

# Walking Mountains

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

*Dear Sangha and Friends,*

It’s the New Year and what better time to recall our “beginners’ mind.” Inspiration abounds from those among us who are ‘beginners.’ Let us all begin this year in this spirit. We have the accumulating energy from the Term Student Program, Jataka Tale Sesshin, Rohatsu Sesshin, our New Year resolutions, the suffering of the world we live in, to return to the mat. How fortunate we are to have the wisdom and practice of senior members as well. Our Sangha grows in multitudinous ways.

We begin January with our annual meeting—a great opportunity to hear all that is going on in our Sangha with the different committees: kitchen, ceremony, Kannon, and more. It brings us together as one. The Kannon Ceremony beckons us to compassionate living, and the Paranirvana Ceremony reminds us of the Way that releases us from the cycle of birth and death: our practice. Please join us.

— *Joan White*

## My Year of Sesshins

by **Nina Thompson**



**D**ear Sangha,  
I am writing to you in late 2017 while on a personal retreat at the Vermont Zen Center. The Term Student program ended last night, and during our closing ceremony I mentioned how my takeaway is always a deeply felt, “I take refuge in Sangha.” This is true for me again, but this year the feeling has grown by leaps and bounds. I am about to complete a year-long commitment to my practice. As I reflect on the year, I

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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.*

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realize that you were with me every step of the way. For the first time, I truly understand how Sangha is family. I couldn't have done this without you.

For my first few years at the Vermont Zen Center, my practice ran hot and cold. It was hot during sesshins and cold in between. In August of 2016, Roshi suggested that I commit to doing a year of sesshins to help with the ups and downs. And she meant all of them. Every sesshin in Vermont and Costa Rica. "Whoa, I can't do that," I thought, but after some internal hemming and hawing I said, "OK, let me think about it and talk to Sylvia."

Asking your partner to support you on a year of sesshins is a big ask, especially given the situation we were in. I was getting ready to close a nonprofit I'd started four years prior which took an enormous amount of my time and brought in little resources. To ask if I could continue to live this way for another year, to be gone a lot, and not to bring in much money – in fact, to spend more money than usual – well, as you might expect, she wasn't wild about the idea.

I understood. I was also concerned about money and time away from home. However, I also thought this was the best possible time for me to do something like this. I was in a transition, and what better time to shake everything up, to jump? What better way to deepen my practice and to level out the ups and downs?

I also hoped that a deep commitment to practice would



help me be better at the work I was to do next. I help people explore death, dying, and life, and guide individuals and families through the dying process. I want to be as present as possible, with my ego out of the way, in these situations.

Sylvia and I spent a lot of time that summer talking it through and eventually we got to yes. I can't overstate what a big deal it was to have Sylvia's blessing. I think it was the most generous yes ever, and I love her for it.

So with a yes, a budget and a plan, I was committed to my year of sesshins. Once I was sincerely committed it felt like I jumped into a very fast moving river. Practice became serious and support for my efforts began to show up everywhere. Some of my oldest friends made donations to my "sesshin fund." A family that I'd helped through the dying process made a significant and unexpected donation. They said they were moved by my commitment to my practice, grateful for the support I had given them, and wanted to help me on my Buddhist path. They also

wanted to support me in my efforts to help other families like I had helped them.

Even my mom contributed, which was a surprise because she didn't think I should do something like this if I wasn't going to get a paying job out of it, or at least a certificate! I think telling her that each day on retreat there is a lecture and three private meetings with the teacher, did the trick.

In many ways, though, it was the help from Sangha that was most substantial. I couldn't have done it without all of you. Sangha brothers and sisters gave rides to and from the airport, offered listening ears and laughter, and appeared in the zendo late at night at just the right time. You offered many words of encouragement: "Leave it all on the mat!" "The further you are the further you can go!" The fact that you were there, practicing, showing up, cooking, cleaning, and working hard made a difference. I needed you to do just that, especially when the commitment got hard. Which it did.

Even though Sylvia and I were on

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# Term Student Program

by Jim Kahle

The Term Student program, or TSP, as it's known by some, is a program that was developed by Roshi some 23 years ago, challenging students to intensify their practice together over a specified period of time, much like the Summer Ango practiced by the ancients. For the most part, the closing ceremony involves an opportunity for all participants to summarize their TSP experience. At the closing ceremony, one first-time participant said, "The Term Student Program sounds so innocuous. This program is really hard!"

