

# Walking Mountains

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

*Dear Sangha and Friends,*

As I write, my warm home fills with the smell of simmering kale and sweet potato soup. It brings to mind the begging rounds of our Zen ancestors, and I am filled with gratitude. Grateful that I don't have to go out into a cold December evening for my meal, but so deeply grateful that they did so in order that we could inherit this practice, a sangha, and a teacher constantly reminding us that there's work to be done.

We begin December with the Rohatsu sesshin honoring the Buddha's Enlightenment. We then move into the New Year's Eve ceremony and, in January, the ceremony honoring Kannon, the Bodhisattva of Compassion. It's an abundance of ceremonies and, yes, preparation. And all our work (not to mention our participation in the ceremony itself) is an offering, whether we are cleaning bathrooms or altars. The energy from our 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. Please join us.

– *Joan White*



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## 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.*



## Celebrating Ryokan

by **Steve Brittain**

Playful and wild, great tumbling cumulus clouds crowd about the Adirondak peaks and snuggle against Camel's Hump's distinctive snout. All along the Route 7 drive from Rutland back to the Jataka sesshin, the land is vibrant in the afternoon light. On the hills far across the valley are swatches of

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colors folded over the ridges and clefts, dark green, yellow, orange. Right ahead, by the side of the road, is a brilliant red and orange maple tree. The fields are subtler shades of brown, light green, and the straw-color of the dying grasses' seed heads blowing in the winds; everything so vivid and alive, from the rocks in the roadside gravel to the clouds overhead.

This was all very fitting for a sesshin that began with stories of the Bodhisattva in his birth as a tree spirit working compassionately not only for the confused and deluded king but for all the interconnected beings of the world – the plants, the animals and the humans. It brought to mind the Japanese poet Ryokan. This wonderful and unique Zen monk lived much of his life in a hermitage on Mount Kugama after receiving inka from his teacher, Kokusen, at age 33. Although he was quite poor and lived with not much more than an old robe and a begging bowl, he was far from impoverished as this poem shows.

*Clouds billow upward*

*Skies are clear*

*I go out to beg*

*And receive heaven's gifts*

There was such a richness of experience available to him even though he had nothing; in fact, because he had nothing. All he had to do was to open himself to the world that was himself and to realize that he was not separate from the tree and rock spirits, the

“

*Forgive me  
If the flowers I plucked  
Have begun to fade  
I can offer you  
Only my heart*

—Ryokan

”

cows and the lice, and, as Sensei Martin showed us, the ogres and the gods. The begging was not that of a poor old monk going out to ask that he be given something, but rather of a man going out and humbly offering himself to the world and the world mutually and unavoidably offering itself to him.

Far from being either an austere mountain ascetic or simply an ecstatic nature-worshiper, Ryokan was grounded in and in touch with the people and place where he had grown up and where he lived. He had a very open and playful nature.

*Playing ball*

*With the children in this village*

*Spring day, never let the shadows fall*

There are many stories of him becoming so caught up in the games he was playing with the children that he lost all track of time and forgot any errands that he might have had. He had no concern that he might be thought a fool. However, he was neither a dumb nor insensitive fool. There is a very real poignancy in the last line of this poem. There is a desire for something that, of course, he and the children could not have. The day will end. He will have to return to his hermitage, and probably with an empty begging bowl as well. This, though, is not a clinging desire as shown further in the following poem.

*Forgive me*

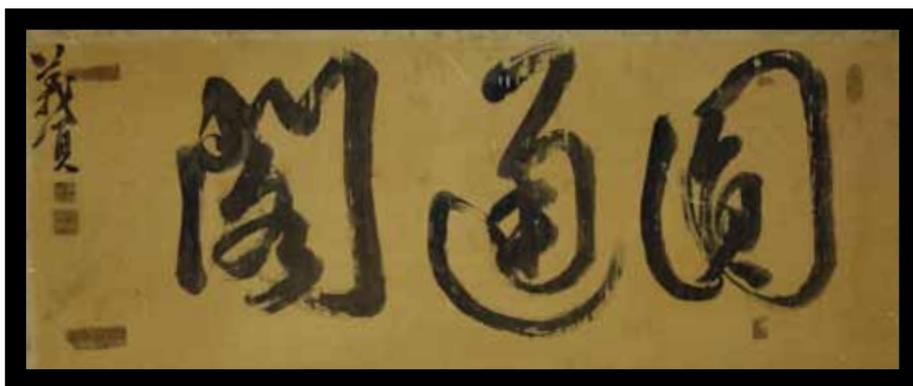
*If the flowers I plucked*

*Have begun to fade*

*I can offer you*

*Only my heart*

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## The Season of Ceremonies

by Bill Petrow

My first contact with Zen long ago came from books. Reading about those irrepressible Zen masters of ancient times revealed a new horizon. What was behind all the mysterious banter between master and student? I wondered. Inexplicable and spontaneous—whatever it was, it seemed to combine the intrigue of a mystery novel with the wild creativity of a jazz musician.

