

Mountains Talking

Summer - 2026



ZEN CENTER
OF DENVER

In This Issue

Introduction	2
Mountains Answering - Kay StayWylde	6
One Family - Karin Ryuku Kempe, Roshi	7
Poem: Darkening Sky Lilacs - Gabrielle Gerlitz	11
Rohatsu Reflection - Gloria Perez-Alvarez	12
Turning The Eight Limbed Wheel - Joel Tagert	13
On Queerness and the Dharma - Brett James	17
Poem: Ikebana Samsara - Michael Bakowski	18
Anatomy of a Scoff - Noah Robertson	19
Poem: Zazen Samadhi - John Steele	21

Mountains Talking is the Zen Center of Denver's publication of original writings and art. The ZCD offers authentic Soto 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
www.zencenterofdenver.org

Editor: Brett James
Designer: Michael Bakowski

Front Cover: Brett James

Introduction

Dear Reader,

Welcome to the relaunch of Mountains Talking, the Zen Center of Denver's sangha publication of original writing and art. Michael and I are excited to continue this tradition that started more than a decade ago. Just as the Zen Center is a place to hold our practice, so does Mountains Talking. In the following pages you will find teishos, poetry, essays, photographs, and original art, all from the ZCD sangha. This issue represents six months of design, selection, and editing that we hope you will enjoy. It has truly been a labor of love that has taken us deeper into our practice. So pour yourself some tea, find a comfortable chair, and immerse yourself in the words and images of your Dharma family.

Yours in the Dharma,
Brett James and Michael Bakowski

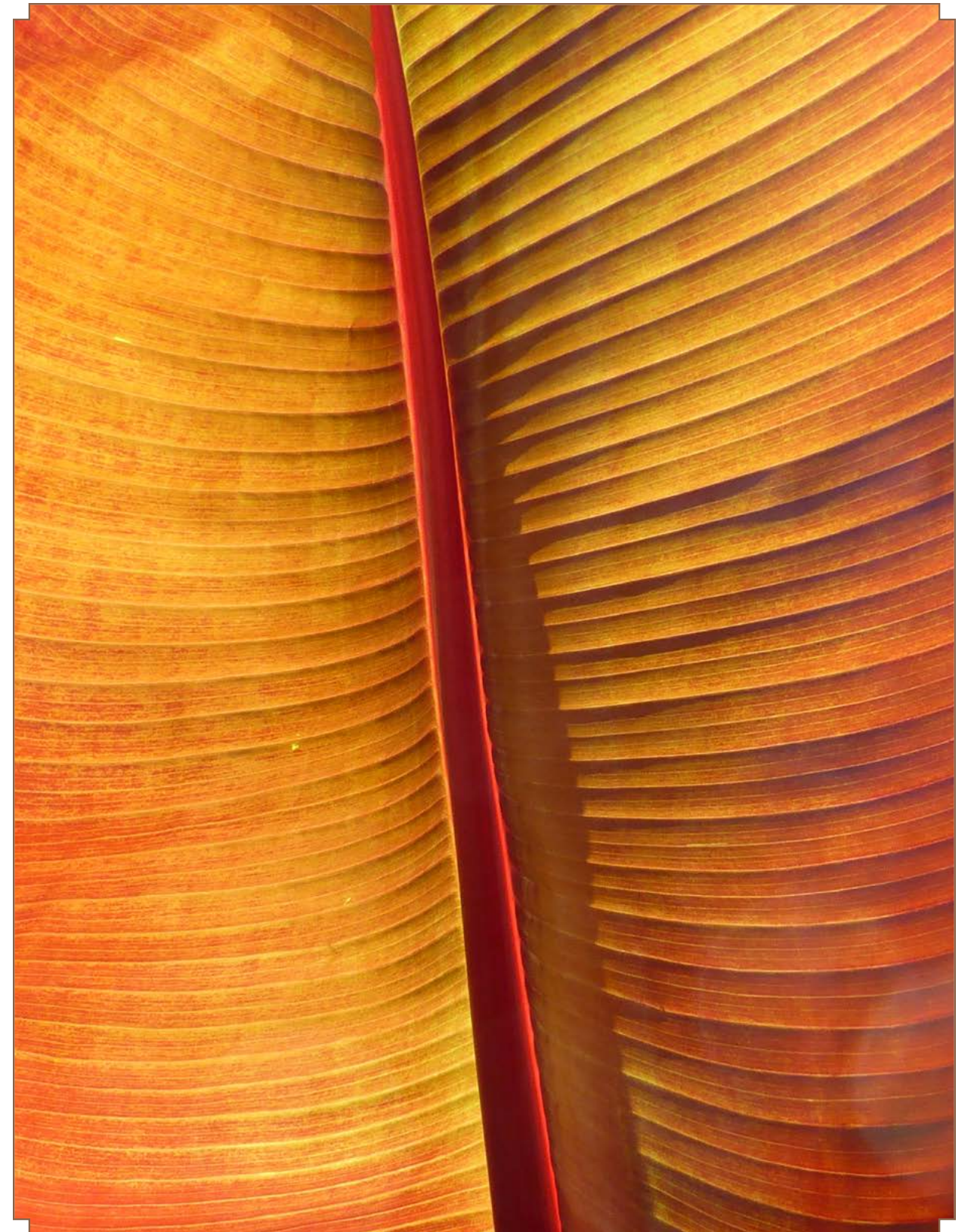


Photo by Merilee Schultheiss

Calendar Highlights

Zen Center closed	June 28th - July 5th
Zen of Recovery	July 1st
River Watch Sample and Test	July 5th
Beginner's Night	July 9th
Sit and Seva followed by assembling hygiene kits for Metro Caring	July 12th
All day Zazenkai	July 19th
Teisho by Peggy Metta, Roshi	July 26th
River Watch Sample and Test	August 2nd
Beginner's Night	August 4th
Council Circle followed by assembling hygiene kits for Metro Caring	August 9th
Chanting service	August 16th
Volunteering at Metro Caring Food Bank	August 20th
All day Zazenkai	August 23rd
Mountain Staff Meeting	August 30th



Photo by Stacey McConlogue

Library Announcement

Would you like to enhance your practice by reading Zen or Buddhist themed books? The ZCD library has a large collection of texts that are available to you! Located upstairs, our library has several comfortable couches and chairs for you to use as you peruse our stacks. We have both lending and reference sections. We ask that you refrain from leaving the temple with any of the reference books, but the lending library has a number of books you can check out. Check out is easy using the ZCD library page on our website: <https://zencenterofdenver.org/library>. Note that you must be logged into the website as a member to check out books. Please reach out to Chad (chad.johnson2@zoho.com) or Michael (mdsmith808@gmail.com) if you have any questions. Gassho, and happy reading!

