



# Mountains Talking

Lotus in the Flame Temple, Zen Center of Denver

Winter 2007

## Drugs, Addiction, and Honoring the Great Light

*A talk given by Joel Tagert on October 1, 2006*

Our guide as Buddhists to drug use is the Fifth Precept, the Precept of Not Giving or Taking Drugs. At this temple we add the phrase, "...that dull the mind," and so we say, "I take up the way of not giving or taking drugs that dull the mind," and vow also to keep the mind clear at all times. I think these are useful clarifications that pose the question: Is your mind clear, or has the drug interfered with your naturally clear consciousness?

In my own life, I've gone through many phases of drug use. I won't go into the sordid details, because I don't want to unintentionally glorify drug use, but with that said, between the ages of eighteen and twenty-one, I took most recreational drugs that came my way. Understand, though, that this wasn't part of an addictive pattern. It seems to me that people most often do drugs for three reasons: first, to gain social acceptance; second, to fulfill emotional needs; and third, to discover meaning as part of a spiritual search. This last was true for me. I took drugs because I was looking for something genuine in the world, and when I finally discovered Zen practice, I stopped doing drugs so intensely.

I've often heard *zazen* compared to drug experiences, and in some ways this is understandable, but in others it's completely mistaken. People compare the two, I think, because of the separation between their everyday lives and their *zazen*. They regard *zazen* as something out of the ordinary, and their experiences of *samadhi* or *kensho* as "altered" states of consciousness. Yet *zazen* is *not* an altered state of consciousness. It is pure, unaltered consciousness itself.

There is a relationship here, though, in that we must be careful not to cling to any experience at all. In this respect, any experience or state that we cling to may be regarded as a drug. Television can be a powerful drug, as can video games, Internet pornography, trashy novels, or whatever we do to escape reality. Even peak experiences during *zazen*

can be a terrible obstacle to practice, because we often look to re-create those experiences.

One may see meditation vs. drug use as being analogous to the Zen concepts of *yoriki* and *tariki*. *Yoriki* is self-power or self-reliance, and this is the type of energy cultivated by Zen practice and meditation. There are no crutches in *zazen*. Nobody can do this practice for us. We sit upright, under our own power.

*Tariki* is other-power, reliance on external spiritual power. Most often this term is used in reference to religious sects that pray to external powers—deities and such—in the hope that those powers will favor the petitioner. However, *tariki* is perfectly reflective of drug usage. Rather than cultivating wisdom through long and difficult spiritual practice, one instead seeks an emotional state or insight through the drug.

I would like to be clear that these insights and states are not *necessarily* false or delusive. I say this to avoid the dichotomy often seen in public discourse and government policy. There's no doubt that drugs can be extremely harmful, even deadly, but it's also true that drugs sometimes help people to overcome psychological blockages and become more insightful and open.

Still, these experiences come at a price. There's a catch to using drugs, and it's that whatever other effects they cause, drugs most often encourage continued reliance on the drug, and that reliance is often in proportion to the degree of positive emotions or insights that the drug provides.

So you get caught in this cycle. You want happiness and turn to the drug to provide it, but once that state fades, you turn again and again to the drug to recreate it.

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# Sangha News

This is clinging to a state of mind. You feel *dukkha*, lack, that life is out of joint, and you take a drug and experience a sense of well-being. Then the feeling fades, and you find that your sense of lack has actually become more acute.

And the more you cling to this state, the worse your suffering becomes, because clinging causes suffering. And the more you suffer, the more you want to escape. This is the downward spiral of addiction.

I have a friend who calls using drugs *getting twisted*. This is an interesting expression and very descriptive of drug effects. You take the drug and it twists your mind, and because you're in a different state, sometimes you can see things about your life that you didn't see before, or you can temporarily escape whatever state you were in. But when the drug wears off, you don't return to the same place; you're somewhere different than where you started, and with continued drug use it becomes difficult to see how off-center you've become.

Bodhidharma said, "Self-nature is subtle and mysterious. In the realm of the intrinsically pure Dharma, not giving rise to delusions is called the Precept of Not Giving or Taking Drugs."

