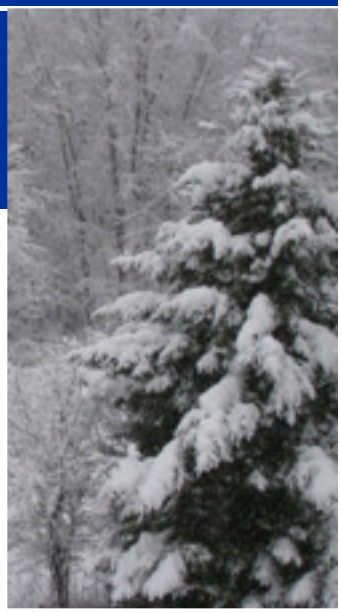
VOLUME 23, ISSUE 9
DECEMBER 2011

# Walking Mountains

"The green mountains are always walking"—*Daokai*



## IN THIS ISSUE


| | |
|---|---|
| *The Art of Gandhara* | 1 |
| *Teaching & Taking the Metta Class* | 3 |
| Shakyamuni Buddha's Enlightenment | 4 |
| Home Purifications | 4 |
| Ceremony Workdays | 5 |
| Winter Advisory | 5 |
| Calendar | 5 |
| New Year's Eve | 6 |
| Kannon Room Dedication | 7 |
| Revised 2012 Sesshins | 8 |


*The Vermont Zen Center's mission is to create a peaceful and inviting environment to support those who seek wisdom, compassion, joy, and equanimity within a Buddhist context. The two-fold practice of the Center is to overcome the causes of suffering through spiritual development and to alleviate the world's suffering through outreach activities and the cultivation of a caring attitude to the Earth.*

*Dear Sangha and Friends,*

The darkest time of the year is lit by snow. It is a canvas upon which the grass scribbles, and rabbits, mice and other creatures dash their calligraphy. You have probably stopped along the way on a winter walk to try and decipher their story. Some are tales of struggle and suffering, others about daily life, and still others leap with joy. These are our stories as well, which is why we hang birdfeeders and toss bread crumbs into the open shallows of icy ponds for the ducks—they are offerings.

At the Zen Center this is a time of offerings too, as we begin the month honoring the Buddha's Enlightenment with a ceremony and the Rohatsu sesshin. We then move into the New Year's Eve ceremony, followed, in January, by the ceremony honoring Kannon, the Bodhisattva of Compassion.

Naturally, all of these activities require preparation. And working at the Center too is an offering, whether you are cleaning bathrooms or altars. The energy from this work spills out the door of the Center into the world at a time of year and world cycle when it is greatly needed. Our practice on the mat, chanting, workdays and ceremonies, truly help relieve the suffering of all sentient beings.

*—Joan White*

## The Art of Gandhara by Bill Petrow

This past summer, I came across a newspaper article describing a museum exhibit titled: "The Art of Gandhara—the Buddhist Heritage of Pakistan," and learned that many artifacts from this ancient civilization were on display at the Asia Society in New York City for the first time in over fifty years.

Dating from the first through the fifth centuries, this ancient Buddhist culture was the earliest to depict the Buddha in human form. I was intrigued by these first Buddhist figures, and

*(Continued on page 2)*

*(Continued from page 1)*

knew at once that I had to go and see them for myself.

I guess my enthusiasm was infectious, because I found myself at the museum in the big city together with my wife, as well as my college-age son and daughter, on a Saturday morning in September.

The figures were remarkable: elegant and sophisticated – not at all the "primitive" art that you might expect from so long ago. And, although they were unlike anything I had seen before, strangely enough, they were at the same time strikingly familiar.

It seems that a few centuries after Alexander the Great fought his way through this northwest corner of ancient India, a multicultural civilization arose, creating an east-meets-west fusion of classical Greek and ancient Indian sculpture and architecture.

