



# The Oak Tree in the Garden

Journal of the Hidden Valley Zen Center

## Reflections on Four Years of Zazen

*This Zen student has written each year of the fruits of his ongoing meditation practice. He has now been at it for four years. It is important to recognize that each person's journey is individual; however, it is equally important to see our own potential in what he has reached in his own journey.*

I have been practicing Zen meditation for four years now, and I want to share some thoughts about how regular sitting, both at home and in the zendo, has changed me. The truth I am seeking to convey here is embodied in experience. This is experience is something lived in-the-body, day-to-day. It is a living, breathing, direct participation in life that the words I am writing can only inadequately describe. Doing zazen is living life in the most immediate and direct way. The miracle of life in all its rich complexity (one could describe it a messy miracle, or better yet a miraculous mess!) is there to be completely experienced.

Through Zen practice my mind, once crowded with worries, analysis, thoughts and more thoughts, has let go of the need to control events. It has let go of the need to judge and assign value to each and every thing that happens. The mental habit of 'compare and despair'— of seeing everything as better or worse than everything else— has gradually eased up. I've begun to realize how much space judgement and comparison were taking up in my life. I've become conscious of a subtle, barely detectable sense of anxiety, a cluster of barely articulated but ever-present questions: What will happen next? Will I be OK? Am I good enough? What if x happens? What if y happens? These habitual and cunning mental constructs have gradually lost their power. This is not to say that I walk around in a state of mindless bliss, living in a sort of 'whatever comes is ok, dude' world. No, when it's time to decide, I decide: quickly, naturally, eas-

ily, out of a spaciousness opened through zazen. There is a feeling of being at ease, no matter what the situation, and not an obsessive concern with how to be in a given situation, or how the situation might change. This is a security literally grounded in nothing— a space which holds all and has no boundaries.

*Homo sum: Humani nil a me alienum puto/I am a man: Nothing human is alien to me.*

—Terence, c. 190-158 BC

This sentence, written by an ancient Roman playwright who was once a slave, resonates deeply with the experience of zazen. The exploration of my whole being while sitting on the cushion, the going inward, deeper and deeper, reveals everything—not just the 'nice' stuff, but all the things I want to cover up and deny. Facing everything, practicing 'radical acceptance' means that the light of awareness can shine throughout the mental constructs that make me reactive, rather than active.

Facing the truth of myself, making conscious the mind habits constructed through years of unconscious conditioning, opens me to a sense of curiosity. To sit zazen is to live a question: What is this? What is beneath this? Is there something even deeper than this experience right now? Sitting with a sense of curiosity means that no one session of zazen is like another. Here is a paradox: Each time I sit down on the cushion, it is the first time I am sitting. Now the ordinary mind has a hard time grasping this. It asks, "How can sitting in the same way, each day, not be totally boring?" The gift of zazen is that everything becomes new in each and every moment. Ordinary life, off the cushion, takes on a different texture. Washing the dishes is just washing the dishes, yet the experience of it, even though I've done it thousands of times, is new. Time off and on the cushion is permeated with this

sense of newness, of possibility.

I want to be clear: Zazen has not provided instantaneous solutions to all the situations life has presented to me over the last four years. I don't sit down on the cushion with a question and stand up with an answer. But in opening myself to all that is human in me, I also open myself to all that is possible. And from a deep well of creativity, beyond my habitual, conditioned ego, the right response to a situation often arises. And when clarity is not forthcoming, I am more and more able to simply take any situation 'hold it on my lap, like a brick,' just sitting with it, exactly as it is. Here, Zen is not progress toward a solution; Zen is being the question, right now, fully in this moment.

Sitting has allowed me to let go of the 'baggage of the past'— dropping all the painful memories that I dragged around, my personal 'bag of rocks.' It has also allowed me to let go of the 'baggage of the future'— all those obsessive concerns with how I will turn out, who I will be in the future— that I have come to realize were as heavy a bag of rocks as the past. This has opened a space for authenticity: "being exactly and genuinely what a thing is said to be" to quote Webster's Dictionary.

This looking directly, both inside myself and outside at the world, allows me to see with increasing clarity. I am able to be just myself, as I am at this moment. I am able to feel this in my body, and not just as a concept in my head. As Dogen wrote in the 13th century:

*...we human beings are continually arranging the bits and pieces of what we experience in order to fashion 'a whole universe,' ...we are continually arranging bits and pieces of what we experience in order to fashion them into what we call a 'self,' which we treat as 'myself': this is the same as the principle of 'we ourselves are just for a time.'*

Four years ago, this quote from Dogen would have made no sense to me whatsoever. Now, I can understand it as a lived experience.

