

SEVEN THUNDERS

newsletter

www.seventhunders.org

February 2022



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ZEN TEACHINGS FOR TIMES OF UNPRECEDENTED UNCERTAINTY

by Nelson Foster,
Guiding teacher, Ring of Bone Zendo,
Nevada City, CA

The following merges and modestly revises two talks I gave this November at Pālolo Zen Center in Honolulu. The title, which I cooked up with my successor there, Michael Kieran, names a subject with obvious and immediate personal relevance for us all and with emotional aspects that could usefully be explored in the context of sangha circle. My talks, however, were for the Dharma-study program that Honolulu Diamond Sangha holds each year, in memory of our late, beloved teacher, Robert Aitken Rōshi, and accordingly, my talks focused on the "Zen Teachings" part of our title.

That said, however, as a way to contextualize the study theme and the rest of my talks, I started by doing a rough inventory of the uncertainties that we're likely to be feeling these days. First of all come the perennial uncertainties, the ones clearly not unprecedented but still with us, as they have been for our ancestors through the centuries:

- The personal set of what-to-dos resulting from the ups and downs of life: health, housing, work, relationship, etc. Love blossoms, cancer strikes, a child suffers a terrible misfortune, you receive a promotion, the house next door is burgled...
- The social uncertainties that stem from the unexpected events we inevitably experience as members of societies: economic booms and busts, wars, plagues, fads, movements, great discoveries, etc.

Continued on page 10

Note from the Editor: Nelson Foster is one of the first of Aitken Rōshi's students asked to become a Zen teacher. He has been fulfilling that role at the Ring of Bone Zendo in northern California for more than three decades. After Aitken Rōshi's retirement, he also served as the lead teacher at the Palolo Zendo in Honolulu until Michael Kieran took over those responsibilities a few years ago. This long essay combines two talks he gave in December to our Diamond Sangha brothers and sisters in Hawaii. It considers what bringing our practice into our daily lives in an era like the one we're living through may entail. It speaks so clearly to the challenges we and all humanity are currently facing that Leonard and I, as newsletter editor, felt it would be valuable to share with all of you. ⚡

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SEVEN THUNDERS RETREATS & EVENTS

FIRST SATURDAY SITTINGS

Monthly "First Saturday" sittings have been transferred online until it is deemed safe to meet at the Trappist Abbey again. Up-to-date information and links to join the sitting can be found on the Seven Thunders website at seventhunders.org.

The format remains much the same, with formal group sitting beginning at 9:00 a.m. A talk by the teacher begins at 10:00 a.m., which is followed by opportunities for private interviews with the teacher. Formal sitting ends at noon. There is no charge, but donations for teacher support and Seven Thunders via the website are gratefully accepted. The schedule for the next 5 months is:

- February 5, Sr. Kathleen Pruitt, guest teacher.
- March 5, Leonard Marcel
- April 2, Leonard Marcel
- May 2, Leonard Marcel
- June 7, Ruben Habito, guest teacher.

SEVEN THUNDERS REGULAR SITTINGS

PORTLAND AREA SITTINGS

■ Monday evenings via Zoom (until further notice) at Stones and Clouds Zendo, 7:00 to 8:30 p.m., zazen & dokusan. Check seventhunders.org for details. Contact: Leonard Marcel at 503.636.9009 or marcellj@hotmail.com.

SALEM SITTINGS

■ For Salem Zen Center's online offerings, email for the Zoom links:

SalemZenCenter@gmail.com. Wednesday evening meditation & dharma talk from 7:00 to 8:00 p.m. and a Saturday morning meditation & poetry share from 7:30 to 8:30 a.m. ✨

RETREAT SCHEDULE

- April 9 & 10 – Palm Sunday CIR, led by Leonard Marcel. Registration information on page 7.
- April 23 – Bend Retreat, led by Leonard Marcel. More information on page 4.
- June 24 & 25 – June CIR. Teacher to be determined. Registration information on page 8.
- July 12 - 17 – Summer Sesshin, led by Leonard Marcel. Registration information on page 9.



OTHER PACIFIC NORTHWEST DIAMOND SANGHA GROUPS

PORTLAND SITTINGS

■ Ring of Moss Sangha. Zazen: Wednesday evenings, 7:00-8:30 and Sunday mornings, 7:30-8:30; virtually on Tuesday mornings, 6:00-7:00. Contact: teacher Andrew Mason at andrewmasonpdx@gmail.com. ✨

OLYMPIA SITTINGS

■ Monday evenings, 6:00 to 8:00 p.m., and every Saturday morning from 6:00 to 8:00 a.m. in the Chapel at St. Michael Church, 1021 Boundary St. SE, Olympia, WA 98501. Three rounds of sittings (from 6:00 to 7:30) are followed by a reading from contemplative writers and a questions and comments period. Contact: Pat Harvey, 360.357.8401 patriciamharvey@comcast.net ✨

NEWSLETTER SUBSCRIPTIONS

Published three times a year, our newsletter is a benefit of Seven Thunders membership. Prospective members who would like to receive the newsletter can be added to the mailing list by contacting Jenny Brausch at livinggreen@comcast.net. Complimentary copies will be sent for up to one year or until January dues requests are mailed. After that, if membership dues (full membership currently \$30 per year) are not received by March, you will be sent an announcements-only version of the newsletter. Please send membership dues to: Jenny Brausch, PO Box 3119, Albany, OR 97321. ✨

ZAZENKAI

Held at the Stones and Clouds (*Rai'un*) Zendo in Lake Oswego, led by Leonard Marcel. These will take place online until further notice. More details on page 6.

