

# Walking Mountains

"The green mountains are always walking"—Daokai

*Dear Sangha and Friends,*

Stick season in Vermont – bare trees call our attention to the simpler things. The deep grooves in black locust bark, a solitary woodpecker seeking food, the air suddenly filled with snowflakes. And here at the Zen Center we too return to our roots: entering the Buddha Way by taking the precepts in the Jukai ceremony; expressing gratitude during Thanksgiving; commemorating the Buddha's enlightenment; and repentance and resolve at the New Year.

It's a very busy time at the Center with all of these events requiring cleaning, set-up, take down, and more. Each and every effort is of equal importance whether you are making lunch, sweeping the entryway, or setting a flower arrangement on an altar. Please join us.

*—Joan White*

## Workshop Practice by Jim Kahle



In Buddhism, there are two occurrences that are considered especially propitious. One is having a human body. The other, equally miraculous, is encountering the Dharma. Opportunities for the latter occur at the Vermont Zen Center approximately every other month with the Introduction to Zen Workshops. I have been fortunate enough to attend many of these workshops over the years.

Workers start to gather pretty early in the morning on the day of the workshop. Floors are swept for the final time and signs go out. Roshi arrives and we go through the final preparations. Dharman Rice worked many

(Continued on page 2)



### INSIDE THIS ISSUE

Workshop Practice	1
Lessons from Sheep	3
Oxfam Ceremony	4
Jukai Ceremony	4
Thanksgiving	5
The Buddha's Enlightenment	5
New Year's Eve	6
Home Purification	7
Temple Cleaning	7
Term Student News	8

### MISSION

*The Vermont Zen Center's mission is to create a peaceful and inviting environment to support those who seek wisdom, compassion, joy and equanimity within a Buddhist context. The two-fold practice of the Center is to overcome the causes of suffering through spiritual development and to alleviate the world's suffering through outreach activities and the cultivation of a caring attitude to the earth.*

*(Continued from page 1)*

workshops along with the myriad other important tasks he capably fulfilled at the Center. He used to say that he never felt more pressure to get it right than he did during the workshops. How does the old saying go: You never get a second chance to make a first impression.

Participants begin to arrive, slowly at first and then there's a rush. The first order of business after introductions is Roshi's opening talk. Sangha members who are assisting at the workshop are given the opportunity to sit in and hear it again; and many people do. Often one hears something new, or amazingly, really hears something for the first time. Roshi always talks about the Buddha's enlightenment, when he looked up and saw the morning star blazing in the sky. I usually tear up when she says that. Maybe it's the astronomer in me.

There's a break and then it's time for the posture demonstration, followed by zazen. Roshi has said that this is the most important part of the workshop. Think about it. For some of the participants this is the only time in their lives where they will learn how to do zazen. You want to get it right.

The posture demonstration is an exercise in finding the middle way. The person who is leading

“Think about it. For some of the participants this is the only time in their lives where they will learn how to do zazen. You want to try to get it right.”

the demonstration has a lot of ground to cover and certainly doesn't want to leave out anything important. Given that time is limited, it is important to stick to the most salient aspects of practice.

After zazen, there is a break and people file in for Roshi's final talk. Remember, for many, it is their first experience with any sort of meditation; turning the attention inward to this body-mind. If they have any doubts or questions, Roshi will shed some light on them. It's like private instruction with twenty to thirty participants. And here I am, the proverbial fly on the wall, privileged enough to listen in.

Like at the end of sesshin when we file past the Roshis during the closing ceremony, I like to watch the faces. As people speak and Roshi responds, there is a golden glow of recognition, of affirmation, that shines on many of the faces. Something resonates deeply for some of them; maybe it comes from the zazen, maybe it comes from the experiences of their whole lives, maybe from somewhere beyond that. It is a joy to bear witness

to it.

After the final talk, there are refreshments, books for sale, and information to pass along. At some point Heather talks about how to become a trial member. She immediately says that it is the Zen Center that is on trial.

The workshop is about impressions more than words. What do participants feel when they enter the Center and the zendo, for the first time? How do they feel about the teacher? And what about the workshop assistants: Do they seem happy, are they comfortable with each other? Mostly it seems to be about reading between the lines.

Usually there is a teisho the next day and it is not uncommon for some people from the workshop to attend. If they aren't at the teisho, then maybe on Zoom for morning sittings, or maybe for an evening sitting during the week. The Wheel of Dharma turns: Trial members become members, attend their first sesshin, start working at workshops. It warms the heart. —

# Lessons Learned From My Sheep

by Meredith Markow

Three summers ago, we got four sheep, Frankie, Raisin, Ruthie, and Winnie. They were a delightful addition to our family and to our property bringing serenity and stillness to the land. Our sheep were a constant, following the same routine every day as they grazed, drank, and slept in the sun. They were content, and they were a delight to care for. That is until they weren't.

