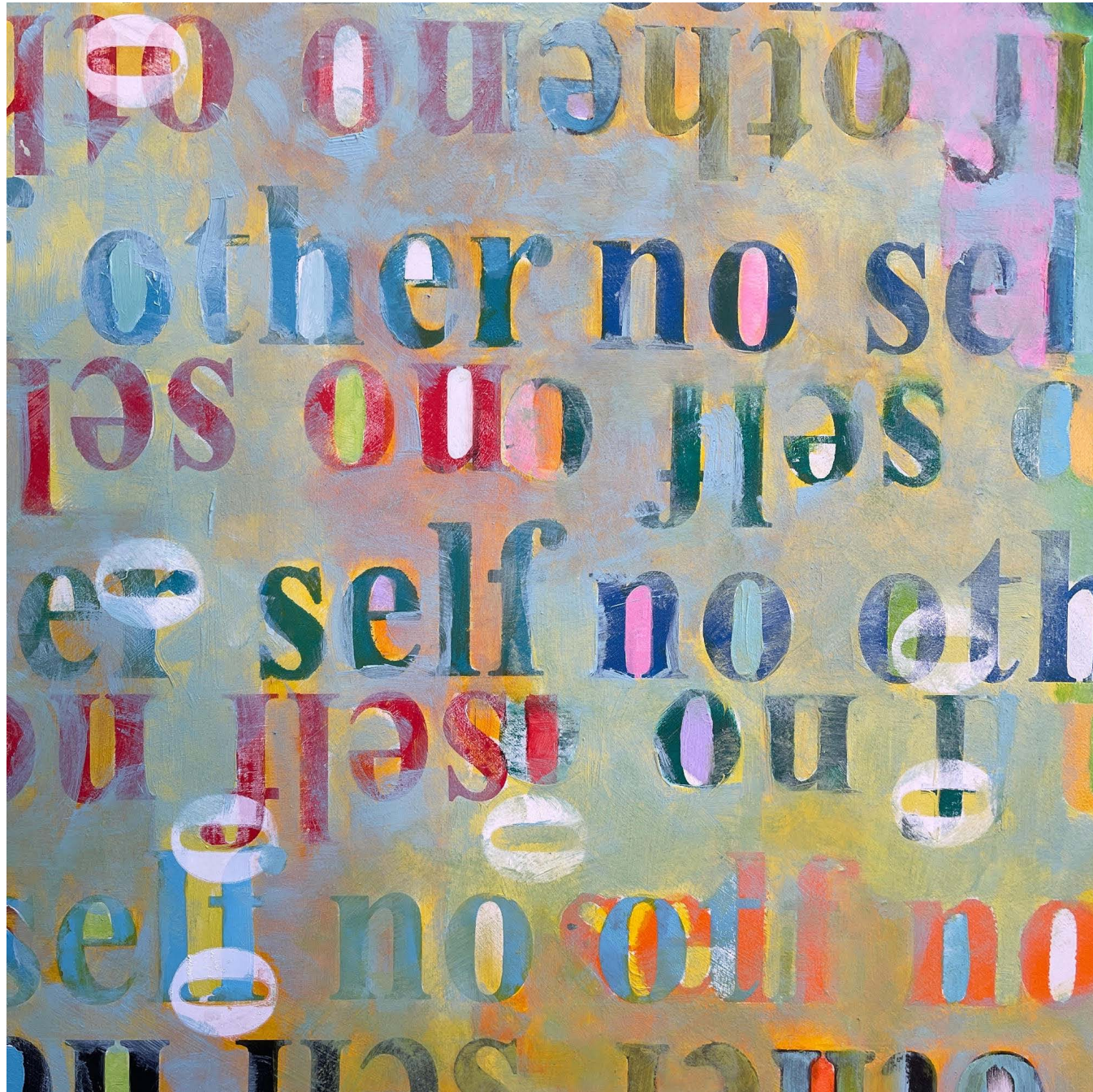
A van with studded snow-tires thunders past,
pounding rap through residential zones. Who hears?