- February 19
- March 19
- September 17
- October 22 ✨

NO SANGHA, PORT ANGELES

■ Teacher: Kristen Larson. Zazen: Saturday mornings, 8:00 to 9:30 a.m. For more information, please contact Kristen Larson at 360.452.5534 or NOSangha@aol.com. ✨

THREE TREASURES SANGHA, SEATTLE

■ Teacher: Jack Duffy. Zazen at *Dharma Gate* (1910 24th Ave S.) on Wednesday evenings 6:30-8:30 p.m. and Friday mornings 6:30-7:30 a.m., followed by breakfast. For more information, please contact Larry Keil at 206.322.8759 or go to their website at: <http://three-treasures-sangha.org/> ✨



PRESIDENT’S COLUMN: HOPE IN THE NEW YEAR

by Ed Glad

After a year full of hope and anticipations that were only partially achieved thanks to the Delta and then Omicron variants, we open the new year with even more hope for an eventual return to being able to sit together in person. An additional challenge from the past year has been the need to find someone to take on the service Sr. Joan has long given to Seven Thunders now that she has retired. In November, we had the opportunity to interview one candidate who will be sitting with us on the first Saturday of February. Sr. Kathleen Pruitt is very excited to be able to join us that day and explore the possibility of becoming one of our regu-

lar teachers. Our invitation for February fit with her busy schedule, and it is a great relief to give Leonard a small break from the added duties he’s taken on since Sr. Joan’s retirement. As this new year progresses, we might see other visiting teachers sit with us and share their insights into the Christian contemplative practice.

The recommendation of Sr. Kathleen came from one of our board members who remembered her own profound experience during a retreat several years ago Sr. Kathleen had led. With a little internet detective work we were able to find and contact her

to see if she would be available and comfortable with our unique little group. As I have been reflecting on this process, I realized that many of our members might also remember a teacher or retreat leader who themselves may be worth inviting to an interview and perhaps a stand-in for Leonard in the First Saturday sequence. Should you have such an idea, I would love to pursue any suggestions.

Hope does spring eternal, especially standing in front of the woodstove on a subfreezing day. Here’s to a Happy New Year full of hope. ⚡

SEVEN THUNDERS MEMBERSHIP: TIME TO JOIN OR RENEW!

Seven Thunders is an organization formed to support growth towards a deepening spiritual awareness and appreciation of life. We believe each of us has a unique path and we benefit from teachers and companions along the Way.

Your membership is a vital part of this vibrant organization and a gift to all others in this faith community. Our practices support and sustain each other as we proceed on the path of an awakened and compassionate life.

If you haven’t already done so, now is the time to renew your Seven Thunders membership for 2022. If you have been receiving complimentary copies of the newsletter this past year, and have not yet joined Seven Thunders, this is the last full newsletter you will be receiving.

Full membership dues are only \$30 per calendar year. With your membership renewal, please also consider any additional donation to help support the offerings of Seven Thunders. ⚡

Name: _____

Address: _____

Phone: _____ email: _____

Membership Type:

- Full member (\$30 per person)
- I am unable to send money at this time, but am an active participant and wish to be a full member.
- I am pleased to include a donation of \$ _____

Total enclosed: \$ _____

Please make out your check to SEVEN THUNDERS and send it with this form to Seven Thunders Treasurer:

Jenny Brausch
 P.O. Box 3119
 Albany, OR 97321

Though payment by check is preferred, you may also go to SevenThunders.org/donate/ to renew your membership and/or make a donation utilizing a credit card. ⚡



JIM MAHER REMEMBRANCE

by Jaime Goldberg

James Leroy (Jim) Maher drew his last breath in the morning of October 20, 2021. He was 67 years old. A long time member and past president of Seven Thunders, Jim was a dedicated and steady practitioner of zen.

Jim arrived in Portland many years ago as a young FBI agent. Later he embarked on a career as a lawyer. Jim was involved in many important cases as he excelled in criminal prosecution, then labor and employment law. In his last few years as a lawyer, Jim practiced criminal defense. He emphasized that he was a "counselor", trying to help unfortunate people who had made a wrong turn (or turns) in life to become defendants in the criminal justice system.

Jim approached life with positive energy and enthusiasm. With a ready smile and a wry sense of humor, he often had a joke on the tip of his tongue. From his childhood in Chicago, he carried his love of family, friends, athletics, and music throughout his life. An accomplished drummer as a teenager, he later inspired high school students when he taught diverse topics from drumming to law at Valley Catholic High School near Portland. Jim was often the instigator of large gatherings with many diverse friends.

In 2014, after Jim was diagnosed with Lewy Body Dementia, he continued pursuing his passions. He began taking guitar lessons and he continued to run, meditate, and travel to concerts. Moments of fear arose as his abilities progressively dropped away, yet he refused to be angry or resentful and explained that he was grateful for the full life that he was given. Jim coped with his illness with dignity and grace, until his last breath.

