

► **THE ROAD TO NIRVANA:** Kempo and Roshi Kjolhede draw a map in the air

**HOW TO BECOME** a Citizen Lobbyist to respond to the climate emergency

**ZEN PRACTICE, MUSIC PRACTICE:** an interview with Rebecca Gilbert



**“OUR HOUSE IS ON FIRE.”** With those five short words, young Greta Thunberg articulated the climate crisis in a way nobody had done before. And the devastating fires in Australia provided additional impetus for the RZC to increase its attention to climate activism.

For decades, the Center has emphasized environmentally-sound practices rooted in the Buddhist precepts: not killing, not wasting, not poisoning the mind or body. But we can't pat ourselves on the back if we don't increase our effort right now. Accordingly, a climate emergency declaration has been drafted and approved by Roshi and the trustees; it can be found on the RZC website. In addition, our climate task force is developing a process, akin to the Term Intensives that we conduct twice a year, that will allow all members, both local and out-of-town, to participate in making commitments to mitigate climate change.

In addition, the Summer issue of *Zen Bow* will be focused on the climate crisis. As a prelude, please see Alan Leiserson's article in this issue where he demystifies the process of lobbying at the federal level, using the principles of Non-Violent Communication to work with politicians to advance climate-positive legislation.

How about you? Have you tried to give up plastic? Are you composting? Have you ever worked with politicians on this issue? Are you struggling with climate anxiety in your practice? Are your children engaged in any climate-change activities? We'd love to hear about it. And you don't have to be a writer; we can interview you. Just email [zenbow@rzc.org](mailto:zenbow@rzc.org).—CHRIS PULLEYN

#### ON THE COVER

IMAGE BY *Ju Lian* | Ju Lian (1828–1904), a painter of the Qing Dynasty, who called himself the “Old Man of the Divided Mountain,” is best known for his paintings of birds, insects, flowers, and plants.



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#### EDITOR

Chris Pulleyn | [zenbow@rzc.org](mailto:zenbow@rzc.org)

#### EDITORIAL CONSULTANT

Roshi Bodhin Kjolhede | [bodhin@rzc.org](mailto:bodhin@rzc.org)

#### COPY EDITOR

Cecily Fuhr | [cecilyfuhr@gmail.com](mailto:cecilyfuhr@gmail.com)

#### AUDIO TRANSCRIPTIONIST

Jennifer Kyker

#### ART DIRECTOR

Daryl Wakeley | [darylwakeley@icloud.com](mailto:darylwakeley@icloud.com)

#### PROOFREADER

John Pulleyn

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Spring 2020

# Soundings



MAN, HANUT/ISTOCK

#### SMARTPHONE JUDO

THROUGH MY MANY years of practicing Zen, I've struggled to establish a daily sitting routine. I would start off strong, but as the very stresses that brought me back to sitting decreased, so did my motivation to sit. Inevitably, the stresses would return, the sitting would be recommenced, and soon abandoned again; this was the cycle. Following the birth of our second daughter I resolved to sit every day no matter what, and I have, with help from the most unlikely thing: my smartphone.

While smartphone use, described in the title of an article in *The Atlantic* as “The Cigarette of This Century,” isn't quite on the level of the opioid crisis, arguments could be made that excessive smartphone use, and the resulting dependence, is just as alarming. Nevertheless, we can benefit from using these devices so long as we are aware of the pitfalls inherent in using smartphones, namely their distractive, habit-forming tendencies.

I know these pitfalls all too well. I had previously avoided social media apps like Facebook and Twitter just out of lack of interest. But the many sleepless nights caused by my first daughter's irregular sleep patterns were stressful, and I would often escape through the Internet. What started off as simply watching videos on YouTube turned to forming new interests online, and branched into wanting to connect with other people on social media, thus completing the trifecta of my dependence on my smartphone for relief. I was hooked.

These new habits came to a head when I realized that I was more interested in checking my Twitter news feed than what was going on at home. The excessive phone use was taking me away from my family and distracting me at work. Then, during one fateful Term Intensive held at the Zen Center, I ditched the superfluous features of my phone, and as a result, noticed a huge difference in my quality of life.

What is it about smartphones and their apps that makes them so alluring?

The answer is simple: they're intention-

ally designed to be habit-forming, preying on our most basic human needs and instincts. It's hardly a secret that software developers design their apps to provide enticing prompts, notifications, and rewards to manipulate our attention, hook us, and keep us coming back for more.

According to Nir Eyal, author of *Hooked: How to Build Habit-Forming Products*, developers accomplish this by incorporating four elements into their programs: triggers, actions, variable rewards, and investments.

Triggers cue users to take action. For example, the ringing of your phone is triggering you to answer it. Action is the ability to have the appropriate response to those triggers (in this example, answering the phone). Variable rewards come in many forms: social rewards and validation (such as “likes” on Facebook), material rewards (monetary prizes for completing an online game), and self-rewards (mastering a new skill). Lastly, there's investment in the app. Investment is the time and energy the user puts into the app that keeps them using that product. For example, if you've uploaded all of your family photos to Google Photos, you're not likely to switch platforms.

Not all apps or electronic devices are nefarious; there are many apps employing similar strategies whose aim is getting us hooked to help us live healthier lives (like weight loss, diet apps, and wearable fitness watches). Seeking out a new app, I came across Insight Timer, the top free meditation app offering a wide variety of content.

Insight Timer has, of course, a meditation timer, but it also incorporates the same type of habit-forming design as other apps. The feature that got me hooked was its Consecutive Days tracker, which tracks all your meditation sessions. All that data is available for you to browse, with your total meditation time broken out by days, months or the past year, including longest sessions, the average session lengths and more. As an engineer, I can't help browsing all this data with zeal!

An ingenious feature of the timer is this: every tenth consecutive day, you get a nice little reward: a milestone badge in the shape of a gold star. If you get 5 milestones, your gold badge turns red, and if you get 25 milestones it turns green. It's all very exciting! This combination of badges, notification, and a sense of progress were enough to keep me hooked.

There were definitely nights I didn't want to sit at all—either I was too tired or out of town for work. More often than not, what got me to sit those nights was not the fear of “the certainty of death, and the uncertainty of the time of death,” but the fear that I would break my consecutive streak and have to start all over again. I really liked those green badges!

The social media aspect of the app is a slippery slope. You can join groups, post and like comments, find friends, and send messages to other users. This comes with the same risks as any other social media app. By connecting with other users and engaging in dialogue, the app then becomes less about meditation and more about social engagement, tempting users to check their social media notifications instead of meditating. I avoid this feature to some extent; however, I did recently join a few local meditation groups, including the Rochester Zen Center group, which hasn't had much activity in the last two years.

Lastly, the app provides a sense of progress by reporting your accumulated hours of sitting. While it may not feel like it at times, I can see the steady increase of hours. Sometimes that's all it takes for



me to put aside striving for goals and return to just sitting for its own sake.

However, using an app like Insight Timer to support your practice may mean making some adjustments to your phone to make sure that the distracting aspects of your device don't get in your way. Recent upgrades to Apple and Android phones feature a "Wind Down" mode that enables the Do Not Disturb feature and changes your phone's screen color to grayscale. This color change mutes the bright neuro-stimulating colors of your phone—a very useful function first thing in the morning. The lack of color makes those red notification bubbles in the corner of most apps less appealing.

Tony Stubblebine, editor-in-chief of *Better Humans*, recommends what he calls the "Essential Home Screen." Your apps are sorted into three categories: —Basic day-to-day tools for navigating your day, including your calendar, maps, and of course your phone app, which he calls "Primary Tools." —Non-essential apps such as reading apps, podcasts, meditation and yoga

apps, music, etc. he calls "Aspirations." —"Slot Machines" are apps like Facebook and Instagram. These are the addictive apps that provide random rewards. Stubblebine recommends having only Primary Tools and Aspirations visible on your home screen, requiring additional effort to access your Slot Machine apps. I've arranged my phone this way, but with Aspiration apps on a different home screen. Insight Timer is the exception, prominently displayed on my home screen so that I don't have to swipe to find it and risk happening upon anything else that could be distracting.

Insight Timer can be modified to minimize distractions, too. In the app's settings, you can set the default screen to be the timer; otherwise it will default to the app's main splash screen, which has recommended meditation courses and status updates from other users. You can set the app to Night Mode, which darkens the screen, making it less bright in the evenings and mornings. Notifications, like the milestones and friend requests, can also be turned off.

▲ Lava field near Kailua-Kona, Hawaii. PHOTOGRAPH BY CHRIS PULLEY

For those of us whose primary practice is sitting at home, Insight Timer could provide the spur needed to keep a daily sitting routine going, especially during the lows and plateaus of Zen practice. Introducing a smartphone into our practice has its risks, but through careful planning and settings we can limit, but not entirely remove, the distracting nature of the phones and apps and continue our sitting, one badge at a time. Instead of being used by the devices, we can use them to create an effective daily practice.

Whatever the causes and conditions, I am happy to report that as of this writing, I have sat consistently every day for almost 15 months. —SAM SCORSONE ■

**DHARMA**

each man's teisho complete in each moment.

—JOEL DAVID LESSES

**THE NEUROSCIENCE OF MINDFULNESS**

I WANT YOU to imagine that your significant other just broke up with you. You are sitting on your couch at home, ruminating about all of the "mistakes" that you made leading up to the break up. Considering that one of the biggest predictors of depression and anxiety is a pattern of self-blame and rumination, you will likely not be surprised by the feeling of sadness that arises as you obsess.

