



# Mountains Talking

Lotus in the Flame Temple, Denver Zen Center

Spring 2000

## Sesshin: Climbing the Silver Mountain

*Excerpts from Sensei's opening talk of the April 1999 sesshin.*

It is said that genuine Zen practice begins with the completion of one's first seven day sesshin. This is most understandable. The word "Zen" is derived from the Chinese word "ch'an," which was derived the Sanskrit word "dhyana," meaning meditation or concentration. It is in and through the



practice of uninterrupted, ceaseless zazen during sesshin that one comes to understand something about the human mind that is impossible to gain any other way, and thus one enters squarely upon the path of Zen. Through long hours of ceaseless practice, the superficial levels of the mind begin to quiet down, the mind starts to settle and one begins to return to a deep silence within. One tastes the interior mind as a result of sesshin practice to a degree and depth impossible outside of sesshin. Also, in the course of working to "cut off the mind road," or "halt the flow of the mind," in the concentrated manner engaged in only in sesshin, one encounters and faces all manner of one's demons - restlessness, boredom, torpor, anxiety, fear, loneliness, self-doubt, anger, hatred, ignorance and anguish. In sesshin one can not avoid or run away from what one is. One comes face to face with the human condition, *dukkha*. By courageously facing one's stuff, one begins to resolve these fears and anxieties at a profound level and develop deep compassion for others in the process.

Sesshin is, of course, difficult. It has been likened to climbing a silver mountain. The surface is smooth and it feels that there is no way to get a hand hold or foot hold on the

mountain side. But if one perseveres courageously and patiently, one makes the ascent and discovers a new vista, a new country.

Sesshin is an essential part of the rhythm or cycle of life for any serious Zen student. This rhythm also includes working, sleeping, family life, recre-

ation, and residential training periods. In the course of each day this rhythm includes periods of sitting and repose as well as periods of activity. But sesshin is the most concentrated and intense part of our spiritual path and must be woven into the fabric of the life of the serious Zen student.

Recently, I was talking to John Daido Looi Roshi regarding serious, transformative lay practice. He said that he was going to address serious lay practice at Zen Mountain Monastery by turning Dharma Communications\* into a lay practice model. Those working in Dharma Communications would sit with the monastic community every morning and evening and eat two oryoki meals with them each day, but would work a 40 hour week instead of 20 hours. He said he was concerned about one thing in particular, which was that these lay practitioners would have to cut back to only four sesshin a year rather than twelve sesshin. He wondered whether that would be enough sesshin practice to provide for genuine transformation. This certainly caught my attention!

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# Sangha News

## Calendar Additions

A question and answer period has been added to the Center's repertoire of practice opportunities. This new event was borrowed from Aitken Roshi's Sunday Meeting at Kaimu. There will be three rounds of zazen and dokusan, after which Sensei will take his seat in the Zendo and answer any questions that participants may have about Zen practice, teachings, or history. Two question and answer periods have been scheduled during this training period, one on Monday, March 13 and the other on Tuesday, May 15. All Associate and Supporting Members are welcome.

Also note that the Seminar Setups have been discontinued, as what little needs to be done can be accomplished by the Office Manager and Sensei, and in the morning before the seminar begins. A regular Thursday evening sitting with a chanting service will be held instead.

## Diamond Sangha News

The California Diamond Sangha has withdrawn from the Diamond Sangha Affiliate network under difficult and painful circumstances. Sensei will discuss the CDS' secession and related issues with interested Supporting Members after the teisho on March 5. These issues will be explored further throughout this training period as well. Two documents related to the split, an open letter to John Tarrant from the Diamond Sangha Teachers Circle and the Diamond Sangha Teachers Code of Ethics are posted on the bulletin board.

## Ordination

In a very moving ceremony on February 19, David Dunley was ordained as a Zen Buddhist priest, receiving the Buddhist name Shonen, ordination vows, and new robes from Sensei. The large turnout from the Sangha to witness the event also included Shonen's parents, his friends Kelly and Terrell, Zen Priest Cliff Clusin, Prof. José Cabezon, and a number of his students.

The Buddhist name Shonen is a Sino-Japanese word meaning "Enlightened Attention;" something for him and all of us to aspire to. As a priest, David will use this name instead of his first name.

During the ceremony, Sensei spoke on the nature of ordination at our temple, emphasizing that the two streams of lay and priest ordination are equal in commitment and profundity, but different in manifestation. Lay ordination manifests itself "hidden in the marketplace, invisibly working in the midst of society as householders with families and careers;" while priest ordination is visibly manifest in society, with the priest living a life of Dharma as vocation and occupation through Buddhist pastoral work and service.

Shonen will continue to work in the Office for the immediate future, but will begin to phase out some of his Office duties and take up tasks more directly related to Dharma, such as working closely with Sensei on the development of practice forms for the Center.

## New Part-time Resident

Peggy Sheehan will be living as a part time resident at the Center, beginning March 6th. She will be staying at the Center Monday through Thursday. While in residence, Peggy will enrich our practice schedule with a few new events. She has recently been certified as a yoga instructor and will be teaching yoga classes on Tuesday and Thursday mornings after the sitting from 7:30-8:30. There will also be a yoga class on Tuesday afternoons at 4:00, followed by a light dinner before the evening sitting. On Friday mornings, an Oryoki style breakfast

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will provided for anyone who can stay after the sitting (please note that the Wednesday morning breakfast club will also continue). Peggy is really looking forward to her stay and hopes to encourage everyone to make the Center their second home.

