At the time of actualization, innumerable buddha ancestors arrive without expectation and receive dharma without seeking.

—Eihei Dogen
Ancestors
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Main Case

The Buddhist master Punyamitra said to Prajnatara, “Do you remember events of the past?” Prajnatara said, “I remember in a distant eon I was living in the same place as you. You were expounding great wisdom and I was reciting the most profound scripture. This event today is in conformity with past cause.”

Verse

The light of the moon reflected in the depths of the pond is bright in the sky.
The water flowing to the horizon is thoroughly clear and pure.
Sifting and straining, over and over, even if you know it exists, Boundless and clear, it turns out to be utterly ineffable.
Prajnatara was the teacher of Bodhidharma, the founder of the Zen school. In addition to the notable role of being Bodhidharma’s teacher, Prajnatara is also an interesting figure because there is some evidence that she was a woman. This possibility first came to my attention a number of years ago through a brief article by a successor of Jiyu Kennett Roshi, the founding abbess of Shasta Abbey. When Jiyu Kennett Roshi was training in Japan, her teacher, Koho Zenji, told her that there were female masters in their direct ancestral line. Years later, Jiyu Kennett asked one of her students to try to find them. His research lead him to records within the Korean Zen lineage in which Prajnatara is remembered as being a woman, as well as to historical and oral traditions from Kerala in southern India, where Prajnatara lived and is remembered within local historical memory as being a woman. He also learned of archaeological discoveries in Kerala that confirm the presence of a well-known woman master around that time. All of these factors aligned to offer a convincing argument that although within most modern scholarship Prajnatara is assumed to be a man, this important teacher may have actually been a woman.

When I first found out about this, I wrote several Buddhist scholars who are friends of the Monastery. One dismissed the matter out of hand, but another said he had heard about this rumor and thought that it was entirely plausible. In fact, he allowed that there may be other female masters within the Zen lineage who have been mistakenly assumed to be male. In written Chinese, gender is inferred from context rather than stated explicitly. So, in the context of lineage within a male-dominated religious tradition and society, there would be an assumption that a master of this stature was male. Prajnatara’s female form may have been lost over time, buried beneath cultural assumptions.

Although historical records don’t contain nearly as much information about female teachers as they do male teachers, we know there have been many realized women masters. There are sutras in which the Buddha states that there is no high or low in the dharma; sutras in which he makes clear not only that the four groups in the sangha—male and female monastic, male and female lay—were all capable of realizing enlightenment, but also recognizes individuals from each of these groups as having achieved enlightenment during his lifetime. Although there are other sutras that seem to refute the capacity of women to realize themselves, some modern scholars believe these sutras were added in later by conservative male disciples.

Whoever Prajnatara was, whether male or female, certainly as Bodhidharma’s teacher she holds a special place within our lineage. She is said to have been an orphan who lived on the streets and didn’t even know her own name—a very good beginning for a Buddhist master. She made her living by begging, and one day she encountered Punyamitra. It seems she had a karmic connection with Punyamitra going back into past lives; he recognized her as a dharma vessel and she eventually became his dharma heir. To escape the mayhem of the Hun invasions in Northern India, Prajnatara traveled to the southern part of the country. This is where she first encountered Bodhidharma’s father, who was a king there, and then later met one of his sons who would become her
disciple. Just as her teacher had seen something special in her, she also recognized Bodhidharma’s potential.

In this koan, Prajnatara is being asked by her teacher, “Do you remember events of the past?” She says, “I remember in a distant eon I was living in the same place as you. You were expounding a great wisdom and I was reciting a most profound scripture. This event is in accord with past cause.” What is the question in this koan, what needs to be resolved? “This event today is in conformity with past cause.” What does this mean? This can be understood from Buddhism’s perspective on karma, but the koan is asking for a deeper, more direct understanding.

“This event today is in conformity with past cause”—this is always the case. This is never not true. Our presence in this hall today is fully and utterly in accord with past causes. We didn’t just suddenly get here by ourselves. We should reflect on the multitudes of past actions, just in this one brief flicker of a lifetime, that brought us to this moment. Prajnatara is reflecting in this way on eons past. One of our cultural identities or myths is of the one who goes it alone, pulls themselves up by their bootstraps, the rebel, the outlaw, the self-made person. What a lie. What an ingratitude. What a danger. We are each the recipient of innumerable currents of life—through the lives of others—streaming into and influencing our own lives. How many thoughts and intentions, how many words and actions of others have influenced us to wonder about things, led us to the dharma? How many acts of kindness, or words of inquiry or concern have we received that helped lead us to this very moment? How is it that on this very day we can study these teachings, learn these practices, be tested in our understanding and be in intimate contact with a spiritual process that began over 2,500 years ago?

For many Western Buddhists, this koan presents a challenge: how are we to understand the Buddhist teachings on past lives and rebirth? We could just dismiss them out of hand because we have no personal evidence to verify them, but is it possible that we just don’t recognize the evidence? Does it make sense to deny something simply because we haven’t experienced it as being true? How often do we come to discover things as true that we didn’t know were true before? How often do we rely on the observations or reflections of others—thinkers, scientists, explorers—to teach us truths even when we haven’t experienced them directly? Or, we could just decide to believe in rebirth with a kind of blind faith, simply because it’s a Buddhist teaching. How do we live in and practice that tension between deep faith and direct experience? How do we hold the deeper truths, more challenging teachings, greater mysteries that are not easy to understand or verify? Is there another way of

How many acts of kindness, or words of inquiry or concern have we received that helped lead us to this very moment?
holding something that we do not yet know to be true?

We do this all the time. We come into practice not knowing much about the dharma, not having verified it for ourselves. In the beginning, we may not even have experienced the truth of the suffering of attachment, but we take it on a measure of faith and begin practicing. We’re constantly practicing with faith in that which we don’t yet know to be true, and having to stretch sometimes to bring that faith forward. Through practice, we discover how to remain open, to simply not know, to let go of our attachment to the certainty of yes or no.

Punyamitra asks Prajnatara to reflect on events from the past. Now, we do this a lot in ways that are habitual, obsessive and utterly non-constructive. We can become mired in memories of things that are long gone, continually giving them life and meanwhile missing our own life right here. But there’s a different kind of reflection on the past that is in accord with practice—to reflect on the karmic streams, on how “this event today is in conformity with past cause.” This is looking at the past to understand our conditioning, to understand how all of those many actions—thoughts, words, deeds—moved us, moved others, and influenced the course of our lives. Each of us can think of pivotal moments—something that happened, something we saw or read, something someone said—that stand out amidst all the others. Sometimes we don’t recognize it as pivotal until later. Looking back, we realize its significance. This event here, today, is in accord with past cause.

This is why it is so important to understand how in every moment we are changing the course of our lives. In that sense, practice has been happening since we first started having active consciousness and were able to discriminate, understand and think. Like the first time we encountered death. That’s a decisive moment in a person’s life. It may come early in our lives, when a pet dies or we lose someone in our family. We realize something in that moment: that this doesn’t last forever.

The Buddha said that if we don’t understand impermanence, we go through life blind; we don’t know what we’re in the midst of. Popular culture is all about living on the surface, but practice leads us beneath the surface to realize what lies beyond the perceived levels of understanding and reality. It’s easy to live on the surface: to talk and act, to provoke and inspire in a superficial way. We can think that’s enough and have no idea what the possibilities are, what is slipping by, who we really are. But to have encountered the dharma means that we have dipped beneath the surface of things, that we have practiced cultivating enlightened qualities before we even know what that means. If this were not the case, we couldn’t have encountered the dharma. We might have come across the teachings, but we would not have turned our attention toward them. For this to happen, seeds had to have been planted and cultivated. Each of us can look at our path to practice and see that this is true.

In his teachings, Bodhidharma speaks about the six realms of existence as the terrain that we inhabit. He says:

Those who blindly follow the precepts and foolishly seek happiness are born as gods in the realm of desire. Those who blindly observe the five precepts and
foolishly indulge in love and hate are born as human beings in the realm of anger. And those who blindly cling to the phenomenal world believe in false doctrines, and pray for blessings, are born as demons in the realm of delusion.

In each of these, Bodhidharma speaks about practicing blindly. We can be practicing the precepts and do it without understanding ourselves or the precepts. We can be engaged in the world of love and hate and be led by selfish desires. We can be asking for and receiving blessings and be looking outside ourselves. He says when our greed is greatest we become hungry ghosts. When our anger is greatest we enter into hell realms. And when our delusion is greatest we become beasts reduced to desire-impulses.

We arrive in a realm of existence due to the strength of our karma. Karma is strengthened by the number of moments or days or years that we’ve devoted to creating certain desires and mental states, by the energy we’ve given to it and the degree to which we’re caught in it. But that strength can also be a form of spiritual power. When we don’t understand, then it’s a blind power. We see how people use great power blindly and wreak great destruction all the time. But when we have opened the eye that sees without looking, understands without knowing, and trusts without expectations, that karmic power can be transformed into something that has liberative qualities.

**What does this mean?** When you find yourself in a difficult place, don’t just look for an exit in panic, but reflect on how this event right now is in conformity with past cause. We can study and understand how our life is being transformed in that very moment. Who names this place as a hell realm? Someone else might see it differently. Seeing into this, how do we leap free? This is the power that comes with understanding mind directly—not through analysis, but through examination.

The wonderful thing about practice is that this ability to see into our mind and to shift is available to us at the very beginning,
in the very first moment. That’s how powerful we are. Keizan says, “Even if you seem to be a beginner, if in a single moment the mind is turned around to reveal its originally inherent qualities, nothing is lacking at all; together with the realized ones, you will commune with the Buddhas.” Since the very beginning it is this way. Since the beginning and all the way through, nothing is lacking at all. Even in those challenging moments, in the presence of challenging people, sitting with that challenging mind, nothing is lacking. Whether the mind is realized or not, this is so.

This moment is always in complete and utter conformity with past cause. Daido Roshi often used to say, “What you do and what happens to you are the same thing.” I remember hearing that again and again and
thinking, “Huh? What are you saying? How can that be?”

What is time? What is today? What is past? Through deep inquiry into this very moment we can begin to have insight into how it is in accord with all time, all events. Time seems by nature to be dualistic, a witnessed measurement of something passing. What is time without the witness, without passing? How does that change our way of living during our days of time, people and consequences? We’re all implicated, we’re all exerting our power, we’re all changing the world. The question becomes how do we use this great power? What do we do with this human life? Realize your very being as all of time—past, present and future—and the unity of cause and effect. What you do and what happens to you are the same.

My mother was visiting recently. She’s always had a very active, creative life. She’s 87 now, and moving a little bit slower, but still very involved with things. This visit she spoke of being with the question, “What am I to be doing at this time in my life?” I said, “Maybe this time in your life is about not doing.” But not doing can be frightening, perhaps particularly as we approach the end of our lives. From a distance, imagined in our mind, doing nothing might appear too still, too naked. But we should understand, while we’re still in the midst of our doing, the profound nature of not-doing. To manifest that spiritual power, to have that kind of influence.

We need activity, but when we look at the state of our world, we can see how essential it is that there be those who know how to stop for a moment, for a day, for a week—how to stop within every moment, how to realize the stillness in activity. Then in arriving, no one comes. Then in living this life, no one is born. Then in facing our death, no one will be extinguished. In facing suffering, fundamentally there’s not a single thing. From this place, to move amidst the many things and intermingle.

The light of the moon reflected in the depths of the pond is bright in the sky. The water flowing to the horizon is thoroughly clear and pure. These images and their qualities describe our basic nature, our potential: the radiant moon, the deep pond, the night sky, the fluid, clear, pure water. These are the unknowable, undefinable qualities we each possess.

Sifting and straining over and over. Even if you know it exists, boundless and clear, it turns out to be utterly ineffable. Even if we know it exists—that we are naturally endowed with enlightened nature—we sit on this cushion having faith. We face our mind in trust. We hear the teachings and somehow, inexplicably, we know that they’re true.

Bodhidharma says, “Do not use your mind to seek mind. Do not look for something.” As Daido Roshi used to say, “It’s not like anything.” Trust deeply, let go deeply. Do you remember how you got here? Do you know how to move forward? You know enough. Practice this.

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*The Transmission of the Light or Denkoroku* was compiled by Keizan Jokin, a seminal figure in Japanese Soto Zen. It is a significant historical and religious document on the role of the mind-to-mind transmission in Zen.
Editorial: Knowing Who We Are

Spiritual traditions across the world make time and space to honor those who came before—the Dagara people perform sacred rituals to keep the bonds with their ancestors clear and strong; Buddhists invoke a lineage of past teachers by name, expressing gratitude for their teachings each day; observant Catholics offer prayers and veneration to the saints. This is in sharp contrast with contemporary American secular life, where many of us struggle to recall the names of our great-grandparents, let alone relate to their presence in any substantive, ongoing way. The Buddha taught that past and present are inextricably bound by the subtle threads of cause and effect. Could it be that connecting to our ancestors might offer something vital to our lives here and now?

This issue of Mountain Record explores the theme of “Ancestors” from multiple perspectives. Some pieces take up the theme from a distinctly Buddhist view: Bhikkhu Bodhi writes about the role of the teacher and disciple within Buddhism; Dogen Zenji considers the importance of dharma transmission across generations. Other writers grapple with the social and political relevance of the theme: Ta-Nehesi Coates reflects on how black American identity has been shaped by the racist history of this country, and how the concept of race itself is an invention of white ancestors; Leslie Marmon Silko examines the loaded intersection between indigenous tradition and capitalist exploitation on her ancestors’ land in the American southwest. Other pieces invite us to expand our view of ancestry. Geoffrey Shugen Arnold Sensei speaks of how “We are each the recipient of innumerable currents of life streaming into and influencing our own lives.” Thich Nhat Hanh reminds us that our ancestral relationships aren’t limited to human beings: “As I look more deeply, I can see that in a former life I was a cloud.”

Throughout, this issue challenges us to dissolve the boundaries we create between the spiritual and the political. The violence, war and hatred that fill the news are the results of our delusion: believing ourselves to be fixed and separate has devastating effects on the world we live in. But if we can appreciate that we are one among infinite beings rising and falling in all directions, intimately connected not only to the actions of our human forebears but also to the mountains and rivers, then we can emerge at a more true and nuanced understanding of this life.

It’s important to offer our gratitude, to appreciate that our life today is possible because of those who came before. And it’s also important to take a long, hard look at what else we’ve inherited: prejudice, self-righteousness, a thirst for wealth and power. Our place in the world is not a given; we create it. As Shugen Sensei says, “We’re all implicated, we’re all exerting our power, we’re all changing the world. The question becomes, how do we use this great power?” Drawing on the wisdom of our teachers, elders, sisters and brothers, how do we understand who we are and where we come from? Deepening our view, what can we do to help heal our troubled world?

Danica Shoan Ankele
Mountain Record Editor
As a religious founder the Buddha did not claim to be a divinely inspired prophet, a personal savior, or a deity incarnate in flesh. Within the framework of his Teaching, the Dhamma, his special role is that of a teacher, the Supreme Teacher who reveals the unique path to final deliverance. In the earliest form of the Teaching, as represented by the Pali Canon, no essential difference divides the goal attained by the Buddha
himself from that realized by his disciples. For both the goal is the same, Nibbana, the perfect liberation of the mind from all constricting bonds and the consequent release from samsara, the round of repeated birth and death.

The differences between the Buddha and his disciples concern, first, the temporal sequence of their attainment and, second, the personal qualities which they acquire through their realization of the goal. In terms of temporal sequence, the Buddha is the discoverer of the path to Nibbana, while his disciples are those who tread the path under his guidance and thereby gain the fruit:

The Tathagata, monks, is the originator of the path unarisen before, the producer of the path unproduced before, the declarer of the path undeclared before. He is the knower of the path, the finder of the path, the one skilled in the path. And his disciples now dwell following that path and become possessed of it afterwards. This, monks, is the distinction, the disparity, the difference between the Tathagata, the Arahant, the Fully Enlightened One, and a monk liberated by wisdom.

In terms of personal qualities, the Buddha, as the founder of the sasana, the teaching or “Dispensation,” possesses a vast array of skills and modes of knowledge that are not fully shared by his disciples. These cognitive faculties include not only certain thaumaturgical powers but also the unimpeded knowledge of the constitution of the world with its many planes of existence and a thorough understanding of the diverse mental proclivities of sentient beings. Such faculties are necessary to enable the Buddha to fulfill his essential mission of establishing the Dispensation in the world at large and of guiding countless beings to liberation from suffering.

Since the Buddha’s aim when he first “set in motion the Wheel of the Dhamma” was to lead sentient beings to Nibbana, the very structure of his Teaching presupposes a relationship of discipleship between himself and those who hearken to his message. The Buddha is the fully enlightened teacher (satta), his Teaching (sasana) is an injunction to undergo a particular course of training; and those who conform to the demands of discipleship do so by following his injunction (sasanakara) and complying with his advice (ovadapatikara). Even at the close of his ministry, as he lay on his deathbed between the twin sala trees at Kusinara, he declared that it was not by external acts of homage that the Tathagata, the Perfect One, was properly worshipped, but by the consistent and dedicated practice of the Dhamma.

The course of discipleship under the Buddha begins with an act of faith (saddha). Faith, for Buddhism, is not an unquestioning assent to propositions beyond the range of possible verification but a readiness to accept on trust the claim that the Buddha makes about himself: that he is the Fully Enlightened One, who has awakened to the deepest, most crucial truths about the nature of sentient existence and who can show the path to the supreme goal. The placing of faith in the Buddha’s Enlightenment is manifested by the process of “going for refuge” to the Three Jewels of Buddhism (tiratana): to the Buddha as one’s mentor and spiritual guide; to his Teaching, the Dhamma, as the most perfect expression of existential truth and the flawless path to liberation; and to the Ariya Sangha, the community of noble
ones, as the corporate embodiment of wisdom and spiritual purity. Faith necessarily leads to action, to the undertaking of the training, which in concrete terms means the implementation in one’s life of the guidelines the Buddha has laid down for his followers. These guidelines vary widely in dependence on the situation and aptitude of the disciple. Certain sets of guidelines are more appropriate for lay followers, others more appropriate for monastics, and it is the disciple’s task to make the right choice among them. But all such guidelines, originating from different starting points, eventually converge upon a single path, universal and unique, leading infallibly to the final goal. This is the Noble Eightfold Path, the way to the cessation of suffering, with its three divisions of virtue (sīla: right speech, right action, right livelihood), concentration (saṃdhi: right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration), and wisdom (panna: right view, right intention).