I recently saw a flock of migrating birds, hundreds and hundreds of them, landing in trees along the street where I was walking. As I watched them, they flew off in their hundreds, forming shapes,

now an enormous ball, now a swirl of black streaks against the blue sky, now a gigantic triangle— each shape a mass of individual birds. They were showing me, there up in the sky, what Dogen wrote, arranging the 'bits and pieces' of the bird flock now into this shape, now into that. When I can see my existence, my self, as bits and pieces arranged, like that flock of migrating birds, into a self that is a response to the here and now, then I can be authentically me. Then I am a self which is genuine response to the moment, not a fixed ego with a limited repertoire of reactive patterns.

When I can see reality for what it truly is, a series of contingencies that is impermanent, then "I" can truly be, in the most authentic way possible.

Four years of zazen has made my life simpler. Four years zazen has made my life infinitely richer. This is the paradox and the gift of Zen. And to all who have travelled this path with me, I bow deeply and with deep gratitude.



Shotai Serita Scott is pictured here in Turtleback Zendo following her ordination as a Buddhist monk.

## Ordination of a Zen Buddhist Monk

On March 9 of this year Serita Scott, longtime Zen practitioner, was ordained as a Zen Buddhist monk and given the name Shotai, which means “Correct [True] Reality.” The ceremony took place in the zendo at Turtleback Zendo, where Shotai is Head Monk, and immediately preceded the beginning of the March 7-day sesshin led by Mitra-roshi. Sozui-sensei, who is Assistant Spiritual Director at Hidden Valley Zen Center, came from California to assist in the ceremony, and Dogen O’Connor came from Mountain Gate to be jikijitsu at the sesshin. He also videotaped the daily teishos, which have been posted on YouTube; these and other teishos by Mitra-roshi can be found by searching “Mitra roshi” on YouTube.

Turtleback Zendo was established several years ago, the realization of a longtime dream of Shotai’s to turn her home into a zendo after her husband, who suffered for decades from early onset Alzheimer’s, passed away. Since then the little zendo has grown and is clearly an integral part of the northern New Jersey community in which it is located.

As is traditional, Shotai was given a monk rakusu inscribed by Mitra-roshi. The inscription—a quote from the Diamond Sutra—translates into English as follows:

*Thus shall ye think of this fleeting world—  
A star at dawn, a bubble in a stream,  
A flash of lightning in a summer cloud,  
A flickering lamp, a phantom, and a dream.*



*In the photo above, Dogen photographs Sozui-sensei, far left, Shotai, and Mitra-roshi after the ceremony.*

## Ordination in the Infinite Mind Order

Traditionally in the Asian and South Asian countries where Buddhism originally took root, the concept of a “home leaver” or “monk” was the model of Buddhist practice. People—most often men—left home, permanently cutting their ties with family in the interest of focusing completely on the search for enlightenment. The reality of this is mixed. For example, in ancient China, some monks actually owned property and had slaves working that property. On the other end of the spectrum, one of the rules Chinese Buddhist novice nuns must follow is to not visit their family without being accompanied by a fully ordained nun—perhaps to keep them from having second thoughts about their path?

Modern European and American culture is not the same as ancient Indian or Chinese culture. Yet many Westerners yearn deeply for the true freedom innate in everyone that because it is obscured by conditioning is not readily accessible. Our modern societies seem less structured and strictured than traditional societies of ancient times, and with it people have more choices available to them. Add to this the fact that America was virtually built by people wanting personal independence above else, and the ability to choose their own path through life—which may or may not have fit with the dominant paradigm of their era. Accordingly, the traditional monastic model is rarely available—or sought after—in the West these days. More prevalent is the model of serious lay Zen practice, regular and committed practice accomplished while also raising a family and living out in the world.

The renowned Japanese Zen master Hakuin Ekaku famously said, “Zazen in the midst of activity is worth 10,000 times that of seated zazen.” Both, of course, are essential if we are to truly tread the path to awakening. This leaves open the possibility of deep commitment to Buddhist practice within the context of family and outside employment. The key, of course, is balance, but that in itself is an aspect of practice.