Jim is survived by his wife, Sherrill, and many close relatives and friends who will always remember him. ⚡



BEND FALL 2021: FINDING A CENTER

by Joe Barrett

Meditation Retreat with Leonard Roshi, Bend, Oregon on October 9:

We met over Zoom
As the sun beat the gloom
We attempted to just sit
And observe

Without words or judgement
The impulses to move
Mind and body
Merged with stillness

Leanne's soft hand command
Organized the troops
As Denise and Rom deservedly
Spread wings traveling continents

Tom's watchful presence
Steady time clock
Removed us from the constraint
Of life in the usual maelstrom

I sat down to contemplate
As Leonard's voice
Dared to suggest another choice
In the midst of my usual clamor

Sage words of old
Mixed with stories so bold
I could barely control
The quiet excitement

I have come to respect
This effortless mess
And thank my fellow comrades
Sitting in silence

All of us having clear intentions
To connect
In this ancient way of healing
Finding a new center

Again and Again ⚡

BEND SPRING RETREAT

On April 23 from 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., Leonard Marcel will offer his usual Spring retreat for Bend Zen. This retreat will be given on Zoom, so it's open to practitioners anywhere – you don't have to be in Bend.

It will include sitting, two talks, phone interviews with Leonard, and a break for lunch.

For further information and registration, please contact Rom Roberts at 541.480.3377 or email him at romjiroberts@yahoo.com ⚡



FUNERAL HOMILY FOR BROTHER MARTIN

by Abbot Peter McCarthy, OCSO

Note: Brother Martin Gonzales passed away on August 29, 2021. He was born in 1925 in La Mesa, CA. He entered Guadalupe in 1952 and made his solemn profession in 1957. Brother Martin was 96 years old and had been in monastic vows for 67 years when the Lord called him. He was known to many Seven Thunders members as the welcoming face in the guesthouse at the Abbey.

“Abba Anthony said, our own life & our death is with our neighbor. If we gain our brother, if we gain our sister, we have gained our God.”

4th Century Saying of the Desert Fathers

During these days following our Br. Martin’s “Passing Over” we have received so many cards and testimonials from so many people who have been touched, who have been healed, through a personal encounter with him over his 67 years as a monk, many of those years in our guesthouse ministry. I found all the messages of deep gratitude summed up in a one sentence quote on one of these cards: “There are some who bring a light so vibrant to the world around them that even after they have gone the Light lingers.”

My question is, if this is true and I find it to be true both in our cloister hallways and in our community since his death: Why is Br. Martin so difficult to “homilize”? In all my 25 years as abbot I have never had such a difficult time with a funeral homily! As I was spending time in his private room and in his Guadalupe office searching for an articulation of this beloved monk, the answer to my question emerged as suddenly as a shaft of light in my heart. For Br. Martin, life’s meaning, faith, Gospel, healing, were never about articulation. Life-meaning, hope, Gospel were always about Presence. It is what Pope Francis calls the Spirituality of Encounter.

“Learn from me,” says Jesus in our Gospel this morning, “for I am meek and humble of heart.” To welcome another into Jesus’ real

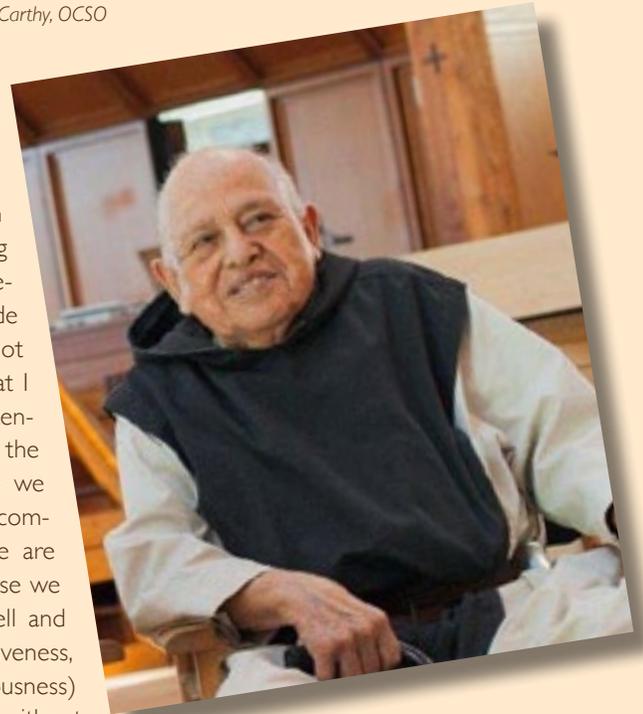
presence takes deep humility. On several occasions over the years, we have heard communication experts tell us that most human communications is 70% revealing and 30% concealing who we really are. I have always felt this made good practical sense and should not be surprising to anyone. It is what I would call an essentially human tension within us – because most of the time we don’t really know who we are. My personal experience in community (in family life) is that we are mostly a mystery not only to those we live with but to ourselves as well and this awareness creates the defensiveness, the distance (yes, the self-consciousness) between us. So we can live years without human-touch, without human-healing.

Br. Martin’s charism, which touched and healed so many of us was to LIVE this mystery as a friend, as a grace that connects us to the very human tension within the Incarnate Word of God (and therefore to each other.)