Those who accept the Buddha as teacher and attempt to follow his path are his savaka (Skt. sravaka), his disciples. The category of discipleship cuts across the conventional distinction between the monastic order and the lay community and thus embraces the traditional “four assemblies” of Buddhist followers: bhikkhus and bhikkhunis (monks and nuns) and upasakas and upasikas (laymen and laywomen). Although later texts of the Mahayana tradition speak of the savakas as if they formed a distinct class of disciples—a class contrasted unfavorably with the bodhisattvas—the early Buddhist scriptures do not know any such distinction but use the word savaka broadly to refer to all those who accept the Buddha as their master. The word is derived from the causative verb saveti, “to inform, to declare,” and thus means those who declare the Buddha to be their master (or perhaps those to whom the Dhamma has been declared). In the early texts savaka is used not only as a designation for the Buddha’s disciples but also for the followers of other spiritual systems in relation to their own mentors.

Within the wide circle of the Buddha’s followers a critical distinction is drawn between two types of disciples, the ordinary disciples and the noble disciples. The differences that divide them do not pertain to outward form and mode of life but to inward spiritual stature. Such differences will become clearer if we discuss them in the light of the world view that underlies both the Buddhist tradition as a whole and the biographical profiles that constitute the substance of the present volume.

The compilers of the Buddhist scriptures accept as axiomatic a worldview that differs significantly from the picture of the universe bequeathed to us by modern science. This worldview is characterized by three basic and interrelated premises. The first is that the sentient universe is a multitiered edifice, with three primary realms divided into a number of subsidiary planes. The grossest tier is the sense-desire realm (kamadhatu), which consists of eleven planes: the hells, the animal kingdom, the sphere of ghosts, the human realm, the sphere of titans, and the six sensuous heavens; of these, only the human realm and the animal kingdom are normally accessible to our natural sense faculties. Above the sense-desire realm is the fine-material realm, or the realm of subtle form (rapadhatu), an ascending series of some sixteen exalted planes which are the ontological counterparts of the jhanas, the meditative absorptions;
here the grosser aspects of matter have faded away and the beings enjoy far greater bliss, peace, and power than is ordinarily accessible in the terrestrial realm. Finally, at the pinnacle of the Buddhist cosmos (arupadhatu), which appear when the accumulated kamma meets with external conditions congenial to its germination. Kamma determines not only the specific plane into which one is reborn but also our inherent capacities and propensities and the basic direction of our lives. The mode by which kamma operates is an ethical one: unwholesome kamma—deeds motivated by greed, aversion, and delusion—brings a bad rebirth and engenders pain and suffering; wholesome kamma—deeds inspired by generosity, kindness, and wisdom—leads to a good rebirth and to happiness and well-being.

What has raised them from the status of a worldling to the plane of spiritual nobility is a radical transformation that has occurred at the very base of the mind.

is the immaterial realm (arupadhatu), four planes of extremely attenuated nature corresponding to the four immaterial meditative absorptions (aruppajhana): here matter has disappeared completely and the denizens are of a purely mental construction.

The second axiom concerns rebirth. Buddhism holds that all unenlightened beings, those who have not eradicated ignorance and craving are bound to be reborn within the three realms. The course of transmigration is without discoverable beginning. It is propelled from within by ignorance and craving, which drive the stream of consciousness from death to new birth in a repeatedly self-sustaining process. This uninterrupted succession of births and deaths is called samsara, “the wandering on,” the round of repeated existence.

The third axiom is the principle that determines the sphere of rebirth. This is what the Buddha calls kamma, action, specifically volitional action. According to the Buddha, all our morally determinate volitional actions are subject to an inescapable law of retribution. Our deeds leave behind, in the ongoing stream of consciousness, a potential to produce results (vipaka), to bring forth fruits since all experience within the round of rebirth is impermanent and unsatisfactory, the ultimate aim for early Buddhism is to break free from this self-generating cycle and thereby win the unconditioned state, Nibbana, where there is no more birth, aging, and death. This is the goal the Buddha himself attained as the culmination of his own noble quest, and it is also the goal he constantly set before his disciples. The distinction between the two types of disciples pertains to their relationship to this goal. The class of ordinary disciples, which is by far the more numerous of the two, consists of those who are still technically classed as worldlings or commoners (puthujjana). Such disciples may have sincerely gone for refuge to the Three Jewels and may be fully devoted to the practice of
the Dhamma, but despite their earnestness they have not yet reached the plane where liberation is irrevocably assured. They have not yet seen the Dhamma for themselves, nor eliminated the mental fetters, nor entered irreversibly upon the path to final emancipation. Their present mode of practice is preparatory in character: it is intended to bring their spiritual faculties to maturity so that, in due course, they may enter upon the supramundane path. Until that experience dawns, however, they wander on through the round of rebirths, uncertain of their future destination, still liable to moral lapses and even to rebirth in the lower realms.

In contrast to this class stands the class of noble disciples, the *ariyasavaka*. These disciples have surmounted the plane of the worldlings, have arrived at the stage of irreversibility, and are assured of reaching the final goal in a maximum of seven more births. What has raised them from the status of a worldling to the plane of spiritual nobility is a radical transformation that has occurred at the very base of the mind. This transformation may be viewed from two complementary perspectives, one cognitive, the other psychological. The suttas refer to the cognitive aspect as the gaining of the vision of the Dhamma (*dhammacakkhu-patilabha*) and the breakthrough to the Dhamma (*dhammabhisekha*). Such an event, altering one’s destiny for all time, generally takes place after the disciple has fulfilled the preliminary requisites of the training and has been engaged in the practice of insight meditation (*vipassana-bhavana*). As deepening insights into the true nature of phenomena bring to maturity the faculty of wisdom (*panna*), at a certain point, when all conditions are ripe, the mists of ignorance momentarily disperse,
affording the disciple an immediate glimpse of the unconditioned element, the Deathless, which is the precondition and final term of the whole process of liberation.

When this vision dawns the disciple becomes a true heir to the Buddha’s message. The texts describe such a disciple as “one who has seen the Dhamma, reached the Dhamma, understood the Dhamma, who has overcome all doubt and perplexity, and become self-sufficient in the Master’s Teaching.” Even though the vision may still be clouded and imperfect, the disciple has won access to the ultimate truth and it is only a matter of time until, by diligent practice, he or she brings this vision to its culmination in enlightenment (sambodhi), the complete experiential understanding of the Four Noble Truths.

The other aspect of the transformation which the disciple undergoes pertains to the constitution of the psyche. It consists in the permanent elimination of certain unwholesome mental dispositions called defilements (kilesa). For purposes of exposition, the defilements are usually classified into a set of ten fetters (samyojana), called thus because they hold beings in bondage to the round of rebirths. From the suttas it appears that in exceptional cases a disciple with a high degree of wisdom from previous lives can cut off all ten fetters at a single stroke, thereby advancing in one leap from the stage of a worldling to that of an arahant, a fully liberated one. The more typical process of attainment, however, is a calibrated one whereby the fetters are cut off sequentially, in discrete clusters, on four different occasions of awakening. This results in a fourfold gradation among the noble disciples, with each major stage subdivided in turn into two phases: a phase of the path (magga), when the disciple is practicing for the elimination of the particular cluster of fetters; and a phase of the fruit (phala), when the breakthrough is complete and the fetters have been destroyed. This subdivision explains the classical formula of the Ariya Sangha as made up of four pairs and eight types of noble persons.

The first stage of awakening is called stream-entry (sotapatti), because it is with this attainment that the disciple can properly be said to have entered “the stream of the Dhamma” (dhammasota), i.e., the Noble Eightfold Path that leads irreversibly to Nibbana. Stream-entry is won with the first arising of the vision of the Dhamma and is marked by the eradication of the coarsest three fetters: personality view (sakayaditthi), the view of a substantial self within the empirical person; doubt in the Buddha and his Teaching; and wrong grasp of rules and vows (silabbataparamasa), the belief that mere external observances (including religious rituals and penitential forms of asceticism) can lead to salvation. With the cutting off of these three fetters the stream-enterer is freed from the prospect of rebirth in the plane of misery (apayabhumi), the three lower realms of the hells, the animal kingdom, and the sphere of spirits or “hungry ghosts.” Such a one is certain to attain final liberation in at most seven more lifetimes passed either in the human world or in the heavens.

The next major stage of awakening is that of the once-returner (sakadagami), who will be reborn only one more time in the human realm or in the sense-sphere heavens and there reach the ultimate goal. The path
of once-returning does not eradicate any fetters beyond most already eliminated by the path of stream-entry. It does, however, attenuate the three root defilements—greed, hatred, and delusion—so that they arise only sporadically and then only in a mild degree.

The third path, that of the non-returner (anagami), cuts off two deep roots of emotional turbulence within the psyche: the defilements of sensual lust and ill will, the fourth and fifth fetters, which are removed in all their manifold guises, even the subtlest. Because these two fetters are the principal ties that keep living beings bound to the sense-desire realm, the non-returner, as the name implies, never returns to this realm. Rather, such a one is spontaneously reborn in one of the exalted form-realm heavens called the Pure Abodes (studdhabassa), accessible only to non-returners, and there attains final Nibbana without ever coming back to this world.

The fourth and final stage of noble discipleship is that of arahantship (arahatta), which is attained by the elimination of the five subtle fetters that remain unabandoned even in the non-returner: desire for existence in the form realm and formless realm, conceit, restlessness, and ignorance. As ignorance is the most deeply grounded of all the defilements, when the path of arahantship arises fully fathoming the Four Noble Truths, ignorance collapses, bringing all the other residual defilements along with it. The mind then enters upon “the taintless liberation of mind, liberation by wisdom, attained by the destruction of the taints”—the state that the Buddha calls the unsurpassed consummation of the holy life.

**The arahant is the fully accomplished disciple of early Buddhism, the perfect model for the entire Buddhist community. Even the Buddha himself, with respect to his liberation, is described as an arahant, and he declared the arahants to be his equals in regard to the destruction of defilements. For the arahant there is no further task to be achieved and no falling away from what has been achieved. He or she has completed the development of the noble path, has fully understood the true nature of existence, and has eradicated all the mind’s bonds and fetters. For the duration of life the arahant hides in unruffled peace in the experiential realization of Nibbana, with a mind stainless and secure. Then, with the breakup of the body at the end of the life span, he or she reaches the end of the entire process of re-becoming. For the arahant death is not the passageway to a new rebirth, as it is for all others, but the doorway to the unconditioned state itself, the Nibbana-element without residue of conditioned existence (anupadisesa-nibbanadhatu). This is the true cessation of suffering to which the Buddha’s Teaching points, the final termination of the beginningless round of birth and death.**

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I thought it would be interesting to offer you a feeling or what it was like back in the old days—you know, back when we had to walk ten miles to the zendo, knee-deep in snow, barefoot. It’s good to know your history. And although Hogen’s immediate lineage is separate from mine—he studied with Kapleau Roshi at Rochester and I studied with Maezumi Roshi at ZCLA—these lineages are joined just another generation back. Kapleau Roshi trained in Japan with Daiun Harada Roshi and Maezumi Roshi’s teacher, Yasutani Roshi, also trained with Daiun Harada Roshi. Daiun Harada Roshi would be your dharma great-grandfather.

As we’ve been developing the training here at Great Vow Monastery, we’ve found that some of what we experienced and found very effective in our own training back in the 1960’s and 70’s doesn’t seem to be effective today. Some of what characterized our training came primarily from the Rinzai tradition, which was adopted by the samurai class to train young samurai warriors. There was a lot of yelling and hitting in Rinzai zendos, and both Kapleau Roshi and Maezumi Roshi trained in the Rinzai tradition. Today, however, we are in a different time and a different culture. Here at Great Vow Monastery, we’ve kept some things from our training and have shifted others. This is how it always is, in a sense. You take what you learned from those who came before you, but then you have to change it to suit the present time.

Hogen recalled Kapleau Roshi’s stories of how at Daiun Harada Roshi’s temple during Rohatsu, somebody stood behind Kapleau Roshi and hit him continuously with a kyo-saku until his shoulders swelled up to his earlobes. The monks accused him of putting padding under his robe to avoid the pain of
the kyosaku and he had to take off his robe and show them that it was actually swelling and bruising.

At Rohatsu sesshin in Rochester, they would leave the zendo windows open and the snow would blow in while they were sitting—which was essentially how it was in Japan. I actually experienced this for myself at Sogenji when we did a Rohatsu sesshin in December. It was so cold that I wore all 13 layers of clothing I had packed, and then I couldn’t cross my legs completely because I had so many layers of clothing on. In a Rinzai zendo, you are not allowed to cover your head or your hands at all. It was so cold that you could not have your awareness anywhere around your skin, so you had to go deep into your hara. I have to say, it drove me into the deepest zazen that I had done until that time and pain became non-pain. Not the pain disappearing, but staying with the experience of pain and having it be sensation, pause, sensation, pause, sensation, pause. Nothing glued it together as pain. It was quite amazing. The pain came back eventually, but once you’ve experience pain in that way, you’re not afraid of pain again.

We recall how we would bellow “Mu!” at the top of our lungs, hell-bent on enlightenment until we lost our voices completely, and how the monitors would shout: “Sit still!” or “Wake up!” or “Die! Die on the cushion!” It was actually very effective for us, all of that. We loved it. We ate it up. It was effective but we haven’t seen it to be effective today as we’ve been teaching.

In Japan if the teacher yells at you or hits you, you are actually in a way pleased. And it is very encouraging because that means that you’re worth it. You have potential or you are worth hitting or yelling at. However, in our culture hitting or insulting invokes the inner critic and makes people upset at themselves or at their teachers or at Zen. They go away sad or mad and maybe even quit practice.

Yasutani Roshi, Maezumi’s teacher, was an ordained Soto monk. However, Yasutani Roshi felt that the Soto tradition over-emphasized the teaching of original enlightenment—the idea that just as you are, you are a Buddha, and if you just sit, with absolutely no notion of gain in your mind, your buddha nature will emerge fully into your experience over time. If you are sleepy, then be a sleepy buddha. If you are distracted, then be a distracted buddha. This is classic Soto Zen teaching, but Yasutani Roshi felt that something was missing. Reading the vivid stories of the sudden awakening of the old masters, he was so inspired that he determined that he would experience this enlightenment for himself. He wanted to experience for himself his original face, the sound of one hand, mu.

Yasutani Roshi was born in 1885 to a very poor family. His mother hoped her son would be a priest. While she was pregnant, she was given a mala bead by a nun who said it would help insure successful childbirth. She swallowed that bead and Yasutani Roshi related that when he was born, that bead was held in his little baby fist. He knew there was no biological explanation for that but everyone in the family said that it was absolutely true.

Yasutani Roshi was ordained at five. Often poor families would do that if they could not support their children. He spent his childhood and young adulthood training and traveling to different temples, both Rinzai and Soto. At age 30 he married and had five children. At the time you had to inherit a family temple, but there was no temple
available for Yasutani Roshi. For ten years he worked as an elementary school teacher and a principal, but his fervor for enlightenment continued burning and he continued training under different masters.

Then he found Daiun Harada Roshi at Hoshinji. Daiun Harada Roshi had also trained with masters in both the Soto and Rinzai lineages. In Japan, if you say you study Zen they ask you, “Which school do you belong to? Rinzai or Soto?” But actually there’s been a lot of cross-over and lineage holding by teachers on both sides. At age 40, Yasutani started studying with Daiun Harada Roshi and at age 58 he received Dharma transmission. I think it was Aitken Roshi who invited him to come and teach in the US. He did, traveling to different cities, including LA. Maezumi Roshi served as his translator and was so impressed with Yasutani Roshi’s clarity that he decided to study with him.

When Maezumi Roshi was 15, his father, Baian Hakujun, who was a Soto priest, told him to train with Osaka Koryu Roshi, who was a Rinzai lay teacher. Koryu Roshi had been asked by his teacher, Joko Roshi, to remain a lay person because Joko Roshi was very distressed by the bureaucratic structure governing Zen priests in Japan at that time. So Koryu Roshi had a lay dojo outside of Tokyo where people would come after work or on their vacation to train. Because of training at this lay dojo, Maezumi Roshi ended up with a strong affinity for lay practice and an unusual faith in any person’s ability, no matter their circumstance, to practice hard and break through.

When Maezumi Roshi began studying with Yasutani Roshi, he did the whole koan curriculum with him, and then he went back
and finished his original koan training under Koryu Roshi. He did two different systems of koans. Now, that takes dedication. It takes years of training to do the koan curriculum. Just think that when you finally finish, you decide to start again. How humbling! You would certainly risk being rejected by your second teacher for an answer to a koan that your first teacher accepted. How clear would you like to be?

Maezumi Roshi was very warm and very funny. He had a very good sense of humor. I remember that he did very good impersonations of geisha girls and would also do impersonations of you. Especially when he had been drinking. He was quite mischievous.

One of the reasons I studied with him was this intriguing combination of being very, very serious about the Dharma, but also very amused about the human predicament, including his own. It was this very amusing predicament of enlightenment manifesting as this imperfect mind and imperfect body. He suffered from chronic back pain. I used to do acupuncture to help him with that, but really he was in pain all the time. You never knew it, though. He almost never said anything about it.

One very striking memory I have is when Roshi came down to San Diego to do a sesshin. Afterward they had a birthday party for him. People were always eager to please the teacher and win favor. One man brought a present and from the way he held it, it was probably handmade and very precious. And as gifts were being presented, this man gave the box to Roshi with a great flourish. Roshi looked at it and said, “Oh, thank you.” Then he turned to the person next to him and said, “You have this,” and he gave it away without opening it up. We were all taken aback, but he was completely unattached to the gift and he was also unattached to the reaction of the giver. It was an amazing teaching.

He would say to me, “Chozen, beee
patient,” because impatience is my life lesson. He would also say, “Be ordinary.” “Be ordinary” meant be totally ordinary, go to extraordinary and then return to ordinary. Our ordinary mind is confused and deluded, but it is the only mind we have to practice with. If the ordinary mind becomes extraordinarily still, extraordinarily open and aware, then it dissolves. If we can leave the ordinary thinking mind behind and let the mind be completely quiet, we find pure awareness. We can gradually lengthen these stretches.
of continuous awareness; then the discursive mind becomes completely optional and the dharma can function through us in ordinary activities and ordinary ways. That ordinary mind is the way.