Everyone laughed. It is hard. For starters, it involves commitments that are made in public, in front of all the other participants. The idea is to stretch, to challenge ourselves in our practice. This happens by increasing daily meditation, incorporating practices such as meal chants, prostrations, precept work, and regular chanting into our daily lives. There is a mandatory meeting among the group members every Tuesday evening where participants report on the week's efforts. The expected operative phrase from every member is, "I have met my commitments." The program is all about these commitments; making vows, and then keeping them. No excuses, other than unavoidable acts of karma.

One's daily efforts are full of pitfalls. During the first week or so, it's easy to simply forget to do all of the commitments. New

habits need to be acquired. Travel can complicate matters. It can put one out of the normal routine, and potentially cut into time that would otherwise be devoted to the program. The TSP is supposed to be a reach. If it's not difficult for you to accomplish the weekly goals, you're probably not doing enough.

In many of the areas of the program if you fall behind, it's easy to make those up. If you commit to 9 prostrations a day and forget to do them, it's relatively easy to make those up the next day. The one area in which you really don't want to fall behind is on your sitting. Many people commit to sitting 1½ to 2 hours a day. If you happen to miss a day, that means you will have to sit 3-4 hours the next day. Many of the participants lead very busy lives. They have jobs, families, other commitments. If you fall behind in the sitting category over the course of a week, it might simply be impossible to make it up.

Sometimes a participant has to be pretty resourceful if he or she is going to keep up. I remember in the early years of the program both of my kids played ice hockey. Most of their practices were in the evening after dinner. The rink in Rutland is down by the mall. There were many nights when I would drop them off for practice, walk outside into the darkness, and find a spot to do some sitting in the bleachers nearby. It was cold out there, but you've got to do what you've got to do. It



always seemed like I was attending some kind of family gathering during TSP. I remember trying my best to be with my practice on an airplane flight from here to there. There were times I would try to do zazen riding shotgun in the car as my wife drove to an event in Ohio or some such. For virtually all the participants, failing to meet one's commitments is not an option. You simply have to find a way.

Sometimes the laws of cause and effect are seemingly turned on their heads during the TSP. Conventional wisdom would hold that the participants value the program, cherish the practice, and that is what motivates their efforts. It sometimes feels like it's the other way around. The practitioner tries very hard to remember all of the things that need to be accomplished every day, and then somehow find a way to do them. The efforts in and of themselves seem to elicit deep feelings of love for the process, affection for fellow participants, gratitude for the opportunity. It is a wonderful mystery.

Last week I stayed at the Center overnight so that I could fulfill my weekly dokusan commitment for TSP. I woke up earlier than  
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the same page when I jumped, I don't think we knew what we were in for. Roshi offers 12 sesshins and retreats in a year, and I added some personal retreats, so in total I was on retreat 14 times this year. That's 28 transitions. I think transitions are hard on everyone, but especially on the person at home. To complicate Sylvia's experience of me coming and going, I was also changing. Practice has a way of doing that to a person, it seems. Sometimes I was pure joriki and love when I got home, and sometimes, I wasn't. I could be ungraceful and even distant, which was hard on her. She said it felt like I was drifting away.

To be very honest, there were tears, and fears that we might be moving in different directions. There was a lot of talking, but in the end we got through it, I think in large part because we are so incredibly fortunate to have our practice in common. It's also because we have all of you! Since we were willing to talk with some Sangha members about this difficult time, Sangha stepped in and helped. It made a world of difference and we are both so grateful.

Believe me, I had many "why am I doing this?" moments. In those painful moments, I would say a prayer: "Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, please help me be of service. Please help me get out of the way so I can truly help reduce the suffering in the world." Saying that prayer helped me dig deeper and tap into reserves I didn't know I had. Thank you, Buddhas and Bodhisattvas.

It has been an incredible gift to do this much training. I moved from "having" to sit, to wanting to sit. I learned how to keep my head down

and to keep moving; and how not to move so much on the cushion. I found an ability to stay with my practice more, both in and out of sesshin. I learned to do just what is in front of me. I discovered, in a much deeper way than I had known, that every moment is incredibly important, and that this path is profoundly endless. I found myself more easily letting go of things that I would have taken personally in the past. I even find myself treating everyday objects more respectfully. The list goes on but the biggest change in me, I think, is a shift from doing practice to being practice. Zen is more of who I am now than it was before.

There is so much more to say. I want to tell you how much I appreciate the extra time I got with some of you this year. How much you all impress me and how much I look up to you. I want to share stories of my bad travel karma, and tantalize you with the details of a Costa Rican breakfast. But there is too

much to say here, so we are going to have to have a cup of tea to talk about it. While we are chatting, I will encourage you to find a way to do more sesshins — even just one more. But if you can see an opportunity to do them all, do it! It's truly worth it. I will help you devise a plan and I will do many of them with you. You can even borrow my packing list...it's only three pages long.

