Nonthinking: The Very Basis
Ken Tetsuzan Morgareidge
A Place of Refuge: Temple Building Project
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Front Cover: Semple Brown Design

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Getting to the Heart of the Matter

At the Zen Center of Denver, our zazen instruction to new people emphasizes three things. First to find a stable sitting posture, second to regulate the breath and make it calm, and third to make the mind like a blank sheet of paper. Actually we don’t need to worry about the blank mind. If one has a stable posture and focuses on the breath, that last bit happens of itself.

This morning I thought we could take a look at Case 129, True Dharma Eye, Master Dogen’s Three Hundred Koans [D. Loori, K. Tanahashi, Shambhala, 2005, p. 175]. The case reads:

When Yaoshan was sitting in meditation, a monastic asked, “What do you think about as you sit in steadfast composure?”

Yaoshan said, “I think not-thinking.”

The monastic said, “How do you think not-thinking?”

Yaoshan said, “Nonthinking.”

This case is taken up by Dogen in a couple of places. One is a reference in Fukanzazengi, A Universal Recommendation for the Practice of Zazen:

At the site of your regular sitting, spread out a thick mat and place a firm round cushion on it. Sit on the cushion in either the Full Lotus or Half Lotus posture. In the Full Lotus posture, you first place your right foot on your left thigh and your left foot on your right thigh. Your robes should be worn loosely and arranged neatly. Then place your right hand on your left leg and your left palm (facing upward) on your right palm, thumb-tips touching lightly. Sit upright, leaning neither left nor right, front nor back. Your ears should be on the same plane as your shoulders and your nose in line with your navel. Your tongue should be placed against the roof of your mouth and your lips and teeth closed firmly. Your eyes should always remain open and you should breathe gently through your nose.

Having adjusted your body in this manner, take a deep breath and exhale fully, sway your body left and right several times, and settle into an immobile sitting posture. Then sit firmly as a rock and think of not-thinking. How do you think of not-thinking? Nonthinking. This is the very basis of zazen.

So, after a minutely precise description of the form: how to sit, cross your legs, etc. he ends with the real heart of the matter: Nonthinking.

The great challenge we face in zazen is thoughts. It is very easy to become obsessed with getting rid of thoughts. There are times of course, when the mind really does quiet down, and we begin to experience the vast stillness that is at the root of our being. But there are other times when we are sitting with our head in a bucket, the thoughts banging around inside like highly energetic ping pong balls.

Is one instance thinking and the other nonthinking? No. Thoughts and no-thoughts are both conditions, and conditions are utterly unpredictable and uncontrollable. As Friedrich Nietzsche said, Thoughts arise when they want to, not when we want them to.

Nonthinking is not a condition, it is a practice which is independent of thought, no-thought, all feelings, and sensations. It is that which leaps clear of all conditions.

Thinking is the delusive activity of the mind, the following of thoughts as they lead you down the garden path, or around the world in eighty minutes. We have all had to struggle with that. Not-thinking is suppression, quietude, blankness. But that’s not it either. If that were the case, you could just fall asleep or drink or drug yourself into a stupor.

Robert Aitken says that the mind produces thoughts the way the pancreas produces digestive juices. That is its natural function, its nature. But if we chase after them we feed the delusive mind. And if we try to suppress them, beat them down, we also feed it, and in doing either we wear ourselves out, trying to meet some preconceived notion of wisdom or serenity.

Continued p. 10
As summer reaches its height, we have made great progress in planning our new temple at 1856 S. Columbine Street, working with Semple Brown Design to hone floor plans and develop conceptual renderings of the exterior and interior of the building. We have now also engaged Spectrum General Contractors, a company with an established reputation for quality construction.

At the heart of our practice is zazen, and so naturally the heart of our new building will be the zendo, or meditation hall. The zendo will be a spacious 1500 square feet, with seating for 36-50 participants in a regular configuration. It will be a beautiful, serene hall with glowing wood floors and gentle lighting, capable also of accommodating secondary activities such as classes, weddings and the like.

Second-floor spaces include a library, mixed-use meeting rooms/space for retreat participants, additional showers and bathrooms, a caretaker bedroom and rooms for storage and mechanical necessities.