Mountains Answering

By Kay StayWylde

Mountains Answering provides insight and reflection into common questions that Zen Center attendees might have.

Question:

What is the significance of the broken pine needle stitch on the back of the rakusu?

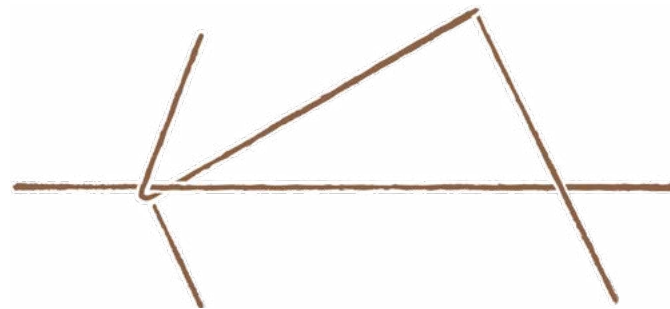
Answer: If you spend time at the Zen Center of Denver, you may notice a small irregular stitch sewn onto the back strap of a rakusu. This is known as the broken pine needle stitch. Though subtle, it carries a great deal of meaning.

The rakusu itself descends from the Buddha's robe that were traditionally sewn from discarded or reclaimed pieces of cloth gathered and stitched together by hand. Traditionally, the stitch is intentionally "broken" or uneven, interrupting the otherwise careful and orderly pattern of the robe. Like many Zen forms, it serves as a teaching expressed through something simple and physical rather than explained outright in words. The rakusu is not meant to display accomplishment, but to embody practice itself.

The pine tree has long symbolized resilience, continuity, and endurance, remaining green through every season. The broken pine needle stitch reminds us that Zen practice is not about perfection. We are always acknowledging impermanence, a lack of completion, and the deeply human nature of our practice. Some teachers describe the stitch as a safeguard against pride. Sewing a rakusu requires many hours of careful attention and effort with the broken stitch gently interrupting any tendency toward self-importance or attachment to having done it "correctly."

Placing the stitch at the back of our necks makes it difficult for us to see ourselves, just as our imperfections, vulnerabilities, and rough edges are often carried quietly, just beneath our awareness. It is often easier for us to see these truths in others before we recognize that we, too, are bearing them. But those rough edges are part of what softens us, humbles us, fuels our growth, and connects us to one another. In this way, the stitch becomes less a mark of flaw and more a reminder that awakening is woven directly into the fabric of our ordinary human lives.

The broken pine needle stitch quietly reminds us that this practice does not require us to become flawless beings. Rather, it invites us to meet our lives exactly as they are with the boundless qualities of loving-kindness, sympathetic joy, compassion, and equanimity.



One Family

Karin Ryuku Kempe, Roshi

Verse 16 in the Gateless Barrier koan collection goes like this:

*"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 separate and different."* (Wumenkuan)

This is something that is hard to see at times. As we become more mindful in our lives and practice paying attention, we start to notice that each thing is completely itself, both specific and unique. We notice a one and only flower as we pass a bush on our walk or we look up to the wide open sky as if we have never really seen it before. Yet at the same time we feel a sense of connection to everything and everyone, through all the ways we are related and dependent. Entering each moment, is it one or is it two? The same or different? It is a fine line, some might even say the edge of a sword.

Case #83 from the Blue Cliff Record, *Pi Yen Lu* in Chinese, goes like this:

"Yunmen addressed his assembly and said, 'An old Buddha and a pillar intersect each other. What number of activity is that?' Answering for them, he said, 'Clouds gather over the South Mountain; rain falls on the North Mountain'" (Yamada 82).

Master Yunmen was one of the greats, fearless and challenging, always pointing both to the ground where you stand, where I stand, but also expressing that world so vast and wide, impossible to contain. It was said of him:

"As usual, within one sentence of Yunmen's three sentences are bound to be present. These are called the sentence that encloses heaven and earth, the sentence

that encloses heaven and earth, the sentence that follows the waves, and the sentence that cuts off the myriad streams. He lets go and gathers up, he's naturally extraordinary, like cutting nails or shearing through iron. He makes people unable to comprehend him or figure him out" (Kequin and Hsien 94).

In the Diamond Sangha, this koan is translated as "an old buddha and a pillar couple with each other," basically saying that they are intermingling, meeting each other intimately. Crashing into one another as if one were coming out of the door just as the other tries to enter. What, who is that old Buddha? That might be something to consider. Is it the One Mind, our True Self? Or maybe the Ancient Buddhas before Shakyamuni whose names we recite: Vipashyin Buddha, Shikhan Buddha, Vishvabhu Buddha...or is it you yourself? And that pillar? It is kind of a weird image because usually pillars are not themselves moving, but are fixed, supporting, stable. I learned that a pillar can be used to express monastic training, a formal expression of all that upholds the dharma. But of course, a pillar could be more than that, could be anything really. Does it represent the Ten Thousand Things, all our objective world? In the end, this is not something we can figure out. As the commentary says,

"The talk of the teaching masters of our school cuts off conceptual consciousness, cuts off emotional evaluation, cuts off birth and death, and cuts off the defilement of doctrine, enters the correct state without retaining anything at all. As soon as you rationalize and calculate, you tie your hands and feet" (455).

Right where we create stability by trying to hold things immobile in time or space, that place where we create the self by latching on, the Buddha identified a source of our suffering. The abundant arising of life, the coming into being, this we all enjoy, but so often we try to freeze it in place and mourn what fades and passes. As if our endless accumulation would even be possible without the dying and disap-

pearing to make room for the new. This kind of greed makes hoarders of us all. But when the mind opens, we experience through fresh eyes and any dichotomy dissolves as we realize that everything, including whatever we have imagined to be what we are, is only a continuous emerging and disappearing, free of any stable identity. Really nothing is fixed or separate – not you, not me. Even our bodies right now contain the atoms of stars and dinosaurs. When we do not separate from our actual experience, we feel ourselves at home, trusting our life; it is this quality that we cultivate in practice, finding our dharma path exactly where we are at this moment. This is something that we sense deeply in ourselves, even if it is not entirely clear, even when we feel ourselves divided or clouded. When we show up and give our full attention to be present, no matter what we are doing, we discover ourselves whole again.