I know how unbelievably blessed I am to have had this opportunity. I am deeply grateful to all the people, the energy, and the good karma that came together to help make this undertaking a reality. I take none of it for granted. I am awed and forever indebted to the powers that be. Including each of you.

With all my love and my deepest bow — I now return the merit of my year of sesshins to all of you.

Forever yours, Nina

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necessary and looked out the window. The sky was perfectly clear. The stars were out. I decided to take a little walk outside before the morning sitting started. Sirius blazed brightly in the southern sky, chasing the constellation Orion across the heavens. It brought me back to a TSP from years ago when I attended a family wedding in Chicago. Accommodations were tight, and so every morning I would get up early and go sit on the same park bench near the University of Chicago. Every morning Orion was there to greet me. When the

constellation vanished into the morning light, my sitting was done. Once again I was able to find a way to do what I said I was going to do. There seems to be great value in that.

We are exceedingly fortunate to be able to practice at the Vermont Zen Center. We have such a wonderful teacher. We have each other. The sense of our good fortune emanates from participation in programs like the Term Student Program, the Jataka Tale sesshin, the Hunger Banquet. My gratitude is overflowing. —



*She of the true gaze,  
she of the pure gaze,  
gaze of great  
and encompassing  
wisdom,  
gaze of pity,  
gaze of compassion,  
ever longed for,  
ever revered...  
Her eye of compassion  
views all  
sentient beings.  
Her ocean of blessings  
is beyond measure.  
Therefore you should  
pay homage to her.*

## Special Ceremony Honoring Kannon

**On Sunday, January 21  
from 9 to 11:30 a.m.**

we will pay homage to Kannon, the Bodhisattva of Compassion. This bodhisattva, so beloved in Mahayana countries, is the embodiment of tender compassion. Through this ceremony, we thank Kannon for her unceasing help.

After a half hour of zazen, we begin a series of rounds of sitting, bowing, chanting, and circumambulating. We chant the Kannon sutra in English and Japanese a total of 108 times, recite the mantra of Kanzeon ("Praise to Kannon bodhisattva") 108 times, and chant the Lotus Sutra Scripture of Kanzeon Bodhisattva and the Dharani of Avalokitesvara three times each.

By the end of the ceremony, we will have made 108 prostrations. Even if you are unable to do prostrations, you can still participate by making standing or partial bows. Members and their families, as well as friends of the Center and non-members are all invited. Anyone who wishes to pay homage to Kannon Bodhisattva is most welcome to attend.

In addition to the bowing, there will be circumambulations, incense offerings, special readings, and a

vigorous Rinzai-style chanting of the Kanzeon in Japanese. A few notes about the ceremony:

**DEDICATION**—You are welcome to dedicate the merit of this ceremony to whomever you wish. There will be a table for photos and names of those to whom the ceremony is being dedicated.

**HOME ALTAR FIGURES**—There is a special altar for Kannon figures from your home altars. Important: Please bring them to the Center on the workday prior to the ceremony.

**WORKDAY**—On **Saturday, January 20 at 10 a.m.** there will be a work period to prepare for the ceremony. Please join us if you can, and don't forget to bring your Kannon figures.

**DONATION**—As a concrete expression of compassion, please bring a *monetary donation* which will be given to Harbor Place, a homeless shelter in Shelburne. **Please note that checks should be made out to the Zen Center so that we can send Harbor Place one check from the Sangha as a whole.**

*The celebration of Kannon Day affords us a way to express our boundless gratitude to the Bodhisattva of Compassion for her ceaseless, wondrous help. We hope you will join us on this special day. —*

# January 2018

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
	1 Zen Center Closed	2 PM ZAZEN	3	4 PM ZAZEN	5	6
7 Priest Novitiate Ceremony for Bonnie Goodman	8 AM ZAZEN MON-FRI Tai Chi 1	9 PM ZAZEN	10	11 PM ZAZEN Sitting & Workshop Prep	12	13 Workshop
14 Annual Sangha Meeting	15 AM ZAZEN MON-FRI Tai Chi 2	16 PM ZAZEN Chanting	17	18 PM ZAZEN	19	20 Ceremony Workday
21 Kannon Ceremony	22 Zen Center Closed Tai Chi 3	23 PM ZAZEN AM ZAZEN TUE-FRI	24	25 PM ZAZEN	26	27 Indian Cooking Course Chaat
28 Teisho	29 AM ZAZEN MON-FRI Tai Chi 4	30 PM ZAZEN ROSHI IN CR	31 CR 3-Day Sesshin			

