It’s wonderful to be up here on Blue Mountain and sharing the dharma, together today. The sky and clouds, the mountain, the myriad forms of living beings who make their homes here, are all our teachers, and join us in the zendo.

Nanch’uan addressed his assembly and said, *All the Buddhas of past, present and future do not know it really is. Instead the badger and the fox know it really is.* (Case 69, Shoyoroku)

How could the Buddhas not know? What is this “not knowing” of Buddhas? Of course, over time, we develop some affection for this “not knowing” and even start to accept it in ourselves. But then Nanch’uan says that badgers and foxes do know? What is the “knowing” of animals, of living beings like trees, and of the non-sentient, the rocks, the sky and the moon?

Up here on the mountain, it’s quite natural for us to let ourselves open to the teaching of this natural setting. Of mosquitoes and birds, of lizards and ants. We allow ourselves to be more open, approach our practice in a less rigid, regimented way. Over the years, we can get a little fossilized! It’s an invitation to let yourself look, really look, using everything, looking with your skin, your ears and your nose. Don’t immediately leap to a word picture in your mind. Don’t chop your life into little pieces, little words. Be very careful to protect and nourish that intimacy that comes from opening wide the sense doors, so that there is no gap into which thoughts can rush in, so that you don’t wander aimlessly in your heads. Thoughts themselves are just another sensation we experience. Welcome them but then let them go, just as naturally as we let our eyes move from the tree trunk to the earth.

Aitken Roshi wrote a wonderful book of short encounters, *Zen Master Raven* in which the teacher is a Raven, and the students all the animals of the forest. Each creature expresses its own very specific nature and they all practice together. Just like all of us, each expressing our own individual nature, even as we join to practice together.

A vignette important for us as lay people goes like this:

It had been stormy for several days, and the community did not meet. Finally, the winds calmed, the rains stopped and the meetings resumed.

Owl obviously wanted to speak so the others deferred. I’ve been told, he said, that long ago, folks could devote themselves full-time to the practice, and enlightened masters emerged. Nowadays here in the forest, folks are so busy hunting and gleaning and protecting themselves that they have very little time for zazen. How can we hope to attain the level of realization the old masters attained?

Raven said, They saw plum blossoms, we hear the robin.
Owl said, But it seems their very atmosphere was charged with realization. That’s certainly not true for us today.
Raven said, The robin just flew away.3

Sometimes we think that we have an inherent handicap in our practice because we do not live monastic lives. A retreat like this, away from our daily affairs, is a special opportunity for us. But then, we get up here, settle in and we are discouraged to find that we have just brought all our business with us! And yet, if we gently release what is not here and now, coming back over and over again to our practice in this moment, then the robin does not fly away but sings for us. And yet, if we gently release what is not here and now, coming back over and over again to our practice in this moment, then the robin does not fly away but sings for us right here. So does the low vibration of the earth and all sounds made by living breathing beings. And we start to hear in a different way - with our whole bodies.

Zen Master Raven sat on his perch and put it like this, Things just come in. Do you listen, or do you hear? When you listen, you are paying attention to something out there, but when you hear, the sounds just come in. You are sitting there with your eyes open, and the dove calls out. That sound defines you. Once you are defined like that, the cedars can define you, the faraway skunk can define you.

Woodpecker asked, Is that realization?
Raven said, Let yourself hear the dove.3

Let yourself be entered by the call of the birds, the bell, the wind rustling the trees. Let it all enter, as if you were an open door - a gateway for sound and light. If we let ourselves be very quiet in everything we do, then we can hear much that normally we are unaware of. The sounds of the earth, the sounds of the sky, of water and of air.

The next evening Gray Wolf attended the circle gathering and asked, After all, what is zazen?
Raven said, Animal practice.
Gray Wolf said, Of course, its animal practice; I wouldn’t suppose the stones and trees do it.
Raven said, That would be the zazen of stones and trees.4

The stones and trees have their zazen. So do the moon and the clouds. And the zazen of the fox and the badger? Can we be as natural and yet still completely human in our own practice, without pretentions or expectations? How do human beings practice zazen in as natural a way as the badger or fox do their animal practice?