This crazy juxtaposition of east and west was slightly disorienting to me at first—here was Buddha alongside of cupid-like figures from Mediterranean art. Hercules depicted as the protector of the Buddha. Shiva and Indra greeting the Buddha, and Corinthian columns from classic Greek architecture supporting Buddhist stupas.

But, as surprising as it was for me to see that Buddhist art actually shared some roots with our western culture, it was the spiritual power that these figures radiated that really impressed me the most.

One particular figure of the Buddha that was both life-sized and lifelike really drew me in. The way in which it radiated peace was palpable. As I gazed at it in the gallery, I felt like I was in the presence of a living human being.

At that time, however, I just put those thoughts out of my mind, figuring that maybe I was just being a bit overly enthusiastic and imaging things. However, later that evening during dinner, before I said a word about this, I was amazed to hear my son, Bryan, describe this particular figure in the exact same way.

We don't know how many centuries Buddhists had practiced alongside that figure, created nearly two thousand years ago. I wonder if they had any idea that their art and religion would spread across the trade routes of Asia, to China, Japan and beyond. And now that it is our turn to practice, perhaps hundreds or even thousands of years from now our lives and practice, will in turn, touch the lives of others that will follow.

# Teaching—and Taking—the Metta Class Again and Again **by Dharman Rice**

Teaching the Center's class on *Metta Bhavana* (lovingkindness) twice yearly for the past three years has been fruitful and gratifying for me, if only because it has allowed me to take the course six times. If we never learn anything so well as when we try to teach it, we are fortunate indeed to teach it repeatedly.

When Sensei asked me to teach the *Metta* course in the spring of 2009, I didn't feel prepared. One of the scariest things was that I would have to teach it out of my own experience and not try to mimic Sensei. Thankfully, the courage to do that was forthcoming, and each version of the course has been fun and instructive for me.

Over the years, three facts about *Metta* have impressed themselves upon me. None of them is really news, but each of them is worth acting on.

The **first** is the trouble so many of us in the West, especially in the U.S., have with phase one, sending *Metta* to ourselves. This is the axial stage of *Metta*, but many Americans find it very difficult.

Yet how can we send lovingkindness to anyone else if we cannot feel it for ourselves? If we are not happy and friendly, how can we help others feel happy and friendly? We must care truly for ourselves before we can care for others. As Sensei says, if the airline cabin loses pressure, we must put on our own oxygen masks before helping others with theirs.

Still, this stage of *Metta* seems "selfish" or self-preoccupied to many people. I'd known this; but the extent, depth, and persistence of this feeling still take me aback each time the course begins. Then again, such a feeling is perhaps not ironic in our culture of self-indulgence.

The **second** is that *Metta* can bring about profound personal changes more quickly than any other kind of Buddhist practice. Sensei had suggested this, but it now seems so to me as well. An example of the progress we can make relatively quickly is dissolving anger or resentment at a difficult person. *Metta*, if practiced faithfully and steadfastly, softens the heart. It opens our true heart of compassion.

The **third** is how mutually reinforcing *Metta* practice and mindfulness meditation (*zazen*) are. These practices complement and strengthen one another.

"If we reflect on our Zen practice for just a moment, we realize that the relationship between Metta and zazen is indeed one of mutual reinforcement. The happier and friendlier we are, the easier it is to pay attention; and the more we pay attention, the happier and friendlier we tend to become."

In the very first *Metta* class I taught, a participant asked what connection, if any, there is between the two. If we reflect on our Zen practice for just a moment, we realize that the relationship between *Metta* and *zazen* is indeed one of mutual reinforcement. The happier and friendlier we are, the easier it is to pay attention; and the more we pay attention, the happier and friendlier we tend to become.

Through it all, *Metta* (just as *zazen*) is an endlessly fascinating and rewarding practice. It never admits of boredom.