An old Buddha and a pillar intersect. How do they interact, or relate? You roll over to straighten your cushions, then push yourself up from the floor to stand. The bell rings and you drop in a prostration, meeting the floor. Wood panels that were once a living tree push you back up. Did something move from here to there? Did anything pass away? “Right now” is the experience of “completely new,” never seen before. When we see it, it may amaze us, and yet it has always been so. Right now is completely new. I may have written this talk a few weeks ago, sitting on an old brown chair in Scotland, but speaking now, my words have become entirely new. We are alive right here, together this morning. This flower now, this water now. Even in an hour, this water now will be a thought, a memory. But this life is always now.

Dogen talks about time not as something that comes and passes, but as the totality of this moment now, which includes time and space, as well as our memories of the past or thoughts of the future. This wholeness now. He wrote in Genjokoan:

“To study the Buddha way is to study the self.

To study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to be enlightened by the ten thousand dharmas. To be enlightened by the ten thousand dharmas is to free one’s body and mind and those of others. No trace of enlightenment remains, and this traceless enlightenment is continued forever.”

The study of the self is practice. As we forget the self in practice, body and mind may drop away and we may recognize in an instant what we call “self-nature,” but is really unnamable. It can be like rediscovering a vast emptiness, a complete and perfect unity that has always been there. But even more important than any discrete liberating event which quickly becomes a memory, is the continuous dropping away which is the expression of our coming into awareness right now. This is why Dogen said that enlightenment is practice and practice is enlightenment, because in each moment of awareness the clinging of “self” is freed, can dissolve, and we find ourselves in all the unique expressions of our world. The bark of a dog, the smile of a friend, the pine tree in the backyard. Shinshu Roberts, dharma friend of old, clarifies this well in her commentary on Ugi, being-time: “This dropping away is enacting our (and all beings’) true state of impermanence, interbeing and cooperation. We do not lose our self-identity, rather; we drop clinging to a particular self-identity and take our true place as and with all being(s) – this is dropping body-mind. Dropping body-mind enacts our kinship with all beings...We are myriad phenomena and we are the entire earth. This is not an abstraction; it is the basis for the Bodhisattva’s altruistic path” (Roberts). The Buddha said, “I and all beings of the great earth in the same instant have attained the Way.” Really, this is what Zen practice is all about. All beings, one body. One body, one family. Not one, not two. It is about real life and how we can live freely even in difficult or confusing circumstances.

I recently read an article by Thomas Friedman, a journalist for the New York Times. He is a long time

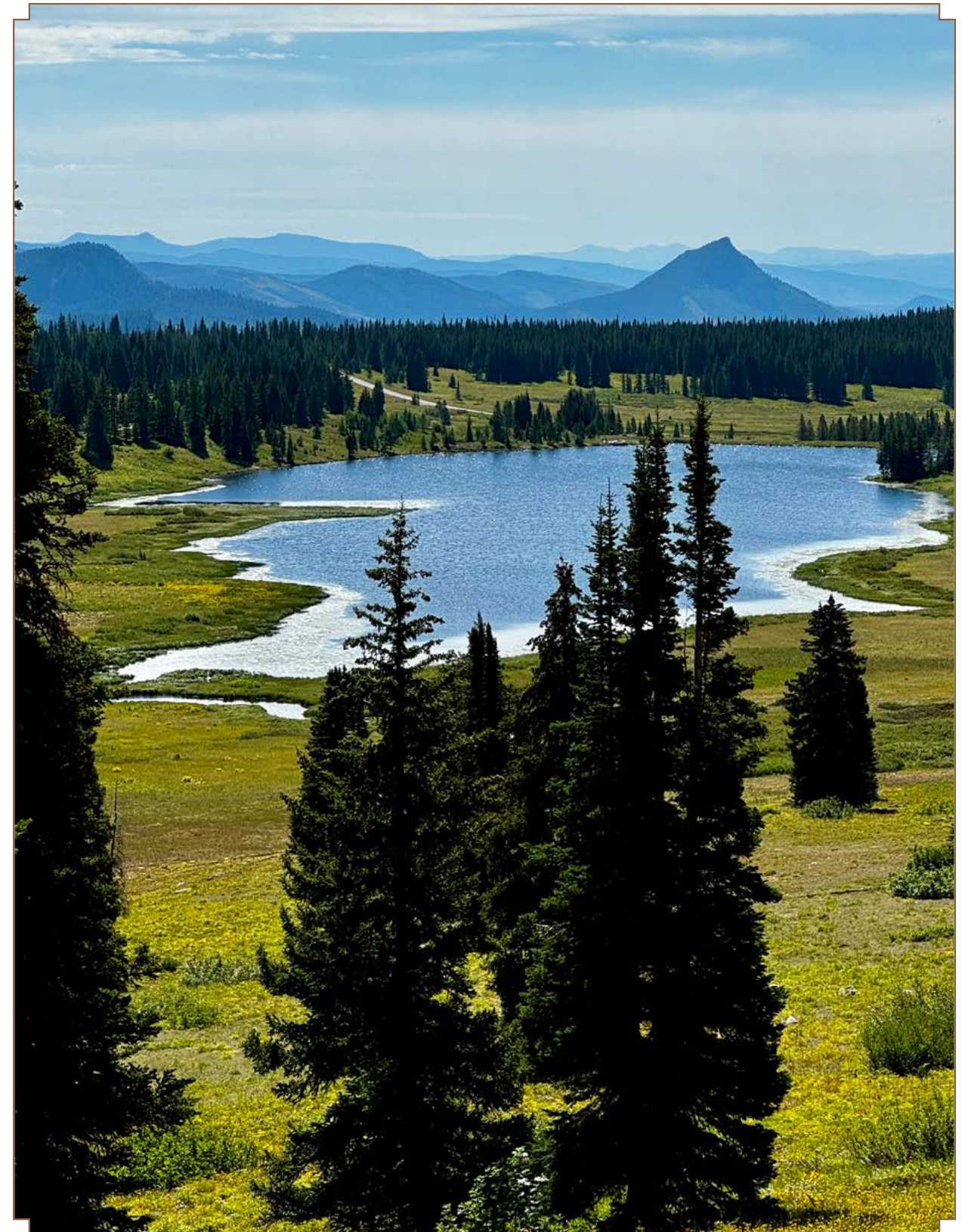


Photo by Stacey McConlogue

commentator on issues related to the Middle East and grew up in Minnesota. He wrote he had just

“spent time in my native state, Minnesota, after something else that I’d never seen in nearly 50 years: a spontaneous uprising of civic activism propelled by a single idea – I am my neighbor’s keeper, whoever he or she is and however he or she got here. It was one of the most courageous battles ever fought by American men and women not in uniform. It was led by moms ready to donate their breast milk to strangers and dads ready to drive someone else’s kids to school because the parents, terrified of ICE agents, were too afraid to go out outdoors.”