The winter came, the grass dried up, and the snow-covered ground froze hard. We fed our four "girls" their hay in the morning and evening, but with no grass to graze, they became restless, stubborn and determined. They started to eat the wood off of their shed, nibble through the tarp which covered their hay, and eventually they started eating the bark around the circumference of two majestic Norway spruce trees in the front yard which protect our house from the busy road. Since trees transfer nourishment from the earth through the inner layer of the bark, they often die when damage of this sort is done. Unable to bear losing the trees, I tried to take control by calling a tree service to cut them down. When we try to prepare for loss, we pretend that we can grieve on our own terms.

When the tree specialist came, he said that trees can be remarkably resilient and that we can't say when or if they will die. So, we've left the trees, giving thanks while they are still alive. They have since formed a scar over their

wound, and last spring, they even sprouted new growth. Little do my sheep know the lessons they are teaching about impermanence and the myriad opportunities we are given to be present rather than anticipate what we might lose in the future.

Our compliant sheep returned the following spring, but once winter hit, they again became stubborn and defiant. This time, we called on the person we bought the sheep from to give us a few tips. The first thing she told us is that our sheep were bored. She said that in the wild, animals spend their days hunting for food and protecting themselves from being preyed upon. They are designed to be active, searching, and wakeful. She recommended that rather than feeding them hay twice a day, leaving the rest of the day with nothing to do, that we find a way for them to actively

work for their food. So, we placed a round bale of hay inside of a very rugged net, making the hay very difficult for the sheep to get to. They remained focused and unified eating at that bale of hay, and remarkably, their miscreant behavior disappeared.

Here, the second lesson from my sheep came to mind. Human beings need to put their minds toward something that is productive and purposeful or we too can grow restless, defiant, and perhaps even destructive. Focused practice nourishes our minds, so that we don't fall prey to stray thinking and wanton distractions. When we sit in unison in the zendo, we tame our minds, just as that bale of netted hay has tamed our sheep. I give thanks to our sheep for teaching me these two solid lessons about inevitability of impermanence and the value of continuous, focused practice. ■





## Fast for a World Harvest

In this month of abundance, it is sobering to remember that millions of people are hungry all the time. Taking our vows seriously means opening our eyes and hearts to this suffering and resolving to offer help where it is needed.

On Thursday evening, November 2 we will commemorate the Oxfam Fast for a World Harvest. For this ceremony, the Center will match all donations received, which will be sent to Oxfam America.

Participants are encouraged to fast in whatever way they are able and contribute the money

they would have spent on food to Oxfam. Of course, you are free to give as generously as you wish.

The ceremony will take place during the evening sitting. All are welcome. Please remember to bring a vegetarian boxed or canned food offering as well as a monetary donation. We hope you can attend! ■

## Jukai: Entering the Buddha's Way

Sunday, November 5, at 9:30 A.M., will be a Jukai Ceremony to formalize our commitment to the Buddha's Way. There will be a sitting beforehand, starting at 9:00 A.M.

Jukai is the single most significant ceremony for a Zen Buddhist, since it expresses one's resolve to uphold the moral principles of the Buddha's Way. Zen Master Dogen said, "The Buddhas and Patriarchs have all stated that receiving the precepts is the first step to entering the Way." And Zen Master Bassui called the precepts, "a shortcut for entering the Buddha gate."

Taking part in this ceremony means you have formally entered the Way of the Buddha.

Because the Precepts are difficult to keep, it is inevitable that they will be violated from time to time. Each time they are broken, one has fallen from the Buddha's Way in a sense. For this reason, and because repeatedly taking them fortifies one's resolve to uphold the vows, it is customary to take part in Jukai as often as possible. Each time you do so, your desire to practice and actualize the Buddha-dharma grows stronger.

During the ceremony, participants take part in a repentance ceremony, and then take the Three Refuges, the Three General Resolutions, and the Ten Cardinal Precepts. Jukai also entails making a monetary donation to the teacher, called an in-



cense offering. This traditional gift represents the practitioner's desire to support the teacher's work in propagating Buddhism, and it is always made anonymously.

Jukai is one of the most solemn rituals we observe at the Center, so please wear a clean and pressed robe if you have one. If not, wear dark, solid-colored clothing or, better yet, borrow a robe from the Center. It is also customary to bathe before receiving Jukai and to clean one's living quarters as well.

Please join us for this important ceremony. ■

# Thanksgiving Ceremony: Expressing Gratitude



**A**Ceremony of Thanksgiving will be held on **Sunday, November 12 at 9:30 A.M.**, after a short sitting. Family members of all ages are welcome to attend this special ceremony. The sitting begins at the usual time of 9:00 AM.

