

# Walking Mountains

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

*Dear Sangha and Friends,*

Welcome to the new year and a calendar chock full of Zen Center activities. We begin the year with the Kannon ceremony, paying homage to the Bodhisattva of Compassion and giving thanks for her unceasing help. This is quickly followed by the Sangha’s Annual Meeting. Please remember this is your Zen Center and at this time significant decisions are made about budgets and projects for the new year. Your input is important. Besides, the potluck to follow cannot be beaten!

In February, we commemorate the Buddha’s final departure from the realm of birth and death at the Parinirvana Ceremony — a profound reminder of his words “be ye lamps unto yourselves.” And we close the month with a two-day retreat. Please join us.

–*Joan*

## Gratitude for Ceremonies by Greg Heath



*M*y road into practice took time and, as with everyone, it had a pace and direction that was my particular karma. For some time I was shielded by distance from fully entering into the practice. As a new student, not living close to the Center, and before remote participation was an option, I made a commitment to myself to get to the Center once a month. How would practice develop if there were not at least this minimal connection?

These monthly trips were made with the blessing of my family. Finding the appropriate balance of practice with family life and receive

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### MISSION

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

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ing the loving support from family members for this path is so important. We have heard how sweet the music can be if the strings of the lute are tuned well, not too loose and not too tight. Thankfully Ruth and I have never kept score in our marriage. This tuning was not a matter of bargaining. It is possible to give oneself freely to practice, where there is not an attitude of holding back, and at the same time give oneself freely to the needs of one's family.

Practicing the paramitas speaks to this balance. How do we practice generosity (dana) in our closest relationships? How is a practitioner's persistence, energy, and diligence (virya) manifest? What skillful means (upaya) do we bring to bear in our everyday interactions? These questions are not merely rhetorical, but are, for each of us, moment by moment, very real. Their interplay, their dance, the insights and the steps they lead to create our karma. Let it be for gladness. Let it be for liberation.

Quite naturally, early on I was especially eager for dokusan, and typically it was offered on Sunday if there was no ceremony. Therefore, though memory plays tricks, it was some years before I went to a single ceremony other than Jukai. Looking back I believe the result was a constricted or narrow view of practice.

Taking on the vows of a lay priest was a true turning point.

“A whole new world opened up adding a depth and breadth to practice, a fullness that continues to be a marvel.”

Those vows, in the broadest sense, are the one vow to continuously deepen practice. One specific form that takes is attendance at all of the major ceremonies. What had been unfamiliar became familiar. A whole new world opened up adding a depth and breadth to practice, a fullness that continues to be a marvel.

Unlike the practice of zazen which is spare, cut right down to the essentials, our ceremonies can be quite elaborate. I found it important to not confuse these very special occasions, replete with expressions of devotion, with expressions of belief. Zen does not rest on belief, but on experience. Each ceremony provides another way to experience the lessons that arise from our practice. Through the Kannon ceremony and ceremonies of aid we cannot help but explore how we are Kannon's eyes and ears and arms.

We pay homage to the Buddha by exploring and celebrating his life and teaching. We see his very human path and follow his steps. Through Great Jukai and the Hungry Ghost ceremony we begin to see into the various realms of existence and their meaning in our lives. The ceremonies take us to these places and touch us in ways

that open the heart. Feeling that touch is not about belief. It is about knowing.

And so people who arrive at the Center having searched for answers in religions based in belief may find some of the devotional practices found in ceremonies surprising. If this describes your experience, please don't be put off. Allow the ceremonies to wash through you. When bowing, just bow. Let a bow be what it is, a simple expression of the body-mind that recognizes and offers up one's ego. In each bow just let that burdensome ego go. In the same motion we demonstrate our reverence and gratitude for the Three Jewels: Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. Simple and profound.

January begins the new year and the year flows in a series of ceremonies that carry us along in their current. It begins with the Kannon Ceremony. They flow one after another right up through Rohatsu and New Year's Eve. As we flow into the deep pools and quiet eddies of practice among the cascades, gratitude for the ceremonies runs deep. —

# Term Student Program: Commitment, Connection, and Communication by Janet Paulus

It can be said that a fundamental aspect of human nature is that commitment is bred by connection. One can take that a step further and see that communication, in all of its forms, is the gateway to that connection. As a participant in the Term Student Program at the Vermont Zen Center last fall, I found that at the heart of the program is the unique opportunity to experience these three elements, each building and growing from the other. Through open and meaningful communication, we fostered deeper connections and strengthened our commitment to our practice.