Roshi had his ordinariness. He loved to put on jeans and a clean white T-shirt with a plaid flannel shirt over the top and go out and move rocks around in the garden. He was a small man but he could easily move big rocks. And he could also move heavy minds.

When Roshi was in the dokusan room he became completely impersonal, ferocious and uncompromising. It was like facing a tiger. He demanded clarity. He loved koans as the best way to test one’s understanding.

Maezumi Roshi also practiced and taught shikantaza. Here is what he said about it on one occasion:

Shikantaza means to just sit, doesn’t it? That’s what we should do. If I can’t, it’s my problem. When you really do it, then right away something happens. If we don’t really do it, nothing happens. Shikantaza is just shikantaza, but we always add something extra then it becomes something else. It seems to me the key is this shikan, “just.” Wholeheartedly, “just sit.” Literally, “just sit.” That’s the hardest part of shikantaza. This is the simplest thing and maybe the hardest thing. Shikan is the most intimate way to exist. That is what it really means. It doesn’t matter what you are doing. Shikan working, shikan sleeping, shikan being sick. If you do it wholeheartedly, it is perfect. So just try to do it literally: just sit. And not only physically. Let your mental activities sit, too. It’s as simple as that. It sounds easy but I guarantee it is hard. Like myself, I can’t do it. But it’s a challenge, see, to just really do it. No questions are necessary. The answer is always there. Your question and answer altogether self-contained. The answer is to just be with yourself. So the thing is to really do that. Then it happens.

Because of all the training he’d had with different masters, because of the depth of his understanding, Roshi had a very fluid mind. In some of his Dharma talks you can’t follow where he’s going, but it’s all there in his mind. He kept turning it over and showing it in fresh ways. You could not predict his response or his view. When we’d have administrative meetings or board meetings, we’d talk on and on and he would just sit back and listen. Then after we’d wound down, he would say something very quietly. And it was always a way of seeing things in a way that we had not imagined.

Roshi’s life was guided by his vows. At age 26 he left Japan on a steam ship with a one-way ticket and just a few hundred dollars of spending money. He carried a vow to plant the seeds of Dharma so firmly in Western soil that it could not die out. From the outside his vow seemed impossible. He didn’t speak English and he had no means of support beyond a small stipend that was paid by a Japanese-American temple where he served as a priest in LA. By day he served at the Temple and also served as a gardener to earn some money. By night he took English classes at a community college. His English was not perfect in its expression, so you had to listen very closely. He spoke quite slowly, usually because he was translating into English in his own mind. Once he gave a whole teisho on the “Rinosaur’s hornfin” and we didn’t understand what he was talking about. He kept going on about the
“Rinosaur’s hornfin.” And at the end we suddenly realized, “Oh, it’s the koan about the Rhinoceros horn fan.” Once he talked about the birds barking and the dogs chirping. Years later I took a class in rapid Spanish and they forced us to speak right away with each other. But because our vocabulary was so small, you would say things like: “Today the sky is blue.” The other person would say, “Yes, today the sky is very blue.” Then I would think, “Wait a minute, that’s how Roshi spoke.” It makes things sound very profound. Because we had to listen very carefully, we had the chance to go deep into the meaning of something very simple.

Maezumi took English classes at a community college and he sat zazen. Gradually a group of Western students came to sit with him, and eventually it grew into a community. After a few more years, they bought a small house. Our original zendo was a dental office and the Dokusan Room was where the dental chair used to be, which we thought was nicely ironic. You’d go in and have, not your teeth pulled, but your ego pulled. Gradually more houses were bought, and as a result of Maezumi Roshi’s original vow, Zen Center of Los Angeles took shape. It grew into a complex of houses and apartment buildings that occupied almost an entire city block, housing 75 residents and a community clinic that was one of the first in the country to integrate western and eastern healing methods. It included an academic institution that sponsored conferences and publications by Buddhist scholars and it is still publishing today. Out of that busy center came a lineage that includes more than 100 authorized Zen teachers serving thousands of students in over sixty Zen centers around the world. All of this came from what might have seemed a foolish vow taken on with great sincerity by a determined young man.

Maezumi Roshi always said, “Appreciate your life.” He meant both your individual unique life and your big life, The Great Life. Both the small, temporary, confined, ordinary you, and the vast, eternal, unbounded, joyful, extraordinary, wonderful life that is you, being lived through you. I know that if he could, or does, see this monastery, every one sitting here so earnestly, he would be very pleased.

We are Shakyamuni Buddha, the original enlightened one, we are Mahakasyapa, the disciplined one, we are Ananda of the quick mind, but slow to actually awaken. We are Bodhidharma the radiant silent sitter. We are those most determined and persecuted Chinese nuns. We are Maezumi Roshi’s descendants. We are his living vow. We are the way the wheel of this precious teaching turns. And as we free ourselves, we also free others.

Please be patient, be diligent, be ordinary. Appreciate your life as the very life of all that is.

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From an edited transcript of a dharma discourse given at Great Vow Monastery during their Honoring the Ancestors sesshin in 2015.
A Buddha is transmitted dharma only from a buddha, an ancestor only from an ancestor, through merging realization in direct transmission. In this way, it is the unsurpassable enlightenment. It is impossible to give the seal of realization without being a buddha, and it is impossible to become a buddha without receiving the seal of realization from a buddha. Who else, other than a buddha, can certify this realization as the most venerable, the most unsurpassable?

When you have the seal of realization from a buddha, you have realization without a teacher, realization without self. This being so, it is said, “A buddha receives
realization from a buddha; an ancestor merges realization with an ancestor." The meaning of this teaching cannot be understood by those who are not buddhas. How then can it be measured by bodhisattvas of the ten stages or even those in the stage of enlightenment equal to buddhas’?

Furthermore, how can it be discerned by masters of sutras or treatises? Even if they explain it, they still do not understand it.

Since a buddha receives dharma from a buddha, the buddha way is thoroughly experienced by a buddha and a buddha; there is no moment of the way without a buddha and a buddha. For example, rocks inherit from rocks, jewels inherit from jewels. When a chrysanthemum inherits from a chrysanthemum and a pine gives the seal of realization to a pine, the preceding chrysanthemum is one with the following chrysanthemum and the preceding pine is one with the following pine. Those who do not understand this, even when they hear the words "authentic transmission from buddha to buddha," have no idea what it means; they do not know heritage from buddha to buddha in merged realization of ancestor and ancestor. What a pity! They appear to be a buddha family but they are not buddha heirs, nor are they heir buddhas.

Huineng, the Sixth Ancestor of Caoxi, once gave a discourse to the assembly: “There are forty ancestors from the Seven Original Buddhas to myself, and there are forty ancestors from myself to the Seven Original Buddhas.”

This is clearly the meaning of the authentic heritage of buddha ancestors. The Seven Original Buddhas include those who appeared in the present eon. Nevertheless, the continuation of face-to-face transmission of the forty ancestors is the buddha way and the buddha heritage.

Thus, proceeding from Huineng to the Seven Original Buddhas is the buddha heritage of forty ancestors. And going beyond from the Seven Original Buddhas to Huineng is the buddha heritage of forty buddhas.

The buddha way, the ancestor way, is like this. Without merging realization and without buddha ancestors, there is no buddha wisdom and there is no thorough ancestral experience. Without buddha wisdom, there is no accepting buddha; without thorough experience, there is no merging of realization between ancestors.

The forty ancestors here represent only recent buddhas. Furthermore, the mutual heritage between buddhas and buddhas is deep and vast, neither backing up nor turning away, neither cut off nor stopped.

This means that although Shakyamuni Buddha had realized the way before the Seven Original Buddhas, he finally received dharma from Kashyapa Buddha. Again, although he realized the way on the eighth day of the twelfth month in the thirtieth year since his birth, it is realization of the way before the Seven Original Buddhas. It is realization of the way simultaneously with all buddhas shoulder to shoulder, realization of the way before all buddhas, realization of the way after all buddhas.

Furthermore, there is an understanding that Kashyapa Buddha, in turn, received dharma from Shakyamuni Buddha. If you do not clarify this, you do not understand the buddha way. If you do not clarify the buddha
way, you are not an heir of the buddha. The buddha’s heir means the buddha’s child.

Shakyamuni Buddha once caused Ananda to ask, “Whose disciples were all buddhas of the past?”

Shakyamuni Buddha answered, “All buddhas of the past are disciples of myself, Shakyamuni Buddha.”

The presence of all buddhas is like this. To see all buddhas, to succeed in all buddhas, to fulfill the way, is the buddha way of all buddhas. In this buddha way, the document of heritage is always given at the time of transmitting dharma. Those without dharma heritage are people outside the way who believe in spontaneous enlightenment. If the buddha way had not clearly established dharma heritage, how could it have come down to the present?

For this reason, when a buddha becomes a buddha, a document of heritage is given to a buddha’s heir buddha, and this document of heritage is given by a buddha’s heir buddha. The meaning of the document of heritage is this: you understand the sun, the moon, and stars, and inherit dharma; you attain skin, flesh, bones, and marrow, and inherit dharma; you inherit a robe or staff, a pine branch or whisk, an udumbara blossom or a brocade robe; you receive straw sandals or an arched bamboo staff.

At the time of dharma heritage, the document is handwritten with the blood of the finger or the tongue. Or, it is handwritten with oil or milk. Every one of these is a document of heritage.

Those who entrust and those who receive this heritage are both the buddha’s heirs. Indeed, whenever buddha ancestors are actualized, dharma heritage is actualized.
At the time of actualization, innumerable buddha ancestors arrive without expectation and receive dharma without seeking. Those who inherit dharma are all buddha ancestors.

In China, since the time Bodhidharma, the Twenty-eighth Ancestor, came from India, the principle that there is dharma heritage in the buddha way has been authentically understood. Before that time, it had never been spoken of. This is something that had never been known in India by teachers of scriptures or treatises. This is something that has never been reached by bodhisattvas or even by teachers of dharani who study the meaning of the Tripitaka. What a pity! Although they have received a human body as a vessel of the way, they are uselessly entangled by the net of scriptures; they do not understand the method of breaking through, and cannot realize the moment of leaping out. This being so, you must study the way in detail and wholeheartedly determine to thoroughly experience it.

When I was in China, I had the opportunity to bow to some documents of heritage. There were various kinds. One of those who showed me documents of heritage was Visiting Abbot Weiyi at Mount Tiantong, a former abbot of the Guangfu Monastery. He was a man from Yue, like Rujing, my late master. So Rujing would say, “Ask Abbot Weiyi about the customs of my region.”

One day Weiyi said, “Old writings worth seeing are treasures of humankind. How many of them have you seen?”

I said, “I have seen a few.”

Then he said, “I have a scroll of old writing. I will show it to you at your convenience.” He brought it to me. It was a document of heritage of the Fayan lineage that he had obtained from the articles left behind by an old master. So it was not what Weiyi himself had received.

The document said, “The First Ancestor, Mahakashyapa was awakened by Shakyamuni Buddha. Shakyamuni Buddha was awakened by Kashyapa Buddha.”

Upon seeing this, I was firmly convinced that there is dharma heritage between an authentic heir and an authentic heir. This was a teaching I had never seen before. At that moment the buddha ancestors had invisibly responded to my wish and helped me, a descendant of theirs. I had never been moved so much.

Eihei Dogen (1200-1253) founded the Soto school of Zen in Japan after traveling to China and training under Rujing, a master of the Chinese Caodong lineage.


Mother I never knew—
every time I see the ocean,
every time.

At my daughter’s grave, thirty days
after her death:

Windy fall—
these are the scarlet flowers
she liked to pick.

Last time, I think,
I’ll brush the flies
from my father’s face.
FROM When God Was a Woman
by Merlin Stone
There is something in all of us, women and men alike, that makes us feel deeply connected with the past. Perhaps the sudden dampness of a beach cave or the lines of sunlight piercing through the intricate lace patterns of the leaves in a darkened grove of tall trees will awaken from the hidden recesses of our minds the distant echoes of a remote and ancient time, taking us back to the early stirrings of human life on the planet. For people raised and programmed on the patriarchal religions of today, religions that affect us in even the most secular aspects of our society, perhaps there remains a lingering, almost innate memory of sacred shrines and temples tended by priestesses who served in the religion of the original supreme deity. In the beginning, people prayed to the Creatress of Life, the Mistress of Heaven. At the very dawn of religion, God was a woman. Do you remember?

For years, something has magnetically lured me into exploring the legends, the temple sites, the statues, and the ancient rituals of the female deities, drawing me back in time to an age when the Goddess was omnipotent, and women acted as Her clergy, controlling the form and rites of religion.

Perhaps it was my training and work as a sculptor that first exposed me to the sculptures of the Goddess found in the ruins of prehistoric sanctuaries and the earliest dwellings of human beings. Perhaps it was a certain romantic mysticism, which once embarrassed me, but to which I now happily confess, that led me over the years into the habit of collecting information about the early female religions and the veneration of female deities. Occasionally I tried to dismiss my fascination with this subject as overly fanciful and certainly disconnected from my work (I was building electronic sculptural environments at the time). Nevertheless, I would find myself continually perusing archaeology journals and poring over texts in museum or university library stacks.

As I read, I recalled that somewhere along the pathway of my life I had been told—and accepted the idea—that the sun, great and powerful, was naturally worshiped as male, while the moon, hazy, delicate symbol of sentiment and love, had always been revered as female. Much to my surprise, I discovered accounts of Sun Goddesses in the lands of Canaan, Anatolia, Arabia, and Australia, while Sun Goddesses among the Eskimos, the Japanese, and the Khasis of India were accompanied by subordinate brothers who were symbolized as the moon.

I had somewhere assimilated the idea that the earth was invariably identified as female, Mother Earth, the one who passively accepts the seed, while heaven was naturally and inherently male, its intangibility symbolic of the supposedly exclusive male ability to think in abstract concepts. This too I had accepted without question—until I learned that nearly all the female deities of the Near and Middle East were titled Queen of Heaven, and in Egypt not only was the ancient Goddess Nut known as the heavens but her brother-husband Geb was symbolized as the earth.

Most astonishing of all was the discovery of numerous accounts of the female Creators of all existence, divinities who were credited with bringing forth not only the first people but the entire earth and
the heavens above. There were records of such Goddesses in Sumer, Babylon, Egypt, Africa, Australia, and China.

In India, the Goddess Sarasvati was honored as the inventor of the original alphabet, while in Celtic Ireland the Goddess Brigit was esteemed as the patron deity of language. Texts revealed that it was the Goddess Nidaba in Sumer who was paid honor as the one who initially invented clay tablets and the art of writing. She appeared in that position earlier than any of the male deities who later replaced Her. The official scribe of the Sumerian heaven was a woman. But most significant was the archaeological evidence of the earliest examples of written language so far discovered; these were also located in Sumer, at the temple of the Queen of Heaven in Erech, written there over five thousand years ago. Though writing is most often said to have been invented by man, however that may be defined, the combination of the above factors presents a most convincing argument that it may have actually been woman who pressed those first meaningful marks into wet clay.

In agreement with the generally accepted theory that women were responsible for the development of agriculture, as an extension of their food-gathering activities, there were female deities everywhere who were credited with this gift to civilization. Methods. In nearly all areas of the world, female deities were extolled as healers, dispensers of curative herbs, roots, plants, and other medical aids, casting priestesses who attended the shrines into the role of physicians of those who worshiped there.

Some legends describe the Goddess as a powerful, courageous warrior, a leader in battle. The worship of the Goddess as warrior seems to have been responsible for the numerous reports of female soldiers, later referred to by the classical Greeks as Amazons. More thoroughly examining the accounts of the esteem the Amazons paid to the female deity, it became evident that women who worshiped a warrior Goddess hunted and fought in the lands of Libya, Anatolia, Bulgaria, Greece, Armenia, and Russia and were far from the mythical fantasy so many writers of today would have us believe.

I could not help noticing how far removed from contemporary images were the prehistoric and most ancient historic attitudes toward the thinking capacities and intellect of woman, for nearly everywhere

I began to ponder upon the power of myth and eventually to perceive these legends as more than the innocent childlike fables they first appeared to be.
the Goddess was revered as wise counselor and prophetess. The Celtic Cerridwen was the Goddess of Intelligence and Knowledge in the pre-Christian legends of Ireland, the priestesses of the Goddess Gaia provided the wisdom of divine revelation at pre-Greek sanctuaries, while the Greek Demeter and the Egyptian Isis were both invoked as lawgivers and sage dispensers of righteous wisdom, counsel, and justice. The Egyptian Goddess Maat represented the very order, rhythm, and the truth of the Universe. Ishtar of Mesopotamia was referred to as the Directress of People, the Prophetess, the Lady of Vision, while the archaeological records of the city of Nimrud, where Ishtar was worshiped, revealed that women served as judges and magistrates in the courts of law.

The more I read, the more I discovered. The worship of female deities appeared in every area of the world, presenting an image of woman that I had never before encountered. As a result, I began to ponder upon the power of myth and eventually to perceive these legends as more than the innocent childlike fables they first appeared to be. They were tales with a most specific point of view.

Myths present ideas that guide perception, conditioning us to think and even perceive in a particular way, especially when we are young and impressionable. Often they portray the actions of people who are rewarded or punished for their behavior, and we are encouraged to view these as examples to emulate or avoid. So many of the stories told to us from the time we are just old enough to understand deeply affect our attitudes and comprehension of the world about us and ourselves. Our ethics, morals, conduct, values, sense of duty, and even sense of humor are often developed from simple childhood parables and fables. From them, we learn what is socially acceptable in the society from which they come. They define good and bad, right and wrong, what is natural and what is unnatural among the people who hold the myths as meaningful.

It was quite apparent that the myths and legends that grew from, and were propagated by, a religion in which the deity was female, and revered as wise, valiant, powerful and just, provided very different images of womanhood from those which we are offered by the male-oriented religions of today.

Merlin Stone (1931-2011) was an American author, sculptor, and professor of art and art history. Noted as one of the foremothers of goddess and feminist spirituality in the 1970s and '80s, her literary works include When God Was a Woman, Ancient Mirrors of Womanhood: A Treasury of Goddess and Heroine Lore from Around the World, and Women Against Racism.