Now I want you to imagine that you had attended a mindfulness seminar the week before this break up where you had learned about mindful breathing. You recall the existence of this new skill and direct your attention towards your breathing.

You naturally slow your breathing as your focus deepens, and you notice the sensation of coolness on the tip of your nose during inhalation. You notice the gentle rise and fall of your abdomen. You notice the subtle to-and-fro beat of your heart in your chest. Importantly, you don't notice any thoughts related to the break up during your times of peak focus.

What has happened in your brain during these two stages of consciousness?

To answer this question, we must introduce two opposing networks in the brain known as the default mode network (DMN) and the task-positive network (TPN). These two networks are like the on/off position of a light switch in that the activation of one by definition inhibits the other.

The DMN is labeled "default" because it represents the mind in a neutral state without a mental or physical focal point. The DMN is the network that allows us to daydream, remember, and imagine. It is unstructured.

The TPN on the other hand becomes active when we have a mental or physical task that we are willfully engaging with. The TPN is engaged when we focus on external or internal sensations, make plans, or perform complex physical tasks....

[The important thing] is the fact that the DMN and TPN are effortlessly mutually exclusive. The relationship between the DMN and the TPN is analogous to the relationship between inhalation and exhalation: despite their intimate nature, the two cannot exist simultaneously.

Thus, rather than binding oneself in

**MUSIC NOTES**

MUSIC COMMUNICATES in a deep, special way; it's a whole-body experience. For me, certain songs in particular have caused some "aha" moments over the years, moments of feeling suddenly shot through with deeper understanding and awe. I'm going to share some of my favorites with you. Give your full attention to these songs for a few minutes, like you would give your full attention to your breathing in the zendo. See where the listening takes you.

—"Chinese Translation" by M. Ward.

Ward is a Portland-based singer-songwriter who's been making indie-folk music for a couple of decades. This is my favorite song of his, from the 2006 album *Post-War*. The song follows a young seeker who "climbs a tall, tall mountain" looking for a wise man to ask three existential questions that haunt him. "What do you do with a broken heart/and how can a man like me remain in the light/and if life is really as short as they say, then why is the night so long?" There's a twist to this lyrical story that is deeply spiritual.

—"At the Bottom of Everything" by Bright Eyes. Conor Oberst, the lead singer, is known for his sad songs and sad voice. But this song isn't sad at all, despite its premise. It's about two people on a plane that's about to crash into the ocean. They are minutes from death. One of them asks the other, "Where are we going?" And he starts singing her this song. By the end, the singer is "happy just because/I realized I am really no one." This is the most joyful song about death you'll ever hear.

—"I am Not in Kansas" by The National. This song is from The National's latest album, *I am easy to find*. In this song, the speaker is free-associating about his life and how it's winding down. Everything around him has changed; he doesn't recognize this new world. He is "not in Kansas," he has grown up. "My shadow's getting shorter," he sings, "I'm a child at the border." The song speaks for itself; my explanation can only fall short. "Time has come now to stop being human/time to find a new creature to be." Give it a listen!



These are my top three for Zen-like inspiration and killer lyrics, but here are a couple of instrumentals I'd recommend for deep listening, too:

—"Mad Rush" by Philip Glass. This piano piece is worth listening to for all its 13 minutes and 47 seconds. If you can clear your mind and just focus on what you're hearing, you're in for a deeply meditative experience. Glass is a composer who also worked for a long time as a plumber and taxi driver.

—*Recomposed by Max Richter: Vivaldi, the Four Seasons*. This is an imaginative modern take on Vivaldi's work. If you don't have time for the whole album, skip ahead to song 13.

Enjoy the music. —SUSANNA ROSE ■

the mental straightjacket that is battling thought with more thought, you can simply engage fully in a mental or physical activity. In doing so you will interrupt your ability to ruminate by sheer biological constraint. You only have the mental power to run a single network. Overcoming the DMN is not a matter of pushing through a mental barrier so much as it is a simple matter of bypassing the barrier altogether.

Returning to our light switch analogy, it is important to remember that our attention is fickle and the oscillation be-

tween DMN and TPN resembles the frantic flicker of a light switch in the hands of an overeager toddler. You will focus intently on your breath, engaging the TPN, only to be interrupted the next second by the return of a ruminative thought as the DMN takes over and the TPN goes dark.

As with most things, practice makes perfect—or more perfect. You practice meditation to strengthen your TPN so that you might have longer stretches of attentional focus before the DMN interjects with wayward thought. —MATTHEW MCKINNON, MD in *Psychology Today* ■

**MAHAYANA.** Sanskrit, literally “Great Vehicle,” one of the two great schools of Buddhism, the other being the Hinayana, “Small Vehicle.” The Mahayana, which arose in the first century CE, is called Great Vehicle because, thanks to its many-sided approach, it opens the way of liberation to a great number of people and, indeed, expresses the intention to liberate all beings.

Hinayana and Mahayana are both rooted in the basic teachings of the historical Buddha, Shakyamuni, but stress different aspects of those teachings. While Hinayana seeks the liberation of the individual, the fol-

lower of the Mahayana seeks to attain enlightenment for the sake of the welfare of all beings. This attitude is embodied in the Mahayana ideal of the Bodhisattva, whose outstanding quality is compassion.

—THE SHAMBHALA DICTIONARY OF BUDDHISM AND ZEN

In The Encyclopedia of Eastern Philosophy and Religion (also published by Shambhala), the first paragraph for the Mahayana entry is the same as above, with no caveat about the word “Hinayana.” But here’s how their entry for Hinayana starts:

**HINAYANA:** Sanskrit, “Small Vehicle”; originally a derogatory designation used by representatives of the Mahayana for early Buddhism. The followers of Hinayana themselves usually refer to their teaching as the Theravada (“Teaching of the Elders”), in spite of the fact that, strictly speaking, Theravada was one of the schools within the Hinayana; it is, however, the only one still existing today. Hinayana is also referred to as Southern Buddhism, since it is prevalent chiefly in countries of southern Asia. —ROSHI BODHIN KJOLHEDE

**DOKUSAN**

I LOVE DOKUSAN. But it has taken me some years to get there. I didn’t really understand what it was for, what its purpose or utility was. I feel like I had read somewhere that dokusan gets translated as “an interview with the teacher.” For me, that was immediately frightening. I can’t think of any interview—for a job, or a placement at a university, or for a volunteer position—that didn’t come with a decent amount of anxiety. Then I was supposed to demonstrate my understanding of practice in this interview! So it was easy for me to take it like I was being tested, which was never comfortable.

I used to get so nervous. I worried about what I wanted to say. I felt like I had to come up with some smart observation, or a smart question. I used to preemptively come up with some script that I would rehearse—not necessarily because I thought it was a good plan; it was just so habitual. I hated it when my brain wanted to rehearse scripts, but when that thought train got rolling, it was a hard one to slow down. Then, I felt so phony performing a script, that I couldn’t bring myself to say anything because I would completely forget the script. It happened over and over again. It was torture. Maybe that’s an exaggeration, but it did feel terrible, and I didn’t see what I was getting out of it.

But I had to keep going. There had to be some reason that people kept going. I just didn’t understand it yet. At some point, shortly after coming on staff, I decided I would go to dokusan once a week, no matter what. If the round I was sitting in felt terrible or fantastic, if I was crying,

or if I had nothing to say at all, I was going to go every Thursday night.

I liked this plan because I was tired of debating in my head if I should go or not. I was going to just commit to the plan and take the debate out. I had known Roshi well enough to know that, if something serious was going on with me, I wanted to be able to talk to him about it. I knew, if I wanted to be able to go to him in a time of need, I needed to get more comfortable with the whole ritual that is dokusan.

I don’t think it even occurred to me that I could go to him outside of dokusan. Instead, the anxiety started when I realized “it’s Thursday night, there’s dokusan.” To talk myself down, I would remind myself, “I just need to get into the practice. I don’t have to say anything, no need to rehearse. Who’s nervous?” That anxiety would rear up when I got into the dokusan line, then as I moved up the line, and I would dig into the practice even more. My anxiety became something that fueled practice.

Over time, the whole ritual of going to dokusan transformed. I would use the entire lead-up to walking into that door to motivate work. But that testing anxiety was still coming into my head once I walked in that door. I’m dyslexic, so in my 20 years of experience in schools, I did a lot to manage my teachers’ assumptions about me and my work. I have had this drive to prove myself, both to myself and to my teachers. It’s totally obvious now that this would affect my dokusan experience, and I had been very directly working on some of that anxiety, but it still took me some time before I realized I ab-

solutely projected my baggage with teachers onto Roshi.

Roshi is my teacher. That is super-clear. But when I occasionally do sesshins with teachers that Roshi sanctions, it shakes me out of unconscious expectations that I have for Roshi and the whole experience of working with a teacher. My working relationship with Roshi benefits tremendously.

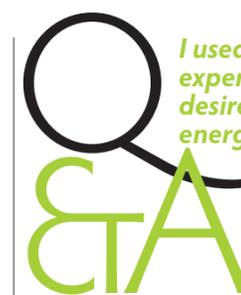
One turning point was when I had a sesshin with Gerardo-sensei. Instead of seeing Gerardo-sensei as a traditional schoolteacher, I saw him more as a grandfather figure. With that came an ease and calmness about how I approached him. For those of you who do not know, Gerardo-sensei is from Mexico, where he still lives, so he has a thick Mexican accent. My grandfather was from South Louisiana; he also had a very quiet demeanor. He would sit on the porch of his house for large parts of his day, by himself, smoking cigarettes, watching and studying the birds. His first language was Cajun French, so he had an incredibly thick Cajun accent. It was so thick that my friends from Texas couldn’t understand him at all. So for me, while Sensei’s Mexican accent was not my grandfather’s accent, there was certainly a kinship-ness.