Guided by Buddha's teaching of interconnectedness, the Term Student Program is a shared journey of practice. While zazen remained at the heart of our practice, we expanded our lovingkindness, chanting, community engagement, and precept work. These shared elements brought us closer to the truth of

interdependence. They created a profound sense of belonging within our community, making each participant an integral and valued part of our shared journey.

Our Tuesday night meetings were a powerful testament to the transformative nature of vulnerability in our personal growth. We'd share our relief and celebrate individual successes, but more importantly, we created a safe space to express our struggles. This true openness was a beautiful reminder of our shared human fallibility and a powerful source of inspiration for our growth. Learning about others' practices not only sparked new and meaningful ways for us to expand our practice and honor our commitments but also served as an influential source of motivation and encouragement.

Whether meeting privately through the week or together during lunch on Sundays, the Zen Center buzzed with conversations

about the precepts. Precept buddies reported deep and meaningful conversations about the precepts, drawing upon their own experiences. Differences and similarities in our Dharma siblings' stories mirrored our interconnectedness, helping us see ourselves more clearly. The value of these communications echoed over and over again during our weekly meetings.

In the early morning, I found the Kannon room overflowing with Sangha members. The energy was tangible. This was my time to practice lovingkindness—sending it to myself and others. Connections inevitably grew. My evenings were filled with chanting practice, and the results bloomed as I found oneness with the voices around me during the morning chanting service.

Our collective practice extended far beyond our Sangha doors. We picked up trash, wrote letters, gave rides, and found

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# Annual Meeting—Sunday, January 19

The Sangha is invited to participate in our Annual Meeting to help plan for the year ahead. We will discuss the Center’s finances, the year’s schedule, courses, special events, and more. Your input is essential and valued. Please come and help with the decisions and direction of the Center. A link to the meeting will be on the member page. A pot luck lunch follows the meeting. Please bring some vegetarian food to share.

## 2025 Annual Meeting Agenda

- 2025 Projects
- 2024 Financial Report
- 2025 Preliminary Budget
- Committee Review and more

JANUARY 2025						
Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
29	30	31	01	02	03	04
05	06	07	08	09	10	11
12	13	14	15	16	17	18
19 ANNUAL MEETING	20	21	22	23	24	25
26	27	28	29	30	31	01

*(Continued from page 3)*

other ways to support our communities. These actions not only benefited those communities but also provided us with opportunities to practice our values and strengthen our commitment to our practice. My spouse Laurence and I, while attending to litter on the side of the road, were met with unexpected expressions of gratitude. Not only was this interaction our experience, many others in the program expressed similar moments of connection with strangers. We found that our small actions had a bigger meaning to the world. Our perspectives broadened. The very same world that brings grief and worry as we struggle to understand became filled with opportunity and gratitude, transforming our outlook from one of concern to one of hope and optimism.

As our bonds strengthened, we witnessed our vows solidifying in our lives, dispelling uncertainties and revealing that the answers had always been within reach. The Term Student Program set a standard, a marker that allowed each of us to enter into our practice wholeheartedly. It offered an invaluable lens to view our practice, forged connections that strengthened our resolve, and reinforced our commitment to following the Way. —