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Tending the Tigress: An Apprenticeship in Clay
By Jody Hojin Kimmel, Osho
Recently, somebody asked me how I found Buddhism. I found it through a crooked tea bowl. At the time, I had been studying with a teacher who was very formal. Everything had to have these exact proportions, and everything had to be straight. He would actually come around with a ruler to measure—is the foot in proportion to the body? Is the lip in proportion? It was very trying for me to make a pot this way. I thought, “What ever happened to feeling it? Can’t I just feel this vessel as it takes shape beneath my hands, as the wheel turns fast and slow?” But I figured, “Okay, I’m here to learn.” And so I’d get my ruler out. Then somebody invited me over and showed me a bowl by Rengetsu, a 19th–century Buddhist nun renowned for her poetry and her pottery. This bowl was cracked, repaired and asymmetrical. Yet it was deeply centered. The first words out of my mouth were, “Who accepted this? Who let this happen?” I wanted to know whose hands and mind put that bowl together. It felt so alive.

How do the teachings of a lifetime come to us? We can meet them anywhere: in a tea bowl, in a poem, but most especially in a teacher. If we have the good fortune to encounter a true teacher, one who themselves has studied with a master, then we enter a stream of wisdom stretching back in time. Although we come to it fresh and new, we touch something very ancient, very human, a spark that has been handed down across the generations. For me, before I found Zen training and practice, I was taught in a lineage of clay.

I was eight years old when I realized I would spend my life working with clay. I was watching a potter, mesmerized as a spinning lump was turned into a vessel before my eyes. I remember a visceral feeling, an electric opening from the bottom of my spine to the crown of my head. Later I said to myself, This is what I will do with my life.

I told this to my mother. Luckily she recognized that this was something beyond a momentary enthusiasm. She enrolled me in a clay class at the local art center and drove me there every weekend. My passion continued through high school and our home began to fill with vessels and experimental sculptures. For my eighteenth birthday I received my very own potter’s wheel, which I still have here at the Monastery. I put this in a shed out back and I would disappear there for hours to spin bowls. I didn’t keep any of them; I just practiced throwing over and over again. There was something about the slowly turning wheel that eased my heart and quieted my mind.

Toward the end of high school, one of my clay teachers showed us images of Maria Martinez, a female master potter from Mexico, and explained that she began a lineage in her style by training and working closely with apprentices. This struck a deep chord in me. I knew that was what I wanted: to be an apprentice.

At college I began to study the history of object–making; it was filled with sublime beauty and the human need to create and express. With full dedication, I entered the realm of art history and my own studio work, painting, drawing and spinning the potter’s wheel. It became my religion. And in the quiet of working alone, I grappled with the materials and creation itself. It brought up the fundamental questions of my life: What is all of this anyway? What are things? What is a still life? Who am I?
As college came to a close, the idea of an apprenticeship kept arising. I thought maybe I would go to Japan or Korea to study, when a teacher and friend invited me to accompany her on a visit to Toshiko Takaezu’s home in New Jersey. Toshiko, she told me, was looking for a new apprentice. I greatly admired Toshiko’s work. She was a pioneer, one of the few female potters in the United States who had made a name for herself in a field dominated by men. I didn’t hesitate to accept the invitation.

Toshiko was the eldest of ten children, born in Pepeeko, Hawaii in 1922 to Japanese immigrants. Her interest in creative expression bloomed early in her life; she worked on weaving rugs and tapestries, painting and began touching clay. When she was older, she enrolled in Cranbrook Academy of Art studying under the potter Maija Grotell, “the mother of American ceramics.” Toshiko loved the gentle guidance of Maija and became skilled not only on the wheel, but in the fine science of glaze-making. She was able to replicate the brilliant colors of her Hawaiian upbringing on her vessels, along with the bold brush strokes of black ink calligraphy she learned in childhood. She began to use the simple vessels as a large canvas and was part of the emerging abstract expressionist movement in clay.

Over time, Toshiko’s work evolved into what would become her signature pieces: round, closed forms—some small and stationary, some giant and suspended in hammocks, floating in space like the moon and planets. She began by making open pots, of course—who would think to close them? But as she worked, the openings of her pots started to get smaller and smaller. Toshiko trusted completely what was emerging and one day, the pot closed completely. She made a small pinhole in it and expanded it further by blowing her warm breath into the clay. On another day a small bit of clay broke off and fell into the pot before she closed it, and after firing it she noticed that this pot made a sound. She began to make what she called “offerings” or “prayers” by rolling small beads of clay and dropping them in before she
closed the vessel. Her vessels began to sing. She never tired of making these forms, or of making the simple tea bowls she had come to love from her training and practice in Chado, the tea ceremony.

On that first visit to her house with my friend, the place was bustling with activity: a meal was being prepared, there was house cleaning going on, and a large kiln was being loaded for bisque firing. After being introduced, Toshiko immediately put me to work, asking if I could help her carry one of her large, round pieces into the kiln. We did that, then she said, “Now come with me to the garden.” It was a very sunny day. Toshiko almost always wore a colorful Japanese cotton printed smock with loose pants beneath, and a large brimmed sun hat when working outdoors. She had long hair with black and silver stands always gathered into a broad elegant twist in the back. Long, loose strands would fall by her beautiful moon-shaped face. She carried herself like a dancer, upright and rather softly. Her movements were graceful, direct, uncomplicated as she flowed from touching her wet pots, to loading the kiln, to preparing a few vegetable for lunch, to giving instruction, to tending the garden. “Follow me,” she said that day, “we are going to pick onions. You carry the basket as I pull.”

Toshiko knelt down and with full attention pulled onions one by one, shaking the dirt off and placing them in the basket I lowered towards her. We worked almost the whole row in silence until she stopped and looked into my eyes and asked, “Why do you want to work with me?” I was startled at this question. I stammered and don’t remember what I blurted out, but it was enough to send her back to the onions in silence. She picked a few more. Then she looked up and asked with a smile, “When can you start?”

Within a week, I had packed up and headed to live with her full time in Quakertown, New Jersey. I would study not only touching clay with this teacher, but really the art of living and working with others, of being a fully expressive human being.

In all my fantasies of apprenticeship I had imagined myself in some remote village
closed? What kind of foot? Or the body, do you want fingermarks or not? Make up your mind, be deliberate and quiet it down.” Was she looking at my pots? What vessel did she see, really?

Most of the time we were in each other’s presence all day long, and we often worked in silence. Whether we were cooking eggs or pulling slugs off a cabbage, she studied my every move and used her body to teach me what needed to happen. Toshiko was gentle, and also a tiger. She was compassionate and yet unafraid to wield the sword that could tear my ego to shreds. I trusted her. She was a powerful female role model for me, embodying the strength and courage I was so hungry for. Sometimes I mustered the courage to ask her about the intimacies of her life: Did she ever want to marry or have children? Did she ever feel it was difficult to be a woman in a predominately male field of art? How did she hold her own? She never balked at the questions. She would answer thoughtfully, with depth and sincerity, taking her time before she started to respond.

Sometimes collectors would come to the studio to purchase her work or view it for an exhibition. It was my job to take them to the showroom alone, where Toshiko would join us a few minutes later. She would listen attentively to the conversations we were having. If they happened to pick up a pot with a few of her small clay balls inside, she would listen to how they shook her pots to get a sense of their temperament. Then she would make her appearance and see what they wanted.

I recall a trip I took with Toshiko down to North Carolina, where she was giving a presentation at a local college. On an impulse, we stopped to check out a craft fair along overseas, and now here I was about forty miles from where I was born.

“So you want to be a potter,” Toshiko said with a strange laugh. She then assigned me to clean the studio, wedge large lumps of clay for her work that day, and throw one hundred bowls of my own off the hump. And all this was to be done before she called me to breakfast at 7:00 am! Each morning, rising early, I faithfully performed my appointed tasks. And each morning after breakfast, we would come down to the studio together and look at my pots on the board. She would carry an umbrella, or sometimes a stick. As she looked at my pots, she would smash them, one by one. This ritual continued each morning for several weeks. It felt like an eternity to me. And as she leveled each pot to the ground, she would give an eerie chuckle and repeat, “So you want to be a potter.”

Then, one day, she spared a vessel. The earth shook. My heart leapt. One was spared! What was it about this one? My mind moved fast: What did I do with this one? Where was my mind? Why is this one special? As I stood absorbed in contemplating my success, I was brought back by her roaring laughter. She was doubled over, tears rolling down her cheeks, laughing at my foolishness. I was completely humiliated. Although my self-righteousness was quick to arise, I recognized something true in her laughter. Taking it all in, after a short while I was able to let go and laugh as I saw my own devices and strategies so plainly at work. For me, it was a profound teaching and marked a first real shift in my character.

I remember another time when she told me that my bowls were “so noisy.” What did she hear? “You don’t know what you want. What do you want with the lip? Open,
the way, and Toshiko recognized one of her former students sitting outside his pottery booth. He popped off his chair at the sight of us and looked extremely surprised, nervously greeting Toshiko. After introductions and some small talk, Toshiko tried to enter the tent and view his work, but the young man seemed to block the entryway. He kept bringing up new topics of conversation, talking faster and faster. Undeterred, Toshiko persisted and finally we entered the tent. I looked around at the pots and vessels. My stomach tightened. I cast a sidelong glance at Toshiko, who was taking it all in like a hawk. She was quiet and still: his work was a near carbon copy of hers.

After a few minutes, Toshiko turned gently on her heels and met the young man at the door. His face was as red as a tomato; I was afraid of what would follow. Toshiko could be fierce and I was sure she would chew this young man out. But before he could open his mouth, Toshiko started to apologize, “I am so sorry,” she began. She was calm and completely sincere. “I am so sorry that you feel you had to do this. You are so much more. I didn’t teach you well. Please, find yourself and trust yourself. There is no need to copy anyone. Just give your work your honest life. Then it will happen for you. You are so much more.” I was dumbfounded. Instead of being furious, she had lovingly opened the gate to his potential.

I apprenticed with Toshiko until I departed for graduate school, and when I completed my MFA, I returned again to work with her. Toshiko wanted me to stay longer, but at this time I began to feel the strong need to break away and find my own expression, as well as tend to other aspects of my life. It was time to part from my teacher. Over the years we kept in touch, wrote letters, and visited on a few occasions. Once, during sesshin, I was sitting on the Monastery’s front stoop when a short, stout figure wearing a wide–brimmed hat and long smock headed toward me. It was unmistakably Toshiko. “Just passing by,” she said.

The last time I saw Toshiko was in January, 2010. It was soon after Daido Roshi died, and four months before Toshiko herself would pass away. She had had a stroke and I was yearning to be near her. There was an exhibition of her apprentices’ work in New Jersey, so I grabbed my dharma brother and we drove to see her. When we arrived, she was sitting upright in a brightly lit alcove, wearing a colorful kimono-smock, her now all–grey hair pinned neatly back and up in a twist, a bit of lipstick and eyeliner. Silent, still, we took each other in. Keeping her eyes locked on mine, she followed my body as I knelt down beside her. We held hands. Then she spoke, “It’s about time. Where have you been?”

Toshiko lives so deeply in my heart and mind. I feel her great patience and care for people and things in every action of my being. Her presence is with me every time I handle a vegetable, sweep the kitchen, or relate with someone. And every time I touch clay, I feel her admonition to always breathe my full life into everything. “Then,” as she told me, “what you do can’t help but be alive.”

Jody Hojin Kimmel Osho is a priest and teacher in the Mountains and Rivers Order. Before entering monastic training, Hojin Osho taught painting and fine arts as well as exhibiting and maintaining a working studio.
Night Singing
by W.S. Merwin

Long after Ovid’s story of Philomela
has gone out of fashion and after the testimonials
of Hafiz and Keats have been smothered in comment
and droned dead in schools and after Eliot has gone home
from the Sacred Heart and Ransom has spat and consigned
to human youth what he reduced to fairy numbers
after the name has become slightly embarrassing
and dried skins have yielded their details and tapes have been
slowed and analyzed and there is nothing at all
for me to say one nightingale is singing
nearby in the oaks where I can see nothing but darkness
and can only listen and ride out on the long note’s
invisible beam that wells up and bursts from its
unknown star on on on never returning
never the same never caught while through the small leaves
of May the starlight glitters from its own journeys
once in the ancestry of this song my mother visited here
lightning struck the locomotive in the mountains
it had never happened before and there were so many
things to tell that she had just seen and would never
have imagined now a field away I hear another
voice beginning and on the slope there is a third
not echoing but varying after the lives
after the goodbyes after the faces and the light
after the recognitions and the touching and tears
those voices go on rising if I knew I would hear
in the last dark that singing I know how I would listen

From The Vixen by W.S. Merwin. Copyright © 1996 by W. S. Merwin. Reprinted by permission of The Wylie Agency LLC.
A chunk of pale, limey dolomite sits on my desk, a fragment of my ancestors’ homeland. Sometimes I fit it inside my fist, as a way to remind me of the very ground from which my grandmother was torn around the time of World War I. Once a chink between larger cobbles in the dry masonry walls of the hut where she resided during her girlhood, this rock speaks to me like no other. The day I plucked it from the wall, I noticed how similar its texture and color were to the ridges flanking the Bekaa Valley, along the present-day border of Lebanon with Syria—a place less than one hundred fifty miles from bullet-riddled Jerusalem, and less than two hundred miles from bombed-out Iraq.

My grandmother was displaced from her region of origin, during a time when, in Lebanon, warring was almost constant. The Turks conscripted over 240,000 Arabs into their forces, and roughly 40,000 of them were killed, while another 150,000 deserted their posts. At least 40,000 of the Lebanese deserters—Arabs who refused to fight for the Ottoman Empire against their own people—were forced to flee with their families to the Americas.

They left the Bekaa Valley as depopulated and broken as Ireland was after the Great Potato Famine. Those who stayed faced a gnawing famine of their own, accompanied by a plague of locusts of biblical proportions. After World War I erupted, at least 100,000
Lebanese died of starvation, leaving the pastures, orchards, and vineyards of the Bekaa with less than half the shepherds and grape-pickers they had prior to the war.

By some counts, political and economic refugees recently uprooted from their ancestral homelands now number two billion. We live during an era, in fact, in which there are as many descendants of refugees around us as people who have stayed put, living in the same places where their ancestors lived.

Peace and place. I have always sensed that these two words have a bit of the same ring in modern English, but had not thought much about their semantic overlap until recently. I hadn’t appreciated the simplest of facts: that anyone who feels secure, grateful, and satisfied in a particular place is likely to feel at peace. Or that those who have fled war or other forms of violence not only grieve for what they have lost; they are often unable to see the beauty of their newfound land because the salt of their tears continues to blind them. They feel humiliated by those who have taken over their homeland, and feel the wounds that their land has suffered.

If we listen, much of what we may hear around us is the keening of displaced peoples, struggling to regain some modicum of dignity, which they pray will come through reconnecting with their ancestral lands. As the late Edward Said eloquently observed, that is why we hear such desperation from Palestinian families evicted from their homes in the West Bank by Jewish “settlers”; they are frustrated because they do not have any legal recourse in Israeli courts to negotiate for a return to their land. That may also be what underlies the vindictiveness seen in certain Kurds who have been forced back and forth between Turkey and Iraq, unable to retain control of land that has been the legacy of their families for centuries.

The unfulfilled need to live in peace, in place, is what fueled the struggle against Apartheid in South Africa, and what continues to drive the Mayan farmers who feel that their only hope for staying on the land is to join ranks with Zapatista rebels in Chiapas. It is why the forced relocation of Navajo families from the Big Mountain region of northern Arizona has been largely unsuccessful.

For too long we have assumed that confronting racism and social injustice were altogether different challenges from safeguarding land rights, practicing multigenerational land stewardship, or protecting cultural and biological diversity. But I see these seemingly disparate threads woven tightly together nearly every place I go. I see it among my O’odham friends, who used to drive past a sign in a national park that warned tourists to “Watch Out for Cattle, Deer and Indians.” They had been displaced from living near one of their sacred sites by preservationists who wanted the park, and who did not understand that the wildlife attracted to that desert oasis were lured there by habitats that the O’odham themselves had stewarded for centuries.

I see it among my Hopi neighbors, whose springs have dried up since the Peabody Coal Company began mining the aquifer underlying their land some thirty years ago. Their culture and their environment have suffered because of water-pricing deals made without their consultation.
To describe such tragedies at home, we tend to use the term “environmental injustice.” But why not use that concept to understand what is happening in Palestine, Iraq, Israel, Lebanon, and Bali? What if we begin to view the crisis in the Middle East not merely as an economic and political struggle, but one in which displaced peoples are attempting to reaffirm their love and attachment to the place on Earth they consider to be most sacred? What if we admit that, from the Gulf War to the present, both sides have damaged the capacity of the land to sustain anyone who lives on it, and have contaminated one water reserve after another, rendering them undrinkable? What would we lose if all parties were sanctioned to renew their efforts to restore traditional ways of caring for the land? While some diplomats might question the worth of such values in negotiating a peace settlement, I doubt that this approach could fare any worse than the Road Map for Peace or the Oslo Accord.

The connections between peace, place, and environmental justice are deeply rooted, if one is willing to listen to the stories these cultures have to tell. Unfortunately, much of our society has retreated into a comfort zone where they only listen to voices like their own. It is this chronic inattention to root values that makes the destabilizing events of the recent past all the more heartbreaking and bewildering.

In the week prior to September 11, 2001, I had a jarring experience. A sense of foreboding welled up within me that haunts me to this day. I was driving through the pinyon-studded mesas and sandy valleys of Navajo and Hopi country. Soothed by the stunning serenity of the Colorado Plateau, I hardly noticed that the car radio was on until an NPR commentary shook me from my reverie.

In a matter-of-fact tone, a National Public Radio correspondent reported that diplomats from the United States and Israel had declined to attend the World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance because they were unwilling to be publicly confronted by diplomats and activists from countries that were calling their policies in the Middle East “racist.” The commentator mentioned the contention, widely shared by conference attendees, that Palestinians were being denied their basic civil, spiritual, and land rights by a brutal Israeli regime propped up by billions of dollars of U.S. military aid.

Merely hearing this made me pull off the road and stop, so strong was the thudding

If we listen, much of what we may hear around us is the keening of displaced peoples, struggling to regain some modicum of dignity, which they pray will come through reconnecting with their ancestral lands.
tion has lost its empathy with 3.5 million of their fellow citizens of Arab ancestry, and with 7 million other Americans who embrace the Islamic faith; that they have come to mistrust the fifth of the human family who either practice Islam (1.2 billion individuals) or speak Arabic (200 million individuals), the predominant language in some twenty nations.