Many considerations factored into our exterior design, including a desire to acknowledge our roots in Japanese Zen temple architecture while embracing a more modern form that will fit into the largely residential University neighborhood. Modest, warm and welcoming, this 7,000-square-foot building will comprise two stories on the western side, with a single-story zendo on the east. With Prairie Park immediately to the south, those windows will look out to a pleasant stretch of grassland, or to an enclosed Zen garden adjacent the zendo.

With luck, the demolition of the small house on the property (which has unfortunately been delayed for some time, due to a variety of unforeseen obstacles) will be finished shortly, and we will be ready to begin construction as soon as fundraising, preparation of construction documents and building schedule allow.
A THOUSAND HANDS,
BUILDING A TEMPLE

The fundraising committee has been very busy in the last few months, preparing printed materials (including trifold and magazine-style brochures, and thank-you cards for donors), mailing pledge cards, readying our Colorado Gives web page, and of course, contacting donors directly. We have already been remarkably successful, raising $398,000 of our projected $877,000 need, and things look promising for the remainder. To those who have already given generously, our deepest thanks!

As our fundraising drive for our new temple continues, we will be taking photos of our donors’ hands in the dhyana mudra, which we use in zazen. Each of these individuals contributed generously to the project, allowing their understanding to manifest concretely in the world, for the benefit of all. Join hands with us, and together we’ll create something wonderful!
Bob Knott participated. Founded by a consortium of Karin Sensei, Jim Long, Mike Tabor, Nancy Peters and to assist the food bank and nutrition education center.

training with practice led by Grant Fuku Couch Sensei.

not-knowing, 2) bearing witness and 3) taking action. Bernie’s dharma heir Shishin Wick Roshi (a teacher of Karin Sensei), and Shishin’s dharma heir Gyodo Paul Agostinelli are both helping to develop the Colorado ZPI group, as is Grant Fuku Couch Sensei, who has worked with ZPI nationally and internationally for years. Meetings have been held in Denver and Boulder for interested Zen sangha members.

Recent activities of Denver members include effective preparation of a meal at Judi’s House (1741 N. Gaylord St.) for grieving families on May 25. With Billy Wynne as organizer, Connie Lane, Amy Strickland and Nancy Peters supported 20-30 bereaved family members and counseling staff working through the months after tragic losses of their loved ones. After the early weeks of shock from a death, the family members receive sustaining emotional support and companionship to cope with their new lives.

Training included our commitment of five volunteers to new housing production at a Habitat for Humanity project on Saturday, July 15, from 7:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. in southwest Denver. Ken Morgareidge Sensei, Amy Strickland, The Vo, Fred Becker, and Bob Knott installed windows while becoming acquainted with low-income prospective residents who helped to build their own townhouses.

A Street Retreat will be conducted Aug. 31 - Sept. 3. Trained leaders will support participants in living on the streets for three days and nights. The group will meditate together, share in council, go on begging rounds, walk across town, check in at a local soup kitchen and otherwise experience homelessness with Sensei Joshua Byrnes.

Further actions included our commitment of five volunteers to new housing production at a Habitat for Humanity project on Saturday, July 15, from 7:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. in southwest Denver. Ken Morgareidge Sensei, Amy Strickland, The Vo, Fred Becker, and Bob Knott installed windows while becoming acquainted with low-income prospective residents who helped to build their own townhouses.

Please contact Bill Wright regarding the Street Retreat or Bob Knott about Metro Caring (Aug. 4) and see https://www.meetup.com/Zen-Peacemakers-Order-Colorado/ if you have interest or questions.

– Bob Knott
Having already reserved a space at the newly opened Rocky Mountain Ecodharma Retreat Center (RMERC) for our summer sesshin, we will be the first organization to hold a retreat there once RMERC reopens after extensive renovation work through the winter.

In July I had the privilege of being able to learn about RMERC by spending three days there. The first weekend’s activities—consisting of indoor and outdoor meditation periods, silent hikes, and talks about the new center—were led by Johann Robbins, a Buddhist Vipassana/Insight Meditation teacher and the center’s cofounder, director, and cheerleader-in-chief. I learned that a group of dedicated Buddhist visionaries, led by Robbins and Boulder-based Buddhist writer and activist David Loy—who through writings and activism for years together—formed a non-profit organization that two months ago used donations to purchase the property from a profit organization that for years together had used donations for practice. We are a supportive place for deep practice, a place for meditation, retreats, workshops and Ecodharma; a place for learning from nature, teachers and other participants, and a place for discovering ourselves in a wild environment.