# Letter to Basho

startled by the crow's  
winged shadow at my two feet  
reverie arrives

and I wonder  
did you track the seasons  
by the lengthening of your shadow

as you made your way  
on the long journey to the interior

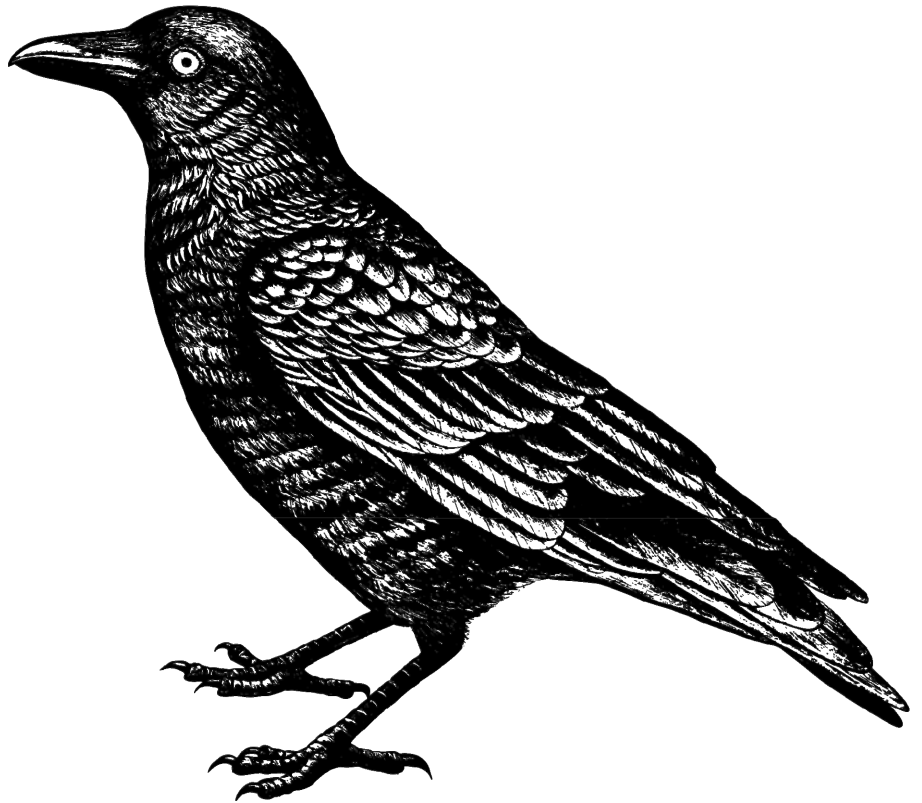
the two of you resting on a stone wall  
sucking on a plum pit  
before entering the poetry  
of a village

and did your illness tighten its grip  
during the hours of words

until all that was left of your syllables  
was their specter  
drifting through the valley

*caw! caw! caw! caw! caw!*  
the crow perching above me  
cocks its head to hear

—Joan White



# Upcoming Courses at the Vermont Zen Center

[www.vermontzen.org/courses.html](http://www.vermontzen.org/courses.html)

## Introduction to Zen

January 18

Lead by Roshi Sunyana Graef, during the half-day schedule of talks, question periods, demonstrations, and guided meditation, participants are introduced to the body-mind disciplines of Zen Buddhism. More information and registration on the Zen Center's website.

## Haiku Poetry

February 1

Through close readings of Japanese poets, participants learn the essential elements of traditional haiku and gain an understanding of the interaction between spiritual practice and poetry, as well as an appreciation of the deeper meaning of haiku. More information and registration on the Zen Center's website.

## The Buddha's Parinirvana

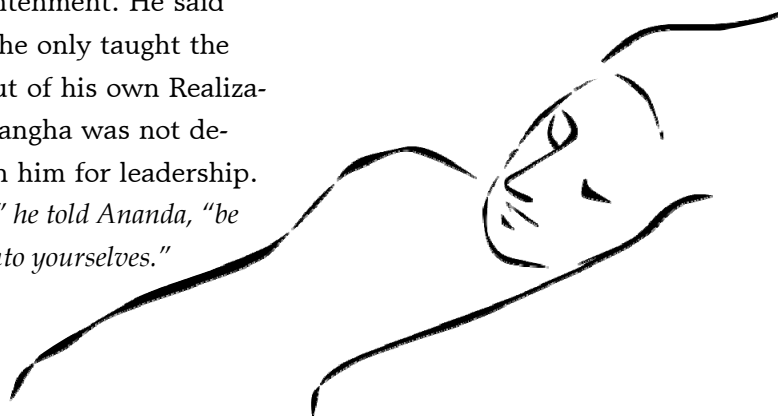
For 45 years the Buddha, after attaining Perfect Enlightenment, preached the Dharma to all who would listen, devoting himself to the welfare of all living beings. But in his 80th year, during the seclusion of the rainy season, he suddenly fell ill. Feeling that his time, though near, had not yet arrived, he entered a deep samadhi to free himself of the disease. Emerging from his meditation he said:

*This body has become worn-out and is like an old cart which can only be kept rolling along with great difficulty. My time to be set free from the*

*bonds of becoming, as a chick which on hatching finally breaks free of its shell, will be in three months.*

He reminded Ananda that although his bodily journey was nearing fulfillment, each person was to continue to work at his own Enlightenment. He said that since he only taught the Dharma out of his own Realization, the Sangha was not dependent on him for leadership. "Therefore," he told Ananda, "be ye lamps unto yourselves."