In any case, after discovering Zen, I cooled off and stopped taking psychedelic drugs. I actually cooled off all the way a couple years later when Lindsey and I went to Hawaii to train with Aitken Roshi there. The entire time we lived with Aitken Roshi, I did no drugs whatsoever, including alcohol and coffee. I took nothing stronger than black tea for about a year and a half. This was also instructive. There's no doubt that it helped to drive me into my practice, and I'd come there to practice, and that's what I did.

However, I also learned that complete abstinence didn't altogether suit me. It made me rigid, uptight, and inflexible, and kept me separate from people, kept me from connecting with people.

Zen also has the archetype depicted in the tenth ox-herding picture: entering the marketplace with helping hands. The picture shows the spiritual traveler with a wine gourd over one shoulder, ready to share it with whoever comes along, completely open.

So when I came back to Denver, I gave up abstinence too. Since then, I drink alcohol socially, though even that tends to slowly escalate. I've also smoked marijuana a few times—maybe a couple of times a year—which is something I continue to examine. It seems that I do it to feel close to old friends, but every time I do I conclude that I really shouldn't again. Until the next time.

Dogen said: "Drugs are not brought in yet. Don't let them invade. That is the great light." Our minds are naturally bright. We are naturally full and complete and aware. How do you honor that great light while remaining open to the people around you?

## A Leaf From the Bodhi Tree

*Submitted by John Steele*

Birdsong from the canopy resounds throughout the courtyard. Sutra chanting emanates from the temple. A kneeling monk murmurs prayers. Squirrels scurry noisily on branches overhead. Ants zigzag over tiles turned golden by the dawn light. A glistening Buddha sits hidden between the temple and the massive trunk. Silent yearning. Inhalation. Exhalation. Clothes stick to skin, ankles press into tiles. Steps lead up to a padlocked-gate. An ornate fence surrounds the ancient tree. A question arises, as if from the roots: "Who is here, under this tree, in this body?"

Slipping in and out of memories, dreams, illusions. Stomach knots up as the driver weaves helter-skelter through traffic on the road from the Delhi airport to my hotel. Dead tired after a 24-hour flight from Denver, I lie awake through the night. It's daytime back home... Exploring the Ganges in Varanasi by rowboat, heavy rain soaks me to the skin. I consider it my ritual bath, a substitute for plunging into this sacred, polluted river.

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Emerging into the startling clarity of hearing, touching, seeing. Awake to that which has no coming or going. Abiding nowhere... What a miracle to find myself under the Bodhi tree where the Buddha sat, penetrating so deeply into the marrow of reality that he was able to cut the bonds that create suffering! The humidity of the monsoon is oppressive. I imagine Siddhartha sitting here in December, the cool dry season.

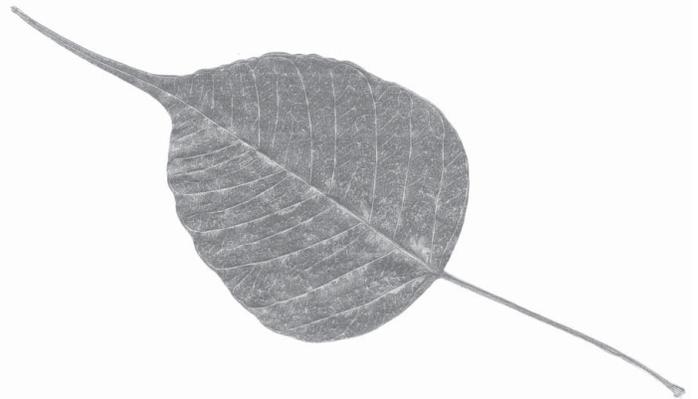
Drifting to the auto-rickshaw ride from chaotic Varanasi to serene Deer Park. I bow before the tree grown from a cutting of the original Bodhi tree and planted here to mark the place where Shakyamuni began teaching. The tree-keeper, a Hindu, excited to learn of my Buddhist faith, unlocks the gate that keeps most visitors out and lets me circumambulate inside the fence. I'm delighted to touch the roots, trunk and branches and be handed a leaf from this magnificent tree. Entering the temple next to the tree, a Buddhist priest invites me to kneel behind the altar where the Buddha's relics are kept. Balancing a sutra book on my head, he chants and ties an orange string around my wrist. I consider this a ritual to mark the beginning of my pilgrimage.