At that time Jesus answered:

I give you praise Father; for although
You have hidden these things from the
wise and learned, You have revealed them
to the childlike. No one knows the Son
except the Father; and no one knows
the Father except the Son and anyone
to whom the Son wishes to reveal him.
Come to me, all you who labor and are
burdened, and I will give you rest.

For our beloved Br. Martin, happiness was to be truly at rest in himself and therefore attentive to the world around him (Yes. The entire World!). Presence touched him deeply, whether a chance encounter in the Porter’s Lodge after Mass, or at an AA Meeting; or often at his own community’s Eucharist or discussions. Presence, wherever he encountered it, brought him home to the Mystery that unites us all as the family of Jesus, as brothers and sisters. The Answer to his life



was not in words, not in judgements, not in good feelings; the Answer to his life was Presence.

I know this happiness is provisional
the looming presences –
great sufferings – great fears
withdraw only into peripheral vision

But ineluctable this shimmering
Of wind in the blue leaves:
The flood of stillness
Widening the Lake of the Sky:
This need to dance
This need to kneel
This Mystery.

“Of Being” by Denise Levertov

Our beloved Br. Martin had me wondering: is it not the very ministry of our beloved brothers and sisters who have loved us and who have “crossed over” through the Dark Mystery of death – is it not their continued and evermore vivid Presence which reminds us day by day – of that priceless pearl hidden in the field? Do they not tenderly remind us of the deeper presence within each of our lives? Yes, they remind us of our lives, just as they are – pregnant with the Word of God – pregnant with Eucharist.



ROHATSU 2021

by Jane Scott

Covid separated us, but Rohatsu gathered us up and wove us tightly together with zazen, kinhin, teisho, sosan, sutras, struggling with pain, thinking we can do better... and doing better when we stopped thinking.

Between December 2 and 5, 2021, the virtual 16-strong (plus several fur babies) Seven Thunders Rohatsu sesshin beamed out from our Stones & Clouds 'home zendo' to Australia, England, California, Washington, Oregon and Virginia under the exacting, loving care and expertise of Leonard and Teresa. They led, timed, counseled, taught, encouraged and graced us with beatific smiles post-Rohatsu when an exuberant feeling of "we did it" was universal and palpable.

Knowing Dan Dickinson was there to reel us back into the Seven Thunders pod if we got lost in cyberspace was a big comfort. Greg Smith's dharma talk about the Four Brahmavharas was impressive, both scholarly and accessible, and Roshi Leonards' elucidation of cases from the *Mumonkan* and *Shoyoroku*,

plunged us into the very heart of not knowing.

Each of us sat in our own zendo, but we moved through time and space as a unit and drew strength from one another. The form of retreat had shifted, but the discipline and practice endured, deep and rich.

We also benefited enormously from the generous support of those in our households who were not doing sesshin with us. They made our participation possible.

After Rohatsu ended, I was sure exhaustion and physical pain would soon lead me into a deep sleep. But for hours I remained open-eyed with wonder, reveling in the Now of each discrete yet interconnected moment, the mote and the mountain, the vanishing and the eternal... all buzzing with challenge, possibility, joy, power and the intimacy of "not knowing." ✨

UPCOMING ZAZENKAI

Zazenkai are an opportunity for intense practice with the Sangha in a shorter time-frame than either a Kosesshin or a Sesshin, as they are limited to one day only.

Zazenkai for the next six months will be as follows:

- February 19
- March 19
- September 17
- October 22.

These will continue to be held via Zoom for the foreseeable future until it is safe to return to in-person events.

Zazenkai take place from 9 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. In addition to formal zazen, the day includes a sutra service, teisho, and dokusan.