During that sesshin with Sensei, I am sure I had some of those academic associations trailing into the dokusan room, but they ended up getting replaced with associations with my grandfather. Then, when I left sesshin, some of the grandfatherly associations I had with Sensei followed me into the dokusan room with Roshi. It helped to shake me out of some habits I had when I walked into the dokusan room.

By the time I had sesshins with Amala-sensei, I had new habitual ways of approaching dokusan with Roshi that she didn’t have the language for, making those habits much more visible. Then, because Amala-sensei is a woman, I felt much more comfortable addressing questions that had been coming up that were related to being a woman on the path. I had no idea how much I needed that perspective and how much I had missed it. I found it incredibly valuable to see a woman carry herself, in practice, with such authority. I could see more deeply how I could assert my own power as a woman, simply by having a role model for it.

All of this helped me appreciate Roshi more. Some teachers would feel quite threatened to have their students do sesshin with another teacher; he’s clearly trusting, making it so much easier for me to trust these teachers as well. By having sesshin with other teachers, I have a better appreciation for the personality that Roshi brings to sesshin. There is a way that teachers bring a life to their teachings and to the experience of sesshin. Every teacher is going to bring to life different qualities in different forms, and every student will resonate with that life in different ways. When you only ever have sesshin with Roshi, it’s hard to see what Roshi brings, because you have no way of seeing it. It’s easy to think that the qualities he brings are just the workings of sesshin: “it’s just how sesshin is” instead of “it’s just how sesshin with Roshi is.”

Just as our relationship to ourselves evolves, so does our relationship with our teachers. It’s not possible to have an intimate relationship if we don’t know how to be intimate with ourselves. They’re such delicate things, intimate relationships. They need time to develop. There have to be some raw moments, when it’s difficult to muster enough trust or vulnerability, but a lot of intimacy development seems mostly boring. It takes time. Not much is happening on the surface. But at the end of the day, going to dokusan reminds me what I’m doing. I walk in the door, take a seat in front of Roshi, do the best I can, to let my thoughts be—like I let my fingers be—and wonder. —DENÉ REDDING ■



*I used to be an enthusiastic Zen practitioner, but I’m experiencing a slump. My sitting these days is dull, and my desire to sit has declined significantly. How can I regain my energy for Zen practice?*

THIS IS A TOUGH problem, and not easy to resolve. It’s also a common problem—nearly everyone runs into dips in enthusiasm and motivation. States of mind, like every other phenomenon, are impermanent. We all have to face the challenge of doing what we value in spite of our own resistance. Julius Erving, a truly great professional basketball player, said, “Being a professional is doing the things you love to do, on the days you don’t feel like doing them.” When it comes to Zen practice, it will help to remind ourselves that getting to the mat, even when we don’t want to sit, makes it more likely that our slump will ease up.

So how do we do that? How do we grind it out when we’re not inspired? The most reliable way is to put your focus on doing, independent of trying to shape your thoughts and feelings. Whether it’s a question of getting yourself to the mat or of dropping distractions and returning to the practice once you’re there, it’s the same. Keep it simple and don’t obsess about conditions. Conditions will change, on their

own, without our needing to manage them. If we’re willing to return to the work of this moment, again and again, regardless of “how we’re doing” and without demanding that things be “a certain way,” things will work themselves out in their own time.

It’s actually a relief when we realize we’re not called upon to manufacture an attitude. We just need to make an effort. T.S. Eliot said:

*With shabby equipment always deteriorating  
In the general mess of imprecision of feeling,  
Undisciplined squads of emotion. And what  
there is to conquer*

*By strength and submission, has already  
been discovered*

*Once or twice, or several times, by men  
whom one cannot hope*

*To emulate—but there is no competition—  
There is only the fight to recover what has  
been lost*

*And found and lost again and again: and  
now, under conditions*

*That seem unpropitious. But perhaps neither  
gain nor loss.*

*For us, there is only the trying. The rest is  
not our business.*

—JOHN PULLEYN

**HOW ZEN IS THAT!**

▼ Presented without comment. PHOTOGRAPH BY DEBORAH ZARETSKY





## MUMONKAN, CASE 48:

### THE CASE

A monk once asked Master Kempo, "A sutra says, 'The Bhagavats in the Ten Directions, one straight road to Nirvana.' I wonder, where is that road?" Kempo lifted up his stick, drew a line in the air, and said, "Here!"

Later a monk asked Ummon about this. Ummon held up his fan and said, "This fan jumps up to Heaven and hits the nose of the King of the gods. The carp of the Eastern Sea makes one leap and it rains cats and dogs."

### THE COMMENTARY

One goes to the bottom of the deep sea and raises a cloud of sand and dust. The other goes to the top of a towering mountain and raises foaming waves that touch the sky. The one holds, the other lets go, and each, using only one hand, sustains the Dharma. It's like two children who come running from opposite directions and crash into each other. In this world those who are truly awakened are difficult to find. But when seen with the true eye, neither of these two great teachers knows where the Nirvana road is.

### THE VERSE

Before taking a step you have already arrived.  
Before the tongue has moved, the teaching is finished.  
Though each move is ahead of the next,  
know there is still another way up.

## "Kempo's One Road"

**KEMPO IS THE JAPANIZED** name of this Chinese master, Yuezhou Qianfeng, who lived in the late eighth and early ninth centuries. In Zen's Chinese Heritage, the mother

lode of biographical information about the Tang Dynasty Zen masters, nothing is recorded about his life.

Ummon is the Japanized version of Chinese master Yunmen, who appears in more koans than anyone except Zhaozhou (Joshu). But we've so often heard about him in teisho that I'll forgo telling his story again this time.

Koans are uniquely Zen in their use as a meditation device. Most koans that have come to us in these collections are dialogues between masters and monks. Sometimes, they're stories. But they all have an element of paradox, or a contradictory quality, to them. If we engage the koan seriously, if we take it to heart and really bore into it, then because of its illogical nature it forces us out of the box of this rational mind of ours into the Incomprehensible.

In *Zen Comments on the Mumonkan*, the author, Shibayama-roshi, quotes his own teacher on the role of the koan in Zen: "[T]he koan does not lead a student along an easy and smooth

shortcut.... [It] throws the student into a steep and rugged maze where he has no sense of direction at all. He is expected to overcome all the difficulties and find the way out himself."

Shibayama's teacher then compares the predicament of the koan with a blind person trudging along with his cane, with the koan "mercilessly" taking the cane away from him, turning him around, and pushing him down. The koan, then, strips us of our myopic way of relating to the world so that we may broaden our vision.

**SO: A MONK ONCE** asked Master Kempo. "The sutra says...." He's quoting the *Surangama Sutra*, one of those most highly regarded in the Zen school of Buddhism. Sutras are collections of the Buddha's teaching, most of them purportedly in his own words. "Purportedly," because his discourses weren't written down until some two centuries after his death. Until then they were passed on orally, and supposedly verbatim, as memorized by Ananda, his attendant of twenty-



KOAN COMMENTARY  
BY Roshi Bodhin Kjolhede

five years. Since the sutras comprise many, many volumes, it strains credibility that the Buddha's millions of words could have been accurately preserved for two hundred years. But we do know of people even today who have such stupendous memories. I'm thinking of reports in *The Guinness Book of World Records* of people—from India, as I remember—who have accurately recited hundreds of successive digits of  $\pi$  in order. So, who knows?

But Zen has always been known as a teaching “without reliance on the sutras,” and “beyond words,” so the verbal accuracy of the sutras is not of concern to us. What matters in Zen is the spirit, or the meaning, behind the words—the moon itself, not the finger pointing to it.

Still, many of our most illustrious masters came to Zen only after years of formal sutra study. And the *Surangama Sutra* is one they probably would have studied. Other Mahayana sutras highly esteemed in the Zen school are the *Lankavatara Sutra* (reportedly Bodhidharma's go-to text), the *Lotus Sutra*, and the *Diamond Sutra*. Also the *Vimalakirti Sutra* and the *Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch*, though this last features the discourses of Hui Neng, not the Buddha. It was later designated a sutra in reverence for his teaching, which established the character of Zen as we know it today.

**AGAIN, FROM THE** *Surangama Sutra*: “The bhagavats in the ten directions, one straight road to Nirvana.” *Bhagavat* is a Hindu term, and I think this is the only koan in which it appears. There is a lot of overlap between Hindu teaching and that of Buddhism. Hindus say that Buddhism is an outgrowth of Hinduism—and even that the Buddha himself was a Hindu! One of the major differences between the two religions, though, is that the Buddha, having realized the intrinsically enlightened nature of all people, opened the gate of liberation to all equally, regardless of caste.

For the purpose of this koan bhagavats can just be understood as a general term for the enlightened ones, or buddhas. In the zendo we're heralding them when we chant: “Ten directions, three worlds, all buddhas, bodhisattva-mahasattvas.” Throughout all space and time, all beings, enlightened ones: one straight road to Nirvana.