As stated on its website, RMERC’s mission is to be “a low-cost home for spiritual practice, with an emphasis on practice in nature. We are a supportive place for deep practice, a place for meditation, retreats, workshops and Ecodharma; a place for learning from nature, teachers and other participants, and a place for discovering ourselves in a wild environment.”

Writes Loy, RMERC “brings Buddhism and Dharma back into the natural world where they originated, and fosters the clarity and compassion needed to better address the ecological crisis and its related social justice issues. We call this Ecodharma.”

Similarly, Robbins suggests that this center provides practitioners an opportunity “to experience your consciousness in a different way; realizing you are not separate from the natural world, and to be nourished and healed by that connection. To spend time in silence simply being, with inner and outer nature, in a beauty and wildness that humans cannot create, and the absolute need we have to be a part of that. And to share that experience with others of like mind and intention. To be, learn, teach, share, practice, and act; while being held by the earth and the sun.”

They expect to host both group and solo meditation retreats, for varying lengths of time, and welcome all spiritual practice traditions. They are further committed to providing “low cost retreats that are offered in the spirit of generosity.”

Offering 180 acres of pristine land a few miles from the Indian Peaks Wilderness, Rocky Mountain Ecodharma Retreat Center is for all of us. Nancy Peters

Rocky Mountain Ecodharma Retreat Center Is For All Of Us

Having already reserved a space at the newly opened Rocky Mountain Ecodharma Retreat Center (RMERC) for our summer sesshin next June, our Zen Center belongs to all of us for whom it was created, who see the need for such a center, believe in its potential, and who share that it could never be developed but must remain in its unspoiled state. Conservation easements administered through the Nature Conservancy further ensure that the original wildness of the land will forever be preserved.

RMERC also seeks to recognize the privilege that a history of domination and conquest has conferred on European Americans at the expense of people of color, and which is at the core of deep national and international injustices and inequities. RMERC leaders are committed to encouraging retreats for underserved communities including people of color, veterans, youth, and others who have historically borne or will bear the brunt of ecological and socio-economic devastation, as well as ecodharma workshops and retreats for activists.

More, the center’s leaders want this to be a place where activists and spiritual practitioners come together to explore the true meaning of “ecodharma” and to express dharma in action by working to alleviate the root causes of the suffering and injustices in our world today.

This aspect of RMERC was brought home to me by Zen priest, boundless, in-motion sangha leader and RMERC board member Kritee Kanko, who conducted the sesshin I attended during my second weekend at RMERC. In her essay “Whiteness and Privilege in Eco-Dharma: How Should We Confront Their Compassionately?”, Kritee writes, “It is not hard to see that at least some of the institutional drivers that militantly keep poor people poor, disenfranchised and in the most polluted environments are the same drivers that lead to exploitation and plundering of mother Earth and those outside this country. The sense of duality and separateness that makes us (both as individuals and institutions) objectify nature, other human and non-human species also makes us materialistic and causes both environmental and social-justice problems.... We need true Eco-Dharma communities that look at both our inner (psycho-spiritual) and outer (institutional, corporate and political) greed.”

Finally, while at RMERC I learned about the additional $200,000 and “sweat equity” required for the septic system, insulation, water and other infrastructure improvements that will allow the 80-year old lodge, cabin and barn to host the many spiritual practitioners and activists who are already lining up to reserve a spot for their retreats, programs and events. Which brings me to the question: Who does RMERC belong to?

As Robbins continually reminded us all, RMERC doesn’t belong to him and the board members—it belongs to all of us for whom it was created, who see the great need for such a center, believe in its potential, and plan to use it in the future. RMERC is counting on all of us to actively support it, through our financial donations, if we’re able, by volunteering to work on the many land and building restoration projects, and in whatever other ways each of us may be inspired to become involved.

So then, RMERC belongs to me, and to you.

