

Walking Mountains

“The green mountains are always walking” – *Daokai*

Dear Sangha and Friends,

Well here I go picking and choosing again. But I can't help myself. The month of February makes my heart sing with all its brightness and light, the willows' yellow buds and the maples' red ones set against a backdrop of clear blue sky. And the air, clear and crisp as the sky, is like food for the practice of breathing.

Interesting that this month we honor the Buddha's Parinirvana: *Be ye lamps unto yourselves*, the Buddha told his disciples, calling them to hold fast to the truth as a lamp. Though we might rather hibernate in our warm homes, sleep more hours with the longer nights, this February light reminds us of his words and calls us to the mat. After all, it is through this practice that we find our way out of the darkness and night of ego delusion. And it is this practice that provides us with a way to step into the light of our true nature.

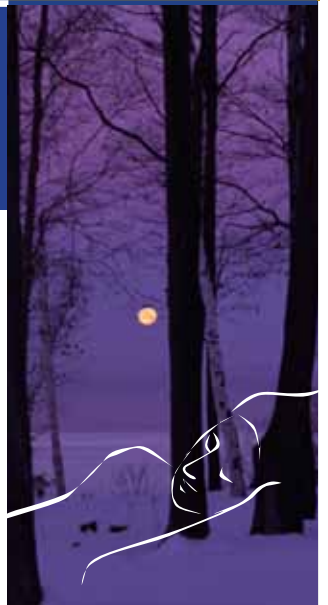
— *Joan White*

L'Heure Bleu by Jim Kahle



It is February, and it is twilight as I head home from work these days. The other night I was driving home under an intensely blue sky.

(Continued on page 2)



INSIDE THIS ISSUE

<i>L'Heure Bleu</i>	1
<i>Parrot Redux</i>	3
<i>Shadow of the Bodhisattva</i>	4
Calendar	5
Buddha's Parinirvana	6
Spring Jukai Ceremony	6
Workdays	7
Temple Night	7
Congratulations	7
Sangha Entertainment	7

MISSION

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.



(Continued from page 1)

Venus was blazing, as usual, in the southwest. As I headed up the hill towards home, I looked out over a snowy field towards a cabin on the edge of the woods. The cabin was a tawny brown, and there was already a warm yellow glow emanating from the lights inside the house. As I looked at this winter's scene, I noticed something I had never seen before. The snow appeared to have a bluish tinge. It was a light, pastel blue; kind of like a bird's egg. Wow! It was beautiful! I was shocked and so happy to notice this phenomenon which had heretofore eluded me. When I got home, I blurted out to my wife. "Look outside at the snow! The snow is blue!" She gave me one of those looks.

The snow did appear to be blue, however. It seemed to be most visible at dawn or dusk under a clear sky. I mentioned this to a number

of people at work. Some just rolled their eyes, and shook their heads. There were others, however, who knew what I was talking about. I found out that there is even a phrase for this in French. It is called *L'heure Bleu*; the blue hour. I remembered the woodcuttings of the famous Vermont artist Sabra Field. She has made a living over the years with her nocturnal winter scenes featuring blue mountains, houses – and snow.

As with many revelations surrounding the natural world, what had previously been hidden now seemed to be everywhere. On clear evenings I was always on the lookout for *L'heure Bleu*. I was seldom disappointed. I remember driving home from the Center on a cold, clear night. It was well past twilight, but the moon was just a little past full. Snow covered fields displayed a darker shade of blue.

Cozy Vermont farmhouses stood in contrast with warm golden light shining from kitchens and living rooms. Blue/gray smoke poured out of chimneys. Thousands of stars shone overhead. I felt like I was cradled and comforted in the arms of the center of the universe; enveloped in a velvet blue world.

While it is always exciting when Mother Nature reveals some of her secrets, there was also a puzzling aspect. I have lived in Vermont almost 30 years. This is not my first snow covered winter. Why hadn't I noticed this before? Now the blue snow seems just as plain as day. I think it had something to do with the warm color of the log cabin, and the yellow light being in contrast to the cool blue snow. I think I must have noticed this on some level previously, but, I have to admit that, somehow, it had never really sunk in.