When Rumi cries out, *Shams*—angels faint.
The far-flung void intones, *Who hears?*

The one who turns when someone calls out, *John*—
feels the question stirring in his bones, *Who hears?*

— *John Whitney Steele*

Read more in John's newly released collection, The Stones Keep Watch, a celebration of the natural world and a passionate response to the ecological crisis facing us today. Published by Kelsay Books, it is available through www.johnwhitneysteelepoet.com.



Fred Becker, *untitled*. On display at D'Art Gallery until Oct. 17.

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focused on sound, to let any sound be the anchor for awareness if I drifted off into thought, the reminder to come back. To let sound be total, all encompassing. And, most important, to be very minutely aware of the actual sensation of sound not just through my ears, but to listen through my hands, my skin, my lungs, my breath, with every part of me.

Some of you may be familiar with the percussion virtuoso Evelyn Glennie, who was raised on a farm in northern Scotland. When she was eight to twelve years old, she lost her hearing, so that since that time she has been profoundly deaf. Still, she wanted to become a musician and was drawn to percussion. She found that by taking off her hearing aids and paying minute attention to the qualities of vibrations elicited by sound in her body, she could both “hear” – hear with her body – and also play music. After an initial application was rejected, she attended a prestigious music school; since then she has performed worldwide as a soloist and in collaboration with other musicians and orchestras. Her mission is to teach us all how to listen, to listen not just with our ears, but to let our whole body be a resonator chamber for sound, which after all is vibration, just as light is vibration, energy. In a YouTube video, I watched her teach deaf kids to listen by holding onto the instrument as its played. And she plays everything – steel beams in an abandoned building, or the floor in a huge space – looking for the vibration of the world. (Those interested can check out the 2004 documentary *Touch the Sound*.)

What she points to relates directly to the shift required when we practice with sound as a meditation practice. What is it like to feel sound through our hands, our feet? This is an exercise she uses to demonstrate this. If you were going to use your body to make the sound of thunder, what would that be like? How about the sound of falling snow?

When practicing with sound, whether sitting or walking about, there is always the temptation to stay in the internal word-stream of our thoughts, naming, labeling, imagining pictures in our minds. But this is just thinking, abstraction, not true listening. True listening asks us to drop our deep-seated habit of constant self-reference. Thoughts, feelings, pictures do arise constantly, but our addiction to them is voluntary. Can we let them evaporate like mists by grounding our listening in our body...this body? Closely notice the characteristics, the

unique quality of each sound. What does it feel like in your hands, in your torso, through your skin? The way a dancer would need to experience sound to let it animate her arms and legs? At times, sound awareness takes a linear path from one sound to another, traveling a random pattern: first traffic – oh, here the sound of the fan – now the sigh of our dog – distant chimes in the wind moving in.

As we become very, very still, motionless, at rest, withdraw your human intention – any picking or reaching or choosing – and simply accept, without making movement, like a huge receiver open in all directions. Come in, come in. Then we may feel our minds expand as this soundscape uncovers a vast space. Time, distance, it all disappears. The flush of a toilet, whishhh! The creak of the floor, or the rasp of your clothes as you get up. There is no sound that is not interesting, none that is better than another. Even sounds we may think of as irritating – maybe a lawnmower next door, harsh or angry words – take their place in the sound landscape, just as the vibrant red of a wheelbarrow might flash in the garden.

When I am in retreat, I often take my walk doing listening practice. Walking in the tapestry of sound, I let my normally strong visual sense be tamped down and recede; I am not blind, but sight is less important. Of course, outside, our eyes do need to be open, but they can be lowered so that sight sensations slide away and don't stick or stimulate thoughts. I also cultivate a kind of alert looseness, open to the infinite variety of the ordinary as I walk through the rain forest of my own neighborhood. And I am always particularly careful crossing streets! For those of us who are highly visual, this is a good practice, refreshing, like taking a bath (I guess it's a sound bath). When we listen, available to what we cannot control or anticipate, we enter a state of open receptivity. The curtain of thought and mind dreams falls away. We are fully in life; *we are* life.