To become formally ordained—as compared to lay ordained, which involves having become a committed Zen student working with a teacher who feels the time is right to recognize that student’s ongoing commitment by giving them a Buddhist name and a rakusu—is a matter of even greater gravity than that of becoming lay ordained. Committing to a life-

time of work on oneself for the benefit of relieving suffering, as a Zen Buddhist monk, is an ongoing challenge. During the ordination of Shozen [who has since died in an accident] he gasped. When asked about it afterwards, he said, "I realized I was making this commitment for lifetimes."

And so a person requesting ordination is called upon to prove over an extended period of time that he/she is truly committed—and in a position to honor that commitment in an ongoing manner—to making the primary focus of his/her life the ongoing practice of coming to true and deep awakening. How that might manifest in a given situation and with a given person is part of the work preliminary to requesting ordination.



*The following article on what is also known as makyo was written by Josh Kelman and originally appeared in the Vermont Zen Center's newsletter, Walking Mountains. It is reprinted here with permission. Josh is a member of the VZC and a longtime student of Sunyana Roshi.*

## Mara

Much of what we experience in our Zen practice can rightly be characterized as inscrutable. The words of the masters can be inspiring and they can appear opaque. Roshi Kapleau, as a beginning student, bemoaned "... Zen's paradoxes which need the personal experience of enlightenment to be understood." But there is one Buddhist teaching, going back to the Buddha himself, that can be perfectly understood right at the beginning of practice. Mara, the demon we ourselves create, is visible to us all. This is the inner voice, which seeks the comfort of the known and fears our efforts to experience that which is greater than our small selves. Most of us encountered Mara the very first time we crossed our legs. And we can see from the Buddha's own life that Mara lives on even after a profound awakening.

Who among us has not been bedeviled by thought patterns during zazen that seek to justify quitting? Discomfort, painful recollections and a gnawing belief in our own inadequacies can ball up and deliver a hammer blow that knocks us off course. And while we are listening to these horror tales from Mara, our practice is ten thousand miles away.

In that sense, Mara is no different a distraction than composing a shopping list. The difference is Mara's power, which finds our weakest spot and bores in. We indulge Mara and walk down Mara's painful road even as the clock ticks away on our mat.

At one time I thought that inadequacy was part of our western psyche, perhaps stronger in myself than in others, but a barrier not faced by our steely-willed Japanese and Chinese ancestors. As for those in the Buddha's time, stories of their instant understanding of the Dharma meant that they could not be the same people as you and me. The truth is that cultural differences are only labels for the work we all must do. Mara has a multitude of faces and one is designed just for us. If Mara tried tempting even the Buddha to quit, it's not likely that anyone else would be immune. Wily Mara stands astride the very same path taken by ourselves and by Shakyamuni Buddha.

With some poetic license, we can find Mara in the biblical Book of Job. Recall the story in which God and the devil are betting whether Job can maintain faith in a withering storm of painful experiences. It is no different for us when Mara is raining down the worst. We must maintain our faith breath by breath.

In the end, it comes down to skillful means. The Buddha on the eve of his great enlightenment could touch the ground to demonstrate his lifetimes of self-work and so dismiss Mara's siren song of quitting. For ourselves the key is simply recognizing Mara for the thief he/she is. We create Mara. We can destroy Mara. Simple as that. Of course, the fine print is that we must do this over and over again. And beware, Mara will return in new clothes. This is zazen after all. What else should we expect?

Perhaps the strongest tool we have in resisting Mara is Sangha, our sisters and brothers who are sitting beside us in the zendo and down through the ages. Facing the same types of issues, they summon the inner strength to persevere. All this and coming out of it with a smiling face and a giving heart. How could we not make the same effort? And with whatever works for us, smacking Mara in the kisser, laughing at Mara's pitiful antics or simply ignoring the mirage, we persevere too. Mara, the great equalizer. The emperor without clothes.



## Lay Ordination

I was reticent about taking the precepts (JuKai)—receiving a rakusu from Roshi—although also excited about the idea. It felt right on an intuitive level to move into that level of a relationship with my Zen teacher—and receiving a name seemed like an expression of something that was naturally happening. Still, I wanted to hash out with Roshi what exactly the expectations were on her part in giving me that name—and what her impression was of what I would be committing to. I wanted that commitment itemized—so that I could pour over it and calculate the odds of whether or not I was fit to take that step. The truth is, I was afraid that if I couldn't fulfill a name—or if I let Roshi's expectations down—I would lose the relationship. She said to me to just jump in and take a risk. So I did. It felt right to do.