At that time, Zen seemed far different than the religious tradition that I grew up with. In comparison, the religion I knew seemed to be far removed from

my everyday life. Ceremonies and rituals, in particular, felt perfunctory at best—performed by rote and accompanied by lots of fidgeting and restless boredom. In comparison, the stories of those wild Zen masters seemed to have nothing to do with any form of ritual activity, or so I thought.

Years later, I've learned that I couldn't be further from the truth. Now we are in the middle of a "season of ceremonies" at the Zen Center starting with World Peace, Bodhidharma, Oxfam and Hungry Ghost ceremonies, to be followed by Jukai, Thanksgiving, and the Buddha's Enlightenment. These

ceremonies express our deepest longings to honor our spiritual ancestors, banish our personal demons, give thanks and bring peace to the world.

But still, how do these practices relate to our day-to-day life? The recent book, *The Path* by Michael Puett and Christine Gross-Loh, based on ancient Chinese teachings, suggests that our everyday life is full of opportunity for spiritual refinement by means of the customs and conventions that we all engage in. Most of us carry out these social conventions automatically, and so ordinarily they go by unnoticed. But if

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performed well, the authors say, these small encounters provide a ritual space for connecting with others.

For example, the authors ask us to consider Confucius as described in a passage from the Analects. Instead of Confucius making sweeping philosophical statements,

the passage reveals what he did on a daily basis: how he entered a room, how he comported himself at meals and how he greeted others. Essentially, how he conducted himself with infinite respect. In this way he embodies truth, and bridges the gap between principle and this messy life.

At the Zen Center, we may do the same during ceremonies or in simple rituals including how we enter the zendo, how we approach altars, and how we chant and do zazen. In this way, we share in a ritual space with the support of our fellow practitioners that is one with our practice-life.

Like Confucius we can extend this kind of ritual to our everyday existence, the authors tell us, not by emphasizing life's grand events, but on focusing wholeheartedly on the small repeated moments, like saying "I love you" and meaning it, or kindly turning off lights when leaving a room. Unlike the rituals that most of us think of, these encounters offer an opportunity to break free of the patterns in which we are stuck, opening up a space for a deeper engagement with the people and events of our lives. —

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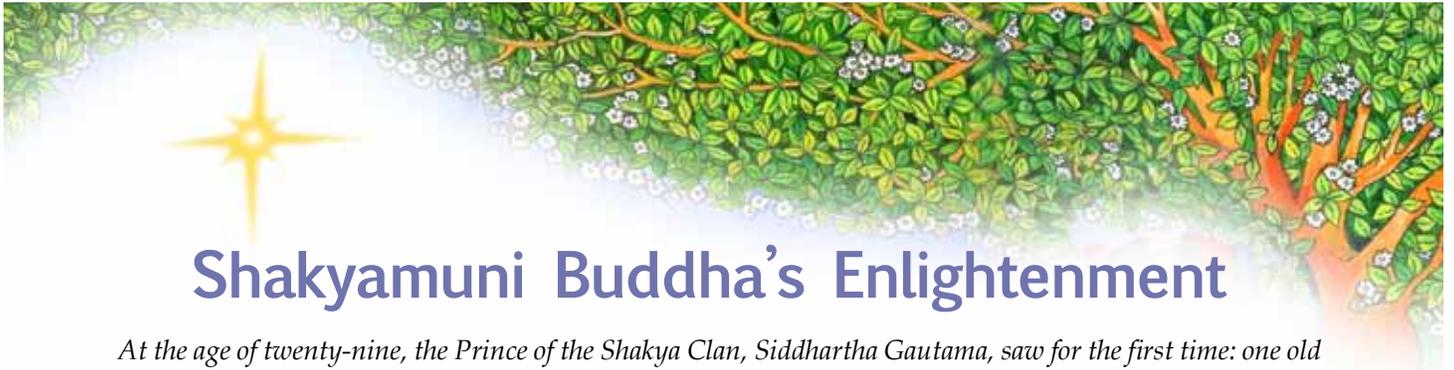
There is a sense an active engagement with all of it: the playing, the beauty of the flowers, the withering of the flowers, the emotions that arise in this activity, the joy, the sadness, the love. There is just as importantly a deep acceptance of all of it including its transience. Ryokan is able to let it be as it is. He is able to be himself as he is.