In a private encounter with Raven, Badger said, I confess that after all this time, I feel very impatient with my zazen.
Raven said, That’s ok.
Badger said, I have the feeling that if I weren’t so anxious, I might get somewhere.
Raven said, Affectionate acceptance is the way of all the Ancestors.5

Can our efforts be tempered with a generosity towards ourselves as individual human beings, towards our bodies as they actually are? Listening to the wisdom of our own bodies, honoring our own particular physical natures. Right here is our personal human practice. When we open ourselves completely to what is, the boundless vast nature we discover is exactly who and what we are right now. Practice this affectionate acceptance towards whatever arises; just say “yes” to everything you encounter. Many of us have a karmic burden of being doubtful and we somehow think it’s very important. We have the habit of saying “no.”

What would it be like if instead of feeding it, we simply let that “no” be, like a dried leaf on the ground. Badgers and foxes don’t worry about if they are good badgers or good foxes do they? Each of us has everything we need to realize the way. We are human beings practicing the Human Way.

Finally, here are two short exchanges between Porcupine and Raven:

One evening Porcupine asked, What is the place of honor in the practice?
Raven said, To be truly Porcupine takes practice.
Porcupine asked, Come on Roshi, you don’t mean just to be true to yourself?
Raven said, To everybody else.6

This is a little different than we usually see it isn’t it? That to be true to ourselves we hold apart. But here Raven is saying not only that being true to ourselves comes about by being true to each other,
but also that it is in practice together that we uncover what it is to be true to ourselves. Practice is not a tool that we use to solve our lives, it’s the fullest expression of who and what we already are. Seeing this helps us to meet everything, whatever comes, with compassion and equanimity.

Porcupine came to see Raven after the talk that night and said, The Blue Planet is immensely vast, isn’t it! Raven said, It doesn’t stop there. Porcupine wept.

Raven said, Vast indeed. Vast indeed.

So vast, so vast. The Way of the vast Blue Planet is beyond anything we can say or even imagine. But it’s the way we experience each moment if we hear, if we see. We don’t see it even as we walk it, because nothing other than our own hands and feet, our own hearts and minds. Where can you find it other than right in front of you?


Preserving the Impermanence Renovation Fund Campaign 2012-2013

Thank you, everyone who has committed a pledge to this third and final year of the Preserving the Impermanence renovation fund campaign that will match our 2010 Colorado Historical Society Fund grant. With this generous support of the CHSF, the Zen Center of Denver has completed an immensely significant project that protected the temple building’s foundation and roof, upgraded electrical components, and refinished the damaged interior walls of the lower level. We have provided careful and considerate stewardship of the Center’s physical and financial resources and the historical and financial assets of the people of the State of Colorado.

The Center’s grant-match responsibility came to just about what we originally had estimated it would be, $61,000. As of August 31, 2012 members, friends and supporters of the Center have contributed $48,894 to the renovation fund. The Fund Raising Committee had ambitiously targeted the achievement of our goal within one year, that is, 2010-2011. We’ve had to push the campaign farther along to make it. And now the fund raising accomplishment is just around the calendar corner.

In July we sent electronically our pledge request letters and response forms for the 2012-2013 Preserving the Impermanence campaign. The response to our e-mail approach was less energetic than to our hard copy solicitations of the first two years. If you missed the July communication, please make a pledge now. The Center needs the support of all members. Pledge forms are on the table in the foyer. Make a pledge in the amount that your resources allow - in cash, check, or bank withdrawals. If you plan to continue your current automatic bank withdrawals, please notify the office with a completed pledge form for 2012-2013.

Again, many bows to everyone for your sacrifices and commitment to the Sangha.
Fundraiser and Gift Giving Option
The first annual Zen Center Calendar is now available and for sale in the store. They are priced at $19.99 each. It is quite beautiful and artfully put together by Merilee Schultheiss and Francine Campone. Deep bows to them and their creative work.

Assistance Needed
Theresa Bradley, good friend of sangha members Hoag Holmgren and Leda Swann, and fellow Buddhist practitioner, is seeking contributions to help pay for a series of operations to help mitigate the effects of a rare condition known as Sturge-Weber syndrome. In Theresa’s case, this means she has a large and growing facial birth mark which has been creating increasingly critical and challenging health issues each year. Please note that the operations are not cosmetic in nature but are being pursued to help Theresa continue her work as Mom, physical therapist, and active community volunteer. For more information, or to make a donation, please visit: (http://www.helpingtheresa.com). Gassho.