This experience reminds me of our search for our True Mind, our True Home.

We look and look, but somehow we can't see it even though we're told it's right in front of us. Where is this True Mind? It's right here – right on the end of our nose. It *IS* our nose. When will we see it? Dunno. When causes and conditions are right. Our job as seekers on the path is not to worry about the fruits of our labors. There is no way of knowing how we're doing, what's around the next corner, the next breath. Our calling is to just keep looking, keep questioning, keep living. We need to keep practicing with faith, joy, curiosity, and determination. Let's let somebody else worry about the results of our efforts. —

Parrot Redux

by Dharman Rice

When, during the October Jataka Tales sesshin, the question arose whether animals really can talk, I immediately thought, "Of course, they can!" I was remembering the African Grey parrot we had when I was a kid in Angola.

As karma would have it, about a month after the Jataka Tales sesshin, my daughter and her two daughters gave me a birthday present of *Alex & Me* (2008) by Irene Pepperberg. The subtitle of that *New York Times* Bestseller is "How a Scientist and a Parrot Discovered a Hidden World of Animal Intelligence – and Formed a Deep Bond in the Process." I hadn't read this book, although I'd read portions of Pepperberg's technical work *The Alex Studies:*

Cognitive and Communicative Abilities of Grey Parrots (Harvard 1999) in connection with teaching the philosophy of animals.

However, primed by Rafe Martin's masterful recounting of the Jataka Tales, I devoured *Alex & Me*, and I recommend it wholeheartedly to anyone interested in animals or animal intelligence.

Not only is Pepperberg a daring and ingenious researcher, she writes very well: clearly, simply, and directly. *Alex & Me* is illuminating and inspiring. It is the



Alex, photo by Mike Lovell/Brandeis University

“ The last thing Alex said to Pepperberg, as she left ... was, 'You be good. I love you.' ”

story of a sometimes cantankerous African Grey parrot, who learned far more than a bird with a brain "the size of a shelled walnut" was thought capable of learning.

This book also tells of Alex's untimely death from heart arrhythmia in 2007 at the age of 31. African Grey parrots commonly live fifty years or more. As you can imagine, Pepperberg was devastated by Alex's early death. "He left at the height of his powers," she writes. She'd planned for him to learn much more than he did.

The last thing Alex said to Pepperberg, as she left the Brandeis University lab on the evening before he was discovered dead in his cage, was, "You be good. I love you." Lest this seem mere mimicry, a brief review of Alex's scientifically verified skills might suggest otherwise.

But first, let me add that Pepperberg received condolences from all over the world when Alex died. Obituaries ran in the *New York Times*, *Time* magazine, the famous British science journal *Nature*, even the *Economist*. Perhaps the funniest was the obituary in the widely respected British newspaper *The Guardian*. "America is in mourning," it said.

"Alex, the African Grey parrot who was smarter than the average U.S. president, has died."

In all seriousness, Alex had become renowned not just because he was an endearing little guy. Even the cautious scientific world was ever more taking note of him, because his cognitive accomplishments put him "on a par with small children and chimpanzees."

Alex used vocal names to identify objects, shapes, and colors. He learned complex concepts like "same" and "different." He even

(Continued on page 5)

Shadow of the Bodhisattva

by Nōwa Crosby

In the early hours of the morning, during the October sesshin in Costa Rica, I was slowly walking around the paved circular pathway in the *Jardin de Bodhisattvas*. When I returned to the entryway, I saw the shadow of Jizo Bodhisattva. I couldn't remember seeing a Jizo figure, but realized before turning around, there wasn't one. The shadow was mine.