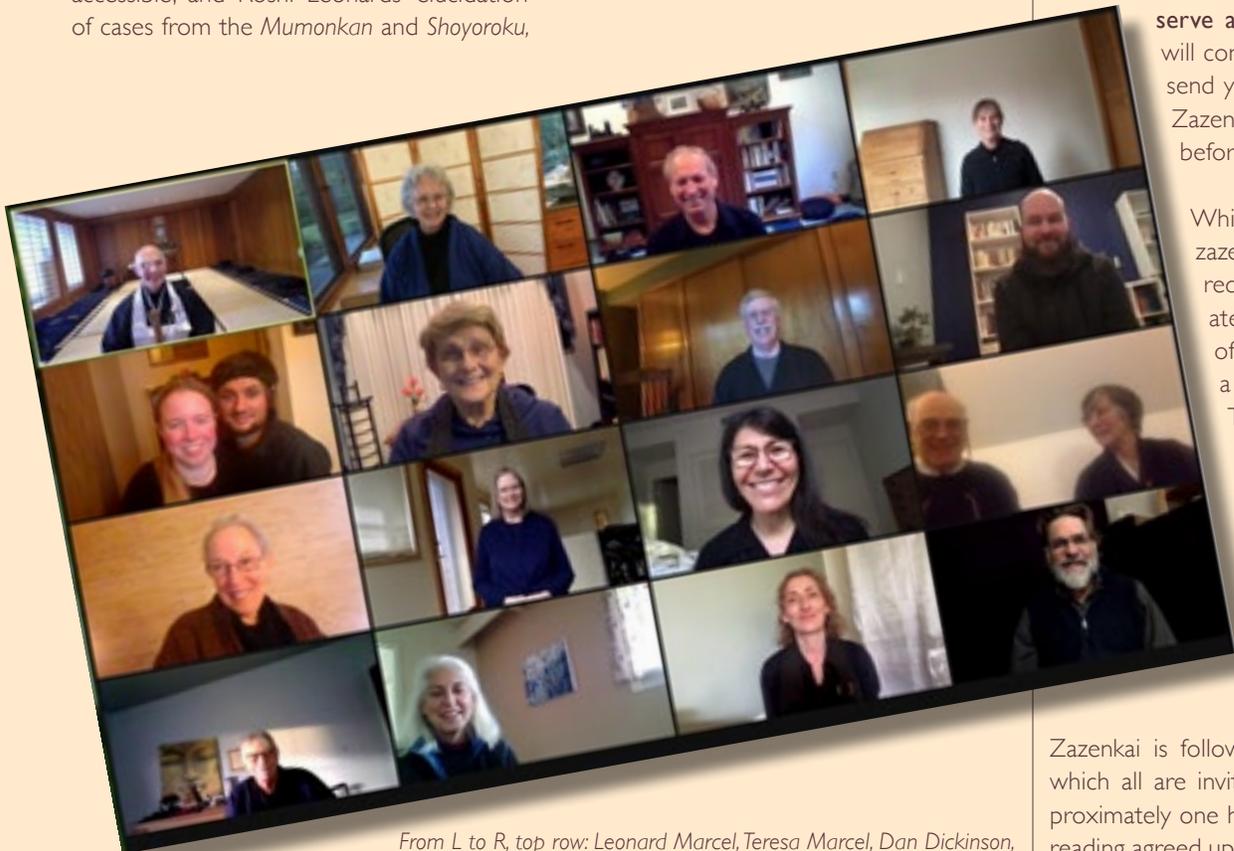
Please contact **Teresa Marcel** at tdmarcel@mac.com or 503.636.9009 to **reserve a place for Zazenkai**. She will confirm your reservation and send you a Zoom link as well as Zazenkai guidelines a few days before the event.

While there is no set fee for zazenkai, a **donation of \$20** is requested and much appreciated to help cover costs. To offer a donation, please send a check to Seven Thunders Treasurer:

Jenny Brausch
PO Box 3119
Albany, OR 97321

Checks should be made out to "Seven Thunders."

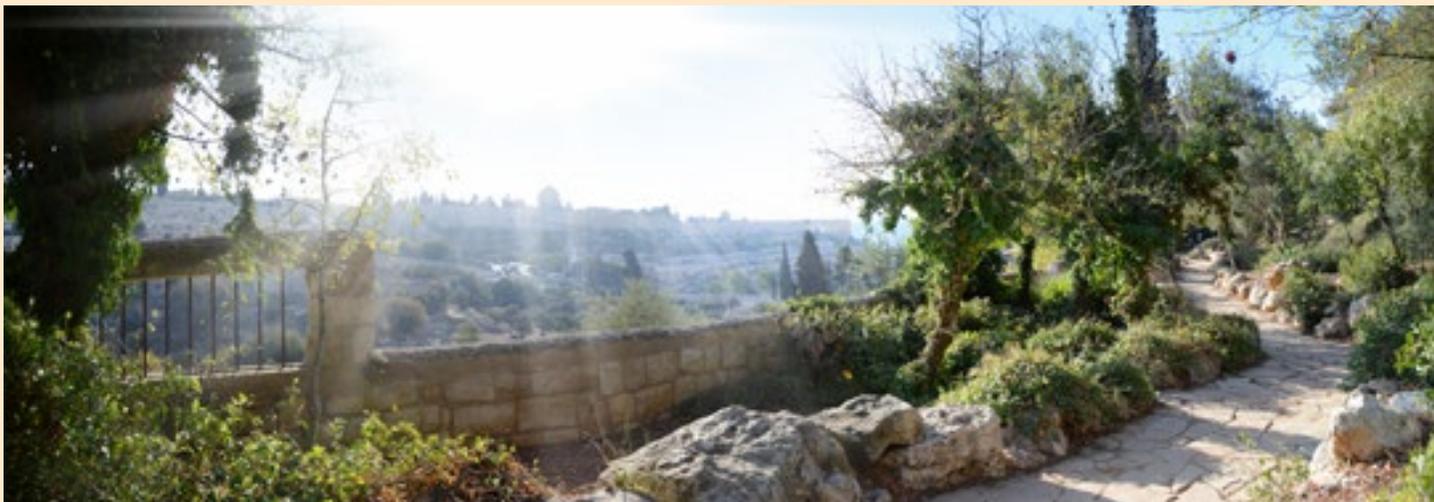
Zazenkai is followed by a study group, to which all are invited. Study group lasts approximately one hour and is centered on a reading agreed upon at the end of the previous meeting. ✨



From L to R, top row: Leonard Marcel, Teresa Marcel, Dan Dickinson, Pam Evans. Second row: Kailyn Kent & Josh Shindler, Katy Bain, Greg Smith, Jared Taylor. Third row: Jane Scott, Lisa Rosser, Lisa Kochinski, Edward Lams & Marian Morgan. Bottom row: Nick Coffey, Nancy Roberts, Emma Stone, Paul Birkeland.