# Shakyamuni Buddha's Enlightenment

*At the age of twenty-nine, the Prince of the Shakya Clan, Siddhartha Gautama, saw for the first time: one old man, one sick man, one dead man, one monk, and with that he was plunged into a struggle for Truth which was to continue until Buddhahood itself had been attained.*

The ceremony of Shakyamuni Buddha's Enlightenment will take place at the Center on **Saturday, December 3, at 8 p.m.**, *on the first night of the Rohatsu sesshin*. Members not attending sesshin may participate in this ceremony, one of great importance for all Buddhists.

Although children are welcome at virtually all Zen Center ceremonies, this one is an exception because it takes place during sesshin. Nonetheless, if your child is old enough to remain silent during the rather long ceremony, he or she is welcome to attend.

The Buddha's Enlightenment Ceremony commemorates Shakyamuni Buddha's spiritual realization and opening of the Way. His experience, the culmination of years of intense effort, came after seven days of deep meditation when he saw the morning star.

The ceremony begins with an account of the Buddha's Enlightenment, followed by chanting and a symbolic reading of all the sutras. Please join us for this special event.

# Home Purification Ceremonies:

## *Entering 2012 With a Contented Home*

Buddhists love cleanliness and orderliness both in their temples and their minds. Therefore, it is no surprise that the traditional preparation for the New Year is to thoroughly clean one's home. Surfaces are dusted, closets straightened, drawers cleaned, everything put in order. To welcome the New Year, many people set up special altars throughout their homes with candles, incense and greenery.

Once the cleaning is complete, you can arrange to have Sangha members come to your house to perform a **Home Purification Ceremony**. Through this ceremony, all the unseen pollutants of greed, anger, and ignorance are ritually driven away. It is a spiritual cleansing which complements the physical one. Since our environment is an extension of ourselves, by cleaning it we too are purified.

The ceremony consists of chanting, prostrations, and a circumambulation throughout the house with doors open and lights shining. At every altar incense is offered and candles are lit while the *Sho Sai Myo* is chanted. You can actually feel your house responding happily, and you, too, will feel renewed. It is a wonderful way to enter the New Year, with body, mind and home cleansed and purified. To participate, please sign up at the Center.

# DECEMBER 2011

| Sunday | Monday | Tuesday | Wednesday | Thursday | Friday | Saturday |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | 1 Sitting & Sesshin Set up | 2 | 3 THE BUDDHA'S ENLIGHTENMENT CEREMONY |
| 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
| VT 7-Day Rohatsu Sesshin (12/3-10) | | | | | | |
| 11 Zen Center Closed | 12 | 13 | 14 | 15 | 16 | 17 |
| | | | Zen Center Closed for Holidays | | | |
| 18 | 19 | 20 | 21 | 22 | 23 | 24 |
| Zen Center Closed for Holidays | | | | | | |
| 25 Zen Center Closed | 26 | 27 Ceremony Workday | 28 | 29 Ceremony Workday | 30 | 31 **NEW YEAR'S EVE** |

## Workdays for New Year's Eve

**Monday, December 26 through Friday, December 30** will be devoted to cleaning our temple in preparation for the New Year.

Altars are set up throughout the Center, the house is cleaned from top to bottom, and everything is refreshed for the coming year.

If you can spare an hour or two or help any time during the week, it would be greatly appreciated. With our temple cleaned and purified, we will usher in the New Year.

## WINTER ADVISORY

As cold weather approaches, please keep in mind that if there is a storm watch, heavy snowfall, or dangerous driving conditions on the day of a sitting, teisho or ceremony, please call the Center before setting out as the sitting might be canceled. In any event, it's best not to venture forth if you feel the roads are unsafe.

# New Year's Eve Ceremony 2011– 2012

**On Saturday evening, December 31**, the Center will celebrate the beginning of the New Year with zazen, repentance, chanting, the Precepts, and a prayer for peace. Chanting and silence—with a bit of Buddhist bedlam at midnight—is a truly wonderful way to welcome the New Year. Friends and family are cordially invited to come to this ceremony; non-sitters can wait out the zazen portions in the living room or bring a chair into the zendo.