# February 2018

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
				1 PM ZAZEN	2	3
				Costa Rica 3-Day Sesshin		
4 Taped Teisho CR All-Day	5 AM ZAZEN MON-FRI Finding Your Seat Meeting Tai Chi Course 5	6 PM ZAZEN Chanting	7	8 PM ZAZEN	9 Retreat Deadline	10 Ceremony Workday
11 The Buddha's Parinirvana Ceremony	12 AM ZAZEN MON-FRI Tai Chi Course 6	13 PM ZAZEN	14	15 PM ZAZEN Famine Relief Ceremony	16 ROSHI OUT OF TOWN	17
18 Taped Teisho ROSHI OUT OF TOWN	19 AM ZAZEN MON-FRI	20 PM ZAZEN Sitting & Retreat Prep	21	22 PM ZAZEN Sitting & Retreat Prep	23 Vermont 2-Day Retreat	24
25 Retreat	26 Zen Center Closed	27 AM ZAZEN TUE-FRI PM ZAZEN Chanting Roshi on Break through March 23	28			

# The Buddha's Parinirvana

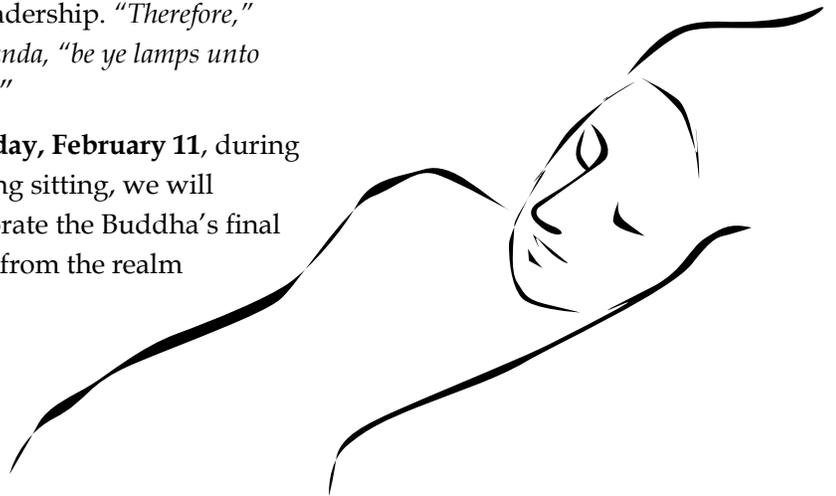
For 45 years the Buddha, after attaining Perfect Enlightenment, preached the Dharma to all who would listen, devoting himself to the welfare of all living beings. But in his eightieth year, during the seclusion of the rainy season, he suddenly fell ill. Feeling that his time, though near, had not yet 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 **Sunday, February 11**, during the morning sitting, 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. Everyone is invited. There will be a short workday to set up for the ceremony on **Saturday, February 10 starting at 10 a.m.**



## Annual Meeting Sunday, January 14, 9:30-11:30 a.m.

The Sangha is invited to participate in our Annual Meeting to help plan for the year ahead. We will discuss the Center's finances, next year's schedule, courses, special events, and more. Your input is essential and valued. Please come and help with the decisions and direction of the Center.

The meeting will be followed by a pot-luck lunch. Your family is cordially invited to join us at **11:30**. Out-of-towners can Zoom-in to the meeting. If you'd like to do so, please get in touch with Ramiro.



### Annual Meeting Agenda

- 2018 Projects
- 2017 Financial Report
- 2018 Preliminary Budget
- Committee Review – reports from the following committees:  
*Ceremony, Kitchen, Housekeeping, Library, Outdoor, Courses, Newsletter, Finding Your Seat, Prison, Kannon*
- Casa Zen Report
- Miscellaneous



**Vermont Zen Center**

Post Office Box 880  
Shelburne, VT 05482

802-985-9746  
www.vermontzen.org

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\* \* \*  
*The winter river;  
Down it come floating  
Flowers offered to Buddha.*  
\* \* \*  
*-Buson*

**CONTRIBUTORS:**

- Maria Delia Crosby, *layout*
- Roshi Sunyana Graef
- Jim Kahle
- Greg Sheldon, *copy editor*
- Kelly Story, *production*
- Nina Thompson
- Joan White, *editor*

**O**ur deepest gratitude to all of you who so generously contributed to the 2017 Annual Appeal and to all of you who plan to do so.

In running our temple, we turn to our members and friends to ask for support.

Your willingness to offer your time and energy, as well as your generosity with financial contributions, enables us to maintain this place of practice which is truly a treasure. Your contribution helps ensure that the Wheel of the Dharma keeps turning and the doors of our temple are kept wide open.

*Thank you for your dedication, support, and generosity!*

*Thank  
You*