Good morning and thank you all for coming to investigate the dharma together. This time of year when our country is in the midst of its four year election cycle certainly arouses some interesting energies, doesn’t it? So I thought we might jump into a koan with this in the background.

HR: Case 31:
Ma-ku’s Ring Staff
Ma-ku, carrying his ring-staff [shakujo] went to see Chang-ching [a brother monk, who was doing zazen]. Walking around Chang-ching’s [zazen] seat three times, he shook his staff, stuck it in the ground and stood up straight. Chang-ching said, “Right, Right!” [Hsueh-tou commented, “A mistake.”]

Ma-ku then went to the place of Nan-ch’uan [who was doing zazen], shook the rings on his staff, stuck it in the ground, and stood up straight. Nan-ch’uan said, “Wrong! Wrong!” [Hsueh-tou commented, “A mistake.”]

Ma-ku said, “Chang-ching said, ‘Right’; why did you say ‘Wrong’?” Nan-ch’uan said, “For Chang-ching it is right, for you it is wrong. You are blown about by the wind, and in the end it breaks down and disappears.”

So, this matter of right and wrong is very near and dear to our hearts, and actually even more so to our core identity. To our very raison d’être. As I investigated this personally, I asked myself, why is that I love to be right. What’s at work here? It’s a very sticky and simultaneously very intriguing aspect or energy. If I look very deeply and I now ask you to look very deeply, what is to be right, or conversely what is to not be right?

Well, it is indeed a matter of survival. Not being right, being wrong is a threat to our existence. If someone says you’re wrong, it’s digested and interpreted as you don’t belong here, you don’t deserve to be here. Fundamentally, if you’re wrong, you don’t exist. Now the problem here is that I don’t exist, you don’t exist, not that “I” anyway. But that false I, that illusion of self, is so powerful. Someone says, You’re wrong, and in less than a nanosecond something clutches, moves and defends. It is a phenomenal energy, clearly one of the most powerful forces in the universe, in our world. Our identity with our beliefs is why right vs. wrong is a matter of survival.

And what happens inside this body-mind is what manifests in our world. What are the endless wars and conflict about? Disagreements, arguments, right vs. wrong.

The ways in which we self-justify are endless. We believe we must self-justify in order to exist. To Be or not to be, that is the question and we are very confused about what it means to Be. The basic stance is I exist and to prove it, I will be right, I will be seen. My thoughts, my opinions, my views will be heard, and they will be right.

There was a joke that went around amongst my women friends, that the way to diffuse any situation with their spouse or male partners was to use 6 simple words - “you are so right about that.”
You are so right about that. It works and it is not
gender specific.

There’s a wonderful story about the Dali Lama
that someone shared with me. Apparently the Dali
Lama gave an indepth ex-
position on the science of
mind and meditation. Ev-
erybody in the room was
nodding and listening in-
tently. And at the conclu-
sion he looked out at ev-
everyone and said, “But...I
could be wrong.”

Try that on for a minute.
Pick one of your most cher-
ished beliefs, or start with
a less cherished belief, and
simply entertain or in-
terject that phrase, But, I
could be wrong. What do
you notice? What if you
did that over and over? To
each and every firmly held
belief? What would hap-
pen to you? around you?

There is a story of a spiritual community where
two members were arguing and they went to the
teacher. The first one presented his case, and the
teacher said, “You’re right!” Then the second one
presented his case, and the teacher said, “You’re
right!” The teacher’s attendant was there and
heard the exchange, and said, “Wait, this person
presented his case, and you said he was right,
and the other presented the opposite case, and
you said he’s right.” The teacher looked at him
and said, “You’re right!”

Ma-ku, carrying his ring-staff [shakujo] went
to see Chang-ching [a brother monk, who was
doing zazen]. Walking around Chang-ching’s
[zazen] seat three times, he shook his staff, stuck
it in the ground and stood up straight. Chang-
ching said, “Right, Right!”

Ma-ku then went to the place of Nan-ch’uan
[who was doing zazen], shook the rings on his

staff, stuck it in the ground, and stood up straight.
Nan-ch’uan said, “Wrong! Wrong!”

Ma-ku said, “Chang-ching said, ‘Right’; why
did you say ‘Wrong’?” Nan-
ch’uan said, “For Chang-
ching it is right, for you it is
wrong. You are blown about
by the wind, and in the end
it breaks down and disap-
ppears.”

So here is a good Zen stu-
dent who has had some in-
sight and he goes to visit his
brother and senior monk to
demonstrate to them. Now
in some circles it might be
considered a little brass,
maybe even rude to march
in and circle the zen teach-
er’s seat three times, bop the
stick down and stand there -
here I am. Not even a hello
or a gassho.