On **Sunday, February 9**, during the morning sitting, we will commemorate the Buddha's final departure from the realm of birth and death. Taking part in this ceremony is a way of paying homage to Shakyamuni Buddha, the founder of our faith. All are invited.



# Special Ceremony Honoring the Bodhisattva Kannon

**O**n Sunday, January 12 from 9:00 a.m. to 11:30 a.m. we will pay

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

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

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

wishes to pay homage to Kannon Bodhisattva is most welcome to attend.

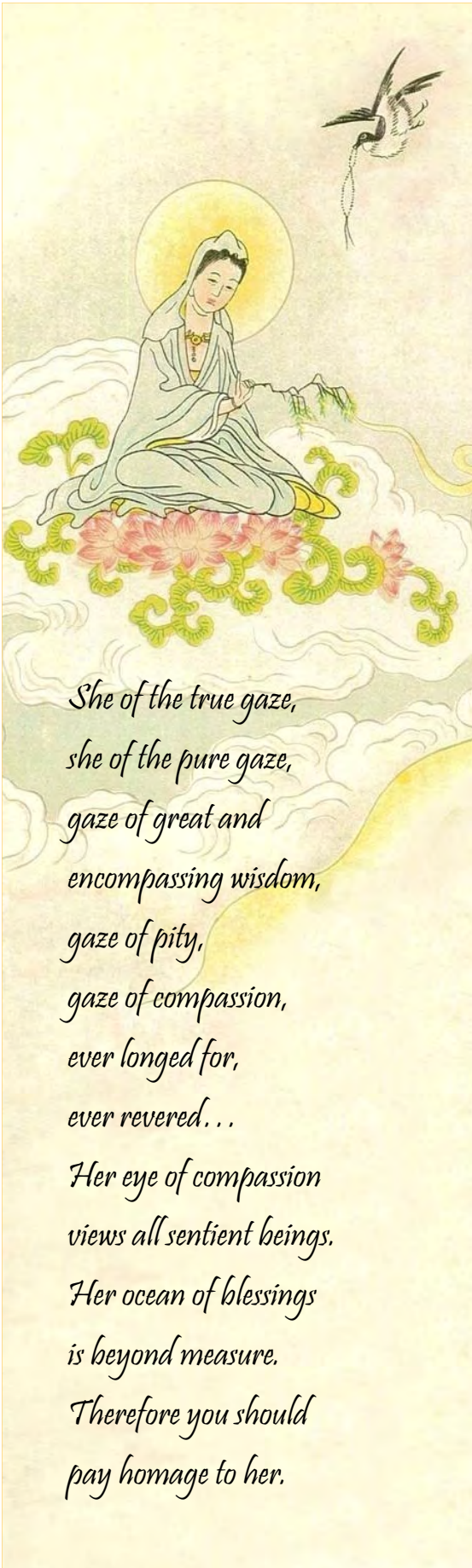
In addition to the bowing, there will be circumambulations, incense offerings, special readings, and a vigorous Rinzai-style chanting of the *Kanzeon* in Japanese. A few notes about the ceremony:

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

**DONATION**—As a concrete expression of compassion, please submit *a monetary donation* which will be given to COTS (Committee on Temporary Shelter). **Please note that checks should be made out to the Zen Center so that we can send COTS one check**

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

More information: [www.vermontzen.org/ceremony\\_kannonday.html](http://www.vermontzen.org/ceremony_kannonday.html)



*She of the true gaze,  
she of the pure gaze,  
gaze of great and  
encompassing wisdom,  
gaze of pity,  
gaze of compassion,  
ever longed for,  
ever revered...*

*Her eye of compassion  
views all sentient beings.*

*Her ocean of blessings  
is beyond measure.*

*Therefore you should  
pay homage to her.*



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*Morning sun lighting them—  
long ones, short ones,  
Icicles under the eaves.*

*—Shiki*

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*Wishing you a  
Happy,  
Healthy,  
and Peaceful  
New Year!*