The ceremony was powerful. It happened on the fifth day of the February Osesshin at Mountain Gate. I was given the name “DoGen” after the great Japanese Zen Master who created the Soto school of Zen. The name translates as “Gen” meaning “source”, and “Do” meaning “way”; together they mean “Source Way”—as in way towards the source. I also like to interpret it as the way in which source unfolds.

Before doing training in monasteries, I used to scoff at ceremonies. I am finding these days how powerful ceremonies are; something about the intention, and focus that happens in events like this have rippling, ongoing effects. And that certainly has been the case receiving the name “DoGen”. It felt appropriate and natural to acknowledge how my life is aligning with the basic moral framework of the precepts by receiving JuKai; more than that, stepping into a name in Zen feels like a selfless act and practice at letting go. I get to see in practice, day by day, how Harrison—my given birth name—is DoGen. Someone might ask, “How is that any different from assuming any other identity? How is that any different from becoming a carpenter, or firefighter, or math teacher?”

That the well of being called “Harrison” is actually “DoGen”, through recognizing this I get to know Harrison—who I am for the first time. The difference is that if Harrison can be anybody—and that nothing is carried along and held onto when

moving into this situation, this interaction with that person, this scenario where something truly needs to be done and accomplished (something that aligns with the ethics and moral tenor of the precepts) then I know who I am experientially without needing anything, including myself, to be a certain and fixed way. That freedom allows me to connect with others, have compassion and be fully human. It's also inherently joyful.



## The Fruits of Dedicated Practice

It is one of the ironies of human existence that the sublime art of music should be so fraught with pain and anxiety. One would think that the beauty of music, and its ethereal appeal – you can't see it, taste it or touch it, only hear it – would make it as close to a 'spiritual' experience as anything in the panorama of human possibilities. And yet for a musician like myself, trained in the rigorous tradition of classical music, the encrustations of anguish and ego-driven suffering encasing this sublimity often cloud, and indeed obscure, the purity of the musical experience.

I have found that zazen has helped me 'cut through' these layers of conditioned ego, and has, gradually and gently, returned me to the simple but profound truth of the musical art form I have spent my life perfecting.

These questions: Am I talented enough? Do I get enough recognition? Why did he/she win the prize and not me? These and more drop away, and begin to be seen for what they are, manifestations of the ego, grasping at the wind, trying to make sound, by its very nature impermanent, a permanent thing. This is like trying to walk right and left simultaneously. And yet so much of the classical music world is caught up in this impossible dilemma.

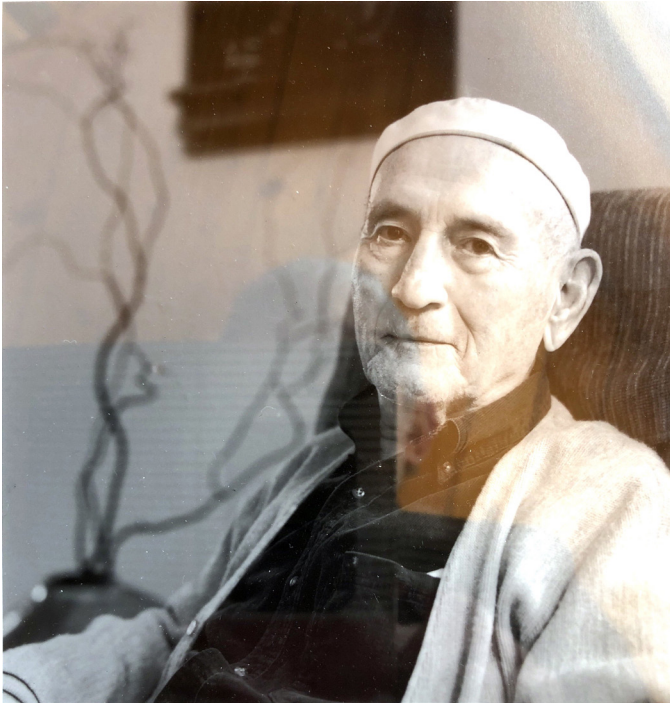
As I do my regular sitting, and continue my musical endeavors, I find myself returning to my childhood wonder at the beauty of sound. Indeed, in letting go of the perpetual striving for recognition, celebrity, success, prizes, applause, the next big performance, a truth, mysterious and profound, beyond childhood wonder opens up.