Meanwhile, I am one of many Arab Americans who feel the anguish of trying to express our grief for both American lives that have been lost or touched deeply by this tragedy, and for those of our innocent Arab brethren who have been killed, jailed, or humiliated by our own government. As my late mentor Bill Stafford used to say, “every war has two losers.”

The ravages of war last far longer than the duration of any “official” combat; our cultures and our habitats remain wounded for years, even decades. Every war we avoid allows millions to remain in place, and keeps the vibrant places of the Earth from being dismembered. It is the healing power of the land and our shared history with it that offers hope of a brighter future.
S

Son,

Last Sunday the host of a popular news show asked me what it meant to lose my body. The host was broadcasting from Washington, D.C., and I was seated in a remote studio on the far west side of Manhattan. A satellite closed the miles between us, but no machinery could close the gap between her world and the world for which I had been summoned to speak. When the host asked me about my body, her face faded from the screen, and was replaced
by a scroll of words, written by me earlier that week.

The host read these words for the audience, and when she finished she turned to the subject of my body, although she did not mention it specifically. But by now I am accustomed to intelligent people asking about the condition of my body without realizing the nature of their request. Specifically, the host wished to know why I felt that white America’s progress, or rather the progress of those Americans who believe that they are white, was built on looting and violence. Hearing this, I felt an old and indistinct sadness well up in me. The answer to this question is the record of the believers themselves. The answer is American history.

There is nothing extreme in this statement. Americans deify democracy in a way that allows for a dim awareness that they have, from time to time, stood in defiance of their God. But democracy is a forgiving God and America’s heresies—torture, theft, enslavement—are so common among individuals and nations that none can declare themselves immune. In fact, Americans, in a real sense, have never betrayed their God. When Abraham Lincoln declared, in 1863, that the battle of Gettysburg must ensure “that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth,” he was not merely being aspirational; at the onset of the Civil War, the United States of America had one of the highest rates of suffrage in the world. The question is not whether Lincoln truly meant “government of the people” but what our country has, throughout its history, taken the political term “people” to actually mean. In 1863 it did not mean your mother or your grandmother, and it did not mean you and me. Thus America’s problem is not its betrayal of “government of the people” but the means by which “the people” acquired their names.

This leads us to another equally
important ideal, one that Americans implicitly accept but to which they make no conscious claim. Americans believe in the reality of “race” as a defined, indubitable feature of the natural world. Racism—the need to ascribe bone-deep features to people and then humiliate, reduce, and destroy them—inevitably follows from this inalterable condition. In this way, racism is rendered as the innocent daughter of Mother Nature, and one is left to deplore the Middle Passage or the Trail of Tears the way one deplores an earthquake, a tornado, or any other phenomenon that can be cast as beyond the handiwork of men.

But race is the child of racism, not the father. And the process of naming “the people” has never been a matter of genealogy and physiognomy so much as one of hierarchy. Difference in hue and hair is old. But the belief in the preeminence of hue and hair, the notion that these factors can correctly organize a society and that they signify deeper attributes, which are indelible—this is the new idea at the heart of these new people who have been brought up hopelessly, tragically, deceitfully, to believe that they are white.

These new people are, like us, a modern invention. But unlike us, their new name has no real meaning divorced from the machinery of criminal power. The new people were something else before they were white—Catholic, Corsican, Welsh, Mennonite, Jewish—and if all our national hopes have any fulfillment, then they will have to be something else again. Perhaps they will truly become American and create a nobler basis for their myths. I cannot call it. As for now, it must be said that the process of washing the disparate tribes white, the elevation of the belief in being white, was not achieved through wine tastings and ice cream socials, but rather through the pil laging of life, liberty, labor, and land; through the flaying of backs; the chaining of limbs; the strangling of dissidents; the destruction of families; the rape of mothers; the sale of children; and various other acts meant, first and foremost, to deny you and me the right to secure and govern our own bodies.

The new people are not original in this. Perhaps there has been, at some point in history, some great power whose elevation was exempt from the violent exploitation of other human bodies. If there has been, I have yet to discover it. But this banality of violence can never excuse America, because America makes no claim to the banal. America believes itself exceptional, the greatest and noblest nation ever to exist, a lone champion standing between the white city of democracy and the terrorists, despots, barbarians, and other enemies of civilization. One cannot, at once, claim to be superhuman and then plead mortal error. I propose to take our countrymen’s claims of American exceptionalism seriously, which is to say I propose subjecting our country to an exceptional moral standard. This is difficult because there exists, all around us, an apparatus urging us to accept American innocence at face value and not to inquire too much. And it is so easy to look away, to live with the fruits of our history and to ignore the great evil done in all of our names. But you and I have never truly had that luxury. I think you know.

I write you in your fifteenth year. I am writing you because this was the year you saw Eric Garner choked to death for selling cigarettes; because you know now that
Renisha McBride was shot for seeking help, that John Crawford was shot down for browsing in a department store. And you have seen men in uniform drive by and murder Tamir Rice, a twelve-year-old child whom they were oath-bound to protect. And you have seen men in the same uniforms pummel Marlene Pinnock, someone’s grandmother, on the side of a road. And you know now, if you did not before, that the police departments of your country have been endowed with the authority to destroy your body. It does not matter if the destruction is the result of an unfortunate overreaction. It does not matter if it originates in a misunderstanding. It does not matter if the destruction springs from a foolish policy. Sell cigarettes without the proper authority and your body can be destroyed. Resent the people trying to entrap your body and it can be destroyed. Turn into a dark stairwell and your body can be destroyed. The destroyers will rarely be held accountable. Mostly they will receive pensions. And destruction is merely the superlative form of a dominion whose prerogatives include friskings, detainings, beatings, and humiliations. All of this is common to black people. And all of this is old for black people. No one is held responsible.

There is nothing uniquely evil in these destroyers or even in this moment. The destroyers are merely men enforcing the whims of our country, correctly interpreting its heritage and legacy. It is hard to face this. But all our phrasing—race relations, racial chasm, racial justice, racial profiling, white privilege, even white supremacy—serves to obscure that racism is a visceral experience, that it dislodges brains, blocks airways, rips muscle, extracts organs, cracks bones, breaks teeth. You must never look away from this. You must always remember that the sociology, the history, the economics, the graphs, the charts, the regressions all land, with great violence, upon the body.

That Sunday, with that host, on that news show, I tried to explain this as best I could within the time allotted. But at the end of the segment, the host flashed a widely shared picture of an eleven-year-old black boy tearfully hugging a white police officer. Then she asked me about “hope.” And I knew then that I had failed. And I remembered that I had expected to fail. And I wondered again at the indistinct sadness welling up in me. Why exactly was I sad? I came out of the studio and walked for a while. It was a calm December day. Families, believing themselves white, were out on the streets. Infants, raised to be white, were bundled in strollers. And I was sad for these people, much as I was sad for the host and sad for all the people out there watching and reveling in a specious hope. I realized then why I was sad. When the journalist asked me about my body, it was like she was asking me to awaken her from the most gorgeous dream. I have seen that dream all my life. It is perfect houses with nice lawns. It is Memorial Day cookouts, block associations, and driveways. The Dream is treehouses and the Cub Scouts. The Dream smells like peppermint but tastes like strawberry shortcake. And for so long I have wanted to escape into the Dream, to fold my country over my head like a blanket. But this has never been an option because the Dream rests on our backs, the bedding made from our bodies. And knowing this, knowing that the Dream
persists by warring with the known world, I was sad for the host, I was sad for all those families, I was sad for my country, but above all, in that moment, I was sad for you.

That was the week you learned that the killers of Michael Brown would go free. The men who had left his body in the street like some awesome declaration of their inviolable power would never be punished. It was not my expectation that anyone would ever be punished. But you were young and still believed. You stayed up till 11 P.M. that night, waiting for the announcement of an indictment, and when instead it was announced that there was none you said, “I’ve got to go,” and you went into your room, and I heard you crying. I came in five minutes after, and I didn’t hug you, and I didn’t comfort you, because I thought it would be wrong to comfort you. I did not tell you that it would be okay, because I have never believed it would be okay. What
I told you is what your grandparents tried to tell me: that this is your country, that this is your world, that this is your body, and you must find some way to live within the all of it. I tell you now that the question of how one should live within a black body, within a country lost in the Dream, is the question of my life, and the pursuit of this question, I have found, ultimately answers itself.

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Hear, Shariputra, all dharmas are marked with emptiness. They are neither produced nor destroyed.

Dharmas, here, mean things. A human being is a dharma. A tree is a dharma. A cloud is a dharma. The sunshine is a dharma. Everything that can be conceived is a dharma. So when we say, “All dharmas are marked with emptiness,” we are saying, everything has emptiness as its own nature. And that is why everything can be. There is a lot of joy in this statement. It means nothing can be born, nothing can die. Avalokita has said something extremely important.

Every day in our life, we see birth and we see death. When a person is born, a birth certificate is printed for them. After they die, in order to bury them a death certificate is made. These certificates confirm the existence of birth and death. But Avalokita said, “No, there is no birth and death.” We have to look more deeply in order to see whether his statement is true.

What is the date on which you were born, your birth date? Before that date, did you already exist? Were you already there before you were born? Let me help you. To be born means from nothing you become something. My question is, before you were born, were
you already there?
Suppose a hen is about to lay an egg. Before she gives birth, do you think the egg is already there? Yes, of course. It is inside. You also were inside before you were outside. That means that before you were born, you already existed—inside your mother. The fact is that if something is already there, it does not need to be born. To be born means from nothing you become something. If you are already something, what is the use of being born?

So, your so-called birthday is really your Continuation Day. The next time you celebrate, you can say, “Happy Continuation Day.” I think that we may have a better concept of when we were born. If we go back nine months, to the time of our conception, we have a better date to put on our birth certificates. In China, and also in Vietnam, when you are born, you are already considered one year old. So we say we begin to be at the time of our conception in our mother’s womb, and we write down that date on our birth certificate.

But the question remains: Before even that date did you exist or not? If you say, “Yes,” I think you are correct. Before your conception, you were there already, maybe half in your father, half in your mother. Because from nothing, we can never become something. Can you name one thing that was once a nothing? A cloud? Do you think that a cloud can be born out of nothing? Before becoming a cloud, it was water, maybe flowing as a river. It was not nothing. Do you agree?

We cannot conceive the birth of anything. There is only continuation. Please look back even further and you will see that you not only exist in your father and mother, but you also exist in your grandparents and in your great grandparents. As I look more deeply, I can see that in a former life I was a cloud. This is not poetry; it is science.

Why do I say that in a former life I was a cloud? Because I am still a cloud. Without the cloud, I cannot be here. I am the cloud, the river, and the air at this very moment, so I know that in the past I have been a cloud, a river, and the air. And I was a rock. I was the minerals in the water. This is not a question of belief in reincarnation. This is the history of life on earth. We have been gas, sunshine, water, fungi, and plants. We have been single-celled beings. The Buddha said that in one of his former lives, he was a tree. He was a fish. He was a deer. These are not superstitious things. Everyone of us has been a cloud, a deer, a bird, a fish, and we continue to be these things, not just in former lives.

Andrew Petersen
This is not just the case with birth. Nothing can be born, and also nothing can die. That is what Avalokita said. Do you think that a cloud can die? To die means that from something you become nothing. Do you think that we can make something a nothing? Let us go back to our sheet of paper. We may have the illusion that to destroy it all we have to do is light a match and burn it up. But if we burn a sheet of paper, some of it will become smoke, and the smoke will rise and continue to be. The heat that is caused by the burning paper will enter into the cosmos and penetrate other things, because the heat is the next life of the paper. The ash that is formed will become part of the soil and the sheet of paper, in his or her next life, might be a cloud and a rose at the same time. We have to be very careful and attentive in order to realize that this sheet of paper has never been born, and it will never die. It can take on other forms of being, but we are not capable of transforming a sheet of paper into nothingness.

Everything is like that, even you and I. We are not subject to birth and death. A Zen master might give a student a subject of meditation like, “What was your face before your parents were born?” This is an invitation to go on a journey in order to recognize yourself. If you do well, you can see your former lives as well as your future lives. Please remember that we are not talking about philosophy; we are talking about reality. Look at your hand and ask yourself, “Since when has my hand been around?” If I look deeply into my hand I can see it has been around for a long time, more than 300,000 years. I see many generations of ancestors in there, not just in the past, but in the present moment, still alive. I am only the continuation. I have never died once. If I had died even once, how could my hand still be here?

The French scientist Lavoisier said, “Nothing is created, and nothing is destroyed.” This is exactly the same as in the Heart Sutra. Even the best contemporary scientists cannot reduce something as small as a speck of dust or an electron to nothingness. One form of energy can only become another form of energy. Something can never become nothing, and this includes a speck of dust.

Usually we say humans come from dust and we are going back to dust, and this does not sound very joyful. We don’t want to return to dust. There is a discrimination here that humans are very valuable, and that dust has no value at all. But scientists do not even know what a speck of dust is! It is still a mystery. Imagine one atom of that speck of dust, with electrons traveling around its nucleus at 180,000 miles per second. It is very exciting. To return to a speck of dust will be quite an exciting adventure!

Sometimes we have the impression that we understand what a speck of dust is. We even pretend that we understand a human being—a human being who we say is going to return to dust. Because we live with a person for 20 or 30 years, we have the impression that we know everything about him or her. So, while driving in the car with that person sitting right next to us, we think about other things. We aren’t interested in him any more. What arrogance! The person sitting there beside us is really a mystery! We only have the impression that we know her, but we don’t know anything yet. If we look with the eyes of Avalokita, we will see that even one hair of that person is the entire cosmos. One hair on his head can be a door opening to the ultimate reality. One speck of dust can
be the Kingdom of Heaven, the Pure Land. When you see that you, the speck of dust, and all things, inter-are, you will understand that this is so. We must be humble. “To say you don’t know is the beginning of knowing,” is a Chinese proverb.

One autumn day, I was in a park, absorbed in the contemplation of a very small but beautiful leaf, in the shape of a heart. Its color was almost red, and it was barely hanging on the branch, nearly ready to fall down. I spent a long time with it, and I asked the leaf a lot of questions. I found out the leaf had been a mother to the tree. Usually we think that the tree is the mother and the leaves are just children, but as I looked at the leaf I saw that the leaf is also a mother to the tree. The sap that the roots take up is only water and minerals, not good enough to nourish the tree, so the tree distributes that sap to the leaves. And the leaves take the responsibility of transforming that rough sap into elaborated sap and, with the help of the sun and gas, sending it back in order to nourish the tree. Therefore, the leaves are also the mother to the tree. And since the leaf is linked to the tree by a stem, the communication between them is easy to see.

We do not have a stem linking us to our mother any more, but when we were in her womb we had a very long stem, an umbilical cord. The oxygen and the nourishment we needed came to us through that stem. Unfortunately, on the day that we call our birthday, it was cut off and we received the illusion that we are independent. That is a mistake. We continue to rely on our mother for a very long time, and we have several other mothers as well. The earth is our mother. We have a great many stems linking us to our mother earth. There is a stem linking us with the cloud. If there is no cloud, there is no water for us to drink. We are made of at least seventy per cent water, and the stem between the cloud and us is really there. This is also the case with the river, the forest, the logger, and the farmer. There are hundreds of thousands of stems linking us to everything in the cosmos, and therefore we can be. Do you see the link between you and me? If you are not there, I am not here. That is certain. If you do not see it yet, look more deeply and I am sure you will see. As I said, this is not philosophy. You really have to see.

I asked the leaf whether it was scared because it was autumn and the other leaves were falling. The leaf told me, “No. During the whole spring and summer I was very alive. I worked hard and helped nourish the tree, and much of me is in the tree. Please do not say that I am just this form, because the form of leaf is only a tiny part of me. I am the whole tree. I know that I am already inside the tree, and when I go back to the soil, I will continue to nourish the tree. That’s why I do not worry. As I leave this branch and float to the ground, I will wave to the tree and tell her, ‘I will see you again very soon.’”

Suddenly I saw a kind of wisdom very much like the wisdom contained in the Heart Sutra. You have to see life. You should not say, life of the leaf, you should only speak of life in the leaf and life in the tree. My life is just Life, and you can see it in me and in the tree. That day there was a wind blowing and, after a while, I saw the leaf leave the branch and float down to the soil, dancing joyfully, because as it floated it saw itself already there in the tree. It was so happy. I bowed my head, and I knew that we have a lot to learn from the leaf because it was not
afraid—it knew that nothing can be born and nothing can die.

The cloud in the sky will also not be scared. When the time comes, the cloud will become rain. It is fun becoming rain, falling down, chanting, and becoming part of the Mississippi River, or the Amazon River, or the Mekong River, or falling onto vegetables and later becoming part of a human being. It is a very exciting adventure. The cloud knows that if it falls to the earth it might become part of the ocean. So the cloud is not scared. Only humans get scared.

A wave on the ocean has a beginning and an end, a birth and a death. But Avalokitesvara tells us that the wave is empty. The wave is full of water, but it is empty of a separate self. A wave is a form which has been made possible thanks to the existence of wind and water. If a wave only sees its form, with its beginning and end, it will be afraid of birth and death. But if the wave sees that it is water, identifies itself with the water, then it will be emancipated from birth and death. Each wave is born and is going to die, but the water is free from birth and death.

When I was a child I used to play with a kaleidoscope. I took a tube and a few pieces of ground glass, turned it a little bit, and saw many wonderful sights. Every time I made a small movement with my fingers, one sight would disappear and another would appear. I did not cry at all when the first spectacle disappeared, because I knew that nothing was lost. Another beautiful sight always followed. If you are the wave and you become one with the water, looking at the world with the eyes of water, then you are not afraid of going up, going down, going up, going down. But please do not be satisfied with speculation, or take my word for it. You have to enter it, taste it, and be one with it yourself, and that can be done through meditation, not only in the meditation hall, but throughout your daily life. While you cook a meal, while you clean the house, while you go for a walk, you can look at things and try to see them in the nature of emptiness. Emptiness is an optimistic word; it is not at all pessimistic. When Avalokita, in his deep meditation on Perfect Understanding, was able to see the nature of emptiness, he suddenly overcame all fear and pain. I have seen people die very peacefully, with a smile, because they see that birth and death are only waves on the surface of the ocean, are just the spectacle in the kaleidoscope.