He went on:

“Virtually every person I spoke with had at least one remarkable story. In fact, I have not heard so many stories of either incredible cruelty by men and women with guns or incredible kindness by neighbors and strangers for one another since I covered the Lebanese civil war in the late 1970s.

To fully appreciate what is so new and special, though, you probably need to have grown up here. I was born in 1953 on the Northside of Minneapolis, a few miles from where George Floyd was killed, and back in my childhood everything seemed binary: You were either white or Black, Christian or Jewish, et cetera.

Minnesota was roughly 99 percent white. By 2023, however, the state was 76 percent white, with Black, Hispanic, Asian and other minorities all making up a far bigger share of the population than in my youth. That is a lot of demographic change.”

It is a long and interesting article in which he met with many from these different groups, each with their own particular experiences during such turbulence, violence and uncertainty. As he finished, he wrote this:

“today, there is an epidemic of ICE PTSD in the Twin Cities of epic proportions, but it is matched by an equally epic level of kindness.”

And he called out the spirit of what he called “neighboring,” which

“trumped both the divisive identity politics pushed by the far left and the borderline racist politics pushed by the far right, which combined to rip apart the city after Floyd’s killing” (Friedman).

It’s not possible to read about what happened there without being horrified, but also inspired by the individuals and communities who responded with such love, who enlarged what it is to be “one of us” these days. Certainly any major religion, including Buddhism, can be corrupted to serve the addictions of greed, anger and delusion. Yet, for all of them, the highest religious expression is of love, love and our collective longing for spiritual transcendence and unity. You can hear this plea in Pope Leo’s Easter message. Over and over we are reminded to care for the one who is “other,” because that other’s face is our face, even as each is unique.

That brings us back to our koan and to Yunmen’s answer to his own question

“An Old Buddha and a pillar intersect. What level of activity is that?...Clouds gather over the South Mountain; rain falls on the North Mountain.”

Well, you could certainly say “No relation at all, each keeps its own place.” And you wouldn’t be wrong because that is true, but maybe it is not the whole story. Sure, South Mountain and North Mountain are each complete in themselves; each takes care of its own affairs. Still, is something missing? After all, if the snow is falling hard in Minnesota, we might need shovels in Colorado. This summer, if Canada burns, we may struggle to breathe here in Denver. Each of us will have to sort out what forms our own intermingling and coupling will take, no matter what comes next... and hope for kindness.

Of course, our One Family is bigger than the self-absorbed world of human beings. Torei Zenji reminded us that daily life is sacred, that beasts and birds and even inanimate things like food, drink and cloth-

ing, the protections of life are “nonetheless the warm flesh and blood, the merciful incarnations of Buddha.” I recently remembered an experience from long ago. I was on a dive trip in the Bahamas. It was a relatively small boat with two other couples and the crew, their last trip of the season, so everyone was feeling quite free. At the end of a dive we were all hanging on a line off the boat, maybe 30 ft down, blowing off nitrogen with our remaining air. Several dolphins, their bodies massively larger than any of ours, lined up parallel to us, floating vertically just like us, in a way I have never seen before. Then as one, they swiveled and swam off together. An experience out of time. I have never been so close to such a being, how did they recognize us? But as I was writing, it came to me with force; this is also about “all beings one family.” Even if every day we may harm the natural world whenever we eat or drive a car or do a thousand thoughtless actions just in living a human life, can we remember to look for ways to honor that kinship each day?

Together with all beings we realize the Way.

Works Cited
Friedman, Thomas. “Why Minnesota Matters More Than Iran for America’s Future.” The New York Times, 15 Mar. 2026.
Keqin, Yuanwu, and Hsueh Tou Ch’ung Hsien. The Blue Cliff Reslated by Thomas Cleary and J.C. Cleary, Shambhala, 1992.
Roberts, Shinshu. Being Time: A Practitioner’s Guide to Dogen’s Shobogenzo Uji. Wisdom Publications, 2018.
The Gateless Gate. Translated by Yamada Koun, University of Arizona Press, 1990.
Wumenkuan. Translated by Yamada Koun and Robert Aitken, 1974.

Darkening Sky-Lilacs

By Gabrielle Gerlitz

Darkening sky-lilacs

Thunder rumbles a warm breeze

Soft scent imbibes me.



Photo by Gabrielle Gerlitz



Photo by Stacey McConlogue

Rohatsu Reflection

Gloria Perez-Alvarez

I participated in my first Rohatsu (extended Sesshin) eight months after I joined the Zen Center. Prior to Rohatsu, I had only done two one-day meditation retreats, or *Zazenkai*. I went into the retreat with few expectations, which served me well as the retreat unfolded countless surprises.

During the retreat I was very intentional about following the guidance of my teacher and adhering to the sesshin guidelines such as refraining from using a phone or a watch, avoiding talking, reading, writing, etc. I allowed myself to trust the process 'blindfolded.'

There was physical pain, but also many tools to manage it. I moved from my *zafu* to a chair. Personally, this comfort allowed me to attend to *Zazen* more fully. I had sufficient opportunities to rest, and all my needs were looked after by the leaders. The food was amazing!

Meeting with my teacher at *dokusan* was instrumental in the outcome of my first sesshin. I was able to navigate questions, emotions, and states of mind unknown to me until then. I also found spiritual comfort and encouragement from the daily *teishos*, chanting, dharma talks, tea ceremonies, and everything else that the sesshin provided.

I did not need to wait until the seventh day to experience the gifts of the sesshin. By the end of the first full day, I realized that I have never had the opportunity to spend so much time with my mind. This realization made me more curious to see what could happen by the end of the retreat.