An ant tickles my leg, jolting me back. How long was I lost in thought? Who is thinking? Exhaling. Birds chirping. Leaves rustling. Drifting back to the overnight train from Varanasi. Arriving in Kushinagar. Circumambulating the stupa and the reclining Buddha that mark the place where Shakyamuni died. In the station on the way back, misinformed and confused, waiting on the wrong platform. Realizing I've missed my train, I rush around frantically seeking information. Exhausted, stymied by language barriers, I feel helpless and alone.

Finally learning, at 1:00 a.m., that the next train is scheduled to depart in four hours, I consider my options. The platforms are littered with people sleeping on the floor, along with the usual chaos of cows, dogs, flies, rotting food, tobacco-stained saliva, feces, and filth. This is a hell realm. Eventually, I go outside to escape the announcements blaring from the loudspeakers. Finding an open space between sleeping bodies, I lie on the concrete and drift into dreams until bus horns and growling dogs waken me. Here I go turning this experience into melodrama, while these longsuffering Indians, also sleeping on the ground, seem to

think nothing of it. India keeps pointing to my attachments, testing my equanimity. The options couldn't be clearer: cast aside preferences or suffer more!

What brings me back to my senses, to my seat under the Bodhi tree? My aching joints tell me I've sat too long. Rising and circumambulating the courtyard, I notice the entire lineage of Buddhas gazing out from niches in the wall. To my left, I take in a panorama of stupas, trees and stones. I wonder what this place was like in Shakyamuni's time? Surely there were no temples, fences, stupas, or Buddhas, just a simple monk in the forest, striving relentlessly until he could finally see his way clear through the desires, passions, and illusions that blind us to the truth; the wonderful truth that we're whole and complete just as we are! Circling back around the tree, I pick up a leaf that just fell and tuck it into my notebook. Placing one foot in front of the other, I continue my journey.



*A student of Bodhin Kjolhede Roshi (spiritual director of the Rochester Zen Center) since 1993, John moved from Rochester to Boulder last year and joined the Zen Center of Denver. He spent the summer in India, studying at the Iyengar Yoga Institute and visiting Bodh Gaya and other Buddhist landmarks.*

## Jukai

At the Jukai ceremony, held on Sunday, November 27th, the following people received the precepts for the first time: Joseph DiNatale, Kathryn Lawrence, Craig Moseley, Jules Shellby, and David Smith. To receive the precepts is to formally enter the Bodhisattva path and to make a commitment to the Buddhadharma.

## Full Ordination

During a private ceremony held by members of the Lay Order on Sunday, November 27th, Karin Kempe, Ken Morgareidge, and Peggy Sheehan were granted full ordination, receiving black sitting robes. Full ordination recognizes that a person's practice has matured to the point where there is no longer any separation between their life and the Dharma.

## Member Articles Welcome

Members are invited to submit articles for publication in *Mountains Talking*. Articles may involve personal stories or events, but should include a presentation of the Dharma as the member understands it. Contact the office for more information.

## Sesshin Applications

An increasing number of sesshin applications are being submitted after the application deadline. This makes it very difficult to plan for sesshin, especially when the number of participants is low. Please try to get your applications in by the deadline whenever possible. Doing so will relieve pressure on the leaders and will help ensure that sesshin is a positive and rewarding experience for all participants.

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## Gassho Corner

Deep bows to Joe Kinzel, who made a generous monetary donation to the Center, and to Karin Kempe, John Bickham, and Suzy Williams, who donated items on the Center's wish list. Karin provided towels for use on the coffee table during sesshin, and John and Suzy contributed a large number of light bulbs for use around the temple. The wish list is posted on the Members Training page of our website.

## Upcoming Events

Shila Ango Opening Ceremony	January 7
Kannon Ceremony	January 11
T&D: Foundations of Mindfulness	January 16
Zazenkai	January 21
Repentance Ceremony	January 25
Workday	January 28
T&D: Foundations of Mindfulness	January 30
Weekend Sesshin Application Deadline	February 7
Parinirvana Ceremony	February 8
Workday	February 11
T&D: Foundations of Mindfulness	February 13
<b>Weekend Sesshin</b>	<b>February 16-18</b>
Zazenkai	February 18
Chanting Service	February 22
T&D: Foundations of Mindfulness	February 27