Here is zazen as liberation. Through regular, committed sitting, I am able to be the musician I truly

am, and to make music with an authentic voice, freer and freer from the tangled web of ego. I can simply create beautiful sound in the moment, and give that sound, just as it is, to my listeners. I can let go of expectations of rewards and applause, I can let go of the harsh self-lacerating judgements of the mistakes I may have made during a performance. I can just BE, freely and fully, the music that I play now.



## Roshi Philip Kapleau



*Roshi Philip Kapleau towards the end of his life. The “Parkinson’s mask”—the inability to make facial expressions, is obvious here. Yet he remained clear and bright despite the manifestations of the disease.*

May 6th will be the anniversary of Roshi Philip Kapleau’s death in 2004, just short of his 92nd birthday. He had often voiced the hope that he would die as his last teacher, Yasutani-roshi, did, only a few days after leading a 7-day sesshin. But it was not to be: The onset of Parkinson’s Disease while he was still in his 70’s progressed inexorably, as it does, until he was mostly confined to a wheelchair before he died, and exhibited ongoing signs of tardive dyskinesia, an incurable side effect of the use of certain medications which had helped relieve his Parkinson’s symptoms for many years. Tardive dyskinesia manifests as random, uncontrollable movements, and he was

major movement in action, his arms waving about wildly and frequently knocking his glasses off. When one of his students commented during a visit, “Parkinson’s is really a teacher, isn’t it, Roshi!” he responded in a calm voice barely audible due to the Parkinson’s, “It sure is.” He was still practicing...

And that is one of his characteristics so evident as more and more time was spent with him as he grew older. While PK-roshi, like all of us, had his blind spots, his less than optimal behavior, it was patently clear that once he saw one of those negative habit patterns it was gone, and never manifested after whatever insight brought it to awareness. This was true “practice in the midst of activity, “ and would have made Hakuin proud. It belied rumours that he had not completed his training. (When he came to the United States to begin teaching it was with the blessing of Yasutani-roshi, who told him when he visited the Rochester Zen Center subsequently, that “if he liked what he saw when he returned the year following he would do the final ceremony.” The following year Kapleau, knowing of the history of abusing women of a certain monk, asked him not to bring that monk with him as translator. Years later, Roshi Kapleau said in teisho to his students, “You don’t tell your Japanese teacher what to do.” Yasutani-roshi had indeed come to the States with the monk in question, but had skipped Rochester; he died before he could travel to the States again.)

Roshi Kapleau went to Japan to begin Zen training when he was in his early 40’s, soon after the end of the Second World War. The Japan he entered was still in severe deprivation following the extended war efforts, and conditions were sparse. So it was in Buddhist monasteries, and after three years of intensive training in Hosshin-ji Monastery—after having done preliminary training under Nakagawa Soen-roshi, who took him to Hosshin-ji and translated for him at Roshi’s first ever sesshin—Roshi was so physically weak from malnutrition that his teacher, Daiun Sogaku Harada-roshi, suggested he leave the monastery and live as a private English teacher so he could make enough money to buy food to regain his health again. So he did, and at Daiun-roshi’s suggestion, took as his teacher Hakuun Yasutani-roshi, Dharma successor to Daiun-roshi. In this way he was able to continue training through Hakuun’s “roving zendo” until he

returned to the States, ready to teach.

While he was in residential training at Hosshin-ji Monastery he was befriended by Tange Harada, Daiun Sogaku-roshi's adopted son and eventual Dharma successor. While Tange was not fluent in English, he could nonetheless convey in his clearly pronounced but limited vocabulary the essentials of monastic practice at Hosshin-ji and became Roshi's "guardian angel." Eventually Tange became Tange-roshi, pictured below, and although he was slated to become the abbot at Hosshin-ji, became instead the abbot—truly the resident bodhisattva—at Bukkoku-ji Monastery, a very short distance from Hosshin-ji. This seems to have been due to the fact that despite being ordained in the Soto Sect, Daiun Sogaku-roshi had trained for some years in a Rinzai monastery and so was qualified to teach koans in the Rinzai manner. Because of this when he died, the Soto Sect replaced him with a purely Soto priest.

Only a few months ago, Tange-roshi, who had had strokes and heart issues for some years, forcing him to stop teaching awhile ago, also died.

Tange-roshi had been quite young during WWII, and had been trained as a kamikaze pilot—a pilot whose plane was filled with only enough fuel for a one-way flight, which mission was to dive into an enemy's boat or plane, effectively taking out the opposition by committing suicide. As karma would have it, the war ended the day before he was scheduled to fly his mission. Thus the world was given the gift of another extraordinary Zen master, who in turn gave the same gift to Roshi Kapleau.