So you see there are many lessons we can learn from the cloud, the water, the wave, the leaf, and the kaleidoscope. From everything else in the cosmos, too. If you look at anything carefully, deeply enough, you discover the mystery of interbeing, and once you have seen it you will no longer be subject to fear—fear of birth, or fear of death. Birth and death are only ideas we have in our mind, and these ideas cannot be applied to reality. It is just like the idea of above and below. We are very sure that when we point our hand up, it is above, and when we point in the opposite direction, it is below. Heaven is above, and Hell is below. But the people who are sitting right now on the other side of the planet must disagree, because the idea of above and below does not apply to the cosmos, exactly like the idea of birth and death.

So please continue to look back and you will see that you have always been here. Let us look together and penetrate into the life of a leaf, so we may be one with the leaf. Let us
penetrate and be one with the cloud, or with the wave, to realize our own nature as water and be free from our fear. If we look very deeply, we will transcend birth and death. Tomorrow, I will continue to be. But you will have to be very attentive to see me. I will be a flower, or a leaf. I will be in these forms and I will say hello to you. If you are attentive enough, you will recognize me, and you may greet me. I will be very happy.

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Janet Ramsden
The old time people always told us kids to be patient, to wait, and then finally, after a long time, what you wish to know will become clear. The Pueblos and their paleo-Indian ancestors have lived continuously in the southwest of North America for twelve thousand years. So when the old-time people speak about “time” or “a long time,” they’re not speaking about a decade, or even a single lifetime; they can mean hundreds of years. And as the elders point out, the Europeans have hardly been on the continents of the Americas five hundred years. Still, they say, the longer Europeans or others...
live on these continents, the more they will become part of the Americas. The gravity of the continent under their feet begins this connection, which grows slowly in each generation. The process requires not hundreds, but thousands of years.

The prophecies foretelling the arrival of the Europeans to the Americas also say that over this long time, all things European will eventually disappear. The prophecies do not say the European people themselves will disappear, only their customs. The old people say that this has already begun to happen, and that it is a spiritual process that no armies will be able to stop. So the old people laugh when they hear talk about the “desecration” of the earth, because humankind, they know, is nothing in comparison to the earth. Blast it open, dig it up, or cook it with nuclear explosions: the earth remains. Humans desecrate only themselves. The earth is inviolate.

Tse’itsi’nako, Thought Woman, is sitting in her room and whatever she thinks about appears.

She thought of her sisters, Nau’ts’ity’i and I’cts’ity’i, and together they created the Universe this world and the four worlds below.

Thought Woman, the spider, named things and as she named them they appeared.

She is sitting in her room thinking of a story now

So perhaps it did not seem extraordinary to the old people that a giant stone snake formation was found one morning in the spring of 1980 by two employees of the Jackpile uranium mine. The mine is located near Paguate, one of seven villages in the Laguna Pueblo reservation in New Mexico. The employees, both Laguna Pueblo men, had been making a routine check of the mine when they discovered the biomorphic configuration near the base of mountainous piles of uranium tailings. The head of the snake was pointed west, its jaws open wide. The stone snake seemed to have always been there. The entire formation was more than thirty feet long and twelve inches high, an eccentric outcrop of yellow sandstone mottled and peppered with darker iron ores, like the stone that had once formed the mesas that had been swallowed up by the open-pit mine.

Reports of the snake formation were at first met with skepticism. The miners must be joking. People from Paguate village and other Laguna Pueblo people had hunted rabbits and herded sheep in that area for hundreds of years. Over time, wind and rain might uncover rock, but the process required years, not weeks. In any case, Laguna Pueblo people have a name and a story for every oddly-shaped boulder within two hundred miles—no way could anything like this giant stone snake have escaped notice. The mine employees swore they had walked the same route twice each month for inspections and seen nothing, and then suddenly, one morning the stone snake was there, uncoiling about three hundred yards from a Jackpile Mine truck yard.
And soon there was a great deal of excitement among Pueblo religious people because the old stories mention a giant snake who is a messenger for the Mother Creator.

Ma ah shra true ee is the giant serpent
the sacred messenger spirit
from the Fourth World below.
He came to live at the Beautiful Lake,
Kawaik,
that was once near Laguna village.
But neighbors got jealous.
They came one night and broke open the lake
so all the water was lost. The giant snake went away after that. He has never been seen since.
That was the great misfortune for us, the Kawaik’meh,
at Old Laguna.

Before the days of the mining companies, the people of Paguate village had fields of corn and melons and beans scattered throughout the little flood plains below the yellow sandstone mesas southeast of the village. Apple and apricot orchards flourished there too. It was all dry farming in those days, dependent on prayers and ceremonies to call in the rain clouds. Back then, it was a different world, although ancient stories also recount terrible droughts and famines—times of great devastation. When large uranium deposits were discovered only a few miles southeast of Paguate village in the late 1940s, the Laguna Pueblo elders declared the earth was the sacred mother of all living things, and blasting her wide open to reach deposits of uranium ore was an act almost beyond imagination. But the advent of the Cold War had made the mining a matter of national security, and the ore deposits at the Jackpile Mine were vast and rich. As wards of the federal government, the small Pueblo tribe could not prevent the mining of their land. Now, the orchards and fields of melons are gone. Nearly all the land to the east and south of Paguate Village has been swallowed by the mine; its open pit gapes within two hundred yards of the village.

Before world uranium prices fell, the mining companies had proposed relocating the entire village to a new site a few miles away because the richest ore deposits lay directly under the old village. The Paguate people refused to trade their old houses for new all-electric ones; they were bound to refuse because there is a small mossy spring that bubbles out of the base of a black lava formation on the west side of Paguate village. This spring is the Emergence Place, the entrance humans and animals used when they first climbed into this, the Fifth World. But the mining companies were not to be stopped; when they couldn’t move the people, they simply sank shafts under the village.

When the mining began, the village elders and traditionalists maintained that no one of their people should work at the mine and participate in the sacrilege. But the early 1950s were drought years, and the Laguna people, who had struggled to live off their fields and herds, found themselves in trouble. Moreover, World War II and the Korean War had ushered in other changes within the community itself. The men who returned from military service had seen the world outside. They had worked for wages in the army, and when they came home to Laguna, they wanted jobs. Consequently, increasing numbers of Laguna men, and later women, began working the mine. Cranky old
traditionalists predicted dire results from this desecration of the earth, but they had never been very specific about the terrible consequences. Meanwhile, Laguna Pueblo became one of the few reservations in the United States to enjoy nearly full employment. Twenty-five years passed, and then something strange and very sad began to happen at Paguate village.

“Tonight we’ll see if you really have magical power,” they told him.

So that night Pa’caya’nyi came with his mountain lion. He undressed he painted his body the whorls of flesh the soles of his feet the palms of his hands the top of his head.

He wore feathers on each side of his head.

He made an altar with cactus spines and purple locoweed flowers. He lighted four cactus torches at each corner. He made the mountain lion lie down in front and then he was ready for his magic.

He struck the middle of the north wall. He took a piece of flint and he struck the middle of the north wall and flowed down toward the south.

He said, “What does that look like? Is that magic powers?”
He struck the middle of the west wall and from the east wall a bear came out. “What do you call this?” he said again.

“Yes, it looks like magic all right,” Ma’see’wi said. So it was finished and Ma’see’wi and Ou’yu’ye’wi and all the people were fooled by that Ck’o’yo medicine man, Po ‘caya’nyi.

From that time on they were so busy playing around with that Ck’o’yo magic they neglected the Mother Corn altar. They thought they didn’t have to worry about anything.

Pueblo communal systems value cooperation and nonaggression above all else. All problems, including the most serious, are resolved through negotiation by the families or clans of the aggrieved parties. Perhaps the harshness of the high desert plateau with its freezing winters and fierce summer droughts has had something to do with the supreme value the old people place upon cooperation and conciliation. For where margin for error is slender—even during the wet years—a seemingly trivial feud might hinder the mobilization and organization necessary to protect crops threatened by dramatic conditions of nature. Moreover, this system of cooperation extends to all living things, even plants and insects, which Laguna Pueblo elders refer to
as sisters and brothers, because none can survive unless all survive.

Given this emphasis on balance and harmony, it was especially painful and confusing when, in 1973, Paguate became one of the first American communities to cope with the unexpected tragedy of a teenage suicide pact. The boys and girls all had attended Laguna-Acoma High School, and all but one of the suicides lived at Paguate. Some left suicide notes that made reference to an agreement the young people had made secretly. “Cherylyn did it Saturday so now it’s my turn,” for example, was the way the suicide notes read. The Laguna people had already suffered suicides by army veterans sick with alcohol. But the suicide victims at Paguate had been the brightest and most promising students at the school. The usual psychological explanations—unstable family environment, absence of one parent, alienation—don’t seem to apply here, as not one of the students had come from a poor or troubled family, and in fact, most had grown up in the house inhabited by their families for hundreds of years and were surrounded by supportive groups of relatives. While teachers and families tried in vain to learn more about the suicide club, it eventually claimed seven lives.

While suicide took its toll, the Pueblo community was disrupted by another horror, an apparently motiveless murder. A Saturday night party in Paguate turned into a slaughter. Two young men were hacked to death at the kitchen table by their friend, who had invited them to stop by the party after they got off swing shift at the mine. The killer then bullied another friend to drive a car they “borrowed,” and while the friend drove around the reservation, the killer randomly dumped body parts in the weeds along the way. The impulse to pick up the shiny new axe had been irresistible, the killer later said. He could not explain the murder of his two friends.

But the old people have their own explanation. According to the elders, destruction of any part of the earth does immediate harm to all living things. Teachers at Indian School would ridicule these ideas; they would
laugh and say, “How stupid you Indians are! How can the death of one tree in the jungle possibly affect a person in New York City!” But isn’t it far more obvious these days how important that single tree in the rain forest of Brazil really is to the Manhattanite? And in the same way, the mesas of sandstone seemingly devoured by the uranium mine are as important, as essential. If it has taken environmental catastrophe to reveal to us why we need the rain forest, perhaps we might spare ourselves some tragedy by listening to the message of sand and stone in the form of a giant snake. Perhaps comprehension need not come from obvious catastrophes, like the destruction of the ozone layer, but more through subtle indications, like a stone snake come to remind us that violence in the Americas—against ourselves and against one another—can run as deep, but only as deep, as the deepest shafts with which humankind has pierced the earth.

When I saw the stone snake in June of 1980, I could hear the clanking and creaking of giant earth movers on the other side of the mounds of tailings. The Jackpile Mine generators roared continuously night and day, seven days a week. At noon, when Jackpile did the blasting, everyone made sure to be indoors because potato-size rocks frequently landed on Paguate doorsteps. (These were the normal, day-to-day living conditions of the Laguna Pueblos in and around Paguate for many years.) Old barbed wire had been loosely strung along a few makeshift juniper posts until someone provided a sagging barrier of chain-link fencing, intended to protect the stone snake from livestock and photographers. Corn meal and pollen, bits of red coral and turquoise had been sprinkled over the snake’s head as offerings of spirit food. Holy people from tribes as far away as Canada and Mexico had come to see the giant snake.

There have been attempts to confine the meaning of the snake to an official story suitable for general consumption. But the Laguna Pueblos go on producing their own rich and continuously developing body of oral and occasionally written stories that reject any decisive conclusion in favor of ever increasing possibilities. This production of
multiple meaning is in keeping with Pueblo cosmology in general. For the old people, no one person or thing is better than another; hierarchies presuming superioriry and inferiority are considered absurd. No thing or location on the earth is of greater or lesser value than another. And this means that any location can potentially become a sacred spot.

Thus, outsiders who visit the American southwest are often confused by the places in which they find sacred altars or sites of miraculous appearances of the Blessed Virgin or others (could it be the notion of original sin that causes Europeans to define the sacred as the virginal or pure?). They expect to find the milagros of Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe in pristine forest grottoes, not on the window glass of a cinder block school building in a Yaqui Indian town; or Jesus’ face in a rainbow above Yosemite Falls, nor on a poor New Mexican woman’s breakfast tortilla. The traditional notion of the wondrous in a splendid setting befitting its claim is subverted here in this landscape where the wondrous can be anywhere and is everywhere. Even in the midst of a strip-mining operation.

Just as the Laguna prophecies say that all things European will eventually pass away, Europeans have, particularly in the last century, predicted the demise of all things Native American. In the late 1960s, anthropologists lugged their tape recorders to the pueblos, so that they might have the elders record stories and songs that would be lost when they passed away. Most of the Laguna elders agreed to make the tape recordings, but a few of the old people took a hard line. They said that what is important to our children and our grandchildren will be remembered; what is forgotten is what is no longer meaningful. What is true will persist. In spite of every-

The wind stirred the dust.
The people were starving.
“She’s angry with us,” the people said.
“Maybe because of that Ck’o’yo magic we were fooling with.
We better send someone to ask our forgiveness.”
They noticed hummingbird was fat and shiny

Richard Smith
he had plenty to eat. They asked how come he looked so good.

He said
Down below
Three worlds below this one
everything is
green
all the plants are growing
the flowers are blooming
I go down there
and eat.

Leslie Marmon Silko is a novelist, poet, essayist, and former professor at the University of New Mexico, University of Arizona and the Navajo Community College. She has been a major contributor to the Native American literary and artistic renaissance beginning in the 1960s.

The Dream That I Told My Mother-in-Law

by Elizabeth Alexander

In the room almost filled with our bed, 
the small bedroom, the king-sized bed high up 
and on casters so sometimes we would roll, 
in the room in the corner of the corner 
apartment on top of a hill so the bed would roll, 
we felt as if we might break off and drift, 
float, and become our own continent. 
When your mother first entered our apartment 
she went straight to that room and libated our bed 
with water from your homeland. Soon she saw 
in my cheeks the fire and poppy stain, 
and soon thereafter on that bed came the boy. 
Then months, then the morning I cracked first one 
then two then three eggs in a white bowl 
and all had double yokes, and your mother 
(now our mother) read the signs. Signs everywhere, 
signs rampant, a season of signs and a vial 
of white dirt brought across three continents 
to the enormous white bed that rolled 
and now held three, and soon held four, 
four on the bed, two boys, one man, and me, 
our mother reading all signs and blessing our bed 
blessing our bed filled with babies, blessing our bed 
through her frailty, blessing us and our bed, 
blessing us and our bed.
She began to dream
of childhood flowers, her long-gone parents.
I told her my dream in a waiting room:
a photographer photographed women,
said her portraits revealed their truest selves.
She snapped my picture, peeled back the paper,
and there was my son’s face, my first son, my self.
Mamma loved that dream so I told it again.
And soon she crossed over to her parents,
sisters, one son (War took that son).
We destroy one another), and women came
by twos and tens wrapped in her same fine white
bearing huge pans of stew, round breads, homemade wines,
and men came in suits with their ravaged faces
and together they cried and cried and cried
and keened and cried and the sound
was a live hive swelling and growing,
all the water in the world, all the salt, all the wails,
and the sound grew too big for the building and finally
lifted what needed to be lifted from the casket and we quieted
and watched it waft up and away like feather, like ash.
Daughter, she said, when her journey began, You are a mother now,
and you have to take care of the world.

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A dream consists of little more than its setting, as anyone knows who tells a dream or hears a dream told:

We were squeezing up the stone street of an Old World village.

We were climbing down the gangway of an oceangoing ship, carrying a baby.

We broke through the woods on the crest of a ridge and saw water; we grounded our blunt raft on a charred point of land.
We were lying on boughs of a tree in an alley.

We were dancing in a darkened ballroom, and the curtains were blowing.

The setting of our urgent lives is an intricate maze whose blind corridors we learn one by one—village street, ocean vessel, forested slope—without remembering how or where they connect in space.

You travel, settle, move on, stay put, go. You point your car down the riverside road to the blurred foot of the mountain. The mountain rolls back from the floodplain and hides its own height in its trees. You get out, stand on gravel, and cool your eyes watching the river move south. You lean on the car’s hot hood and look up at the old mountain, up the slope of its green western flank. It is September; the golden rod is out, and the asters. The tattered hardwood leaves darken before they die. The mountain occupies most of the sky. You can see where the route ahead through the woods will cross a fire scar, will vanish behind a slide of shale, and perhaps reemerge there on that piny ridge now visible across the hanging valley—that ridge apparently inaccessible, but with a faint track that fingers its greenish spine. You don’t notice starting to walk; the sight of the trail has impelled you along it, as the sight of the earth moves the sun.

Before you the mountain’s body curves away backward like a gymnast; the mountain’s peak is somewhere south, rolled backward, too, and out of sight. Below you lies the pale and widening river; its far bank is forest now, and hills, and more blue hills behind them, hiding the yellow plain. Overhead and on the mountain’s side, clouds collect and part. The clouds soak the ridges; the wayside plants tap water on your legs.

Now: if here while you are walking, or there when you’ve attained the far ridge and can see the yellow plain and the river shining through it—if you notice unbidden, that
you are afoot on this particular mountain on this particular day in the company of these particular changing fragments of clouds,—if you pause in your daze to connect your own skull-locked and interior mumble with the skin of your senses and sense, and notice you are living,—then will you not conjure up in imagination a map or a globe and locate this mountain ridge on it, and find on one western slope the dot which represents you walking here astonished?

You may then wonder where they have they gone, those other dots that were you: you in the flesh swimming in a swift river, swinging a bat on the first pitch, opening a footlocker with a screwdriver, inking and painting clowns on celluloid, stepping out of a revolving door into the swift crowd on a sidewalk, being kissed and kissing till your brain grew smooth, stepping out of the cold woods into a warm field full of crows, or lying awake in bed aware of your legs and suddenly aware of all of it, that the ceiling above you was under the sky—in what country, what town?

You may wonder, that is, as I sometimes wonder privately, but it doesn’t matter. For it is not you or I that is important, neither what sort we might be nor how we came to be each where we are. What is important is anyone’s
coming awake and discovering a place, finding in full orbit a spinning globe one can lean over, catch, and jump on. What is important is the moment of opening a life and feeling it touch—with an electric hiss and cry—this speckled mineral sphere, our present world.