Nirvana is one of those Buddhist words, like karma, that has trickled into the English language. But this doesn't mean that anyone really

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understands it. One literal translation of it is “extinction,” but from way back when the first Buddhist texts arrived in the West, people commonly have thought of Nirvana as the Buddhist heaven. Well, that's not entirely a misunderstanding. It's certainly not literally a place we go, but we can find our way there in sesshin. We can experience the essence of Nirvana in samadhi. And that is a heavenly experience.

“I wonder, where is that road?” He's asking, “What is the Ultimate? What is the Way?” And then Kempo lifted up his stick, drew a line in the air, and said, “Here.”

Kempo could have said, “This. Just this. It's all here. It's all this.” In the deepest sense, there is no there, or then: it's all here. And we discover this if we delve into this question or another fundamental one. If we go deep enough, we realize: Where else could it be but right here? This is the only thing that's real.

Everything else is thoughts. Some other place? Well, we have words for that. Nevada, South Africa, the moon.... But where are those places right now? They're just words. Where is Brazil, where is Russia? I don't see them. What about the future? Where is that, except in our thoughts? And the past? Thoughts. We're always looking, looking, looking, toward the future, or back into the past. Imagining something else, some other place, some other time. And so as a result, we miss *just this*. We miss HERE.

You may protest, “Wait—I remember the past. I even have objective reports of it, from the news and from books.” But memories and news and biographies themselves exist only in the present.

Another translation has Kempo drawing a circle instead of a line in the air. The circle is the one symbol used in Zen. It's about as close as we can come to representing our formless Essential Nature in form. In the verse to case 23 in the *Mumonkan*, Zen master Mumon reminds us, “You describe it in vain, you picture it to no avail.” But we try anyway, wearing this True Self as the ring in our rakusu and painting it calligraphically as an enso. Want to picture this “True Self that is no-self,” as Hakuin puts it? Go look at the big, brush-stroked circle displayed at the end of the hallway outside the zendo. Take a look at who you really are. (Or stay in the zendo and do that!)

**“WHERE IS THAT ROAD?”** Now, Kempo's response must not have satisfied the monk, or he didn't

get Kempo's point. So then he went to the great Ummon and asked the same question: “*The Sutra says, ‘the bhagavats in the ten directions, one straight road to Nirvana.’ Where is that road?*” And Ummon gave a very different response from Kempo's: *He held up his fan and said, “This fan jumps up to heaven and hits the nose of the king of the gods. The carp of the Eastern Sea makes one leap and it rains cats and dogs.”*

What in the world is he saying here? It is the job of a student working on this koan to demonstrate first the spirit of Kempo's response, and then of Ummon's response. The whole point of demonstrating is that we are then forced to embody our understanding, and the teaching embedded in the koan. It's one thing to discuss Buddhist doctrine; it's another thing to assimilate it, to incorporate it enough that we can present it in our bodies. To grasp this koan, one has to *inhabit* these two masters, body and mind.

To present one's understanding of a koan, often you have to first determine the states of mind, and even the levels of understanding, of the protagonists. A Chinese master offers his own take on Kempo in this commentary: “Kempo's medicine for a dead horse didn't work as medicine. This monk was a man who had already perished and lost his life [meaning he had come to awakening]. Ummon gathered some reviving incense to enable the dead to come back to life again.”

And that's the symmetry in this case; the two sides of our nature, the two sides of reality. And that's what Mumon gets to in his commentary: “*One goes to the bottom of the deep sea and raises a cloud of sand and dust. The other goes to the top of a towering mountain and raises foaming waves that touch the sky.*” Which master is diving underwater and which is soaring? Or does it even matter? These two lines also can be taken together as a single point Mumon is making. What point is that?

“*The one holds, the other lets go.*” Holding and letting go constitute just one of countless pairs of opposites that were baked into the philosophy and religion of China since long before Bodhidharma was sitting there in his cave. Taoist philosophy is laced with these polarities, and there's a lot of Taoism in Zen. The Sixth Ancestor, Hui Neng, in his instructions to his disciples enumerated some thirty-six such pairs, including activity and tranquility, the pure and the muddy, permanence and impermanence, ad-

vance and retreat, yin and yang of course, and as presented in this koan and every koan, form and formlessness, the phenomenal and the void.

**TO SAY THAT ZEN** is beyond words and concepts doesn't mean we don't make use of them. Like the sutras themselves, they articulate—make more conscious—the understanding we uncover through practice alone. We can appreciate these many sets of polarities as a way to better understand the range of differences that they highlight. In this way, Hui Neng says, “The interdependence and mutual involvement of the two extremes will bring to light the significance of the Mean.” “The Mean”—in other words, the Middle Way that is the Dharma.

Buddhist doctrine rests on the two-fold truth of emptiness and form. “Holding” is the emptiness side, that of non-differentiation, no-thingness, *sunyata*—the essence of everything. But there is no such world of just negation. It's an abstraction. “Letting go” is the side of differentiation, of phenomena, of self-and-other, of “name and form.” These are just two perspectives, but the reality is not two.

With respect to the actual practice of Zen, “holding” could be seen as the highly structured, spare realm of formal sitting, where we are largely disengaged from the sense world, especially in sesshin. Silence. Eyes down. This is where we're most likely to be able to see into the formless aspect of reality, through turning inward, detaching from objects.

It's the other side that completes the work of Zen: bringing forth our practice into the realm of phenomena. Zen practice in activity, and out in the wide world, represents the “letting go.” Here we let go of our cushions and engage with life in its profusion of changing circumstances and conditions. Leaving the zendo, our practice now becomes socializing again, smelling the flowers as we walk outdoors, driving through traffic, returning to family life, to work, going to the supermarket. Yet this side, too, is just half of it. Nietzsche said, “It is good to express a matter in two ways simultaneously, so as to give it both a right foot and a left. Truth can stand on one leg, to be sure, but with two it can walk and get about.” People who think that it's enough to “practice in activity,” without sitting regularly, are deceiving themselves. The quality of the active meditation is dependent on the sitting.

The world of thingness, of differentiation, is the only world that most people really know. But

by itself it can't be reality. The "nothing" side is obscure. Through our senses we perceive every *thing*—forms, phenomena, objects—but not "nothing." Still, I would bet that everyone who undertakes Zen practice seriously—and that would mean everyone who goes to sesshin—has gotten some inkling of that other side: the silence in sound, the stillness in movement, the no-self in self. But to confirm the reality of that side through direct experience means dissolving our attachment to concepts. Zen master Linji, in his characteristically fierce way, exhorted his monks to seize the day, on the mat and off, to be done with the idea of "others" as apart from us:

Followers of the way, if you want insight into Dharma as is, just don't be taken in by the deluded views of others. Whatever you encounter, either within or without, slay it at once. On meeting a buddha, slay the buddha. On meeting a patriarch, slay the patriarch. On meeting an arhat, slay the arhat. On meeting your parents, slay your parents. On meeting your kinsman, slay your kinsman. And you attain emancipation. By not cleaving to things, you freely pass through.

When we transcend thoughts and concepts, nothing obstructs us. "Nothing" stands brightly before us.

**WE CAN SEE THE** interplay of holding and letting go all around us. It forms a continuum of teaching styles, with the most demanding teachers at one end and the most allowing, or relaxed, at the other. Probably the most "holding" of all Zen teachers was the Chinese master who, whenever asked about the Dharma, would just silently turn his back on the questioner. In teaching, that's the purest expression of the negation aspect, but it surely would have arisen out of faith in the questioner; he was withholding what he knew the student could discover on his own when forced back on his own resources.

At the other end of the teaching spectrum is the prominent teacher in Europe who would not require his students working on subsequent koans to spend more than one dokusan on a koan. If the student's presentation missed the point, the teacher, rather than ring him out, would give the proper demonstration himself and assign the student her next koan. Since the effectiveness of teaching depends so much on the particular student and on timing and other

circumstances, we can't really pronounce any style as better or worse in the abstract. As always, it comes down to skillful means.

In academic teaching and in coaching and mentoring generally, we can see a similar range of styles between, on the one hand, those who are strict and exacting, and on the other those who are more allowing, encouraging, and willing to make exceptions. Likewise, parenting styles fall along a range of strictness and permissiveness, and fortunate is the child whose parents know when to say no and when to yield—"when to hold and when to fold."

The same diversity of teaching styles would, by extension, apply to Zen centers and temples. There are centers that have more relaxed discipline and looser policies than others. A teacher, now deceased, who offered a Zen-like meditation outside Rochester allowed participants at her retreats to skip whatever sittings they wished; they never needed to show up. People generally land at centers whose style they feel an affinity with, but geographical proximity is another consideration.

Aside from Zen practice and teaching, there are other aspects of life we can see in terms of holding and letting go; for example, on the conservative-to-liberal spectrum, with social, economic, and institutional conservatives contrasting with liberals in those fields. Religious conservatives hold fast to scripture and tradition; political conservatives to a more literal reading of the Constitution. Among translators, too, there is a range between those who hold to a more literal rendering of the text and those who translate more freely in order to make the text more accessible. People also differentiate themselves as to which is more important: principles or pragmatism. Even in linguistics, purists holding to conventional grammar and diction face off against modernizers, adapters.

Letting go is the free-acting, the expressive, the expansive, the creative: arts, humor, comedy, the profusion of things. But that world itself can become hollow without insight into the other side, the no-thingness of things. Before discovering Zen, Roshi Kapleau was something of an art collector and an aficionado of classical music. But as time went on he grew weary of what he later described as "the joyless pursuit of pleasure." Then his karma took him to the war crimes trials in Nuremberg and then Tokyo, where he strolled through the gardens of a Zen temple and was struck by lightning.