We often think of shadows and mirrored images as being insubstantial illusions, but they can be a reflection of who we are, regardless of who we think we are. Just so, a Buddha figure, or figure of Kannon, Jizo, Manjushri or any other bodhisattva, is a reflection of who we truly are—our true self, the potential of who and what we will eventually become. Bodhisattvas are not just figures sitting on an altar or shelf, or in a story about the lives of past Masters. We are each of us bodhisattvas, especially when we do the work of the bodhisattva, by sitting together in the zendo, or coming to ceremonies and participating in these events together as a Sangha. Or by any small act of compassion we may do during our daily lives.

At the Vermont Zen Center two ceremonies are presided over by specific bodhisattvas: one for Kannon and one for Jizo Bodhisattva. As well, we have temple nights, with many Buddha and bodhisattva figures. During the ceremony directed to Kannon we

thank her, honor her, and ask for her continued help. In this ceremony we make 108 prostrations, recite the Ten Verse Kannon Sutra 108 times, the Mantra of Kannon Bodhisattva 108 times and the Lotus Sutra Scripture of Kannon Bodhisattva and the Dharani of the Great Compassionate Avalokitesvara three times each. The ceremony, done in three sections, takes over one and a half hours to complete, and it is physically intense, as well as very concentrated in its focus.

People often wonder about prostrations. A prison Sangha member recently asked about this, not understanding why we prostrate and to whom are we prostrating. First, when prostrating to or more correctly towards a Buddha or bodhisattva figure, we are not bowing or prostrating to a figure or idol worshipping. In fact, we are bowing to ourselves and to whom and to what we really are;

“Bodhisattvas are not just figures sitting on an altar ... We are each of us bodhisattvas, especially when we do the work of the bodhisattva”



Buddha bows to Buddha. Yasutani Roshi often said that prostrating lowers the mast of ego. The ego is always resistant to anything that is not acknowledging ego, and when we are prostrating wholeheartedly, there is no thought of self and other, just the prostrating over and over. In the Kannon ceremony we chant “Kannon Bodhisattva” as we kneel, calling out our commitment to the path of compassion and the Bodhisattva Way.

When we offer this as a Sangha, it helps reinforce our commitment to practice together, and shows each of us what we are capable of together, without any competition, without any sense of doing anything strange, without any sense of self and other—just the chanting together, the prostrating together. We do this, not as a solitary practice for ourselves, but together as a Sangha for the benefit of all sentient beings. —

FEBRUARY–MARCH 2010

SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY
	1	2	3	4 Chanting	5	6
7 Sitting & Set Up	8	9 Famine Relief Ceremony	10	11	12	13 Parinirvana Ceremony Sesshin...
14	15	16	17	18	19	20
Vermont 7-Day Sesshin 2/13–20						
21 ZC Closed	22	23	24 Chanting	25	26	27
Sensei Away						
28 Taped Teisho	MARCH 1	2 Chanting	3 Metta 1	4	5	6
Sensei Away						
7 Sangha Entertainment	8	9	10 Metta 2	11 Chanting	12	13
Sensei Away						
14 Taped Teisho	15	16 Chanting	17 Metta 3	18 Sitting & Setup	19	20 Workshop
Sensei Away						
21 Teisho	22	23	24 Metta 4	25 Chanting	26	27 Workday Sesshin Deadline
28 Ceremony Workday	29	30 Temple Night	31 Metta 5			

(Continued from page 3)

volunteered “none” to point to the absence of a set of objects, suggesting he had a rudimentary concept of zero, a high-level abstraction indeed. He did simple addition and recognized Arabic numerals up to 6; he learned, too, that these numerals can modify groups of objects (3 squares or 4 triangles) and, for example, that 6 is larger than 5.

Alex also made up words as well as expressions like “Yummy bread!” (birthday cake). He helped train other parrots—reminiscent of how

Washoe helped Roger Fouts teach other chimpanzees American Sign Language. Alex would sometimes urge fellow parrots to “Talk clearly!”

But my favorite story about Alex involves an instance in which he seems deliberately, possibly out of boredom with endless experimental trials, to have given a wrong answer. The right answer was “two,” but he repeatedly gave either “one” or “four.” When Pepperberg ended the session and closed him in his room, Alex immediately called out, “Two...two...two...I’m sorry...come here!”