Truthfully in Zen circles this
is considered rude. And yet
this monk is taking a stand.

Maybe going out on a limb or maybe simply stand-
ing firm - this is my insight. For this he gets some
credit. Could you do it?

Well I’ll tell you - all of you who come to doku-
san - you are doing it. You come in and present. It
doesn’t matter what you think or feel about show-
ing up in the room. It doesn’t matter if you feel big
or small, certain or uncertain, right or wrong. You
may be out on a limb, you may be standing firm,
you may have no clue, And you are Right!

And even when the teacher says, “Wrong! No, Not
It, Not right! What’s happening?!

Don’t fall into the trap of Ma-ku here, who bristles
and says wait, Chang-ching said Right, why do
you say Wrong? I’m sure I’m right, how come you
say wrong?
Don’t fall into the trap. Our practice is to be free of fixed views and opinions. To break out of this house of ego. To see it for what it is, transient, illusory, falsely constructed. In our tradition we use koan practice, shikantaza, teisho and dokusan to pry us free of these false constructs. sit here, those who keep coming, do this because they MUST.

It does take courage to show up in the room, it takes a willingness to be wrong. It’s the teacher, the practice, the koans job to shed light on the areas where we are not clear, where we might be stuck. It may not feel good to be told, that’s not it - Wrong.

But I ask you, Who cares! Really WHO cares! Look deeply, Who is that?

Don’t be caught in doing practice to confirm a self, to feel good. That is a trap. This is not to say at all that we don’t enjoy our practice, enjoy our MU or Shikantaza. No we do.. But let’s be clear, those who sit here, those who keep coming, do this because they MUST.

And there is a balance between responsibility for your own practice and trust in the teacher and the teachings. If we don’t trust it, we aren’t willing to be wrong, we will fall into what is called self-directed practice. A big problem. Why? because the self that is threatened by being wrong, that self, is the one in charge.

There is a verse by Master Wu-men - stop all your groping and maneuvering there is nowhere to hide your true self. With self-directed spiritual practice there tends to be quite a bit of groping and maneuvering. I think I’ll practice like this, Now, maybe I’ll do it this way, No that doesn’t feel right anymore, I’ll try this and on it goes endlessly. Right practice, wrong practice, groping and maneuvering.

We’ve all been there; this is part of the territory, but my only advice is that if you are here because you Must be, then get on with it. Show up in the room, take a stand like Ma-ku, and be wrong so many times that your edges rub off and the house crumbles.

So showing up is probably 90%. Ma-ku gets credit for this, but, alas, he gets caught.

Ma-ku said, “Chang-ching said, ‘Right; why did you say ‘Wrong’?” Nan-ch’uan said, “For Chang-ching it is right, for you it is wrong. You are blown about by the wind, and in the end it breaks down and disappears.”

So, how do you and I get blown about by the wind? Well certainly topics such as religion or politics stir up the dust. Believe me, it happens to us all. Try having a skillful conversation with my sister, for example, about politics. We all have our match. Now why can we talk about the weather or music or pets, but bring in politics, or religion for some, and the tornado hits. What is it? Well, it’s back to fixed views and strongly held beliefs that the mind mistakes for a self, believes IS the self. This is our conditioning. We’ve created a self from our beliefs and opinions, our likes and dislikes, our successes and failures. Unfortunately, our self-image is just that - an image, and as such can be blown about by the wind.

Now, your thoughts, your opinions, your views may be valid. Is there a difference? There is a huge difference, there is a gulf as great as the Grand Canyon of difference here. My view, your view IS a view and as such is valid. It’s valid. Is it right, is it wrong. It’s a view, that’s all. In this particular moment it’s the one you’ve got. It may accord with reality, it may not. That’s not a problem. It is a problem if we mistake it for reality. If we see through the conditioning of our own minds, we know that what we are seeing is a view and as such no defenses arise. Nothing is being threatened. It’s like the weather. Is the weather right or wrong? Are you threatened by it?

The conditioned self moves into right and wrong, it enjoys or feeds on right and wrong, defines itself by right and wrong. Our minds create duality. Duality doesn’t exist other than in our minds. The unconditioned has no fixed view. Period.

So where does that leave us or leave this monk? Humble, I would say. And with this humility we must step into the nitty gritty, we must come forth, we must express the truth, our understanding in
this moment as best as we can.

You who sit on the top of a hundred-foot pole, Although you have entered the Way, it is not yet genuine. Take a step from the top of the pole And the worlds of the Ten Directions are your total body.

We can and must realize the absolute, essential nature of existence which has no fixed view, and then we will take a step, because if we don’t our practice, our life is not genuine.

So get out there, whatever it looks like, write letters, carry signs, speak out, vote. And take every opportunity to see when you are caught, look deeply, inquire there, it is your path to freedom. The very places that we feel stuck is an entry point, but we must recognize it.