**AND EACH, USING ONLY** one hand, sustains the Dharma. It could sound as though Kempo and Ummon are each presenting just half the truth. But, Mumon assures us, in their responses each "sustains the Dharma." So both masters must be presenting the whole truth. In that case, where in Kempo's spare response is the "letting go"? And where in Ummon's exuberant response is the "holding"?

Both Kempo and Ummon would long since have seen the illusory nature of conceptual templates like holding and letting go. And neither of them would have saddled himself with the designation Mumon playfully gave him. In fact, the expansive response Ummon gives here is the opposite of the "one-word responses" he was famous for. And even though Ummon playfully answers the monk in colorful terms of cause and effect—"this begets that"—he's free to do so because he's realized the other side of causation: the Absolute. Or as Kempo put it, "Here!"

Another commentary, this from another Chinese master, comparing Kempo's response with that of Ummon's: "Kempo points out the road, indirectly helping beginners. Ummon then went through his transformation, so as to make people of later times be unwearied." If we had only the side of holding, of sitting zazen, this could get wearisome. But it never has to be. We have to emerge from our sitting. We have to emerge from sesshin at some point. We have to eat, we have to talk, we have to work, we have to laugh and to love.

**IT'S LIKE TWO CHILDREN WHO** come running from opposite directions and crash into each other. In this world, those who are truly awakened are difficult to find. But when seen with the true eye, neither of these two great teachers knows where the Nirvana road is. The terms holding and letting go, slaying and reviving, can be useful in describing function: Kempo's and Ummon's responses in this koan, and our own range of responses to circumstances in our lives. But then there is just the nature of things—their being, our being—and the two aspects of that realm are better described in abstract terms: the relative and the Absolute, the conditioned and the Unconditioned, form and emptiness. In each of us and in all things, these two sides co-exist. And in Awakening they crash together, revealing that they are both and they are neither. Then "road" and "Nirvana" also crash together and fall apart. It's like that old saying about peace: "There is no way to peace.

Everyone  
who undertakes  
Zen practice  
seriously  
has gotten some  
inkling of  
that other side:  
the silence  
in sound  
the stillness  
in movement,  
the no-self in self.  
But to confirm  
the reality  
of that side  
through direct  
experience  
means dissolving  
our attachment  
to concepts

Peace is the way." Kempo and Ummon have both rolled up the road and swallowed it whole, and there is no road left to know.

There's another koan, this one in the *Blue Cliff Record*, which looks at the same theme as this one: *One day Changsha went for a walk in the mountains. When he returned to the gate of the monastery—that's important, the monastery being the "negation" side to the "affirmation" side of worldly activity—the head monk said, "Master, where have you been?" Changsha said, "I've come from walking in the hills." The head monk asked, "Where did you go?" Changsha said, "First I went pursuing the fragrant grasses, then I returned following the falling flowers." The head monk said, "You are full of the spring, aren't you?" Changsha said, "It even surpasses the autumn dew dripping on the lotuses."*

The seasons reveal the same dynamic of holding and letting go in the form of the potential and the manifest. Winter is the withdrawing, the sap returning to the roots of the trees, everything covered in snow, silence. In the daily cycles of day and night—visible and invisible—we see the same repeating flux. Changsha is contrasting spring with autumn, and if "spring" represents nature emerging in a profusion of colors, sounds, and smells, what is he really pointing to as the "autumn" mode of practice? And why would he declare the one better than the other? This poem by the American poet Wallace Stevens might serve as a Zen answer: "After the final no, there comes a yes. On that yes, the future of our world depends." In the most profound sense, without yes, without the affirmative side of things, there would be no world at all. There is no coin without both heads and tails.

And now, Mumon's verse:

*Before taking a step, you've already arrived.*

*Before the tongue has moved, the teaching is finished.*

*Though each move is ahead of the next, know there is still another way up.*

Where is there to go? Where could we go, when there's only *this*? What is there to say? What is there to teach when each one of us has been endowed with all wisdom from the beginning—from the no-beginning of time? "Though each move is ahead of the next"—progressing on the Path, evolving, maybe advancing through different koans—"know there is still another way up." What's the other side of both progressing and regressing? **///**

# Interconnection and the alchemy of performance



AN INTERVIEW WITH  
Rebecca Gilbert

**ZEN BOW:** WERE YOU RAISED in a religious or spiritual tradition?

**REBECCA GILBERT:** My mother had more of an interest than my father in making sure we had a spiritual path, so we were enrolled in a Sunday School at a Methodist church in our small town of Lomira, Wisconsin. My parents only went to church regularly during the months my younger sister and I were enrolled in Sunday School. During that time of Sunday School studies, I also sang in the church choir.

**ZB:** Was yours a musical family?

**RG:** Not particularly. One of my grandmothers played a little piano, I only ever heard her playing Christmas carols, and I had an aunt who played some accordion.

**ZB:** What was the first instrument you played?

**RG:** My first musical experiences were in the church choir.

**ZB:** You have a decent singing voice?

**RG:** I wouldn't say that. In a past life I may have been a singer because I have these latent fantasies of being an opera singer. I dream about it a lot, and when I play the flute I think about it as my voice; that is, I feel the sound as an extension of my voice. I never really was trained [as a singer] although I had a teacher in graduate school who, as part of her pedagogical technique, had us take voice lessons, but I never really, really sang.

But I was only in a choir for a short period of time—maybe a year when we were going to church. I was young, maybe ten years old, and it wasn't a children's choir. It was the adult church choir. I have this memory of connecting with everybody who was singing—connecting with their voices—and I still love the sound of a great chorus. I love chanting in the zendo, just being able to hear how we're all resonating together. And that sense of our bodies and our spirit and our energy all combining.

**ZB:** When did you learn to read music?

**RG:** I learned in music class at school and I played recorder in school before I played the flute. The music program in our rural Wisconsin

community was incredible. You learned to read music, to play the recorder, and when you chose an instrument you had a private lesson once a week instead of recess. That was helpful in keeping us from learning bad habits, and it accelerated our early progress.

**ZB:** When did you start playing the flute?

**RG:** In sixth grade as part of a public school band program

**ZB:** Were you expected to practice every day? For how long?

**RG:** My parents gave me no parameters about practicing. I had a goal-oriented, type-A personality which kept me self-motivated with my flute practice. But I almost quit after we moved the summer between my sixth and seventh grade years.

We moved to Broken Arrow, Oklahoma, outside of Tulsa, and the culture shock from the rural Midwest to the suburban Southwest was an enormous challenge. The band program at my new school was focused on pep band/marching band music for football games where the focus is on the brass players, this kind of balls-to-the-wall, blow 'em away approach to playing music, which I wasn't interested in.

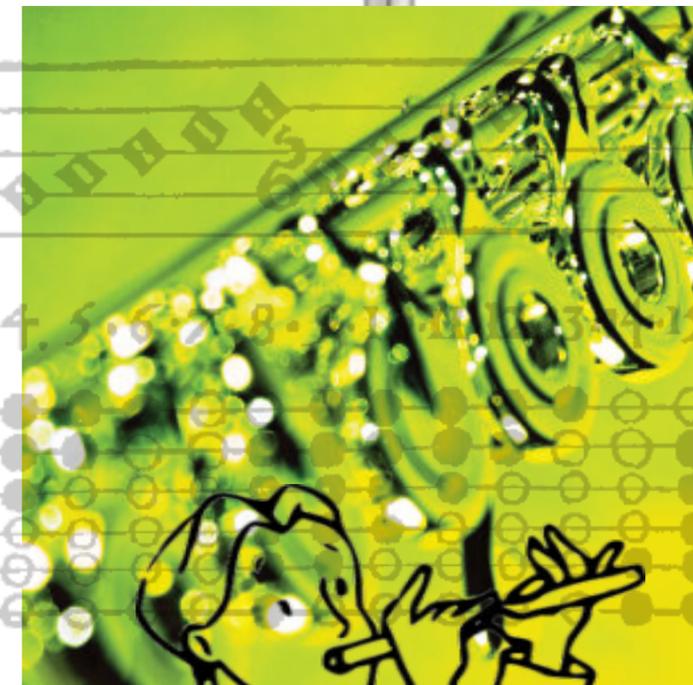
Plus, in the new school the band wasn't as good and, though my family are rabid Green Bay Packers fans, I had never been interested in sports—and, in particular, hated football. When we moved to Oklahoma I had been playing flute for only a year and that's when I was ready to quit.

**ZB:** When did you start thinking that you might be a professional musician?

**RG:** This was a process which came after a series of events that led me to the choice. At that point, when I was so disheartened, my mother saw an opportunity for me to maybe invest a little bit more and she found me a private teacher, my first private teacher outside of school. My teacher was a professor at Oral Roberts University, so I used to go onto this gilded golden campus for my lessons.

At the same time, I remained in the school band. Ironically, the marching band was very competitive and we were the top in the state. It was actually one of the first experiences that taught me what level of artistic excellence you can achieve with hard work. We would get up in the morning and be at band practice at 6:00 in the morning before school started. There were high expectations. It required a very intense commitment. I didn't love the music, the venues, or having to march or any of that, but I did absorb and appreciate what it was like to do hard work as a team together.

*Tablature & Estenduë de la Fluste d'Allemand.*



▷ WORK IN PROCESS

And the private lessons worked! There was no orchestra at the school, no strings at the school, but I auditioned and won a spot in the Tulsa Youth Symphony and then I absolutely fell in love with the sound of the orchestra...in particular the lush blend of the string sections and the way the band instruments were positioned as solo instruments in the texture of the sound.