PALM SUNDAY CONTEMPLATIVE INTENSIVE RETREAT (CIR) – APRIL 9 & 10, 2022



Above: Approaching Jerusalem.

The 2022 Palm Sunday CIR will be held virtually via Zoom, starting at 9 a.m. on Saturday April 9 and end at 5 p.m. on Sunday, April 10. Timed with Palm Sunday, it is an opportunity to deepen our contemplative practice by sitting intimately in preparation for Holy Week. Leonard Marcel will lead our retreat, sit with us, present a talk and offer interviews. He has studied both Zen and Christian Contemplation for more than 35 years and has been teaching since 1996.

The retreat will take place from 9:00 a.m. to 9:00 p.m. on Saturday, and 9:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. on Sunday. You will sit in your own space, access the retreat via Zoom on your own device and provide your own meals.

Once your registration has been received and accepted, you will be sent a link for the retreat as well as a PDF containing the retreat schedule and all retreat prayers.

The retreat is open to a maximum of 15 attendees, and the total fee is \$75 for Seven Thunders members, \$105 for non-members. Please notify registrar Teresa Marcel at tdmarcel@mac.com of your intention to attend this retreat. You may then register by sending your check to:

Teresa Marcel
1333 Skyland Dr
Lake Oswego, OR 97034

Please make out checks to SEVEN THUNDERS. Or, you may pay the fee online at SevenThunders.org (click on the 'Contribute' tab and follow the donation process).

Fees are payable in full to confirm your registration. Should you need to cancel, all but \$30 will be refunded for cancellation requests received by retreat registrar on or before March 26; half the fee (\$38/\$53) will be refunded if received by April 3; no refund in the last week before the retreat. Partial scholarships are available to Seven Thunders members. Registrations will be made in the order received by registrar. ⚡

REGISTRATION FORM

PALM SUNDAY CONTEMPLATIVE INTENSIVE RETREAT (CIR) APRIL 9 & 10, 2022

Name: _____

Full payment of \$105 enclosed

Address: _____

\$75 (Seven Thunders members)

Phone: _____ Email: _____

Donation for Scholarships \$ _____

Special needs _____

Request a Scholarship of \$ _____

I commit to participating fully in the entire schedule of formal group contemplation.



VIRTUAL CONTEMPLATIVE INTENSIVE RETREAT (CIR) JUNE 24 & 25, 2022

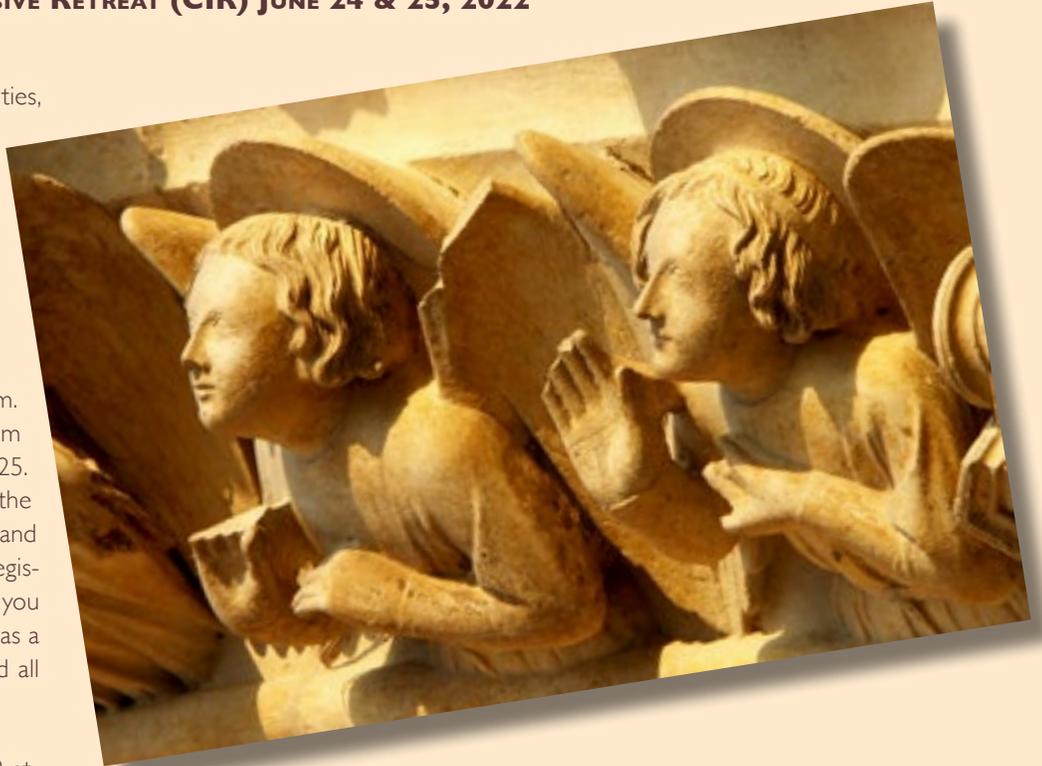
As have all other Seven Thunders activities, the Contemplative Intensive Retreat (CIR) usually held at Our Lady of Guadalupe Trappist Abbey in June has been changed to a virtual retreat on Zoom.