### Donations on Behalf of Others

For those who would like to make donations to the temple on behalf of others as a gift, or in memory of someone who has died, simply fill out one of the forms next to the donation box and place it in the box with your check. The Office will then send a card to the person or family on whose behalf you made the donation by way of acknowledgment.

### Rick Harper: In Memoriam

On January 19, 2000, Rick Harper, a formerly homeless man that members of the Sangha assisted in a program called Circle of Support, passed away. The following is excerpted from Bob Knott's talk on homelessness during the February Ceremony of Aid:

“ He (Rick) spent time at the Denver Public Library where Laurel Conroy became acquainted with him. Rick had served in the Air Force and worked as an office manager. He was congenial and genuinely enjoyed people. He was gay and was rejected by his family for being gay. Rick allowed some suffering or pain in his early life to drag him into alcoholism. He lost lovers and jobs due to drinking binges.

Even though selling newspapers and living in shelters, he demonstrated aspiration to live differently. With guidance from community developer and Buddhist – Mike Green – our circle of Sangha members tried to provide supports and new contacts for Rick. He was able to gain sobriety for perhaps eight months and moved into an apartment and began temporary jobs.

He was very disappointed to lose a telemarketing job. When Laurel pointed him to a promising janitorial job with Denver Public Library, he apparently was devastated to fail a required physical exam. He refused to answer phone calls or notes left on his door. We don't know what his mind states were in those last two weeks. Empty whiskey bottles and empty blood pressure medicine containers were found in his messy apartment. The

coroner's office told his mother that hardened arteries and heart failure were the cause of death on preliminary inspection – toxicology tests may reveal more precise or different evaluation.

We know that we lost a warm and engaging friend. Rick was talented and inspired us at times with his resolve. We feel real loss and perplexity. We will go forward with sad knowledge of the painful life on the streets for many of our neighbors.”

Rick's ashes are interred at Ft. Logan National Cemetery (section 13, plot # 1933) where there is a nice view of the mountains. Rick is deeply missed by those who knew him. The Circle of Support is currently in the process of determining how and if they will go forward with future efforts.

### Dennis Genpo Merzel Roshi to Speak at DZC

Dennis Genpo Merzel Roshi, abbot of the Kanzeon Zen Center in Salt Lake City and author of *The Eye Never Sleeps* and *Beyond Sanity and Madness*, will be speaking at the Center through the Naropa Institute's Continuing Education program on Thursday, March 13 at 7 PM. The title of his talk is “Beyond Zen.” As the date of this talk falls on the Thursday evening before sesshin, the sesshin setup will be held on Friday evening instead.

### Upcoming Events

Introductory Seminar	March 4, May 5, June 3
Samu	March 11, March 25, April 8, April 29, May 13, May 20, June 10
Zazen/Q & A	March 13, May 15
MWW Meeting	March 18
Zazenkai	March 19, May 14
Dharma Talk	March 26
Kannon Ceremony	March 30
Lay Order Meeting	April 1
Sesshin Setup	April 14, June 15
<b>Sesshin</b>	<b>April 14-22, June 17-24</b>
Dharma Discussion	April 30
BOD Meeting	May 10
<b>Vesak</b>	<b>May 21</b>
Ceremony of Aid	June 8
<b>Sangha Meeting</b>	<b>June 11</b>

### **Sesshin: Climbing the Silver Mountain, con't...**

I have been struggling with this as regards the Lotus in the Flame Order and the Monastery Without Walls program for years now. It will soon be time to add two five day sesshins to our calendar; one during the winter training period (January & February), and one during the summer training period (July & August). In this way it will be possible for anyone who really wishes to attend one sesshin every three months for a total of four sesshin a year. And those who wish and are able could attend six sesshin a year. Also, the two additional sesshin will provide a strong training opportunity for members of the Lay Order and the Monastery Without Walls, as I will not be conducting those sesshin.

Students come to sesshin for different reasons. New students come to sesshin to be initiated into the Path of Zen. They come to learn how to engage the practice more profoundly and thus go far deeper into Zen practice than they could before. Some students come to sesshin to break through their initial koan, “Mu.” It is in sesshin that they are able to get up the head of steam necessary to burn

away enough delusions (discriminatory thoughts) and attachments to break through the barrier of self and other and enter the room of non-duality. Some people come to sesshin to work single mindedly on subsequent koans and thus clarify and deepen their understanding of the nature of life and death. But regardless of our different motives, we all come to sesshin to become still and quiet through and through and return to that place that is unmoving and thoroughly at rest—our true abode.

Making this connection with our true nature is the most important thing we can do in this life. And it is in sesshin that we are able to accomplish this great matter more easily than anywhere else.

So once again we have the supreme opportunity to put aside all of our worldly responsibilities, concerns and preoccupations and practice now the Dharma that we may bring greater clarity, peace and joy to ourselves and the world.

\* Dharma Communications is the publications arm of Zen Mountain Monastery in New York.

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