Later in high school I won a position playing Principal Flute in the All-State Orchestra and was recruited by the Flute Professor at Oklahoma State University, who opened the door to what a career as a professional musician would look like.

**ZB:** Is it “flutist” or “flautist”?

**RG:** Every person who plays the flute could have a different answer, but the question comes from the European roots of Western Classical music. The word for flute is pronounced with a specific accent depending on the nationality of the player. So if you lived in Italy, the word flute is spelled flauto, pronounced with an Italian accent and then you might choose “flautist.” As I am American, and play the flute, I prefer “flutist.”

**ZB:** How long have you been with the RPO? What was your audition like?

**RG:** I joined the RPO in 1996. The audition process is quite interesting. It starts with applying for the job and receiving a list of required repertoire to prepare. Then you perform for a panel of musicians who sit behind a screen in rounds and sort through the candidates with a voting system.

**ZB:** Do you have any anxiety before auditions and performances? How do you deal with it?

**RG:** Early on, I developed a routine including specific steps that set me up to be in a reliable physiological/psychological state for performing. For instance, I always do a cardio workout, refrain from caffeine, and eat the same things before performing. It’s like training for an athletic event: you want to neutralize anything that might get in your way (example: caffeine) and feel confident that you have control over your body and mind. Now, of course, I do as much zazen as I can before performing. It helps me feel more energetic and activates my intuition.

Now, as I am getting older, my physical routines have changed a bit and I am doing more yoga and Pilates as well as cardio. Playing the flute requires an asymmetrical body posture, and because of that I have had to pay more attention to physical maintenance in the past few

years. I also watch what I eat all the time because I am performing all the time.

Another of my pre-performance rituals, believe it or not, is watching reruns of *Little House on the Prairie*. I always loved watching them as a girl and find them soothing, grounding, and capable of opening up my heart. Listening to inspiring music also has the same effect on me.

Auditions are a little different because you are playing, literally, to a wall. You have to re-create a performance setting in your mind because of the screen, and you don’t have the interconnection with and responsiveness of the audience. When I coach younger musicians before auditions, I emphasize the importance of imagining the audience as they are playing.

**ZB:** When did you first start meditating or first come to the Zen Center?

**RG:** I started Zen practice in 1999, only a few years after moving to Rochester. Before finding the Zen Center, I had a sporadic interest in meditation and a simple meditation practice I started a few years before moving to Rochester. I was inspired to look for a community of practitioners after attending a weekend sampler workshop at Kripalu, where I attended a combination yoga/meditation class. I loved the feeling of connecting with the other practitioners in the room and it reminded me of the feeling of connection I feel when I am performing. Also, I had an aspiration to go deeper with my practice and wanted to find a teacher.

**ZB:** What attracted you to Zen practice?

**RG:** I’m an introverted extrovert who needs plenty of quiet and grounding for the emotional demands of my performing career. I am also healing from family and sexual assault trauma.

**ZB:** You’re in a very competitive environment. How do you balance professional ambition with the notion of ego attrition?

**RG:** I think in some ways I escaped some of the pitfalls of pursuing career ambition because I was so naïve. My early musical experiences were well out of the mainstream of the classical music world, and I always just felt lucky that things kept working out for me. I didn’t have a lot of expectations, and that set me up for feeling pretty grateful and humble. My last flute mentor, who was the Principal Flutist of the New York Philharmonic, often tried to encourage me to think bigger than I naturally thought.

I love the alchemy of performance and the feeling of connecting with the audience. This has been the most compelling thing about why I gravitated to a performing career. ///



**KLAVA HOUSE PROGRESS,**

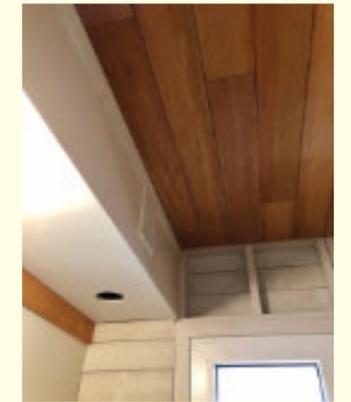
clockwise from upper left:

1) Exterior view with siding finished. The lower portion will be covered with a cultured stone product that has a rustic look.

2) The toilet area of the bathroom features subway tile and a modern sink. The shower area, which is separate, also has subway tile and a no-barrier floor for aging in place.

3) The ceiling of the toilet area was covered with Douglas fir scraps left over from building the retreat center.

4) Muffin and coffee break for Tom Kowal and Eric Cady, a local member who helped with framing



and hanging doors.

5) Interior view showing the entry into the toilet area and the doorway to the walk-in closet at the end of the wall. The Douglas fir trim (again, leftovers) is designed to echo the trim in the retreat center.

Tom Kowal comments, “Chapin Mill is a nice place to be quarantined.”

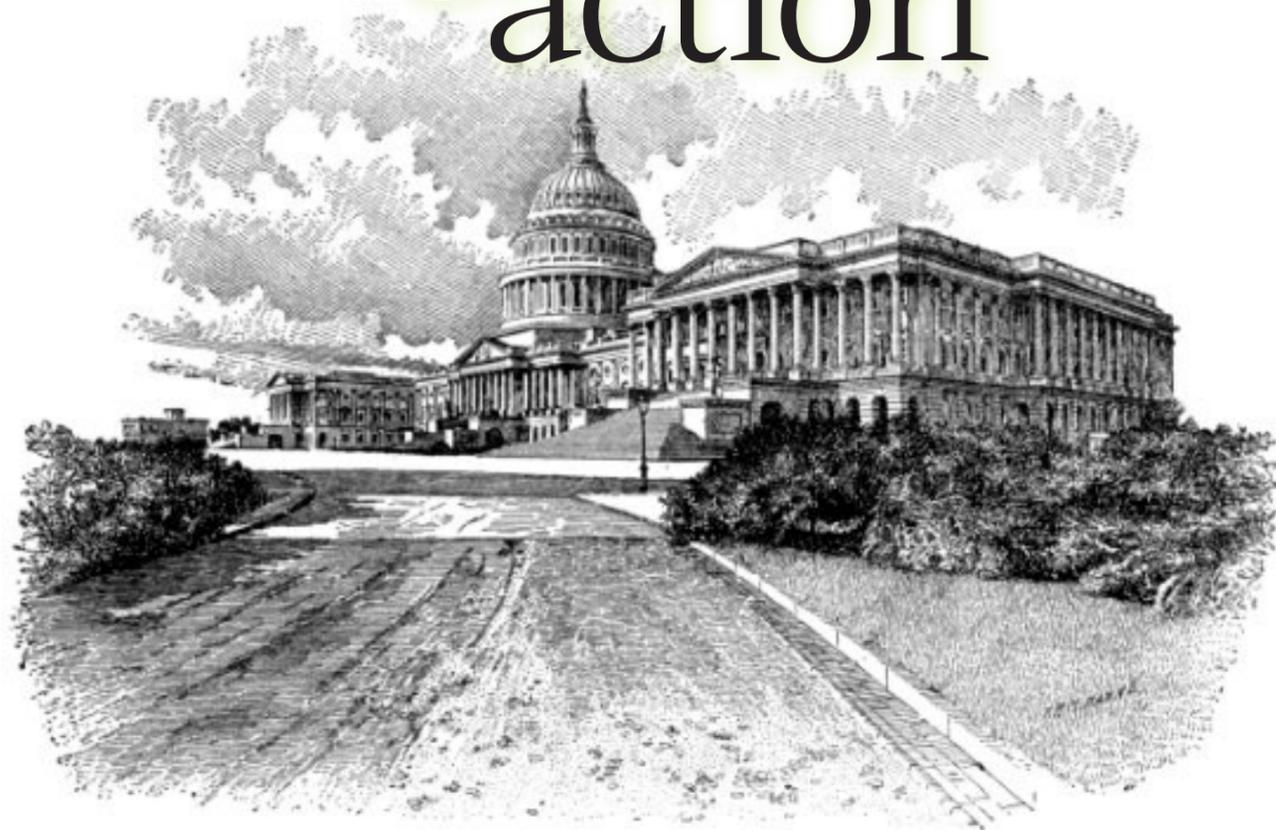
Progress on Klava House will be delayed somewhat due to supply chain issues caused by the pandemic. The kitchen cabinets, for instance, were ordered from Ikea but certain pieces are on backorder so now the entire order is backordered.



**REBECCA GILBERT** joined the Rochester Philharmonic Orchestra as principal flute (The Charlotte Whitney Allen Chair) in the 1996–97 season. She has performed as acting principal flute of the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra and guest assistant principal flute with the Boston Symphony at Tanglewood. She has been a member of the Zen Center since 1999.

THE  
*Journey*  
towards  
right  
action

THE FIRST TIME



I met with a member of Congress on climate issues was when I went to Washington, DC in November of 2019. I was struck by how different it was from my 20 years of meeting with

members of the Tennessee legislature. First of all, the setting is imposing: the 435 members of the House of Representatives have offices in three huge buildings on the National Mall beside the Capitol. Each building is the size of a city block, and five stories tall. But once I found my way to the office and sat down with a member, I was not a lawyer speaking on behalf of an agency, I was just there for me speaking about something that is important to me. It was personal and it was empowering.