In only one week I learned more about the practice than in all the months I have been practicing, combined. The sesshin was a new beginning for me

and my daily practice. Since the sesshin, I have been living my life more mindfully.

During the sesshin, I experienced peace of mind, felt inexplicably loved, and was reassured by the Dharma that everything in life is well taken care of. I look forward to doing it again.

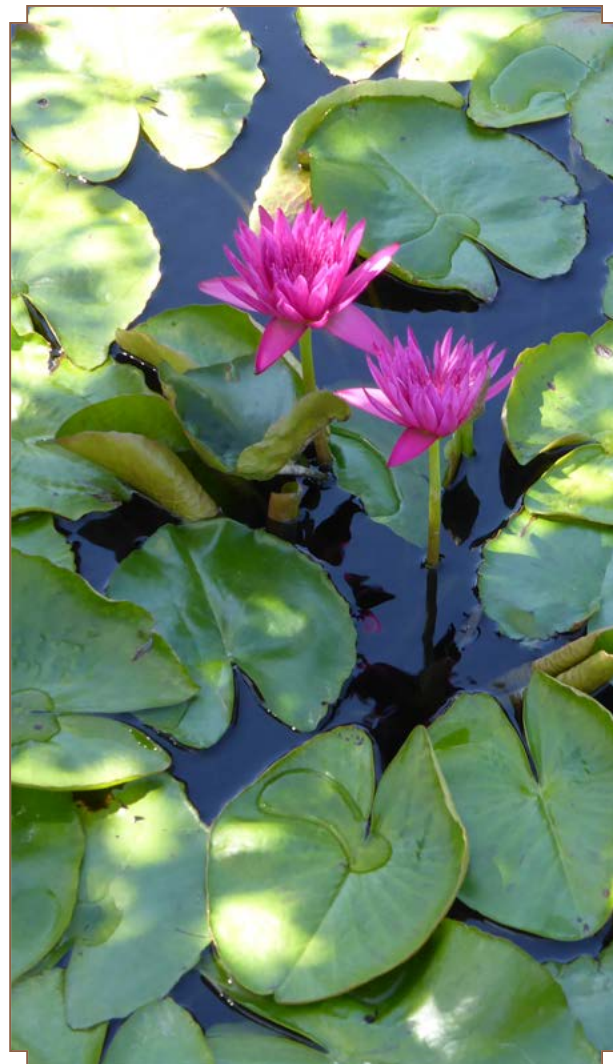


Photo by Merilee Schultheiss

Turning The Eight-Limbed Wheel

The Somatic Practice of Buddha Dharma

Joel Tagert

If we wish to understand Buddhism, we might begin at the beginning, with the Buddha's very first sermon after his awakening: the *Dharmachakra Pravartana Sutra*, "Turning the Dharma Wheel." Tradition has it that following his great enlightenment, the Buddha went looking for his former companions, five ascetics searching for ultimate truth through self-mortification. Finding them at Deer Park in Sarnath, near Varanasi, he proceeded to set forth the fundamental teachings of Buddhism, namely the Four Noble Truths and Noble Eightfold Path. Today at Sarnath you may visit the *Dhamek Stupa* at this very spot, a large round stone edifice circumambulated ceaselessly by pilgrims from around the world, physically reenacting the Buddha's timeless teaching. (And yes, there are tame deer you can feed too.)

The Dharma Wheel (*dharmachakra*) carries a deep symbolism arising from ancient Indian religious concepts of cyclical existence. Particularly within Vedic and Upanishadic traditions, life was understood as a repeated cycle of birth, death, and rebirth (*samsara*), driven by actions and consequences (*karma*). The wheel (*chakra*) was a powerful metaphor for this unending cycle, often depicted as the Wheel of Birth and Death (*bhavachakra* or "Wheel of Becoming"), which appears in both Hindu and later Buddhist cosmology. The Buddha, adopting this imagery, repurposed the wheel to describe the path out of the cycle—the Wheel of Dharma as the means to transform and transcend the Wheel of Birth and Death.

The Noble Eightfold Path is therefore represented as the eight-spoked Dharma wheel. The wheel's connection to the Eightfold Path is obvious, but less so

is its relationship to the Four Noble Truths, especially the first truth, *dukkha*: the pervasive feeling that something is not quite right, out of harmony, out of joint, like a wheel spinning out of alignment. Take special note of the latter, which is fundamental to the translation of the word *dukkha*: *duh-* is a prefix meaning "bad," "difficult" or "hard," while *kha*, along with meaning "space" or "hole" generally, refers specifically to an axle-hole. *Dukkha*, then, is the ill-formed axle-hole that is making the wheel of our lives turn askew.

The very first verse of the *Dhammapada* also alludes to this meaning:

"All mental phenomena have mind as their forerunner; they have mind as their chief; they are mind-made. If one speaks or acts with an evil mind, 'dukkha' follows him just as the wheel follows the hoofprint of the ox that draws the cart" (1).

This understanding is very different from the common translation of *dukkha* as "suffering" or "anguish." It is also far from the popular formulation of the First Noble Truth that "life is suffering," a sloganistic interpretation handed down from the 19th century that in my view has done tremendous harm to Buddhism in the West, implying that the entirety of life is little more than an endless round of pain and discomfort. No wonder some think Buddhism nihilistic. But the best and most accurate translation of *dukkha* is not "suffering"; it is "misalignment." The Noble Eightfold Path, then, offers a way to correct this misalignment, to true the wheel so that we can move frictionlessly on the bumpy road of human existence—and all future existences.

There are a few more points regarding the sym-

bolism of the wheel I'd like to highlight before moving on. In the Dharmachakra Pravartana Sutra, the Buddha says:

"Bhiksus, in regard to these three turnings and twelve motions of the Four Noble Truths, if they had not given birth to vision, wisdom, understanding, and Bodhi...I could not have achieved liberation, gone beyond, and departed. I also would not have had self-realization of the attainment of Anuttarā Samyaksambodhi. Yet I have, from these three turnings and twelve motions of the Four Noble Truths, given birth to vision, wisdom, understanding, and Bodhi."

The "three turnings and twelve motions" comprise an investigative matrix in ancient Indian rhetorical and philosophical traditions. An argument that cycled through these stages of understanding (the "three turnings" of theory, practice and result, applied to each of the Four Noble Truths, making twelve "motions") was formally called a "wheel." By calling his sermon a "wheel," the Buddha was indicating his logic's exhaustive nature.