The teacher is yet to be determined, and will be announced at a future date.

The retreat will take place from 8:45 a.m. to 9:00 p.m. on Friday, June 24, and from 9:00 am to 5:00 p.m. on Saturday, June 25. You will sit in your own space, access the retreat via Zoom on your own device and provide your own meals. Once your registration has been received and accepted, you will be sent a link for the retreat as well as a PDF containing the retreat schedule and all retreat prayers.

The retreat is open to a maximum of 12 attendees, and the total fee is \$75 for Seven Thunders members, \$105 for non-members. Please notify registrar Jenny Brausch at livinggreen@comcast.net of your intention to attend this retreat. You may then register by sending your check to:

Jenny Brausch,
P.O. Box 3119
Albany OR 97321



Or, you may pay the fee online at seventhunders.org (click on the 'Contribute' tab and follow the donation process, leaving a note in the last window saying that this is your CIR fee payment.)

Fees are payable in full to confirm your registration. Should you need to cancel, all but \$30 will be refunded for cancellation requests received by retreat registrar on or before June 10; half the fee (\$38/\$53) will be

refunded if received by June 17; no refund in the last week before the retreat. Partial scholarships are available to Seven Thunders members. Registrations will be made in the order received by registrar. ⚡

**REGISTRATION FORM
CONTEMPLATIVE INTENSIVE RETREAT (CIR) JUNE 24 & 25, 2022**

Name: _____

Address: _____

Phone: _____ Email: _____

Special needs _____

Full payment of \$105 enclosed

\$75 (Seven Thunders members)

Donation for Scholarships \$ _____

Request a Scholarship of \$ _____

I commit to participating fully in the entire schedule of formal group contemplation.



HYBRID SUMMER SESSHIN AT STONES AND CLOUDS ZENDO JULY 12 - 16, 2022



The 2022 Seven Thunders Zen Summer Sesshin, led by Leonard Marcel, is tentatively planned as a **hybrid event** to take place from 7 p.m. Tuesday evening, July 12 to 10 a.m. Saturday morning, July 16. This arrangement involves a maximum of 7 attendees in the zendo, and 9 online, via Zoom, all following the full in-person sesshin schedule (6 a.m. to 9 p.m. on full days).

This plan will be reassessed in June to determine if it is a safe option. If it is decided it is not safe, the retreat will be held fully online and the schedule changed to 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. on full sesshin days.

To attend sesshin at the Stones & Clouds zendo you will have to be fully vaccinated for Covid-19 and be in good health. If attending via Zoom, you will sit in your own space, access the retreat on your own device and provide your own meals. The fee for in-person attendance is \$210 for members, \$240 for non members, and includes all meals from Tuesday evening to Saturday breakfast. For online attendance, the fee is \$130 for members, \$160 for non-members.

The extra \$30 of the non-member fee can be applied to your Seven Thunders membership, should you choose to do so, which then qualifies you for the member rate for all other Seven Thunders regular retreats

and sesshin through the remainder of the calendar year. Registration deadline is June 21. Should you need to cancel, all but \$30 will be refunded for cancellation requests received by the retreat coordinator on or before June 28; half the fee will be refunded if received by July 5; no refund in the last week before the retreat.

Registrations will be accepted on a first come basis. As this sesshin is usually well subscribed, early registration and payment is encouraged. Part-time attendance may be possible as schedules permit.

Once your registration has been received and accepted, you will receive a confirmation from the registrar. If for any reason you find the full fee a barrier to attending, please check the box on the registration

form requesting a "scholarship" or contact the registrar. Affordability need not be a deterrent to attendance. Full or partial scholarships are almost always available. Donations for such scholarships are both appreciated and tax-deductible.

Silence will be observed in the zendo. For those attending online, please make every attempt to maintain silence to the extent possible, as your circumstances permit.

To register for the retreat, please email registrar at tdmarcel@mac.com to signal your intent to attend, and then complete the form below and send it with your fee to:

Teresa Marcel
1333 Skyland Drive
Lake Oswego, OR 97034.

Please make checks payable to **Seven Thunders**. Alternatively, you may pay the fee online at SevenThunders.org (click on the 'Contribute' tab and follow the donation process).

Questions? Please contact Teresa Marcel at 503.636.9009 or tdmarcel@mac.com ⚡

REGISTRATION FORM
STONES & CLOUDS SUMMER SESSHIN, JULY 12 - 16, 2022

Name: _____
Address: _____
Phone: _____ Email: _____
Emergency contact name & Phone: _____

- I would like to **attend in person**, and enclose full payment of \$210 (the member rate).
- I would like to **attend in person**, and enclose \$240.
 please apply \$30 to my Seven Thunders member dues.
- I would like to **attend online** and enclose full payment of \$130 (the member rate).
- I would like to **attend online** and enclose \$160.
 please apply \$30 to my Seven Thunders member dues.
- I request a scholarship of \$ _____
- I enclose a donation of \$ _____

Please make checks payable to Seven Thunders



ZEN TEACHINGS FOR TIMES OF UNPRECEDENTED UNCERTAINTY, *continued from page 1*

- The sublime uncertainties, such mysteries as “Who am I?” “What is this?” “Why did it happen to me?” “What becomes of us when we die?” and “Why do pigs have wings?”

