Heart of Compassion

Karin Ryuku Kempe
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This morning I want to explore something that has been percolating for me a while and came to the forefront recently with the events in Orlando, Florida, where a hundred people either lost their lives or were seriously injured, and many others, family, friends, community, found their world changed forever. This event was followed by what has unfortunately become the usual and customary public reaction to a mass shooting on the part of our leaders – more talk, words of grief and handwringing, but great difficulty in moving towards any meaningful formal action and a wide difference between our two political parties in beliefs about the underlying causes, and therefore what to do. Grief and gridlock. Then last weekend there followed even larger horrific attacks, in Istanbul, Bangladesh, and Baghdad. And just this Friday, I added yet another set of shootings, now in Louisiana, Minnesota and Dallas, supplanting concerns abroad.

How does our tradition see such events? What is required from us? Is anything required from us, other than the usual respectful special dedication for the week’s chanting? What is the role of compassion, of heart-wisdom in our tradition? How does it function and what do we do with it? Often we come to Zen desiring a sense of stability in an often dangerous world, peace of mind, but then we also wonder about the cost of a detached serenity. Does Zen lack heart? Is it too “cool”?

Actually it’s not long after starting to practice that we learn that the spiritual life is not a journey away but a journey towards, that we learn the skill of equanimity by going right into the heart of darkness and difficulty. In other words, we don’t escape suffering; we turn in, engage it, and our experience becomes transformed by a journey towards, that we learn the skill of equanimity.

Before I left for our recent mountain retreat, our real estate broker asked what Zen has to say about events such as the Orlando shooting – and each of us in the car had very different answers, like blind men feeling different parts of an elephant. One way to see it is like lightning striking a tree in the forest, an impersonal force of nature, but it seems to be closer to the bone to say that really its like lighting reaching in to strike each of us simultaneously – that intimate. Leonard Cohen says:

Ring the bells that still can ring
Forget your perfect offering
There is a crack in everything
That’s how the light gets in.

Talking with you this morning, I know this offering is inadequate and incomplete … but as another Zen guy once wrote, “You have to say something.” So I am not speaking in any capacity of authority today; my hope is that you will let the crack stay open, that you will let yourself be disturbed, uncomfortable and challenged, that we may start to build a less arrogant and more respectful society. Also I am not talking about the specifics or politics of these events, about gun control legislation, about radicalization, about fathers and sons, about the marginalization of minority groups, although I have my opinions, just as you do. I am talking about just the raw issues of suffering, of hatred, of heart and compassion and spiritual practice.

But first a word about language. For many years, most of the translations used in going from Japanese or Chinese to English, have translated the kanji for shin as mind, and we use it a lot in talking about insight or wisdom, in phrases like this very famous one by Master Huang Po: “There is nothing but the One Mind, besides this nature, but it seems to be closer to the bone to say that

There is a crack in everything
That’s how the light gets in.

The problem is that in English, this word “mind” often refers to our intellect, our thinking capacity, that somewhat detached capacity to see clearly. But the kanji for mind in Japanese, in Chinese, also means ‘heart,” so really shin means the heart-mind, a phrase which includes that broader awareness that our fortunes are linked and our welfare interdependent. The heart-mind not only knows, knows transcendently, intuitively, but also feels.

Karin Ryuku Kempe

Editor: Joel Tagert
A Grass Hut on Blue Mountain

A shining window below the green pines –
Jade palaces and vermillion towers can't compare with it.

- Shih-t'ou, “The Grass Roof Hermitage”

This June the ZCD held its 10th annual Blue Mountain sesshin at Becky Wethington’s property outside of Lyons, Colorado, twenty-one people joining to sit deep zazen in the beautiful straw-bale zendo (a real grass hut!). We were guided by our teachers Peggy Metta Sensei and Karin Ryuku Sensei, and by Shih-t'ou, whose poem “The Grass Roof Hermitage” we recited each day.

Really, words cannot express the profundity of silence felt there on the mountain – a vast spaciousness filled with the cries of nighthawks, the feathery buzz of hummingbirds’ winds, the whisper of wind and crack of thunder. Nor can they encompass the warm embrace of sangha or the dedication and insight of our teachers. Nine bows to all who made it possible!
Kinhin
the walking
stopped and stared
in breathless fox samadhi
not letting on
she’d seen us there
she walked alert from nose to tail
all four feet
disappeared
without a backward glance
something stayed behind
to circle round
until the final bell
- John Steele

Ten Ways of Looking at the West

I
I drive the canyons of the West
Deliberately,
The way I drag my finger between
The shoulder blades of the cat.

II
The earth fired this mountain
Before it was the West, before
Weber or Madison or Curtis
before Morrison or Mancos,
Dakota or Jurassic.