There are also interesting political and prophetic implications to the Turning of the Wheel. Myth has it that when the Buddha was a baby, a seer came to the palace and inspected him, finding thirty-two marks that indicated a great destiny. The seer prophesied that the Buddha would become either a great world-ruling monarch (called a chakravartin, a "wheel-turner") or he would become a Buddha. By setting the Dharma Wheel in motion in his sermon, the Buddha thus became the "King of the Dharma," whose teaching conquers the mind.

Finally, the word chakra is likely familiar to you from another context, namely yoga practice, in which chakras represent the energy centers of the body. Thus truing the wheel also implies the harmonizing of the chakras and alignment of the body's energy.

Along similar lines, the Noble Eightfold Path in Sanskrit is Arya Ashtanga Marga. Arya here means "noble"; Marga means "path or 'way'; and Ashtanga, notably, means "in eight parts" or more simply, "eight-limbed." We might then call the way of the Buddha the Noble Eight-Limbed Path.



Artwork by Joel Tagert

Here are the Eight Limbs, with my translations alongside the originals:

1. *Samyak Drishti, Wise Vision*
2. *Samyak Sankalpa, Wise Intention*
3. *Sakyak Vach, Wise Voice*
4. *Samyak Karmanta, Wise Action*
5. *Samyak Ajiva, Wise Sustenance*
6. *Samyak Vyayama, Wise Vitality*
7. *Samyak Smriti, Wise Recollection*
8. *Samyak Samadhi, Wise Absorption*

These are, collectively, the fourth and final of the Four Noble Truths, the actual path to free ourselves from disharmony. This was the primary framework for Buddhist training and realization for centuries and remains central in much of Theravada Buddhism.

My own background, however, is in Zen; and there, and perhaps in Western Buddhist teaching generally, I find that the Eightfold Path has received short shrift. Our Dharma forebear (and my early teacher) Robert Aitken Roshi mentioned it only in passing in his primer Taking the Path of Zen, and never took it up at length in any of his books. Commentaries on the Four Noble Truths abound, as do commentaries on the Sixteen Bodhisattva Precepts, but somehow the teachings specifically named as the Fourth Noble Truth are repeatedly relegated to a footnote.

This has a great deal to do with the development of Zen, whose inception in China followed many centuries after the Buddha's time, in a very different culture. Above all Zen taught realization in the here and now, separate from any fixed doctrine, "a special teaching outside the sutras, not reliant upon words and phrases, pointing directly to the mind and realizing Buddhahood," in Bodhidharma's famous formulation (2). The means to this realization was the singular method of silent seated meditation (a focus that only intensified on Zen's transmission to Japan). With this emphasis, the study of the classical sutras may have come

to seem antiquated, especially as other texts—most notably the Heart Sutra and various koan collections—came to occupy the preeminent place in Zen discourse.

So it is not perhaps surprising that in many modern Zen centers, we find the Eightfold Path deemphasized if indeed not glossed over entirely. Yet while illumination is available to all, always, by dint of our essential nature as the “fabric and structure of the universe itself,” to use Alan Watts’s phrase, a failure to understand the Eightfold Path in many ways amounts to a failure to understand Buddhism, at least as it was taught by the historical Buddha (3). This is naturally a great loss.

Then too, when one does review what modern commentaries exist on the Eightfold Path, it again and again appears represented primarily as an intellectual framework, each spoke a field of mental endeavor, one might say. In this I partially fault the painfully inadequate translation of the original Pali and Sanskrit terms, rich with meaning and history, into English words, which possess a different and narrower set of connotations. These translations especially seem to elide the yogic implications of the original terms. The effect is first, to denude them of their original context, since the Buddha and his disciples certainly understood their yogic associations; second, to disregard many of the practical recommendations for skillful practice; and third, to deprive practitioners of the somatic qualities of these teachings.

This is not incorrect; it is merely incomplete. We ourselves should recall that for centuries the Buddha’s teachings were transmitted orally, and so literal, detailed recollection was expected of every monk. One could not, after all, understand the teaching if one could not remember it. In India, as in every ancient culture, memory was highly valued, and monks were trained in complex mnemonic techniques, especially rhythmic chanting and recitation. This is likely part of the reason for the repetition common to ancient

Indian religious texts. We might then consider how the active practice of memory—Wise Recollection—could benefit our own minds, and how this fits into the complete development of consciousness presented in the Eightfold Path.

Comparable oversights are readily found in every one of the other limbs. My hope is that sharing them will lead to a more well-rounded practice and a deeper understanding of Buddhism and ourselves. If we are to train our consciousness, we must do so holistically, with our entire body. It is a grave mistake to attempt to alleviate discomfort through mere intellectual striving. Discomfort, too, is a kind of sensation, and it arises like all the rest as a result of our total somatic state. No thinking will relieve it. To truly turn the wheel, we must engage it with every cell and fiber.

To read about Wise Vision, the first limb of the Noble Eightfold Path, subscribe to Joel’s newsletter at earthwitness.online

Works Cited

(<https://www.tipitaka.net/tipitaka/dhp/verseload.php?verse=001>)
(<https://terebess.hu/zen/mesterek/40b.5-Transmission-outside-the-scriptures.pdf>)
(tricycle.org/magazine/special-transmission)
(https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Alan_Watts)

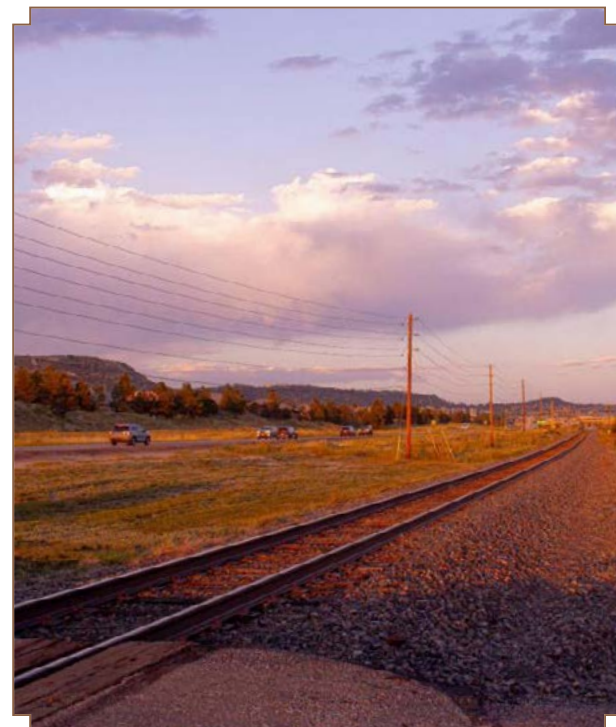


Photo by Mark Smothers

On Queerness and the Dharma

Brett James

We show up to our practice exactly as we are. We bring our questions, our uncertainties, our self-doubts and insecurities, and most importantly, we bring ourselves. To show up takes courage. It takes integrity, intention, and a steadfastness that carries us through our days. With showing up comes facing ourselves. Removing the walls, quieting the stories and the narratives we carry. Our shields against the hardness of the world, buoys on which we float through our days and the tribulations they bring. Each barrier to our practice, each barrier to ourselves, is our own. Universal and personal.