On your mountain slope now you must take on faith that those apparently discrete dots of you were contiguous: that little earnest dot, so easily amused; that alien, angry adolescent; and this woman with loosening skin on bony hands, hands now fifteen years older than your mother’s hands when you pinched their knuckle skin into mountain ridges on an end table. You must take on faith that those severed places cohered, too—the dozens of desks, bedrooms, kitchens, yards, landscapes—if only through the motion and shed molecules of the traveler. You take it on faith that the multiform and variously lighted latitudes and longitudes were part of one world, that you didn’t drop chopped from house to house, coast to coast, life to life, but in some once comprehensible way moved there, a city block at a time, a highway mile at a time, a degree of latitude and longitude at a time, carrying a fielder’s mitt and the Penguin Rimbaud for old time’s sake, and a sealed envelope, like a fetish, of untouchable
stock certificates someone one hundred years ago gave your grandmother, and a comb. You take it on faith, for the connections are down now, the trail grown over, the highway moved; you can’t remember despite all your vowing and memorization, and the way back is lost.

Your very cells have been replaced, and so have most of your feelings—except for two, two that connect back as far as you can remember. One is the chilling sensation of lowering one foot into a hot bath. The other, which can and does occur at any time, never fails to occur when you lower one foot into a hot bath, and when you feel the chill spread inside your shoulders, shoot down your arms and rise to your lips, and when you remember having felt this sensation from always, from when your mother lifted you down toward the bath and you curled up your legs: it is the dizzying overreal sensation of noticing that you are here. You feel life wipe your face like
a big brush.

You may read this in your summer bed while the stars roll westward over your roof as they always do, while the constellation Crazy Swan nosedives over your steaming roof and into the tilled prairie once again. You may read this in your winter chair while Orion vaults over your snowy roof and over the hard continent to dive behind a California wave. "O'Ryan," Father called Orion, "that Irishman." Any two points in time, however distant, meet through the points in between; any two points in our atmosphere touch through the air. So we meet.

I write this at a wide desk in a pine shed as I always do these recent years, in this life I pray will last, while the summer sun closes the sky to Orion and to all the other winter stars over my roof. The young oaks growing just outside my windows wave in the light, so that concentrating, lost in the past, I see the pale leaves wag and think as my blood leaps: Is someone coming?

Is it Mother coming for me, to carry me home? Could it be my own young, my own glorious Mother, coming across the grass for me, the morning light on her skin, to get me and bring me back? Back to where I last knew all I needed, the way to her two strong arms?

And I wake a little more and reason, No, it is the oak leaves in the sun, pale as a face. I am here now, with this my own dear family, up here at this high latitude, out here at the farthest exploratory tip of this my present bewildering age. And still I break up through the skin of awareness a thousand times a day, as dolphins burst through seas, and dive again, and rise, and dive.

Annie Dillard is an author and poet. She was awarded the 1975 Pulitzer Prize for her novel Pilgrim at Tinker Creek and the 2014 National Humanities Medal among many other honors. She is currently a Professor emeritus at Wesleyan University.

After the conclusion of the narrative, Black Elk and our party were sitting at the north edge of Cuny Table, looking off across the Badlands (“the beauty and the strangeness of the earth,” as the old man expressed it). Pointing at Harney Peak that loomed black above the far sky-rim, Black Elk said: “There, when I was young, the spirits took me in my vision to the center of the earth and showed me all the good things in the sacred hoop of the world. I wish I could stand up there in the flesh before I die, for
there is something I want to say to the Six Grandfathers.’

So the trip to Harney Peak was arranged, and a few days later we were there. On the way up to the summit, Black Elk remarked to his son, Ben: “Something should happen to-day. If I have any power left, the thunder beings of the west should hear me when I send a voice, and there should be at least a little thunder and a little rain.” What happened is, of course, related to Wasichu readers as being
merely a more or less striking coincidence. It was a bright and cloudless day, and after we had reached the summit the sky was perfectly clear. It was a season of drought, one of the worst in the memory of the old men. The sky remained clear until about the conclusion of the ceremony.

"Right over there," said Black Elk, indicating a point of rock, "is where I stood in my vision, but the hoop of the world about me was different, for what I saw was in the spirit."

Having dressed and painted himself as he was in his great vision, he faced the west, holding the sacred pipe before him in his right hand. Then he sent forth a voice; and a thin, pathetic voice it seemed in that vast space around us:

"Hey-a-a-hey! Hey-a-a-hey! Hey-a-a-hey! Hey-a-a-hey! Grandfather, Great Spirit, once more behold me on earth and lean to hear my feeble voice. You lived first, and you are older than all need, older than all prayer. All things belong to you—the two-leggeds, the four-leggeds, the wings of the air and all green things that live. You have set the powers of the four quarters to cross each other. The good road and the road of difficulties you have made to cross; and where they cross, the place is holy. Day in and day out, forever, you are the life of things.

"Therefore I am sending a voice, Great Spirit, my Grandfather, forgetting nothing you have made, the stars of the universe and the grasses of the earth.

"You have said to me, when I was still young and could hope, that in difficulty I should send a voice four times, once for each quarter of the earth, and you would hear me.

"To-day I send a voice for a people in despair.

"You have given me a sacred pipe, and through this I should make my offering. You see it now.

"From the west, you have given me the cup of living water and the sacred bow, the power to make live and to destroy. You have given me a sacred wind and the herb from where the white giant lives—the cleansing power and the healing. The daybreak star and the pipe, you have given from the east; and from the south, the nation's sacred hoop and the tree that was to bloom. To the center of the world you have taken me and showed the goodness and the beauty and the strangeness of the greening earth, the only mother—and there the spirit shapes of things, as they should be, you have shown to me and I have seen. At the center of this sacred hoop you have said that I should make the tree to bloom.

"With tears running, O Great Spirit, Great Spirit, my Grandfather—with running tears I must say now that the tree has never bloomed. A pitiful old man, you see me here, and I have fallen away and have done nothing. Here at the center of the world, where you took me when I was young and taught me; here, old, I stand, and the tree is withered, Grandfather, my Grandfather!

"Again, and maybe the last time on this earth, I recall the great vision you sent me. It may be that some little root of the sacred tree still lives. Nourish it then, that it may leaf and bloom and fill with singing birds. Hear me, not for myself, but for my people; I am old. Hear me that they may once more go back into the sacred hoop and find the good red road, the shielding tree!"
We who listened now noted that thin clouds had gathered about us. A scant chill rain began to fall and there was low, muttering thunder without lightning. With tears running down his cheeks, the old man raised his voice to a thin high wail, and chanted: “In sorrow I am sending a feeble voice, O Six Powers of the World. Hear me in my sorrow, for I may never call again. O make my people live!”

For some minutes the old man stood silent, with face uplifted, weeping in the drizzling rain.

In a little while the sky was clear again.

Black Elk (1863-1950) was a healer of the Oglala Lakota tribe who participated in the Ghost Dance Movement alongside Sitting Bull and Chief Crazy Horse. His conversations with John G. Neihardt recounting his life are recorded in Black Elk Speaks.

John G. Neihardt (1881-1973) is the Poet Laureate in Perpetuity of Nebraska.
THE MOUNTAINS AND RIVERS ORDER
NEWS AND TRAINING

ZEN MOUNTAIN MONASTERY
The main house of the Mountains and Rivers Order in Mount Tremper, NY.

ZEN CENTER OF NEW YORK CITY
Fire Lotus Temple, the city branch of the MRO in Brooklyn, NY.

SOCIETY OF MOUNTAINS AND RIVERS
An international network of MRO sitting groups.

ZEN ENVIRONMENTAL STUDIES INSTITUTE
Environmental education and training programs including the Green Dragon Earth Initiative.

DHARMA COMMUNICATIONS
Not-for-profit dharma outreach, including podcasts, The Monastery Store, and the Mountain Record Journal.

NATIONAL BUDDHIST ARCHIVE
Preserves and documents unfolding American Buddhist history.

NATIONAL BUDDHIST PRISON SANGHA
Offers spiritual guidance, correspondence and support to prison inmates.
The Mountains and Rivers Order

The Mountains and Rivers Order of Zen Buddhism (MRO) is dedicated to practicing, realizing and embodying the Buddha’s wisdom as it has been transmitted mind to mind through the generations of Buddhist ancestors, beginning with Shakyamuni Buddha himself. The MRO offers practitioners an approach to spiritual training that is grounded in the recognition that all human beings have the capacity to awaken, while acknowledging that this journey requires guidance and support. The MRO includes two major practice centers, numerous affiliate groups, and various organizations dedicated to supporting sincere and vigorous spiritual practice. To enter into the MRO is to take up the dharma as a matter of profound personal importance and to be guided by the tradition, the teachers, and the sangha as one embarks on the path of self-realization.

Eight Gates of Zen

Arising from the Buddha’s original teaching on the Eightfold Path, the Eight Gates of Zen form the core of training in the MRO. The Eight Gates draw on Zen’s rich tradition of practice across disciplines like archery, haiku, painting and tea ceremony. Accessible and relevant to the lives of modern practitioners, they challenge us to infuse every aspect of our lives with spiritual practice. The Eight Gates are zazen, direct study with a teacher, art practice, body practice, Buddhist study, liturgy, right action, and work practice—points of entry that offer ever-deepening ways of studying the self.

Lay and Monastic Training

The MRO includes two distinct yet interrelated paths of training: lay practice and monasticism. Monastics dedicate the whole of their lives to practicing and realizing the dharma and serving the sangha. Lay students commit to awakening within their daily lives, in the midst of family, home and work. The unique feel of training in the MRO emerges in part from the rich commingling of these two paths, as men and women of all ages, from all walks of life, take up the teachings in accord with their individual sense of spiritual calling.
Teachers, Priests and Dharma Holders in the Mountains and Rivers Order

**John Daido Loori Roshi** (1931-2009) was the founder of Zen Mountain Monastery and the Mountains and Rivers Order, and served as the guiding teacher for almost thirty years. Daido Roshi was a lineage holder in the Soto school of Zen, and also received Inka (final seal of approval) in the Rinzai school from his teacher. Roshi drew on his background as a scientist, artist, naturalist, parent and Zen priest to establish a uniquely American Zen Buddhist training center.

**Geoffrey Shugen Arnold Sensei** is the Head of the Mountains and Rivers Order, as well as the abbot of Zen Mountain Monastery and the Zen Center of New York City. Trained as a musician, he came to the Monastery in his late twenties after ten years of practicing Zen on his own. He has been in full-time residential training since 1986, and received dharma transmission from Daido Roshi in 1997. He is the author of *O, Beautiful End*, a collection of Zen memorial poems.

**Jody Hojin Kimmel Osho** has been in residential training at the Monastery since 1991 and is the training coordinator there. After Daido Roshi’s passing, Hojin Osho completed her training with Shugen Sensei, receiving the priestly transmission from him in 2012. Before ordaining, Hojin was an artist and potter.

**Ron Hogen Green** has been engaged in formal Zen practice since 1978, and was in residential training at the Monastery for twelve years. In 2007, Hogen returned to lay life, and in 2011, he became a dharma holder in the Order. He currently lives with his family in Danville, PA.

**Vanessa Zuisei Goddard** began residency at the monastery in 1996, ordained in 2001 and returned to lay life in 2014 while continuing on as senior staff and becoming a dharma holder in the Order. She currently lives in Mount Tremper with her partner and serves as the Director of Dharma Communications.
Zen Mountain Monastery: The Main House

Nestled in the Catskill Mountains, Zen Mountain Monastery is the main house of the MRO. The Monastery offers both experienced practitioners and beginners a chance to enter a unique environment where distractions are minimized and all aspects of life are engaged as study of the self.

Residents, students, and retreat participants share their days while following a rigorous training schedule. The resident teacher and abbot, Shugen Sensei, oversees daily life and training.

Residency at the Monastery means joining the cloistered community, letting go of worldly responsibilities, and giving oneself completely to the training schedule. Each day revolves around practice in the Eight Gates, with time devoted to zazen and liturgy, as well as other areas of study.

The Monastery draws its strength from the ancient tradition of Buddhist monasticism, but it’s the rich interplay between the monastery cloister and the vibrant world outside the doors that keeps the practice earnest and alive.

Zen Center of New York City: The City Branch

Located in the Boerum Hill section of Brooklyn, Zen Center of New York City: Fire Lotus Temple offers lay practitioners a vibrant experience of Zen training in the midst of one of the world’s great cities. The Temple maintains a daily schedule of zazen and liturgy, offering those who live in the city a chance to come and practice together as their schedules and obligations allow. In addition, the Temple offers meditation intensives, right action and study groups, evening classes, community work periods, a Sunday morning program and Saturday retreats.

As one of the few residential Buddhist training centers in New York City, the Temple offers a unique opportunity to be in full-time training while simultaneously engaged in the world. Our small
community of residents holds jobs or goes to school. Residential life is guided by the abbot, Shugen Sensei, and by Ron Hogen Green, a dharma holder. Temple residency offers a powerful way to take up the crucial but challenging work of extending our spiritual practice into our ordinary lives.

**Beginning Instruction in Zazen**

Instruction in zazen, along with many opportunities to develop and deepen one’s meditation practice, is one of the most important things the MRO has to offer. Beginning instruction is available each week at both the Monastery and the Temple as part of our Sunday morning program and on Wednesday evenings at the Monastery.

**Retreats**

Both the Monastery and Temple offer introductory retreats, including a monthly *Introduction to Zen Training Weekend*, led by the teacher and senior students at the Monastery, and *The Essentials of Zen*, a series of evening seminars at the Temple that take up different facets of lay practice. Other retreats offer opportunities to study and train in the Eight Gates with guest instructors across a range of disciplines. At the Monastery, retreatants step into the residents’ cloistered community for a full weekend; at the Temple, retreats take place on Saturdays.

**Sesshin and Meditation Intensives**

Characterized by silence and deep introspection, extended periods of zazen such as sesshin (week-long) and zazenkai (day-long) are the heart of Zen training. All intensives include dokusan, or private interview with the teachers, and formal meals taken in the zendo (oryoki).

**Residential Training**

The Monastery and the Temple offer different ways to engage in Zen training full-time. Monastery residents join the cloistered community, letting go of other worldly responsibilities; Temple residents maintain careers, pursue degrees, or engage in other focused work while living and training at the center. For more information, check our websites at zmm.mro.org and zcnyc.mro.org.
In Memorium:

Lopön Rita Gross

July 6, 1947 – November 11, 2015

We note the passing of renowned teacher of Comparative Religions and friend of the Monastery, Rita Gross, who was widely recognized for her groundbreaking scholarship on gender and religion. She described herself as a “scholar practitioner” with a nonsectarian approach to the study of Buddhism, and was a longtime student of Jetsün Khandro Rinpoche. Recognized as a feminist, theologian and advocate for genuine inter-religious dialogue, she led numerous retreats at the monastery and we will miss her dedicated scholarship and warm-hearted presence.

Jason Spiotta

October 30, 1969 – August 20, 2015

This summer our sangha experienced the tragic, sudden passing of a well-loved and appreciated friend of the Monastery, Jason Spiotta, husband of Elizabethanne and father of Jakson, Che, and Cosimo. Jason was co-founder of the local alternative energy company Solar Generation and installed the solar arrays which power the Sangha House and other buildings at the Monastery. His generous, kind, and wise presence was a gift to our sangha and we miss him greatly.

Moss the Cat

After 15 years of dedicated prowling, purring, sunning himself and serving the Monastery sangha in numerous ways, Moss passed away surrounded by those who loved him. A service was held with recognition of all benevolent creatures of the earth, expressing gratitude for Moss’s life. A resting place was made near the garden and the woods where he loved to roam.
**New MRO students**

From August through November, Jill Hamer, Brent Kite, Larry Miller, Achong Chen, Steve Miron, Lori Davis and Rami Eskelin each passed through the five barrier gates to become formal MRO students.

**Appreciation**

The Monastery would like to express gratitude to Tasha Orloff for the new logo for our apple butter, John Caruso for the fresh baked goods; Hosei Allore for the summer peaches; Warren Chikan Bacon for a rototiller and furrower; and Shinsui Bowles for many-faceted support, logistical and otherwise. Sincere thanks to the Temple Bodhisattvas for their continuing work on behalf of the city sangha, and to the anonymous donor for the greenhouse for the monastery garden. Dharma Communications extends thanks to Don Symanski, David McNamara, and JL Hokyu Aronson for photos, Nitzan Blouin for the iMac, and to Diana Lynn Cote and Christopher Kilkenny for the iMac and original artwork.

**Comings & Goings at the Monastery**

From August through September, month-long residents included Jean-Sebastien Samso from Montreal, Canada; Sandy Del Valle, MRO, from Forest Hills, NY; Polly Horne, MRO, from Brooklyn, NY; Ron Kavic from Lakewood, NY; Carl Seglem from Brighton, MA; Scott Glover from Ridgefield, CT; Grethe Karin Lehman from Halden, Norway; Eduardo Zayas-Avila from Guaynabo, Puerto Rico; Karen Daw, MRO, from New Zealand; Vadim Galperin from Brooklyn, NY; Alex Holder from Odessa, FL; Dennis McCormick from Brooklyn, NY; and Jorge Collazo from Brooklyn, NY for one week. For the month of October we welcomed Alexandra White from Boston, MA; Es Taylor from Balitmore, MD; Annelisse Fifi from Brooklyn, NY; Magnus Mareneck from Shelter Island, NY and Kirby Horn from Georgetown, TX and Nitzan Blouin from Brooklyn, NY. Extended stays this fall include Joseph Greenberg from Cambridge, MA and Christian Vyboh from Montreal, Canada. In November we welcomed Kensan Molloy, MRO from Wellington, New Zealand, and Donna Nicolino, MRO from Willimantic, CT, for one–month residency. For year-long residency we welcomed Vadim Galperin, Eduardo Zayas-Avila, Es Taylor, and Alexandra White. The monastery said goodbye to Gjon Tinaj, MRO, Magda Kadblukowska and Zachary Keener, and in November to David Gendo Press, MRO, all completing a year of residential training.

**Comings & Goings at the Temple**

In August, Shon Arieh-Lerer completed a month of residential training and Todd Fubai Cowdery, MRO, began an eight-month residency. This fall Sydney Lohan finished three months, Jason Zontanos stayed for two months, and Theresa Braine for four months. Johanna Magin stayed for two weeks in November, Maghnus Maranek for three weeks and Camille Bonham for one week.
Teaching in the Ten Directions

Shugen Sensei had a busy ango this fall, tending the fires of practice both at the Monastery and the Temple. He led Buddhist Study sessions on Bodhidharma’s teachings at both places throughout the three-month ango, as well as Fusatsu ceremonies and mondos. In early November, Shugen Sensei led the annual Hungry Ghost ceremony in an atmospheric evening procession to the cemetery chapel and Basho Pond, with lanterns and carved pumpkins illuminating the way. Reminiscent of the Japanese Obon ancestor’s ceremony, this service provides opportunity to recognize and communicate with those who have passed away.