III
Flaming Gorge, One gigantic rock
Sliced red on the diagonal,
Stacked from floor to
The heaven of the West.

IV
Was it in the West that I loved you?
Pre-Cambrian? Or before that?
Tonight I sleep at the edge of your canyon.
I listen to your starry wind.

V
Golden light of autumn
Wide, scattered rolls of hay
Shades of lavender and horses,
The sky and fences of the West.

VI
In the face of the wide open
Thights of the West,
I am shy.

VII
I see the snow-capped sea monster
In the bony Western spine
Of a mountain range risen and resting.

VIII
Sweetwater.
Deer Lodge.
Steamboat Springs.
My tongue plays
The words of the West.

IX
All afternoon the crows
Are calling, racing around
The treetops of the West.

X
Bring the Western sky inside you
Peace is blue.

- Jacqueline St. Joan
Zazenki and Weekend Sesshin in the Works

The summer ango is usually a quiet time for ZCD activities, but not so this year. Since it has been difficult arranging sesshin while we are looking for a permanent home, the teachers are committed to arranging a zazenki almost every month. We’ve done pretty well so far this year and are keeping up the pace through the summer months.

The next zazenki, on Saturday, July 30, will be led by Karin Ryuku Sensei at the Willow Farm Contemplative Center in Hygiene, Colorado, a rural crossroads community in the agricultural lands of Boulder County, about five miles west of Longmont. Susan Nemcek and Steve Mullin reside on a little farm there and have constructed a log zendo attached to their house. They have opened their zendo to host Buddhist groups, retreats, and celebrations from the Front Range as a gift of their practice. The meditation hall was perfect.

If you miss the July zazenki or want to repeat the experience, you can look forward to the zazenki at Willow Farm on Saturday, August 27, led by Ken Tetsuzan Sensei. The registration deadline will be August 20. The same arrangements as those for July will apply in August; George Mathews will act as coordinator.

Our third zazenki will be on Sunday, September 18 at Santosha Yoga in Wheat Ridge at 5810 West 38th Avenue. This will be a full-day event with a partial-day option. Ken Tetsuzan Sensei is planning this zazenki. The studio is very conducive to zazen, being quiet, cool and subdued. You’ll need to pack your own lunch. If the studio is on the second floor and the building does not have an elevator. As usual, cost is $50 for the full day, $15 for half.

Lastly, as a preview of the fall ango, on October 21-23 there will be a weekend sesshin at the Benet Hill Monastery in the Black Forest south of Parker-Franktown, northeast of Colorado Springs. We are just beginning planning for this weekend, but mark your calendar now.

- George Mathews

Rohatsu Sesshin 2016

The Zen Center of Denver’s Rohatsu sesshin will once more take place at Shambhala Mountain Center on December 3-10. Our three teachers, Karin Ryuku Sensei, Ken Tetsuzan Sensei, and Peggy Metta Sensei, will jointly conduct the sesshin.

Participants’ responses to last year’s sesshin at Shambhala were overwhelmingly positive. Distancing ourselves from the hurry-scurry of our daily chores, routines and obligations to this beautiful mountain retreat allowed us to settle deeply into the Zen practice of Right Mind/No Mind. Wind, cold and snow cleared away our thoughts. The hills and the meadows, trees and rocks, ravens and deer held us in safe concentration.

Shambhala Mountain Center is a Buddhist retreat center located in the Front Range northwest of Fort Collins, about a two-hour drive from Denver. Because Shambhala is a Buddhist facility, our values and practices were welcomed and shared. Shambhala staff attended the teishos. We enjoyed and entered into Shambhala’s Tibetan atmosphere, especially the monumental Great Stupa of Dharmakaya. The vegetarian and vegan meals were delicious and plentiful. The lodging arrangements were comfortable and accommodating. The meditation hall was perfect.

The Rohatsu sesshin application, with instructions and information about lodging choices and costs, will be emailed to members and posted on the ZCD website. Shambhala’s meditation hall will seat a maximum of 35 participants. The deadline for application with a non-refundable $50 deposit will be September 30.
Jukai

Three longtime ZCD members took Jukai at the Rocky Mountain Miracle Center on Sunday, June 19: Greg Fellman, David Lee and Mark Smothers. Together they recited the Sixteen Bodhisattva Vows and received their rakusus and Buddhist names in the presence of their families and fellow sangha members. Afterwards they enjoyed some refreshments and the traditional ... light-saber battle? Turns out Manjusri’s sword glows blue and green.

Above, from left: Ken Tetsuzan Morgareidge, David Lee, Greg Fellman and Mark Smothers.