I was 13 when I first saw David Bowie on TV. His long hair, his slender, feminine hands and manicured nails, and how he allowed himself to laugh easily and gesture in ways that were not typical of the men who populated my world told me that I was looking at someone who was like me, someone who existed outside the gender norms. Growing up in a small conservative town there was no room for folk like Bowie; there was no room for me, and I knew it. The repeated messages from some family, friends, popular culture, and the sociopolitical landscape of the time made sure that Bowie and I were unwelcome at the table, that to take a seat came with ridicule, with judgement, and with being othered. Sit at your own risk was the message. So I learned to do something that I would only later come to know by its name: code switch. Present as someone I was not. Ask a girl to the skating rink. Engage in locker room talk about the opposite sex. Be a male: don’t cross my legs at the knees, don’t gesture in an effeminate fashion, and never ever comment on the good looks of someone of the same sex.

Fast forward through high school and college girlfriends, unreachable boys in shorts and tank tops soaking up the sun at the beachfront university I at-

tended, marriage to a woman, coming out, and divorce. And then one night landing at the Zen Center of Denver for meditation instruction. I was out for 9 years at that time and while unapologetic about my sexual identity I was still attempting to make sense of what it meant for me, how I should look, and how I should act. I knew there was more beneath the surface, that David Bowie was right there with me, but was still under the layers built by conditioning and fear.

As I settled into my practice it was my time on the cushion that allowed me to settle into myself, and even though it was the self I was supposed to forget, it was what kept arising and leaving me unsettled. I started working with my teacher; the more I practiced the more comfortable I became in my own skin, not through any elixir or therapeutic advice, but through the repeated reminder that I show up as I am.

I had already spent decades feeling anxious, floating through an existence where I was like no one at all, a complete outsider when everyone else seemed to know the password to the club where people were comfortable in their own skin and knew how to navigate the human condition. I looked for a buoy to help me feel like everyone else, but was always and repeatedly left feeling like Walt Whitman, untamed and untranslatable.

On the zafu I eventually came to see that sitting with all that uncertainty was just as much me as sitting on the zafu with a better understanding of who I always was. It took the stillness of mind and heart to stop defining myself as a type and as a should be. When the sociopolitical landscape of America shifted in 2016 and I and my queer brethren found ourselves fighting for a seat at the table and for our lives is when I took my lived experience of mindful action and creat-

ed a space for people like me, a space where folx could come to a place free from hate and walk openly in a place of peace. Through meditation, the exploration of queerness and the dharma, serving tea to one another, and simply being as we are, the Queer Dharma group offers its love and empathy to the world. I have enormous gratitude for the Zen Center of Denver for immediately agreeing to hold space for us when I first asked for permission even though I did not yet know how offering refuge for others would look.

It was important for me to write this piece for the summer issue of Mountains Talking because 57 years ago this month a group of courageous, valiant, fed up queers stood up to the police at the Stonewall Inn and declared ENOUGH!, that they were entitled to live their lives exactly as who they were. For six nights they threw bricks and set fires so they would be seen. Pride was a riot. I didn't throw bricks, nor did I set fires, but I sat on my cushion for one round and then another and then another until I came home.

I dedicate this piece to the Bodhisattvas who rose up on that June night and am grateful for their strength, their integrity, and the bricks they threw so that four decades later I could walk my own path, let go of the buoy, and float in the still water of who I am.



Photo by Mary Coleman

Ikebana Samsara
By Michael Bakowski

Petals float
asymmetrically weighted-
adornments for a funeral of
their own.

The stem is cut.
Decay delayed.
Wilting with grace, not the
grave.

Arrange not to conceal
but reveal the form-
to sit with the self,
mirrored in a bowl adorned.



Photo by Michael Bakowski

Anatomy of a Scoff
Noah Robertson

We were waiting in line to donate plasma. He seemed angry from the beginning because I had a pass that let me skip to the front of the long line – an incentive they give new donors to come back a second time. He wore brown work boots, blue jeans, a green t-shirt with a truck on it, and a hat that said Veteran in gold font. He had a long white beard that reached his stomach and long white hair that fell to his mid-back. He bemoaned that it was the second time in a row somebody skipped ahead of him, shaking his head, reflecting the overhead lights off his wiry glasses. I tried to joke with him and said, “I’m sorry the person before me did that to you. That’s not right.” He scoffed, shook his head some more, and went back to talking to the woman next to him about how he might need to order dinner for later because he might still be stuck in line.

An hour in, we were in the second part of the line, past the physical assessment that clears you to donate for the day. I had been reading and pacing in my place in line while they continued conversing. I left for the restroom and placed my book on the table. It was a book by Dr. Julia Shaw on the history of bisexuality with its title, Bi, in large letters, difficult to miss. When I returned, he had obviously noticed the title of the book and began a diatribe to his line buddy about gender, sexuality, and the lost world we are now in:

“That’s right, they’re not a he, not a she, so I just call them an IT... God, isn’t that shameful? We have one of them as a councilman representing us. Dude wears dresses to political meetings! I went into the bank the other day and saw that the manager was a man wearing a dress. How can anyone take that seriously? I was looking around at the staff, thinking, ‘You actually take orders from someone who looks like that?’ I look at these people and think, ‘Jesus is right here

waiting for you when you’re ready.” He spoke loudly, provocatively, as if to beckon an audience and someone to challenge him. I continued to read and pace in-between the forced eavesdropping. He presented himself as a type that did not think of himself as wrong in much of anything he did. My focus on my book decreased, and irritation grew.