There are several koans in our tradition based in listening practice. Probably the simplest is the introductory koan, “Who hears?” which is sometimes used as an initial inquiry, like Mu. The commentary of another favorite, “Why do you put on your robe at the sound of the temple bell?” (case 16 in *The Gateless Barrier*) presents it clearly:

All you Zen students, training in the Way, it is urgent

that you avoid pursuing sounds and clinging to forms. You may realize the Way on hearing a sound, or understand the Mind on seeing a form – that's natural. But don't you know that true Zen students can ride sounds and enclose forms? They see everything clearly, moment by moment and handle each and everything deftly, action after action.

Do we handle everything deftly, action by action, in the flow of our lives? We seem very sure that we do not, as if there is something wrong. But what if seeing everything clearly is to see that there is nothing wrong, nothing to fix, no need to pursue sounds and cling to forms. Maybe instead of fueling our practice, our faithfulness to the count, to our breath, to Mu, with a compulsive energy, a greed, we can simply give ourselves, with a generous wholehearted spirit. Then sounds carry us, and we find ourselves in all the expressions of our world: a clump of flowers beside the sidewalk, the shifting shape of the clouds, a pool of water. Women's commentary goes on:

But even so, tell me, does the sound come to the ear, or does the ear go to the sound? Even if sound and silence are both forgotten, what do you say at such a point? If you listen with your ear, you cannot realize it. If you hear with your eye, you are intimate at last.

Who hears? Does the sound come to the ear, or ear go to the sound? We can only move past the duality of such a challenge by becoming the question itself. And we can't really enter a koan like "Stop the sound of the distant bell" in any way other than by letting it into our body, letting near and far become irrelevant, becoming sound and silence at the same time. Entering like this requires that we give up the self, throw ourselves away. What I love about the koan path is that it is not about passing or resolving anything, but in opening wider than the challenging dilemma of the koan, entering that space which includes the darkness of not-knowing as much as knowing and is beyond both. I have often talked about the need we have to exhaust our doubt; that we have to move close to it, live in it, with it, embrace and challenge it. But I recently read that the same Chinese character

for "exhaust" also means "complete." And that is a lovely way to see this process: that we complete our doubt so that it can fall away naturally, like a dead crust no longer needed. We discover a new space where we have already thrown ourselves away.

I so appreciate the words of Ross Bolletier, a teacher in the Diamond Sangha from Australia and avant-guard musician who composes on broken ruined pianos. He knows listening well both as a koan and as a root practice and says:

It's common knowledge that we can be enlightened by hearing a sound, but it's important not to chase after sounds hoping that they will enlighten us. Oneness, emptiness, enlightenment are all just thoughts in the mind. It is important to notice them and let them go, just as we do for other thoughts that arise in our zazen. This allows the sound of the breath, the sound of the bell, the caw caw of the crows to do their work. In the long run, even though we hear with the eye and see with the ear, we still get up with the sound of the newspaper landing on the drive, do zazen, prepare breakfast, drink coffee, moment after moment without there being anyone to own one bit of it, we are living the great life.

Even in the midst of ordinary daily activity, there is a vast unbounded quiet, there is a stillness. Can we hear that great life – the life of children running down the hall, or dogs barking at the postman? Of the dripping faucet or the fan? Where does that the bell complete itself without anything holding it back? Can each of us take even just a short time each day, to simply stop and listen, to listen with our whole bodies, to be open to whatever the world presents as its music of this moment?

Let the world call you.

Together with all beings we realize the Way. ☸

What I love about the koan path is that it is not about passing or resolving anything, but in opening wider than the challenging dilemma of the koan.



CALENDAR HIGHLIGHTS

Oct. 17: Zazenkai with Dharma talk by Dennis Sienko

Oct. 24: Sangha circle meeting & Mountain Staff meeting

Oct. 31: Kannon Ceremony

Nov. 5- 7: Weekend sesshin with Karin Roshi and assistant teacher Bill Hamaker

Nov. 14: Fast for a World Harvest

Nov 21: Dharma talk on the Precepts

Nov. 28: Precepts Ceremony

Dec. 3-10: Rohatsu sesshin with Karin Roshi and Peggy Roshi

Dec. 19: Sangha meeting with Board of Directors election



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