Ascending the Mountain

Our warm congratulations to Rafe Martin, who on June 30 received dharma transmission from Danan Henry Roshi and the dharma name Jnan (from the tenth and final Paramita, jñāna, meaning knowledge). Rafe is the resident teacher of Endless Path Zendo and a well-known Buddhist author and storyteller. He now becomes our brother in the lineage of Philip Kapleau, and plans to participate with us in the Diamond Sangha community.

Right: Danan Henry and Rafe Martin.

Rochester Reunion

The 50th reunion of the Rochester Zen Center was held in Rochester, New York on July 1-4. Festivities included the introduction of some of the teachers descended from founding teacher Philip Kapleau, a concert by Leo Kottke and a picnic at the beautiful Chapin Mill retreat center. Old dharma friends and companions converged from near and far to renew relationships and express gratitude for our time together. Both Ken Sensei and Karin Sensei trained at Rochester before coming to the Zen Center of Denver.
As an experience, this is a powerful realization, with profound implications. Nisargadatta, a deeply enlightened Indian teacher, wrote: “Love says, ‘I am everything. Wisdom says, ‘I am nothing.' Between these two my life flows.” He is saying, these two are my life, these are my doors. Wisdom is not opposed to the heart of compassion, they are two sides of the same realization. “I am everything” means I am you and you are me; the injury to a Puerto Rican man injured in a gay bar is my injury, the loss of a black man who worked in a cafeteria is the death of my son. We cannot hide from terror and loss in a ghost cave of nihilism. These people are our own flesh and blood, part of our own body. Our flags should be at half-mast for all of these.

When we chant the Heart of Perfect Wisdom, as we just did this morning, we are chanting the realization of the Bodhisattva of Compassion, Avalokiteshvara, that form is emptiness and emptiness form, that there is nothing in between them, and even to talk in such terms is to tear the fabric of reality. Our great freedom, the freedom which breaks the bonds that create suffering, comes from the direct experience of a vastness which, while we call it empty, is not lacking but omnipotent, alive, all pervading, without a hint of separation, transcendent, containing everything. It’s important to really experience that emptiness for ourselves, because that experience transforms our lives and transforms our relationships.

This is the great strength of the Zen tradition. True compassionate action is not doing good for someone else but comes from complete selflessness, by bringing the other in to be me myself. That is why we learn to sit in deep quiet and let go of our usual preoccupations so that we can experience the unveined heart-mind. It’s not to divorce from the world of form with its complications and challenges, to avoid tough and painful realities, but to give ourselves without reservation. When we truly see the emptiness of no eye, ears, nose, tongue, body, mind, in other respects, is absolutely of no value.

So we can say that “compassion is not true compassion unless it is active” (as the Tibetan Book of Living and Dying says). That is, compassion is not a fleeting feeling which arises and falls away; it is not a capacity which we each carry in varying amounts; it is a practice, it is the north star by which we can steer our lives.

Bernie Glassman simplified his dharma teaching to three tenets: Not knowing, bearing witness, and loving action. The first two have to be expressed in the third: not-knowing and bearing witness only live through loving action.

In Zen practice, koan practice teaches us to respond instantly and without reservation from the heart-mind of no separation and not-knowing; in shikantaza practice we bear witness, we stay with whatever arises, without judgment or clinging, resting in the same spaciousness. And loving action is appropriate responsiveness and the practice of the precepts, the awakened heart-mind functioning in the world as non-harming, not stealing, not lying and so forth. What is more, the active expression of compassion is essential for our own happiness. Our own self-centeredness and self-serving actions not only make others unhappy and often cause harm, they make us unhappy as well by dividing us from life as it is and isolating us from other beings. All our negativity comes from our rejection of our ignorance, the three poisons of greed, anger and ignorance. Compassion is the antidote, the medicine which heals us as it heals the world.

Our basic Zen practice is our practice of awareness, the practice of no separation, of being awake. But Buddhism offers additional compassion practices which can help us especially in times like this, and I will just talk about two of them: Metta and Tonglen.

Metta: Lovingkindness

Our practice of the precepts, the awakened heart-mind functioning in the world as non-harming, not stealing, not lying and so forth. The Bodhisattva of Compassion is often depicted as having many hands, many eyes, the better to respond in all circumstances. One ancient master asked another: “How does this Bodhisattva use all those many hands and eyes?” The other master replied, “It’s like a man in the middle of the night reaching behind his head for his pillow.” No hesitation, without thought, completely natural. This is only possible when our whole body is made up of hands and eyes, open and aware. To practice compassion therefore is to allow ourselves to be open and porous, penetrated by this world of form, not guarded or armored. To be open is a practice, the constant releasing of our tendency to dry up, harden, close ourselves and pull away. The Avatamsaka or Flower Garland Sutra says, “Great compassion is the essence of meditation. It is her body (that is the Bodhisattva’s body), her source, and her means to spread herself throughout the whole universe. Without this great heart of love and compassion, meditation, however sublime it may be, is of no value.”