Almost as if to say, “Geesh, can’t you take a joke?”

Alex’s achievements help us realize yet again that animals are not just mindless mechanisms driven solely by instincts. This commonplace about animals has dominated Western thinking since ancient Greek times. It has distorted our understanding of animals—and of our own place in nature—and facilitated our barbaric mistreatment of animals for centuries. *Alex & Me* will help us understand a bit more about animals and our inter-existing with them. —

The Buddha's Parinirvana

For 45 years the Buddha, after attaining Perfect Enlightenment, preached the Dharma to all who would listen, devoting himself to the welfare of all living beings. But in his eightieth year, during the seclusion of the rainy season, he suddenly fell ill. Feeling that his time, though near, had not yet arrived, he entered a deep samadhi to free himself of the disease. Emerging from his meditation he said:

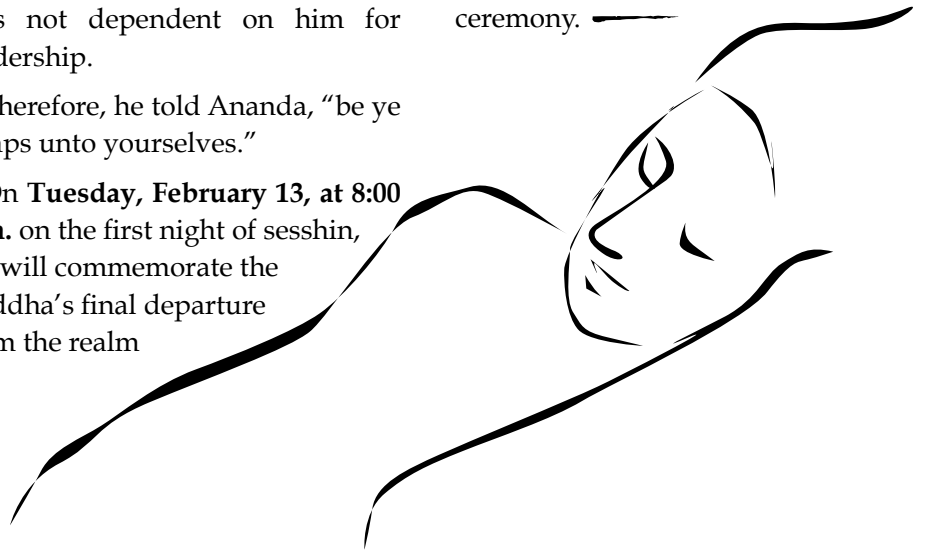
This body has become worn-out and is like an old cart which can only be kept rolling along with great difficulty. My time to be set free from the bonds of becoming, as a chick which on hatching finally breaks free of its shell, will be in three months.

He reminded Ananda that although his bodily journey was nearing fulfillment, each person was to continue to work at his own Enlightenment. He said that since he only taught the Dharma out of his own Realization, the Sangha was not dependent on him for leadership.

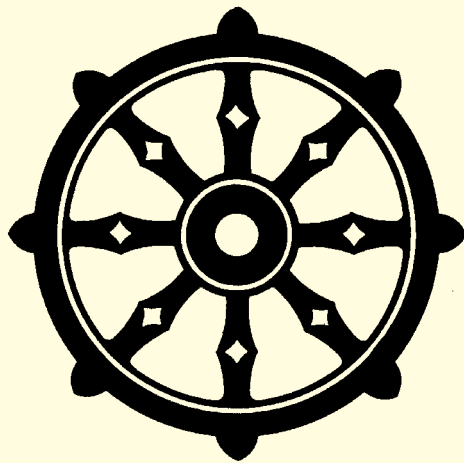
Therefore, he told Ananda, "be ye lamps unto yourselves."