Jann Griffiths the Appalachian Trail and a Good Cause
As the first and former program director of the Denver VAMC Fisher House, I know how much it means to the sick or injured patient to have family nearby at this time. For more than fourteen years, as a VA employee, I served my fellow veterans and their families at the Denver Fisher House.

The Fisher House provides a comfortable “home-away-from-home” for active duty and veterans’ families who are undergoing medical treatment at the VA medical center or one of the other medical facilities in metro Denver. I was honored to work in service of my fellow veterans, the active duty military and their families who made physical and emotional sacrifices for our country. I witnessed these families working together to make the hardships and suffering of illness in the family less difficult to bear.

Since 1996, when the US Army Fitzsimons Medical Center closed, the Denver VA Medical Center has maintained the Zachary and Elizabeth Fisher House with the support of the Friends of Fisher House. And now, the needs have greatly outgrown the capacity of the 9-room comfort home.

The Secretary of the Department of Veterans Affairs has accepted a 20-room “replacement” house from the national Fisher House Foundation. The new house will be built within walking distance of the new Denver VAMC, which is scheduled for completion in 2014.

The Denver Fisher House Foundation is dedicated to raising a large portion of the required $6,000,000.00 to build this new home for our military families. It is my personal mission to raise $2,181,000.00 and awareness for this capital campaign. Therefore, I am backpacking the entire 2181 miles of the Appalachian Trail in 2012. And I really need your help.

Please donate to help us build the new Denver Fisher House. All donations are tax deductible. Thanks so much for helping support our troops and their families. http://www.active.com/donate/DenverFisherHouse/ATJann2012

Dokusan with Karin Sensei
Please note in your calendars, that Karin Sensei will be out of the country from October 9-November 7 and dokusan with her will be suspended during that time.

Dokusan! Hurry!
Alas, Sensei is not here.
My eyebrow itches.
by Jackie St. Joan
Nominations to the Board
To be on voted at the Sangha meeting 11/11/12. Nominations may be made through the nominating committee or from the floor as long as the nominee is present at the meeting. To qualify for nomination to the Board, a potential candidate must be at least 21 years of age, a member for at least one year, not be the member of the same family (husband, wife, sibling, children, or cohabitating adults in a personal relationship) as another Board member. Board members serve for a term of 2 years. There are currently nine members of the Board with 3 member’s terms expiring (eligible for a second term) and three leaving the board in November, and who are eligible for a second term.

The board may consist of 5-9 members. “The Board must contain a minimum of two men and two women at any given time, either elected or appointed.”

If you are unable to attend the November 11th Sangha meeting, please remember to give your proxy votes to another member, so that we are better able to conduct business. Thank you!
Brett James - (303) 668-1210
Bob Knott - (303) 388-0808
Mark Smothers - (303) 683-0888

To Mom and Dad, In Loving Memory
Gwendolyn Lailey Steele
1915 – 2003

Clark Wilson Steele
1908 – 2003

under the tree
rain falling
on your grave.

your birth and death
engraved in stone
cradled in my heart.

three townhouses mark
the place where our house once stood
but squirrels still play in the grass.

- John Steele, August 2012

Calendar Highlights
Samu October 6
Workday October 14
Sesshin October 20-24
Board of Directors November 5
Sesshin App. Deadline November 9
Sangha Meeting November 11
Ceremony of Aid November 15
Samu November 17
Precepts Teisho November 18
Center Closed November 22-24
Ceremony of Gratitude November 22
Precepts Ceremony November 25
Rohatsu Sesshin December 1-8
Buddha’s Enlightenment Cer. December 8
Potluck Brunch December 16
Center Closed December 22-3
New Year’s Eve Zazen December 31

Mountains Talking is a Quarterly Newsletter Published by
The Lotus in the Flame Temple
Zen Center of Denver
3101 W 31st Ave.
Denver CO 80211
303.455.1500
http://www.zencenterofdenver.org