**IT MAY HAVE** something to do with being raised in a humanist Unitarian household; it may have been something I picked up from my father; it definitely had something to do with coming of age in the Sixties, first in Nashville (where my minister-mentor and others from the Unitarian Church participated in sit-ins to desegregate restaurants) and then in Ann Arbor, Michigan (where activism and the “counter-culture” were very strong), but I’ve always wanted to do work that makes a positive contribution. And I’ve been fortunate in being able to find such work that also paid the bills.

I had three jobs between college and retirement. First, I worked for food co-ops: a storefront in Ann Arbor, and then a warehouse and trucking operation that served food co-ops in Michigan, northern Ohio and Indiana. Next, as a lawyer, I worked for a legal aid program for a few years, representing low-income people in a variety of different cases. Finally, for thirty years

I was an environmental lawyer working for the state of Tennessee, bringing cases against cities, companies, and individuals who violated air pollution, water pollution, drinking water, and solid and hazardous waste laws. I also drafted environmental laws and regulations, and lobbied for improvements in Tennessee’s environmental laws and against efforts to weaken those laws and regulations.

Although I view all three of these positions as making that positive contribution, I know that others had different views. The people who violated the laws felt the department and I were picking on them unfairly—that others were doing the same thing or worse. My friends in environmental groups often believed that the department was not doing as much as it should to enforce the law, and blamed us in the department personally for that. Standing in line at a movie theater, my wife, Anna Belle, was surprised when we greeted another couple we knew and the man, who was a leader in the environmental community, turned his back on us.

**A COUPLE OF YEARS** before I retired, I came across Nonviolent Communication (NVC). My first experience was with a small group, working through the book of that name by Marshall Rosenberg. Then I attended a few weekend workshops led by out-of-town NVC trainers. I’ve now been facilitating practice groups for several years.

NVC is a system intended to improve skills of connecting with others through authentic expression and empathetic listening. The foundation of

TEXT BY *Alan Leiserson*



**ALAN LEISERSON** was first exposed to Buddhism during high school when he traveled to Japan and India. He and his wife Anna Belle have been together for 48+ years and have two daughters in their thirties. Before joining the Rochester Zen Center they were members of the Ann Arbor and Boston affiliate groups in the 1970s.

the system is the concept of universal human needs such as acceptance, community, purpose, security, health, love, integrity, autonomy, and choice. We meet those needs through strategies, and we're more effective in doing so when we're conscious of the need than when we pursue a strategy without considering what it is we're trying to accomplish. If I'm clear that my need in my marriage is for closeness and intimacy, I can express that to my wife rather than, for example, complain that she's going out too much. This example also demonstrates the NVC principle that when we make a request of another, it is more effective to say what we want than what we don't want.

I find that it's often not clear to me what I'm needing. However, if I reflect a moment on both my judgments and my feelings, I can connect to the needs. Our feelings are pointers to our needs; when our needs are met we tend to have "positive" feelings, and "negative" feelings typically are indicators of unmet needs.

It isn't the goal of NVC to meet all of our needs all the time. There are many times when our needs are just not going to be met. (Thus, the first noble truth.) Really sensing deeply how important the need is to me helps me be at peace with the fact that it isn't being met at the moment, rather than thinking the problem is something "out there" that should change. Also, this awareness helps me observe feelings and various states of mind with some degree of equanimity and let them pass, as they will if I don't keep feeding them with thoughts and judgments. This is one of several areas where NVC and zazen reinforce and support each other.

Of course, it takes practice to do this. When someone accuses us of something, argues vehemently for a position we strongly disagree with, or says something that triggers a reaction in us, it takes practice not to react in our habitual way. It also takes practice to be able to respond in language that sounds natural and is appropriate to the context.

NVC is all about connection. Good things often happen through people having understanding and connection, but the goal is the connection, not a specific outcome. If the goal is to get a certain result, then using the technique is manipulation, and people sense the difference.

As I experienced the openness and depth of interactions when using NVC, I became less satisfied with the roles I felt constrained to be in as an attorney representing the department. This was especially true in my work with the state

legislature. That, together with changes caused by a hostile takeover of state government after an election that changed the governing party, led to my decision to retire.

**AT MY RETIREMENT** reception, I said that I was interested in spending more time outdoors, getting more exercise, and attending to my spiritual life (in Tennessee, I've mostly been a closet Buddhist). It seems many people think retirees have lots of free time, and offer you opportunities to fill that time. The method I've used to make those decisions is whether or not the activity would be nourishing for me. Nourishing may sound self-centered, but in order to distinguish between projects that all make some positive contribution, I want to focus on things that leave me feeling energized rather than depleted.

It was clear that law-related activities didn't meet that test. And it also became clear that the Unitarian Church was not giving me what I needed. About the same time, Anna Belle was reaching out to Buddhist groups, and then to the Rochester Zen Center. When we were in our twenties, we had been members of the Zen Center. After we moved back to Nashville and had children, we dropped our membership. To our surprise, the Zen Center welcomed us back. One thing led to another, and although I have trouble articulating to people why I spend a significant amount of time on the mat in daily sitting and in sesshin, I know it's what I need to do.

After a few years of involvement with a community organizing group in Nashville called NOAH (Nashville Organized for Action and Hope), I became aware of Citizens Climate Lobby (CCL), an environmental organization focused solely on climate change. For the past year, I have had three main areas of focus: Zen practice, NVC practice, and work with Citizens Climate Lobby. I love the way these three reinforce and support each other.

**CITIZENS CLIMATE LOBBY** is a vibrant, growing organization focused on empowering people to get governments to address climate change. It was founded in 2007 and now has over 560 chapters across the world. With the goal in the U.S. of getting Congress to act on climate, it builds political will through working with media, grassroots campaigns (getting letters and phone calls to Congress), "grasstops" work (getting endorsements from community leaders, companies, and organizations), and, of course, lobbying. CCL is dedicated to finding a bipartisan solution (so it will be stable

and not subject to partisan attacks the way Obamacare has been) and doing it in a way that builds bridges rather than creating wedges.

CCL is lobbying for a bill introduced in the House of Representatives, HR 763. I expect the Senate bill to be introduced soon. It would put a price on carbon-based fuels and return the net proceeds (after about 2% for administrative costs) to American households in a monthly dividend. For low- and middle-income people the dividend would be more than what they are likely to pay in increased costs. Currently the bill has 80 co-sponsors and although the goal is to be bipartisan, they are all Democrats.

Almost as important to me as the goal, I love the methodology CCL uses. This is from the statement of core values on the CCL web site:

*We take the most generous approach to other people as possible—appreciation, gratitude, and respect. We listen, we work to find common values, and we endeavor to understand our own biases. We are honest and firm. We know that there is a place for protest, but our approach is to build consensus.*

CCL volunteers are trained to begin every meeting with Congressional offices by appreciating something the member has done, to give the member or staff person the opportunity to do at least 50% of the talking, and to conduct the meeting so that they want to meet with us again. By asking members who are not currently supporting the bill open-ended questions about their concerns, we can learn what we might be able to do gain their support. I think you can see how this is consistent with NVC's goal of connection. The more I can connect with another, the less they are "other."

Last November, on my return to Nashville from sesshin, I participated in CCL's November Lobby Day. I joined with over 800 other volunteers as we had meetings in the offices of over 480 members of Congress. I was in five of those meetings and delivered a few hundred letters from constituents our Nashville chapter had collected. Although we sometimes did more than 50% of the talking, especially when our open-ended questions were answered with very brief responses, all of the meetings were at least cordial and some were quite friendly—even with conservative Republicans. Many of the staff were quite engaged and asked good questions. The highlight of the day occurred at my last meeting—the only one where the Representa-

CCL encourages its volunteers to use the five levers of political will (which could also be used by other groups in other causes):

**LOBBYING CONGRESS:**

Training citizens how to lobby in support of the Energy Innovation and Carbon Dividend Act by building friendly relationships with our federally elected representatives.

**MEDIA RELATIONS:**

Training citizens how to engage with and influence the media.

**GRASSROOTS**

**OUTREACH:** Recruiting and educating the public on climate solutions and how to participate with one's government.

**GRASSTOPS**

**ENGAGEMENT:** Educating, building partnerships with and gaining the support of community leaders and non-governmental organizations, both nationally and locally.

**GROUP DEVELOPMENT & ORGANIZING:**

Through growing and managing local CCL chapters, it becomes possible to push on the other four levers for building political will.

tive attended. At the end of the meeting, this conservative Republican told us that although his staff had to do some research into it, he hoped to become a co-sponsor of the bill!

**SINCE THEN I** have been asked to be the CCL liaison to the offices of Representative Jim Cooper and Senator Lamar Alexander. As liaison, I have responsibility for building a relationship with the office and setting up appointments. I set up an appointment for some CCL members who identify as conservatives with Senator Alexander's staff on CCL's first Conservative Lobby Day. The concept here was that conservatives can ask conservative members to be leaders on climate change, to be at the table when HR 763 or other climate change legislation is discussed. Hopefully, the members see that they can support action on climate change without alienating their base.

As I continue to work in these three realms—Zen practice, NVC practice, and CCL actions—not only do they support and reinforce each other, but they are all ways in which I see how I'm not separate from those around me. As I work on myself in the first two, I can see how it affects others, including those I encounter in doing climate change work. As I reflect on how it developed that I am working in these three areas, it occurs to me that this is what "right action" looks like for me.

As the liaison for Senator Alexander, I sent an email in late December to his legislative aide, "to congratulate Senator Alexander and all of you on the recent successes. Quite a list! Simplifying FAFSA, recurring funding for HBCUs, and the funding for National Labs, Office of Science, Oak Ridge clean up, and Chickamauga Lock! It's great to see how our Senator and Congress can get things done!"