This fall was peppered with visits from college students. Shugen Sensei met with students from Bard College at the Monastery and with students from Saint Joseph’s college at the Temple. Hojin Osho worked with a group of students from Hartwick College visiting the Monastery and officiated an eye-opening ceremony for the Bard College Buddhist group. Hojin Osho also offered a new art practice retreat, “Mirror to Mirror: Expressing from the Still Point” at the Monastery.

Tokudo for Sensui Shoan

On Sunday, October 25, Shugen Sensei officiated shukke tokudo, or full monastic ordination, for Danica Shoan Ankele amid a very full zendo of family and sangha. Shoan received the Sixteen Bodhisattva Precepts and the five monastic life vows of simplicity, service, stability, selflessness and to accomplish the Buddha’s Way and the ordination name Sensui, or “Mystic Waters.”

Shoan first came to the Monastery in 1994, became a formal student of the Order in 1996, and in 1999 she received the Bodhisattva Precepts from Daido Roshi. She became a postulant in 2011 and received novitiate ordination from Shugen Sensei in November of 2013. Shoan lives at the Monastery with her partner Gokan, and she is currently the creative director for Dharma Communications and the editor of Mountain Record.
Lokasparsa Dance Performance

In September the Sangha House held a sold-out performance of Gibbous by Lokasparsa Dance Company. One meaning of the word gibbous is “nearly but not quite illumined”. Gibbous explored witnessing ourselves and each other, exploring extremes of intimacy, solitude, isolation and invisibility, clearing boundaries for seeing and being seen. Artistic director clyde fusei forth, MRO, was joined by dancers Charla Ruby Koren Malamed, MRO, Jennifer Lavenhar, Caitlin Quinn, and Caeli van Hine. Lighting by Zack Jacobs, music by Kevin Salem.

Sangha Wedding

On August 30th, Amanda Graham and Joris Sankai Lemmens were married in a ceremony at Zen Mountain Monastery. Shugen Sensei officiated the service, and after the couple exchanged wedding vows, Sensei offered a poem for the occasion. Amanda and Sankai live in the Woodstock area and practice at the Monastery regularly. Congratulations to the newlyweds!

WZEN Reborn

WZEN, Dharma Communications’ online radio station, has been through several evolutions since its inception back in 2002. Adapting to the evolving internet and the way people use it, WZEN began as a streaming radio station, shifted into a play on-demand station, and now will be phased out as all the teachings from ZMM and ZCNYC are uploaded onto our website, and made available through subscribing to our podcast. Check it out at the monastery's web site.
On Sunday November 15th, five students received the Bodhisattva precepts in a ceremony officiated by Shugen Sensei, in a zendo filled with students, friends and family members. From left to right pictured above, they are Shannon Shinko (“Deep Light”) Hayes, JL Hokyu (“Penetrating Dharma”) Aronson, Chelsea Fushin (“Trusting Wind”) Green, Máire Tosho (“Earth Star”) O’Brien, and Todd Fubai (“Universal Plum Tree”) Cowdery.

On Sunday November 22nd the sangha celebrated the Shuso Hossen ceremony with Shuso Richard Ryoha Dunworth, MRO, marking the close of our fall ango and the culmination of three months of intensive training. As a new senior student, Ryoha presented his first talk and held a Dharma Encounter with ango sesshin participants to a full-house zendo, encouraging us all with his example to always take the next step forward. A strong presence was made by fellow sangha members from Vermont where Ryoha lives and practices and where he will continue to help support the affiliate sitting groups in the northeast region. He is pictured above, right.

In November, members of the Earth Initiative’s original planning group met at the monastery to review progress and to assess how to best continue supporting the sangha’s relationship with the Earth and engaging advocacy on behalf of the planet. The full day meeting included a focus on how these activities could be deeply integrated into our practice and include environmental advocacy, earth education and sustainable living. The Earth Initiative will continue to hold periodic special events while the planning process continues, so stay tuned!
Wild Grasses Zazenkai and Sesshin

What are the subtle ways we define ourselves by gender, and separate ourselves? How does this impact our practice of Buddhadharma? This fall women of all ages, abilities, colors, cultures, and sexual orientations gathered for a zazenkai at the Temple and a sesshin at the Monastery for the second annual Wild Grasses retreats. Led by Hojin Osho, the name Wild Grasses comes from a poem by Otagaki Rengetsu, a nun from early 19th century Japan who was also an accomplished poet and potter. The Wild Grasses retreats brought together even more women this year than last, with 30 attending at the Temple and 80 at the Monastery.

Hojin Osho experimented with the zendo seating, breaking the traditional straight rows with a bit more of a bend. At the Monastery, the zendo was arranged in a series of cascading half-moon lines, creating a curving shape around which participants walked kinhin, and experienced a sense of roundness when sitting facing inward. When facing inward, the curved lines offered a new experience of inclusion, and when facing outward, one of harmonious solitude. Within this space, in addition to rigorous zazen practice of sesshin, Hojin Osho introduced a chanting practice of Rengetsu’s poem, accompanied by the haunting tones of the shruti box.

Within these all-women’s retreats, participants were released from navigating among male voices, bodies, energy. Afterwards, many spoke of finding freedom from the subtle flattening of female identity that can come in multi-gender or primarily male environments. Gone, too, was the singular focus on the male Buddha and the all-male lineage: the chanting included the lineage of female ancestors, bringing direct attention to the presence and identity of women. Within this context, there was no question that buddha ancestors included women; the women of the sangha were engaging and touching the female lineage as something alive and real.
ZMM’s 35th Anniversary & the Board of Governors Meeting

“Happy 35th Anniversary Dragons and Elephants!” proclaimed a brightly painted banner suspended over the Monastery’s hearth, a salute to the noblest creatures of the land, sea and air. October 9-11 brought nearly 150 sangha members (dragons and elephants alike) together for a weekend of reflection, celebration, dreaming and practice.

As Shugen Sensei noted in his opening remarks, Western Buddhism has come a long way since Daido Roshi founded Zen Mountain Monastery in 1980. Since Roshi’s passing in 2009, his vision has been developed and continues to evolve, and there is clearly much to celebrate. That Saturday, Sensei asked us all to reflect on how our location, both on the mountain and in the city, is part of a larger whole, part of this great Earth, and how these specific locales inform the offerings and opportunities at both the Monastery and the Zen Center of New York City. With attendees seated in the Sangha House’s performance hall, Sensei shared a collection of photos detailing the formation of the Monastery and the Mountains and Rivers Order and spoke of the mountain itself as a sangha member with its own unique needs and gifts.

Coincidentally, 2015 also marks the 15th anniversary of the Zen Center’s location at 500 State Street in Brooklyn. Sensei noted that the Temple has continued to play a pivotal role not only in offering a practice home for city dwellers, but also in introducing people to the Monastery who might not otherwise have come across it. The weekend’s participants were treated to the premiere screening of a 30-minute film about the Temple, chronicling its roots in Manhattan and radiant blossoming in Brooklyn under the leadership of Bonnie Myotai Treace, Sensei. The film also explored the evolution of the Temple during Shugen Sensei’s time as resident teacher, and notes the ways in which Dharma Holders and senior monastics are currently stepping into more active leadership roles in the city.

After a productive day of meetings, in which sangha members envisioned the future of the Order in thematic break-out groups, their hard work was rewarded by an exquisite meal. Prepared by the Monastery cook and served by a group of residents and volunteers, the meal was a three course
vegan feast. Over coffee and dessert, remarks were offered by board members, Shugen Sensei, and special guest Myotai Sensei, who journeyed north from Cold Spring for the occasion.

The weekend marked yet another anniversary—the sixth year since Daido Roshi’s passing. After supper, attendees viewed a documentary about Daido Roshi created to help preserve his memory for those of us who knew him, those who have arrived more recently and for those yet to come. Echoing words Roshi used often with his students, the 40-minute film is entitled Trust Yourself. Roshi’s three Dharma heirs are interviewed in the film, along with a number of the monastic and lay students he ordained during his three decades of teaching. Interspersed with the stories and reflections are mesmerizing archival clips and photos, filling out this affectionate portrait.

Sunday morning completed the gathering as the sangha processed up to the cemetery for a memorial service at Roshi’s stupa. Shugen Sensei officiated and offered this poem:

Sitting in an empty hall
a call is sent out
And still today the answer can be heard.
Buddha mind seal—
to soothe the baby’s cry
to sing the body electric.
One intention, one action;
This river has countless streams.
The hands and eyes weaving a tapestry
in an empty sky.
How can I express my gratitude?
All the way to heaven—
Roshi, you please, give the last line.
Action is the literal translation of the word “karma.” Throughout Traleg Kyabgon Rinpoche’s book *Karma: What it is, What is isn’t, Why it matters*, karmic theory is presented as a dynamic process in which we train ourselves in spiritual liberation. Karma, he writes, arises as non-linear causes and conditions, whether coming from past or present life. Traleg Rinpoche repeatedly makes it clear that we are a changing agent with an active role and responsibility in karma: “Better to view oneself as a work in progress without a real me.”

Traleg Rinpoche, who died in 2012, was among the few uniquely qualified teachers to deliver Tibetan teachings to Westerners. He fled Tibet to India in the 1959 Chinese Communist invasion. He received the traditional education of a tulku, one who is recognized as bearing the rebirth imprints of past lineage masters. In 1980, Rinpoche relinquished his monastic vows, became a married lay teacher in Australia, and studied in Western philosophical traditions.

This book dovetails with Rinpoche’s earlier book, *The Practice of Lojong: Cultivating Compassion through Training the Mind*. According to Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, Lojong means “basic intelligence.” The Lojong mind training provides pithy slogans to engage our basic intelligence in the Buddhist path. For example, there is a Lojong encouragement to work on the stronger disturbing habits first. In *Karma*, Rinpoche elaborates by observing that negative habits or emotional afflictions are addictive and thus hard to break. Not so for wholesome or good actions that are carried out with good intention. He tells us that breaking through a difficult habit results in a momentary boost in wholesome energy that we can use to become more spontaneous and open.

Through the various topics of this book, there are examples of karmic theory coupled with practice issues that I find both inspiring and useful. While Rinpoche warns us that karmic fabric is so complex we cannot fully comprehend it, he assures us we can get to the basics. Any karma is binding, he says, but we are freer with good or wholesome actions, “Good karma, done properly, is not habit forming.” Transformation of negative habits into good has ripple effects. These teachings are echoed in contemporary psychological studies that show “keystone” changes in harmful behavior shift other unhealthy or harmful habit patterns, changing them as well. The instruction to work on the most difficult habits first, converting them to good or wholesome actions, is not only drawn from Buddhist karmic theory but also makes psychological sense.
I greatly appreciated Rinpoche’s emphasis on collective karma with its implications for social change. “The collective nature of karma...underscores the interconnectedness of our karmic way of life.” He reminds us that minds can join in “mass hysteria” where great harm can be done. And the converse can occur as well. For me, these words brought to mind the Rwandan 100-day slaughter of one-half to one million Tutsi and moderate Hutu by majority Hutu. Just as mass harm can take place, so can compassionate action. Rwandans are now engaged in a truth and reconciliation process. In this format, victims and perpetrators meet and often testify in public with the intention of healing. This model began in the wake of apartheid in South Africa and is now used in many post-conflict settings.

At least a quarter of Traleg Kyogban’s book is devoted to Tibetan practices unique to Vajrayana, especially tantric deity visualization and bardo teachings for the period between death and rebirth. Rebirth is framed as coming about from karmic imprints of a life—not a fixed personal entity that changes bodies like changing clothes, but a kind of energy stream. Here students of Zen benefit from clear explanations of Tibetan practices and views that Rinpoche also grounds in western psychology and science.

Envisioning oneself as a tantric deity can teach us about the profound flexibility of mind and our powerful ability to project. “We need to keep in mind Buddhism’s overall theoretical context here, where the mind is understood to be continually projecting all kinds of images anyway in our present life,” he writes.

As a Zen student, this book is especially useful in bringing together Indo-Buddhist history and evolving views on karma, especially through the Yogacara and Madhyamaka Schools, common to both Zen and Tibetan practices. The further elaboration of these teachings specific to Tibetan tantric Buddhism provides another window for understanding our own practices.

Diana Kosei Hartel was a student of Daido Roshi from 1997 to 2005. She returned to the MRO in 2014 after extensive travels in the US, Canada, and Australia. She has worked in and for human health and ecology as a scientist, nature writer, and artist.
“If the categories of race, sexuality, and gender are illusions or social constructs, then what is the tension and ultimate hatred that arises with regard to them?” writes Zen priest, Zenju Earthlyn Manuel in *The Way of Tenderness: Awakening Through Race, Sexuality, and Gender*. Manuel, who is the guiding teacher of Still Breathing Meditation Center in East Oakland, opens her own path of discovery to her readers, emphasizing that liberation is achieved by seeing into the truth of no-self while also recognizing the karma that comes along with different identities and embodiments.

Manuel is black, a woman, a lesbian, and a Zen priest. It almost sounds like the punch line to a bad joke, but it isn’t, and the questions Manuel raises in this volume are powerful and not to be taken lightly. I came to this book as a new practitioner immersed in Zen practice, having taken on a year-long residency at Zen Mountain Monastery. I am also black, a woman, and a lesbian, and it was refreshing and encouraging for me to come across another Zen practitioner—an ordained priest no less—who acknowledges outright the pain that comes from racism, sexism, and homophobia, even in the context of practice and liberation.

What I perceive as the tension between the teaching of no-self and the reality of embodiment has been confusing for me—and I know I’m not alone. How do we forget the self and embrace our unique identity? Zen teaches that our conditioned self brings a great deal of suffering, but to me it seems counterintuitive and even unfair to just forget about aspects of myself when I’ve worked hard to feel empowered in my identity. Encountering the dharma, I didn’t like the idea that I would have to let all that go in order to be liberated—I wondered, were the paths to liberation and self-empowerment mutually exclusive?

In *The Way of Tenderness*, Manuel offers a way into the teachings of selflessness and liberation while recognizing the complexity and importance of different identities and embodiments. She also explores what it means to be one with everything around us. Buddhism teaches that the separation and difference we perceive between self and other comes from our delusion, but as we go about our ordinary lives in the world, clearly differences also exist. As practitioners, how do we proceed?

Manuel writes, “It isn’t always necessary to engage the difference, but giving it an ‘inner bow’ allows us to experience the whole landscape of oneness. By not acknowledging difference, we unwittingly exaggerate the difference until it screams to be acknowledged.” There is a way, Manuel insists, to find the truth of our difference.
and the truth of our sameness. She teaches that zazen gives us a way to acknowledge the difference and also let it go. Sometimes the letting go part doesn’t happen as easily as we want, and Manuel suggests that when we find ourselves sticking or attached, it’s a sign that something is demanding to be acknowledged.

Manuel’s guidance has helped me learn to be with the pain, rage, and shame that come along with racism, sexism, and homophobia, and helped me see that I don’t have to give up my womanhood, or my culture, or my desire to love in exchange for liberation.

Manuel writes, “The way of tenderness appears on its own. It comes when the events of your life have rendered you silent, have sat you in the corner, and there is nothing left to do but sit until the mental distress or confusion about who you are or who you are not passes.” She lets her reader know that being tender is not a form of weakness but an expression of strength. This book makes it clear that to be tender is to allow for compassion, understanding, and unity to enter every aspect of our lives.

This book isn’t just for those who have spent many sleepless nights worrying about how to face the world because they are different. The Way of Tenderness reminds us that racism, sexism, and homophobia don’t just cause suffering for people of color, women, non-cisgender people, homosexuals, bisexu-als, pansexuals, asexuals, or disabled people, but for everyone. Even when we don’t directly suffer from oppression ourselves, the truth of no separation means that the suffering of others is our suffering, too. Manuel’s passionate, wise and thought-ful guidance can help us all learn about compassion and vulnerability, no matter how we identify or how we are physically embodied.

*Jordan Burnett* is from Brooklyn, NY and is a recent graduate of Hartwick College, where she majored in Political Science. She is in the midst of a year of residential training at ZMM, where she presently serves as the registrar.
Directory of MRO Affiliate Groups

These informal groups offer practitioners who live locally an opportunity to come together for zazen, as well as for periodic retreats and intensives with visiting MRO teachers and senior students. These groups are led by MRO students and follow MRO training guidelines. For more information please contact the coordinator.

Vermont Affiliates
— Burlington
Bob Tokushu Senghas, MRO (802) 985-9207 rsenghas@uuma.org

— Montpelier
Michael Joen Gray, MRO (802) 456-1983 grhayes1956@comcast.net

Philadelphia Affiliate
Paul Kyudo McCarthy, MRO phillyzen@gmail.com

Buffalo Affiliate
Ray Eigen Ball, MRO and Gwen Coe, MRO (716) 655-1856 coeball@mac.com

New Zealand Affiliates
— Auckland
Monica Seisho van Oorschot, MRO (09) 636-6086 auckland@zen.org.nz

— Christchurch
Shayne Chosei Crimp, MRO (03) 942-3563 christchurch@zen.org.nz

— Nelson
Graham Houn Snadden, MRO (03) 548-4619 nelson@zen.org.nz

— Wellington
Rachel Furyo Stockwell, MRO (04) 977-6460 wellington@zen.org.nz

— Manawatu
Peter Jolly, MRO (06) 356-8811 manawatu@zen.org.nz

Prison Affiliates
— Green Haven Correctional Facility, Great Meadow Correctional Facility, Woodbourne Correctional Facility, Shawangunk Correctional Facility, Wende Correctional Facility

The following groups offer regular opportunities for zazen, but are not directly affiliated with the MRO.

Augusta, ME — Christopher Shosen York, MRO (207) 622-9433 christopheryork8@gmail.com

Wayne, PA — Joe Kenshu Mieloch, MRO (610) 933-0594 jmieloch@rcn.com

Ottsville, PA — Pam Jinshin Dragotta, MRO (215) 882-1924 pdragotta92@gmail.com

Springfield, VT — Bettina Krampetz (802) 464-2006 normpetz@sover.net

Whitesburg, GA — Sybil Seisui Thomas, MRO (770) 834-9615 syllabil@aol.com
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