The active expression of compassion is essential for our own happiness.
invoking Bodhichitta, the compassionate wish to benefit all beings. Then on the in-breath you breathe in the distress, anguish or pain of a particular group with the wish that they can be free of that suffering; then on the out-breath, send out enough space to allow the suffering to be relieved, comfort, happiness or whatever specifically is needed for healing. Sometimes this is visualized as taking in the dark, even seeing it as a mass of hot, black, grimy smoke, allowing it to dissolve into the core of your own grasping heart. As it dissolves and your own Bodhichitta is freed, you breathe out, releasing the cool, brilliant light of peace, joy and wellbeing, radiating compassionate energy and love as widely as possible. As with Metta practice, after first starting with yourself, you move to others, gradually increasing the circle to include all beings.

In his wonderful discussion of Tonglen in the Tibetan Book of Living and Dying, Sogyal Rimpoche encourages us to practice letting everything we encounter in our lives open our hearts, the sight of a homeless man begging on the curb, the TV coverage of violence in some faraway country, our local community, our aching country and our world. There can be no prescription but remember that compassion is not true compassion without action. It may seem that our world has gone crazy with a tsunami of violence and suffering, and that our out-breath action is too small. But each cupful is important and contains all waters. Don’t hold back. Please use all your many hands and eyes and remember your Bodhisattva vows to save all beings.

May all beings be free from suffering.
May all beings realize the Way.

Calculated with Love
- Ken Tettsuzan Morgareidge

That forgets the pain is a pebble
Rattled in a dry gown.

Finally, while it is certainly true that at times we do need to retire from the affairs of the world to cultivate our own inner capacity and equanimity, the world calls now to each of us and needs our engagement and attention. It calls us every minute, even as we sleep. In whatever capacity seems right to you, please give your skills, your care and your energy to your circle of communities, to friends and family, our local community, our aching country and our world. There can be no prescription but remember that compassion is not true compassion without action. It may seem that our world has gone crazy with a tsunami of violence and suffering, and that our individual actions have no more impact than bailing the oceans with a teacup. But each cupful is important and contains all waters. Don’t hold back. Please use all your many hands and eyes and remember your Bodhisattva vows to save all beings.

Comings and Goings

We bid a fond farewell to member Sara Bauer, who is currently in Hawaii with the Honolulu Diamond Sangha, serving as temple keeper at Palolo Zen Center. We trust she is enjoying her time there, and hope to see her again soon.

We also welcome new members Teri Meehan and Erin Overturf. May your practice be deep, and your sangha friendships likewise!

Gassho Corner

We offer deep thanks to everyone who helped with our Blue Mountain sesshin, especially sesshin leaders Cathy Wright, Bill Hamaker, Melanie Ritter and Jim Long, our teachers Peggy Metta Sensei and Karin Ryuku Sensei, and Becky Wethington, without whose remarkable labors and generosity Blue Mountain Zendo would not exist. We thank her also as tenzo, for meal after delicious meal.

Thanks are also due our zazen Kai organizing crew, especially George Mathews and Francine Campone. We all appreciate your ongoing efforts in this time of transition.

Calendar Highlights

Saturday, July 30 - Zazen Kai at Willow Farm with Karin Sensei
Sunday, Aug. 21 - Sangha picnic at Washington Park
Saturday, Aug. 30 - Zazen Kai at Willow Farm with Ken Sensei
Saturday, Sept. 10 - Introductory Seminar at Rocky Mountain Miracle Center
Sunday, Sept. 18 - Zazen Kai at Santosha Yoga with Ken Sensei
Sunday, Aug. 25 - Sangha discussion

Editor’s Note

Regular readers of Mountains Talking will notice that this issue presents a considerable departure from past issues, with a photo cover, a two-page layout and several new features, including “Comings and Goings” and “In the Marketplace.” The new layout and features will, I hope, allow us to better showcase our community and our sangha members’ talents and contributions. It also opens the possibility of print editions in the future. I hope you enjoy it, and welcome your feedback and suggestions.

Also, submissions are always welcome and desired! Send your Zen-related essays, poems, artwork and photos to office@zencenterofdenver.org.

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In the Marketplace allows ZCD members to reach their fellow sangha members with business, for-sale or want ads. If you would like to place an ad in our next issue, email office@zencenterofdenver.org.

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Jason Polk, LCSW, LAC. Helping couples and individuals get along better. Couple therapy & Individual therapy. See ParamitaCounseling.com or email jason@paramitaCounseling.com.

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