This is expressed beautifully in one of my favorite of all Ryokan's poems; in fact one of my favorite poems of all time:

*Showing its back  
and showing its front,  
a falling maple leaf.*

Here Ryokan gives us the wisdom of a tree. There is nothing extraneous and there is nothing left out. It is perfect guidance for doing

zazen in the zendo. The beauty of the mountains and the rivers, the pollution of the shopping mall, anger, happiness, pain, the grief of loss, the joy of love and sharing, the struggles to see, the struggles to avoid seeing, all is shown, just as it is, on the mat and in the forest. The front of the leaf is completely exposed, and the back of the leaf is completely exposed, exposed in the mirror of practice. —



## 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 8, at 4:00 a.m.** The ceremony this year is during sesshin, so it is for adults only. If you are joining from outside sesshin, please be sure to have your

robe (and rakusu) on when you arrive at the Center. There will be no place to change once you arrive.

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.

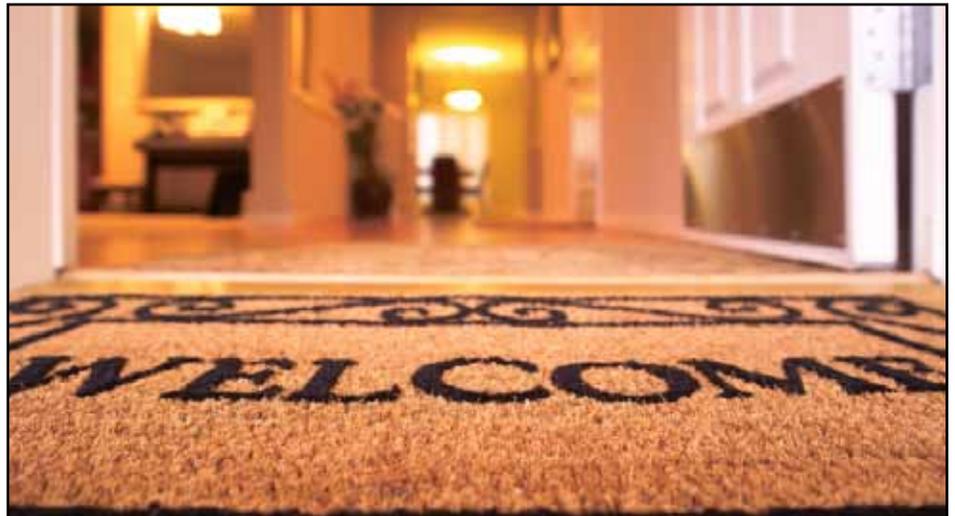
## Home Purification Ceremonies

*Entering 2019 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.

# New Year's Eve Ceremony 2018-2019

**O**n Monday 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 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! —

# December 2018

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
						1 Sesshin
2	3	4	5	6	7	8 The Buddha's Enlightenment Ceremony
Vermont 7-Day Rohatsu Sesshin 12/1-8 <b>VZC CLOSED DURING SESSHIN</b>						
9 ZC CLOSED	10 AM ZAZEN MON-FRI Finding Your Seat Meeting	11 PM ZAZEN CR	12	13 PM ZAZEN Chanting	14	15 Costa Rica 3-Day Retreat 12/12-15
16	17	18	19	20	21	22
<b>ZC CLOSED FOR THE HOLIDAYS (12/16-26)</b>						
23	24	25	26	27	28	29
<b>ZC CLOSED FOR THE HOLIDAYS</b>				New Year's Workdays—No Formal Sittings		
30 New Year's Workday	31 New Year's Eve Ceremony					



## Workdays for New Year's Eve

Thursday, December 27, through Sunday, 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. There will be no formal sittings during that time, though members are welcome to sit whenever they wish.

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.



**Vermont Zen Center**

Post Office Box 880  
Shelburne, VT 05482

802-985-9746  
www.vermontzen.org

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*Winter moonlight;  
The shadow of the stone pagoda.  
The shadow of the pine-tree.*



*-Shiki*

**CONTRIBUTORS:**

- Steve Brittain
- Maria Delia Crosby, *layout*
- Roshi Sunyana Graef
- Bill Petrow
- Greg Sheldon, *copy editor*
- Kelly Story, *production*
- Joan White, *editor*

*Wishing you  
a Happy,  
Healthy,  
and Peaceful  
New Year!*