*Harada Tange-roshi, in his later years.*

## Special Sale Price on HVZC T-Shirts!

Awhile ago, inspired by the comment by a member who said, "Don't doubt the power of zazen!" we had some special T-shirts made to sell to raise funds to help support Hidden Valley Zen Center. They've been for sale now for some time, and many have been purchased. But now it's time for a closeout sale. These are very high quality T-shirts, all short sleeved and in Navy blue, with Mitra-roshi's enso [Zen circle] imprinted in white on the back of the T-shirt, along with the text, also in white: "Don't doubt the power of zazen." The front of the T-shirt is plain. Because it is a closeout sale we will not be ordering more shirts; hence the sizes are limited. If you're relatively local in southern California—the Center is in northern San Diego County—you can stop by and pick one up for the amazingly discounted price of \$10. These T-shirts originally sold for \$25. If you're out of town and need to have it mailed to you, please also include the shipping cost of \$7.45. The shorts are pictured below. Thank you for helping to support HVZC!



## Calendar

**May 6 - All-Day Sitting** led by Sozui-sensei

**Please NOTE: There will also be as yet unscheduled Zazenkai [All-Day Sittings] at Mountain Gate in the coming months.**

**May 30 - June 3 Regaining Balance Retreat for Women Veterans with PTSD;** this is a special retreat—free and nonsectarian—for women veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress. For more information: [www.RegainingBalance.org](http://www.RegainingBalance.org)

**June 8-15 7-Day Sesshin;** deadline for applications is June 3. This is the only 7-day sesshin held at HVZC this year.

**June 2 - July 1 Regaining Balance Retreat for Women Veterans with PTSD;** this is a special retreat—free and nonsectarian—for women veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress. For more information: [RegainingBalance.org](http://RegainingBalance.org)

**July 10-17 7-Day Sesshin at Mountain Gate;** application deadline is July 3.

**August 3-5 Regaining Balance Retreat for Wives and Female Partners of Veterans with PTSD;** like the Regaining Balance Retreats for Women Veterans with PTSD this is a special retreat—also free and nonsectarian.

**August 10-12 Weekend Sesshin** led by Mitra-roshi, who expects to be at HVZC August 9-16

**September 26-30 Regaining Balance Retreat for Women Veterans with PTSD;** this is a special retreat—free and nonsectarian—for women veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress. For more information: [RegainingBalance.org](http://RegainingBalance.org)

**October 9-16 7-Day Sesshin at Mountain Gate;** deadline for applications: October 2.

**November 1 Jukai [Precepts Ceremony],** beginning at 7 pm. Jukai is a very important ceremony in the Buddhist world, and to

receive Jukai is to make a commitment to live as much as possible by the Buddhist Precepts. While some of these resemble the Ten Commandments, these precepts are not commandments, but rather, express the way a person completely enlightened and with that enlightened mind state expressed in every moment, would naturally behave. As for the rest of us, it's a work in progress, and each time we undergo the ceremony of receiving/taking the precepts we are deepening our intention to align with this compassionate behavior of body, speech and mind.

**November 2-4 Weekend Sesshin** led by Mitra-roshi; Roshi expects to be at HVZC Oct. 30 to Nov. 6.

**November 13-20 7-Day Sesshin at Mountain Gate;** deadline for applications is November 6.

**November 30 - December 8 Rohatsu Sesshin—**considered the most powerful sesshin of the year—**at Mountain Gate;** app deadline Nov 20

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*Deep Zen practice affords us the opportunity to see clearly who we really are, and with that seeing, wisdom and compassion naturally arise. When we see a need, we naturally move to meet it. The practice of dana—the paramita [perfection] of generosity, is a way to express that wisdom and compassion by offering support to our places of practice and to our teachers, who guide us through all the pitfalls of practice and help us to reach depths we never knew existed. Without dana, neither our Zen centers nor our teachers would be available to us or to future generations. Although Zen teachers and centers are sometimes supported by larger institutions in places like Japan and China, they are not usually supported in this way in the U.S. Offering support to our places of spiritual practice and to our teachers is a vital component of our practice as Zen students, because it affords us not only an opportunity to express compassion and gratitude, but it also ensures the continuity of Zen itself. Where would we be without a place to practice and a teacher to guide us?*

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