To learn more about getting involved with your REMERC, go to rmerc.org, or email info@rmerc.org.
and as he was paying for them saw an ax mounted on commodities in barrels. He bought a couple of candy bars, tin ceiling, a counter along one side and various com-
temporary general store; the kind with the high pressed
Lincoln’s ax. A certain gentleman was driving through a rural part of Illinois, and he came to a small town. He
wanted to buy a snack and he happened upon an old, traditional general store; the kind with the high pressed
ceiling, a counter along one side and various commod-
ties in barrels. He bought a couple of candy bars and as he was paying for them saw an ax mounted on
pegs on the wall behind the counter. It was obviously very well cared for, so he remarked to the proprietor,
“That’s a nice looking ax you have.” The proprietor said,
“Oh yes, that ax belonged to Abraham Lincoln.” “Oh
my goodness,” said the visitor, “It must be priceless!
Shouldn’t it be in a museum or something?” The pro-
prietary said, “Oh no, I couldn’t give it up. It’s a great ax.
I’ve had three new handles and two new heads put to it, and it’s still the best ax I’ve ever owned.”

Well, it’s pretty obvious that the concept of Abe Lincoln’s as far outlived the reality. And what about us?
Do our concept of ourselves go on and on regardless of the reality of change? I’m in my 70s and the aging pro-
cess has forced me to give up a lot of notions about who or what I am. But it gets more and more subtle.

This nonthinking is the very skin, flesh, bones, and marrow of our zazen. Zazen is independent of conditions. Nonthinking is nothing other than the realization of imperma-
ence. It is a total non-att-
tachment to anything, and total acceptance of the moment. Our very being, our Buddha nature
is this impermanence.

But if this self is nothing
but a construct, if I am my ever-changing thoughts, it’s pretty obvious that I change from one moment to the
next like shadows on water. If all we are is the sum total of all thoughts and sensations at any given moment,
how can there be any fixed self? Thinking is an attempt to freeze reality into fixed forms, a kind of permanence.
Nonthinking is trying to go blank, another kind of permanence.

There is rather humorous story about Abraham
Lincoln’s ax. A certain gentleman was driving through a rural part of Illinois, and he came to a small town. He
wanted to buy a snack and he happened upon an old, traditional general store; the kind with the high pressed
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This nonthinking is the very skin, flesh, bones, and marrow of our zazen.... Nonthink-
ing is nothing other than the realization of imperma-
ence.

Nonthinking expresses his very skin, flesh, bones and
marrow of not-thinking.

Yaoshan’s words are singular: He is thinking of not-think-
ing entity called the self.

Although he is not alone in this steadfast sitting,
we hear about things like emptiness and we start
viewing properly.

We hear about things like emptiness and we start
looking for something other, something outside of our
everyday experience, a void, a darkness, a vast chasm,
which does not belong to knowing or not knowing. Knowing
is delusion; not knowing is blankness. If you truly reach
the genuine Tao, you will find it as vast and boundless as
outer space.

Yes, even the most mundane object is vast and
boundless. The Buddha on the altar, the candles, a gar-
bage can, a piece of dog poop. All vast and boundless.

Here are some lines by Hongzhi [from “The Acu-
needle of Zazen” in Cultivating the Empty Field, TD Leighton, Yi Wu, trans]. North Point, 1991, p. 39]:

Knowing without touching things, This knowledge is infinitely subtle. Illuminating without encountering objects, This illumination is innately miraculous.

There is no discriminated thing to touch, no separate object to illuminate. How would we make distinctions?
We sit and think of not thinking. How? Nonthinking, the letting go every moment. We let go; we are the
letting go. Even as we are, each of us, the ever-changing here and now; and the infinite here, the eternal now.

Together with all beings, we realize the Way.

Gassho Corner

Special thanks to the fundraising committee, including Peggy Sheehan Sensei, Karin Kempe Sensei, Jeff Black,
Connie Lane, Francine Campone, Judy Mazarin, Billy
Wynne, and Lois and Fred Becker, who have put forth
great effort in rousing the support we need.

Thanks also to David Lee, who has pursued the demo-
lition of the house on Columbine through one obstacle
after another.

And of course to the many members and friends of the
Center who have contributed so generously to the build-
ing project. Nine bows!

Save the Date: Summer Sesshin 2018 at RMERC

Our summer sesshin will held next year from June
12-17 at the Rocky Mountain Ecodharma Retreat Cen-
ter (see article, p. 8). There is no fee structure as yet, but
based on what we’ve seen and heard it will be affordable,
with the option to tent on the meadow or stay in the
lodge dormitory rooms. We are excited to be the first
sangha booked for a retreat after improvements are made
to enclose a zendo space and update the kitchen, where
we will be cooking for ourselves.

In the Marketplace

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