One of the questions for the student working on this koan, is when Nan-chuan says Wrong, Wrong, how would you respond? And you must demonstrate how you respond beyond right and wrong. This is our life’s work, to respond, to take a step again and again, to step from the top of the hundred-foot pole with the world’s of the Ten Directions as our total body.

Together with all beings we realize the Way.

1 The Book of Equanimity by Gerry Shishin Wick, p53

Photo by Geoff Keeton

2012 Sesshin Announcement
Except for weekend sesshin, all retreats will now be 7 days in length. Those unable to attend the full week will have options for partial attendance. Speak with your teacher, if this is the case. See updated schedule in the calendar highlights section of this newsletter.

Diamond Sangha Teachers Circle
This year the meeting is in Argentina. Karin and Peggy Senseis will be attending and gone from January 27-February 10.

Mindfulness Mondays
Mindfulness Mondays will begin January 7. It will be a practice session followed by group discussion and offered on the first and third Mondays monthly, at 7:00 pm. Open to the public. Donation to the temple is appreciated.
GREAT EXPECTATIONS
Encouragement Talk - Weekend Sesshin
By Bill Hamaker

Whether we know it or not, whether we are aware of it or not – we all come to sesshin with certain expectations. These expectations may be in the forefront of your conscious mind, “Oh, this a short sesshin so I am really going to work hard!” “I am going to pass this koan and maybe the next two, or 3 or five…” “I am going to achieve total bliss satori in the next round….” We all know where this leads, don’t we?

And if we have been practicing for some years, we may think – “no I don’t have any expectations, desires, hopes, demands….” Well guess again! Maybe your conscious mind is serene, with very little thought activity….but underneath……these wants, expectations, requirements, and demands run like a subliminal thread through the subconscious.

Maybe they have a negative flavor…”I’m just no good at this!” “It isn’t going the way I thought it would” “I don’t know if I can make it through this round!”

At times like these it feels as though we are facing a great barrier or a solid wall. Like the childrens’ chant about “Going On a Bear Hunt” in which they encounter all sorts of obstacles in the search for the bear –“we can’t go over, can’t go around it, we sure can’t go through it!”

What is this wall anyway?……“Dharma gates are countless I vow to wake to them.” How do you wake to this dharma gate? See it for what it really is – How? Muuuu…..One…..two…..just breathing….just sitting.

If you continue in this way - sincerely, gently, letting everything go, moment by moment, then you will see that there aren’t and never were ANY dharma gates other than the ones we ourselves have created.

Keep looking into this, see how every one of these thoughts, expectations, requirements, doubts, and fears have no real substance. When you see that, every last wall will collapse and all that will remain is the sound of the traffic, the chirp of a bird, the coolness of the air.

Tonight is our last night of sesshin! So I invite you to continue looking deep into the night during yaza or late night meditation. Yaza is very loose compared to the taut atmosphere of the zendo. You may sit in the auditorium chairs behind the zendo, in the soft light of the foyer, in the zendo or in a chair downstairs. We have done extremely well settling into such a depth of quietude in such a short time. Use that quiet use that stillness, let it carry you through the night even when you are asleep….on through the zazenkai tomorrow, heedless of the comings and goings of others, of the comings and goings of thoughts and expectations. Let go of everything like Kobun Chino falling to the floor weeping, collapse completely into this moment!

Photo by Geoff Keeton

plunging in
to deep water
goose bumps.
by John Steele
from Snapshots of Nature on the Lake
Rim of the Well Concert December 15

New Members
Welcome to our newest members, Jackie St. Joan and Ross Doman from Laramie.

Mindfulness Mornings
Stay tuned for Mindfulness Mornings announcement. It will be a mindfulness training offered once every 4-6 weeks on Saturday mornings. Public is welcome to attend with a donation to the temple appreciated.

Head of Zendo
Many thanks to Bill Hamaker for his service, who will be stepping down as Head of Zendo. Francine Campone will be assuming this responsibility in 2013.

Calendar Highlights
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Dates</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Center Closed</td>
<td>January 1-5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seminar</td>
<td>January 12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weekend Sesshin App. Deadline</td>
<td>February 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samu</td>
<td>February 9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weekend Sesshin</td>
<td>February 16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Board of Directors Meeting</td>
<td>February 25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sesshin Application Deadline</td>
<td>March 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samu</td>
<td>March 9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sesshin</td>
<td>March 23-30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2013 Sesshin Dates
- March 23-30
- August 6-11 (Mountain Sesshin)
- October 19-26
- December 7-14

2013 Zazenkai Dates
- February 17
- April 21
- September 22

Winter 2013
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