For the New Year's Ceremony, bring some type of noisemaker with you, such as a kazoo, harmonica, recorder, or drum. Part of the ceremony is a noise-making kinhin to "drive out the demons." We will also read the (unsigned) resolutions of ceremony participants. Write these resolutions down and place them in the resolution bowl when you arrive. This year we will be ringing the Temple Bell 108 times during the evening. The schedule for the New Year's Eve is as follows:

| | |
|---|---|
| *8–9:30* | *Formal zazen with kinhin. Ringing of Temple Bell begins.* |
| *9:30* | *Repentance ceremony followed by a tea break.* |
| *10:30* | *Formal zazen. Reading of resolutions. Purification of Altars.* |
| *11:50* | *Driving out of Demons Circumambulation: Chanting and noise making.* |
| *Midnight* | *Cacophony, ending with "Happy New Year! May Peace Prevail on Earth!"* |
| *12:01* | *Moment of silence. Chanting: Prajna Paramita. Abbreviated Jukai Ceremony.* |
| *12:20* | *Candle-lighting Ceremony. New Year's Prayer. Refreshments.* |

Please come—**members are welcome to bring family and children**. The kids can sleep in the bedrooms until the circumambulation or take part in all the ceremonies if they wish. **Non-member adults** (no children, please) are also cordially invited. If you are coming from a distance and need to spend the night, you are welcome to stay at the Center; just let us know ahead of time. Many different things happen throughout the evening, so it is helpful to know who is coming. You can sign up on the sheet on the bulletin board or, if you live out of town, give a call. We hope you will join us!

# Kannon Room Dedication by Emily Cross

KANNON ROOM DEDICATION

*On August 6, Sensei led the dedication ceremony for the new Kannon Room. The dedication of the Buddha Building will take place next year. Sensei said that the idea for the Buddha Building germinated with the need for a larger Kannon room. The dedication of the Kannon room symbolizes the completion of a profound aspect of the vision for our temple grounds. Members from Vermont, Costa Rica, and Toronto led the procession to install seven Kannon figures in their beautiful new home on the south side of the Buddha Building, facing the LaPlatte River.*

THE BUDDHA BUILDING

**Vermont Zen Center**
Post Office Box 880
Shelburne, VT 05482

802-985-9746
www.vermontzen.org

Nonprofit Organization
U.S. POSTAGE
**PAID**
Shelburne, VT
Permit No. 60

*Walking in the night*
*Snow is falling,*
*A farewell to the year.*

*–Shara*

CONTRIBUTORS:

- Ti'an Callery
- Emily Cross
- Sensei Sunyana Graef
- Bill Petrow
- Dharman Rice
- Kelly Story, *production*
- Joan White, *editor*
- Delia Zamora-Crosby, *design*

**2012 SESSHINS/RETREATS/TRAINING PROGRAMS**

| | COSTA RICA | VERMONT | Vermont Sesshin Application Deadlines |
|---|---|---|---|
| JANUARY | 7-12 (5 days)[3] | | |
| FEBRUARY | | 18-25 (7 days) | January 28 |
| MARCH | 5-10 (5 days)[4] | | |
| APRIL | | 21-28 (7 days)[1] | March 31 |
| MAY | 14-19 (5 days)[2] | | |
| JUNE | | 23-28 (5 days)[2] | June 2 |
| JULY | 12-15 (3 days)[5] | 7/29-8/3 (5 days)[4] | |
| AUGUST | | 4-11 (7 days) | July 14 |
| SEPTEMBER | 7-14 (7 days) | 27-30 (3 days)[5] | |
| OCTOBER | | 19-26 (7 days)[3] | September 29 |
| NOVEMBER | 28-12/1 (3 days) | | |
| DECEMBER | | 8-15 (7 days) | November 17 |

[1]Work Sesshin [2]Open Schedule Retreat [3]Jataka Tale Sesshin
[4]Training Program [5]Gardening Weekend

*Happy Holidays!*