During our annual Thanksgiving ceremony, we make food offerings, read words of gratitude, chant, offer incense, circumambulate, and end with a special gatha of gratitude. At the end of the ceremony all are invited for refreshments. Pies are welcome! —

## Shakyamuni Buddha's Enlightenment

*At the age of twenty-nine, the Prince of the Shakya Clan, Siddhartha Gautama, saw for the first time: one old man, one sick man, one dead man, one monk, and with that he was plunged into a struggle for Truth which was to continue until Buddhahood itself had been attained.*

**T**he ceremony of Shakyamuni Buddha's Enlightenment will take place at the Center on **Thursday, December 7, during the evening sitting**. The ceremony this year is not during Rohatsu sesshin, so all are welcome to attend.

The Buddha's Enlightenment Ceremony commemorates Shakyamuni Buddha's spiritual realization and opening of the Way. His experience, the culmination of years of intense effort, came after seven days of deep meditation when he saw the morning star.

The ceremony begins with an account of the Buddha's Enlightenment, followed by chanting and a symbolic reading of all the sutras. Please join us for this special event either virtually or in person. —

# New Year's Eve Ceremony 2023-2024



**O**n Sunday evening, December 31, the Center will celebrate the beginning of the New Year with zazen, repentance, chanting, the Precepts, and a prayer for peace. Chanting and silence—with a bit of Buddhist bedlam at midnight—is a truly wonderful way to welcome the New Year. Friends and family are cordially invited to join us for this ceremony which will take place at the Zen Center.

For the New Year's Ceremony, have some type of noisemaker with you, such as a kazoo, harmonica, recorder, or drum. Part of the ceremony is a noise-making kinhin to “drive out the demons.” We will also read the (unsigned)

resolutions of ceremony participants. The schedule for New Year's Eve is below.

We hope you will join us for this hybrid event. More information as well as registration is online at [www.vermontzen.org/ceremony\\_newyears.html](http://www.vermontzen.org/ceremony_newyears.html)

9:00 P.M.	Formal zazen with kinhin.
10:30 P.M.	Repentance ceremony followed by break.
11:15 P.M.	Formal zazen. Reading of resolutions.
11:45 P.M.	Purification of Altars.
11:50 P.M.	Driving out of Demons circumambulation: Chanting and Noisemaking
Midnight	Cacophony, ending with — “Happy New Year! May Peace Prevail on Earth!”
12:01 A.M.	Moment of silence. Chanting: Prajna Paramita. Abbreviated Jukai Ceremony.
12:20 A.M.	Candle-lighting Ceremony. New Year's Prayer.

# Home Purification Ceremony

## Entering 2024 With a Contented Home

Buddhists love cleanliness and orderliness both in their temples and their minds. Therefore, it is no surprise that the traditional preparation for the New Year is to thoroughly clean one's home. Surfaces are dusted, closets straightened, drawers cleaned, everything put in order. To welcome the New Year, many people set up special altars throughout their homes with candles, incense, and greenery.

Once the cleaning is complete, you can perform a **Home Purification Ceremony**. Through this ceremony, all the

unseen pollutants of greed, anger, and ignorance are ritually driven away. It is a spiritual cleansing, which complements the physical one. Since our environment is an extension of ourselves, by cleaning it we, too, are purified.

The ceremony consists of chanting, prostrations, and a circumambulation throughout the house with doors open and lights shining. At every altar incense is offered and candles are lit while the *Sho Sai Myo* is chanted. You can actually feel your house responding happily, and you, too, will feel renewed. It is a wonder-



ful way to enter the New Year, with body, mind and home cleansed and purified.

Please contact the Zen Center at [info@vermontzen.org](mailto:info@vermontzen.org) for the full service. ■

## Temple Cleaning for New Year's Eve



Wednesday, December 27 through Saturday, December 30, will be devoted to cleaning our temple in preparation for the New Year. Altars are set up throughout the Center, the buildings are cleaned from top to bottom, and everything is refreshed for the coming year. There will be no formal sittings during that time.

If you can spare an hour or two or help any time during the week, it would be greatly appreciated. With our temple cleaned and purified, we will usher in the New Year. ■



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*The kitten*

*Holds down the leaf,  
For a moment.*

*-Issa*



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## Term Student News

For the past few weeks, sittings, both in person and virtual, have been full and there has been a corresponding increase in energy throughout the Center. Term Student Program 3, the longest program ends on **Tuesday, November 7**, with a special ceremony. Family members are cordially invited to attend, as are all Sangha members. We hope you will come to celebrate the end of the successful intensification of practice by the 37 participants in this year's three programs. —