Many thoughts and possible interventions came to my mind while I listened. At first, it began as a patience meditation. My heart rate spiked with hot anger, and I could feel myself tensing, then another part of me emerging to tell the angry part to ease up. But sometimes it’s hard to tell whether this is worthwhile practice or merely self-denial. One of my less impressive ideas was to simply tell him, “Buddy, you have a loud mouth.” I considered saying something to him more intentionally, wondering if confrontation might be an actual obligation from me in this moment. It is rhetoric like this that seeks to destroy the existence of LGBTQ+ folx, and these situations can be small opportunities for resistance to that kind of thinking. Maybe I am bound to a greater ethic that demands I engage him in discussion. But is it helpful for either of us if I assume a morally superior stance and proceed to lecture him in the name of interpersonal activism? Aren’t we doing enough lecturing to each other these days? I had this discussion with myself as I pretended to read.

Eventually, the person who was mostly bobble-heading him began to respond less, and he tired himself out. I became tired of pretending to read as well, placed my book down again, and waited for it to be my turn to walk to the donation tables. He stared off at all the donors at the back of the building, glared down at my book again, paused, and raised his head while shaking it with a frown. I shifted from ambivalence to pity and began my own internal head-shaking. But it didn’t take long for this righteous disgust to return to ambivalence when I realized we were doing the same thing.

Unselfing

I was caught between wanting to cling to my own certainty and the deeper sense that I have to find a way to love this man. If that seems excessive, cartoonish, and cheesy, that is also how it felt. It seems to me that the apocalypse of disconnection we are in is more likely to be healed by the small, trivial encounters we have with others than in a top-down, policy-driven manner; something situated more in the mundane than the epic. I have an endlessly frustrating but hope-filled intuition that everything is contained in this tiny, obnoxious moment in the plasma center. As romantic as this hope is, I found myself unable to get near a sense of warmth for him. But love and uncertainty are not in contradiction.

Love is an act that lives in the flexible spaces of emotional experience: risk, ambiguity, vulnerability, and not-knowing. What these have in common is that they require letting go of something you really don't want to let go of. Not just letting go of pride, but a chain of certainties that lead directly to your core; the identities you protect and that are fundamental to who you are. The Irish Philosopher, Iris Murdoch, called it unselfing, in her 1970 work *The Sovereignty of Good*. It is letting go of your own definition of self and tending to the world. In letting go of the "fat, relentless ego," Murdoch writes, you lay down your self-devotion, risking your own constructs and securities to take up a greater project. It is to let go of our identities and our response to the question of "who am I?"

Real presence is ego-death. To let someone in, I have to let myself be nothing for a moment. And this presents itself every single time I share space with someone, particularly when they feel like they are from another planet. I am exposed to this problem of ambiguity in the other; I don't know who you are, and I feel as if I need to know to be confident in who I am. In this me-you confrontation, I can very easily settle for some facile gesture of empathy where I lean over into

your world briefly, minimally, crassly, and then back into my own shortly after. This is my default. But the other mode, where I let myself become porous, involves genuinely risking the possibility that I may change. In other words, that is not abstract and grandiose but unsettlingly practical, I have to confront my own death to be with another authentically. It is the death of identities that I coddle and defend, fighting tooth and nail for an answer of "who am I?" in every situation.

We are not the self that we create and repeat as a story. This is Buddhist *annica* – the truth of no-self – and immediately palpable in my experience. I can feel in my body that I guard this image of myself as a decent person. Keith Payne discusses this in *Good Reasonable People*, writing that political division is largely a product of defending group identities that support the notion of us being good and reasonable humans. In permitting myself to be wrong, to be more than good and reasonable, and permitting the other to be that as well, something emerges. Boundaries collapse. It can be frightening to depart from yourself like this. It's okay to have fear when you do. It's worth pointing out that in this moment, fear seemed to be leading me closer to love and self-forgetfulness, whereas knowing led me merely back to myself.

Set him down by the river

I could feel my cortisol still flowing as I sat down at the table and the needle slid into my arm. The tube connecting to the machine filled with yellow ooze, bringing a cooling sensation where the needle met my skin. I would get more time to practice my anger meditation while the man finally got his wish and was called over to the table right next to mine. He sat down, got his own needle jabbed into his arm, pulled out his phone, and began scrolling.

Disgust is an invitation to otherness. While I quietly condemn, I am affirming myself, and if I can notice the opportunity to unself, I can walk from con-

demnation into something larger, something outside more than arrogance and provocation. Maybe there is a simpler tune underneath the top layer. His words repelled while also inviting listeners in, as if there's an unconscious desire that wants to be wrong, wants to be unselfed. Maybe the prove-me-wrong types are in a constant panic, fearing their own sense of identity will slip away if they don't make noise. Needing to confirm who they are, they send out flailing, abrasive messages, like a drowning person tackling others in the water.

The plasma machine lights up, indicating that it's done. I get my arm wrapped, collect my things, and make my way toward the exit. As I walk out of the plasma center, I push open the door and sneak a glance at him one more time, still feeling stirrings of conflict, even though we did not have any real exchange. Thinking of the things he said brought me fresh anger. I ruminate as my steps lead me to my car, wondering if I should have said something, what more I could have done. I feel sad for a moment, thinking of that conversation taking place with one of my trans friends. I turn the ignition and the car coughs to life. He mentioned Jesus waiting for us when we are ready, and at another point, brought up the rapture happening soon. To describe our encounter using language he might prefer, we choose between the fiery pits of self-confirmation and the golden gates of invitation through wrongness. I think of being a child, sitting in those stiff pews, listening to sermons, building anticipation for what was yet to come. I used to draw stick figures in the bulletins while I sat, running in between the words, seeing what was between them, and building little homes there. Maybe the ultimate redemption the man spoke about is happening every second we share space, weaving through every word, every thought, hiding in plain sight.

Zazen Samadhi

By John Steele

Seated, facing the wall,
gazing down,

sacrum-spine ascending
bone by bone,

I sense the wave-like motion
of belly-chest,

the unplumbed depths of space
and consciousness.

Light and shadow
traverse my field of vision,

vague thoughts drift in,
coalesce, disperse,

mirage-like indigo mandalas
emerge, dissolve.

Consciousness
extends beyond the stars.

Gong . . . gong . . .
we stand and face the center,

join our palms as one.
Gong . . . we bow.

Wooden clappers clack—
step by step

we circle the hall.
Clack—stand facing in.