On Tuesday, February 13, at 8:00 p.m. on the first night of sesshin, we will commemorate the Buddha's final departure from the realm

of birth and death. Taking part in this ceremony is a way of paying homage to Shakyamuni Buddha, the founder of our faith. Members not attending sesshin may participate in this ceremony. Because it takes place during sesshin, please do not bring children who are too young to remain silent during the ceremony.



Entering the Buddha's Family: Spring Jukai Ceremony



On **Sunday, April 4**, we commemorate the Buddha's real birthday with a Jukai Ceremony at 10 a.m. Prior to the ceremony, there is a one hour sitting. Dokusan will not be offered that day.

Our Center has two Jukai Ceremonies each year, one in April and one in November. It is customary to take Jukai as often as possible. Each time you participate, your resolve to practice and realize the Buddhadharma grows stronger.

During the ceremony, participants take part in a repentance ceremony,

then take the Three Refuges, the Three General Resolutions, and the Ten Cardinal Precepts.

Jukai also entails making a monetary donation to the teacher, called an incense offering. This traditional gift represents the practitioner's desire to support the teacher's work in propagating Buddhism.

Jukai is one of the most solemn rituals we observe at the Center, so please be sure to wear a clean and pressed robe if you have one. If not, wear dark, solid-colored clothing or borrow a robe from the Center. Children of all ages are welcome to come to this spring Jukai, which honors the birth of Shakyamuni Buddha.

Temple Night

Tuesday, March 30 and **Thursday, April 1 from 6:30 to 9 p.m.** are Temple Nights at the Center. This takes the place of regular sittings. There is no dokusan on those evenings.

At Temple Night people of all ages come to sit informally, offer incense, chant, and do prostrations before Buddha and Bodhisattva figures set up on special altars.

Participants often walk around the zendo looking at the many different figures. The sitting, though informal, is focused and deep. Anyone who has been to a Temple Night can attest to the strength of concentration that builds up through the night. The sari-covered altars are beautifully decorated. Seated upon them, the figures not only remind us who we really are, they also help us express gratitude to and reverence for those who have transmitted the Dharma.

This year, as in the past, we will have a table for home figures. If you wish, you can bring the figure on your home altar to share with the Sangha. Children may also place



their special figures on this Home Altar.

You will find Temple Night inspiring and invigorating. It is surely one of the most beautiful stops on the journey to our True Home. Please join us. Everyone is invited whether or not they are a member of the Sangha.

Workdays for Temple Night and Jukai

Saturday, March 27 and **Sunday March 28** are workdays to set up for Temple nights and **Saturday, April 3** a workday for Jukai. The sitting on **Sunday, March 28** will be followed by a work period to complete the temple night setup. Saturday workdays begin at **10 a.m.** Please lend a hand if you can.



Congratulations Nōwa and Delia!

Happy news! Delia and Nōwa are now the proud owners of the house they have been living in for the past several years, which is next door to the Zen Center.

The proceeds from the sale of the house (and eventually, the adjacent property) will help us finish the shell of the Buddha Building. If and when we are able to sell the development rights to the land across the river, we should be able to complete the building.

Best wishes, Nōwa and Delia, on becoming home owners!



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



There is neither heaven nor earth,

Only snow



Falling incessantly.

—Hashin



CONTRIBUTORS:

- Ti'an Callery, *copy editor*
- Nōwa Crosby
- Emily Cross, *copy editor*
- Sensei Sunyana Graef
- Jim Kahle
- Dharman Rice
- Kelly Story, *production*
- Joan White, *editor*
- Delia Zamora-Crosby, *layout*

Sangha Entertainment

Time to dust off your instruments, just like to sit in the audience, bring out the games, loosen the that's fine too! Informal sitting vocal chords, brush up on your beforehand (no dokusan that Tango—it's Sangha Entertainment day). The entertainment begins day **Sunday, March 7** and all acts at **10 a.m.**

are welcome. Bring your family and friends for a morning of music, fun, games, and vegetarian pot luck fare. Kelly Story is the coordinator for this event, please give her a call if you want to perform. If you'd