I said nothing about climate change in that email and got this reply, "Thanks for recognizing the work we've accomplished. Much more still to do, but a good week no doubt. Of particular interest for you, Senator Alexander believes that record funding for the national labs is vitally important to producing the technology we will need to combat and counteract climate change. Hope the holidays are great for you and your family."

When it came time to set up the appointment for CCL's Conservative Lobby Day, the same aide (who had declined to meet with us in November) was very responsive and agreed to the meeting right away. I don't think my email was the only reason for that, but I do think it helped. ///



# Sightings

## ON SCREEN

**THE MOVIE: BIRTH** ¶ *What it's about:* A man named Sean is running in Central Park and collapses under a bridge tunnel, dead of a heart attack. Ten years later, we're introduced to his widow, Anna (Nicole Kidman). She's in a cemetery, standing at Sean's tombstone. She touches the headstone hesitantly and then walks away, as if she's saying goodbye to him for the last time. She enters a car, turns to the driver whose been watching her all along, and simply says "OK." We soon realize that this is her fiancé, Joseph, and she's saying "Yes, I will marry you after all."



During their engagement party, however, a 10-year-old boy appears, uninvited, and tells Anna that he's Sean: not just that his name is Sean, but that he's also her dead husband reborn. What's more, he says, she shouldn't marry Joseph but should be with him instead. Initially, she's incredulous, but Anna quickly settles into uncertainty as Sean answers questions that only she and her family know about her late husband. How can this be?

*Why it's worthy:* This is a bold emotional story that uses reincarnation as a means to explore loss and grief. The 10-year-old Sean has a fierce, unrelenting gaze and the young Cameron Bright (he was nine years old at the time of shooting) pulls off an un-

settling performance; he feels like an adult stuck in a child's body. Nicole Kidman is exceptional as Anna. We feel her struggle and see the part of her that knows this is silly; but the damaged part, the part that can't let go of her dead husband, wants to be-

lieve. And I would be remiss if I did not mention the haunting, exquisite music score for *Birth*. Heavily indebted to Richard Wagner, the score feels elemental to the movie, like a DNA strand with its two chains coiling around each other.

I won't attempt to describe to you the gorgeous opening scene of a man running in Central Park, or the devastating closing scene of a woman reeling with anguish on a beach—but I will tell you that the most mesmerizing shot in the film is a prolonged three-minute shot of the human face. It's an intense close-up of Anna at a Wagner concert, and you know something momentous is happening to her. There's no way I can adequately describe it to you, other than as a merging that occurs as you watch Anna's emotions unfold. For that type of shot alone, I return to the movies again and again: to look and be carried away.—**TRUEMAN TAYLOR**

## IN PRINT

**THE BOOK: THE PRESENTATION OF SELF IN EVERYDAY LIFE, BY ERVING GOFFMAN**

¶ *What it's about:* The central idea of this classical work of sociology is that people are constantly engaged in a process of "impression management" to project a favorable view of themselves. We achieve this purpose by having a collective "definition of the situation," where all agree on an expected outcome defining how everyone should behave. The projected views and outcomes vary depending on the groups we interact with and the setting of the interaction.

*Why it's worthy:* In 1998, the International Sociological Association listed Goffman's book as the tenth most important sociology book of the twentieth century. What does sociology have to do with Zen practice? Remember this saying of Dogen: "To study the Buddha Way is to study the self; to study the self is to forget the self; to forget the self is to be actualized by myriad things." An aspect of the self is the persona, which Jung described as "a kind of mask, designed on the one hand to make a definite impression upon others, and on the other to conceal the true nature of the individual."



Goffman's work, in sum, aligns with Wright and Barkow, as well as the oft-quoted Shakespearean claim that "all the world's a stage." However, Dogen's observation suggests that, whatever the role(s) we play and how we play them, adherence to the truth in the presentation of ourselves in everyday life affects our practice.—**AMAURY CRUZ**

we are and can move in the direction of being either truthful or deceitful in a direct, personal way.

In *The Moral Animal*, Robert Wright posits that consciousness is largely "a press agent" singing our praises. Darwinian anthropologist Jerome Barkow similarly argues that the primary function of the self is impression management instead of decision-making, as is commonly believed.

Goffman uses the metaphor of theatrical performance as a framework for detailed analysis. He addresses the functions of setting, manner, front, backstage, and appearances, as used in the theater and replicated in social situations. Meticulous research covers the interaction of black Americans with the white ruling class in southern states, the use of status symbols in the Anglo-Saxon world during "performances" designed to establish claims regarding non-material values, and how public officials incorporate and exemplify the officially-accredited values of their societies purely for effect.

## ▷ SIGHTINGS

### PROGRESS REPORT

**SAFE ZONE TRAINING** As one of several diversity initiatives that are underway, the Zen Center will hold a Safe Zone training session for those who serve in leadership roles, including staff members, trustees, and residential trainees. Led by facilitators from Rochester's Out Alliance, the four-hour interactive workshop will focus on devel-



oping LGBTQ+ inclusive language skills, understanding the spectrum of sexual and gender identity, and finding other ways to cultivate an inclusive environment at the Center. Along with this training, the Center is taking other steps aimed at LGBTQ+ inclusivity, such as building an all-gender changing room and enhancing membership, sesshin, and training applications to include a question about gender pronouns.

Diversity coordinators Donna Kowal and Dene Redding have several other projects in progress. New books will be purchased for the library with the goal of creating a "Buddhism and Diversity" section, and plans are in motion for conducting another workshop on implicit bias and white privilege. While Dene and Donna have mainly been focusing on the Center's internal operations for the time being, their work will eventually spill over into wider Sangha and community engagement.—**DONNA KOWAL**

### SOCIAL DISTANCING

**WILLINGNESS, ACCEPTANCE, AND COVID-19** As this issue of *Zen Bow* goes to press (virtually, as a PDF), the Center is on lockdown. Sittings are continuing but for residents only, spaced wide apart in the zendo in assigned seats. Teishos and Dharma talks are available to members as podcasts, and phone calls and FaceTime have replaced traditional dokusan practice ("knee to knee and eyeball to eyeball" in the days before social distancing). The March sesshin has been cancelled, and decisions are yet to be made about upcoming Spring events such as Buddha's Birthday, the annual meeting, and the trustees' meeting.

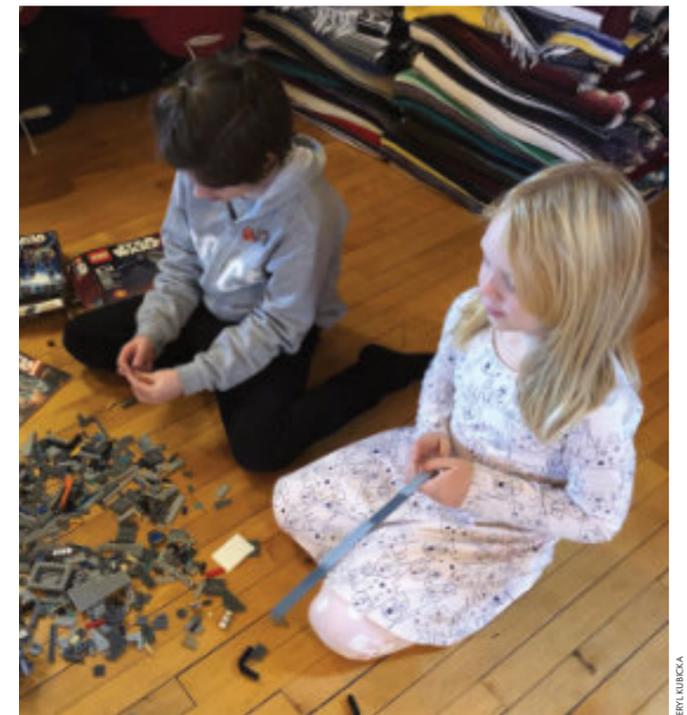
In times of uncertainty, it may help to remember the words of Marsha Linehan, the psychologist who developed DBT (Dialectical Behavioral Therapy) and a Zen practitioner:

*Radical acceptance rests on letting go of the illusion of control and a willingness to notice and accept things as they are right now, without judging.* Our willingness to see things as they are, to let go of judgment, and to be grateful for the advantages that we do have will go a long way towards getting us through this pandemic. Please remember that you can still tune in to streaming audio of any scheduled sitting, and that you can take advantage of dokusan and private instruction remotely.

For dokusan, formal students of Roshi may email him (bodhin@rzc.org) including their phone numbers and he will respond with a time that he will call. There's also an opportunity for private instruction with Eryl Kubicka (eryl.kubicka@gmail.com), John Pulleyn (john.pulleyn@gmail.com) or Trueman Taylor (cpt0628@gmail.com). If you're interested, send an email to any of them with your phone



CHRISTOPHER MALEY



ERYL KUBICKA

▲ The Youth and Family Program participants have been meeting regularly, either in the Center's library or in the Buddha Hall. Volunteer leaders are working with the children on Sundays when there are teishos so that parents may have two uninterrupted hours in the zendo. TOP: Hungry Ghosts invade the Buddha Hall with the help of some pint-sized artists. ABOVE: Free play with Legos in the Buddha Hall. Looking at all those little pieces makes us grateful for the hard work of the Youth Program leaders.

number to set up an appointment. Please also remember to get in at least 30 minutes of zazen if you can before dokusan or private instruction.—**CHRIS PULLEYN**