Beyond those lie uncertainties arising out of these times in particular, the ones that Michael and I had especially on our minds as we sketched out our topic. These usually have both large- and small-scale dimensions, both public and personal aspects:

- Pandemic-related uncertainties. What will its near-term impact be on travel, the economy (tourism, supply chains, construction, etc.), work, schooling, health care systems, childcare, personal health and safety, social contacts? What about long-term impacts? Will even better vaccines be developed? Will vaccine resistance prolong the pandemic into perpetuity? Will there be endless new variants? If so, will they be managed so they're on a par with seasonal flu? What about the pandemic's population impact, political fallout, etc.? More personally, am I being careful enough? How should we adjust for it at the zendo?

- Environment-related uncertainties. These I lumped into two sub-groups:

- Effects of climate change: What trajectory will the world's weather follow? What extreme incidents will occur? Where? What will the effects be – economic crisis, climate refugees? Which mitigation strategies would be best? How effective will they be? How shall we take part in creating change, and how much

time, energy, and money shall we devote to these efforts? Is it important for me to change my personal habits? If so, how shall I alter them? Shall we have kids? Shall I stop flying? Local uncertainties differ, of course. For Hawai'i, leading questions are about increased frequency or strength of hurricanes, “rain bombs,” and drought; about the extent of sea-level rise, resulting erosion and salt-water intrusion in the water table; about disruptions of the economy, especially tourism, and the security of crucial imports—fuel, food, building materials. How serious will these get, and what impact will they have on us?

- Consequences of population growth and rising standards of living: Will the depletion of wildlife populations continue to accelerate? What further extinctions will occur, and what will their impact be on the intricately networked web of life? How will increasing human demand affect the availability of food, building supplies, and the non-renewable materials such as cobalt and lithium required in manufacturing of cell phones, computers, batteries, and many other modern devices? What hardships and social unrest will occur as a result? Wars? Increased viral transfer from other animals?

- Technology-related uncertainties. With innovations occurring fast and often, some of them very powerful, how shall we assess their potential benefits and dangers to us personally, to society, and to the ten thousand things? How are digital technologies affecting the ways we learn and relate?

Can we trust corporations, government agencies, watchdog groups, and experts to provide adequate protection from deleterious effects? What constraints, if any, do we need to place on cutting-edge technologies such as gene splicing, 3-D printing, artificial intelligence? Which of these constraints should we adopt as a matter of law? Which should we implement personally or as households? Then there are such infernal practical problems posed by advanced technologies as “How do you use this gizmo?” and “Is there anywhere I can get this fixed?”

- Media-related uncertainties. With the proliferation of both information and disinformation sources, how shall I get the news? Which sources should I trust? Should I keep tabs on other media outlets to understand what they're dishing out? Local news sources having declined, how do I stay abreast of what's going on at home? Can we promote a shared understanding of facts while also protecting free speech? Are digital media causing social fragmentation? Do we need to police the internet? Can it be effectively done?

- Governance-related uncertainties. With partisanship strong and poised to get even stronger, is democracy itself at risk? Will democratic institutions be able to function effectively at the national and state levels or even locally? Are they capable of correcting historic inequities in our society? Will political convictions so badly skew judicial appointments and court rulings that justice goes out the window? Can cops be trusted? Will elections be fairly administered? Are we heading for civil unrest or outright conflict?

- Uncertainties in the international realm. This too could be a very long list, but perhaps it will suffice to mention a few of the more conspicuous areas of tension in U.S. relations: N. Korea, Iran, China, Russia.... What problems will our tensions with these countries create militarily, economically, or through





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overt and covert interference in U.S. affairs? And let's not overlook the ruinous impact that U.S.-led and -sponsored actions have had upon other nations. What will their consequences be? And how will all that feed back into other uncertainties? Will the United Nations, the World Health Organization, the International Criminal Court, and other global institutions stand up to the increasing pressures created by current conditions?

This catalogue, lengthy as it is, undoubtedly fails to name every uncertainty afoot these days. I mean, who's going to win the ...? [Enter your preferred championship or other contest here.] Folks attending the talks in Honolulu didn't think I'd left out any critical source of uncertainty, but there was one more that I felt important to acknowledge – namely, our relative inexperience with uncertainty. At least until now, even less privileged citizens of the United States have had to cope with less uncertainty than citizens of many other nations do today and much less than people typically did historically. Having lived during a relatively stable period in a relatively stable, very affluent and powerful country, most of us are used to dependable water and power, solvent banks, well-stocked supermarkets, ready access to medical care, orderly elections, safe housing, secure borders, good roads. Few of us know the anxieties of living month after month under conditions such as those that many millions of people are enduring now in Afghanistan, Lebanon, Pakistan, India, Brazil, much of Africa, and elsewhere. For us, that makes these times of unprecedented uncertainty feel extra unprecedented.

So much uncertainty brings with it feelings of vulnerability, of precariousness. How do we cope? What does our ancient, utterly low-tech tradition have to offer by way of support and guidance as we come up against these conditions? What direction does it suggest in responding to the needs of others, human and not just human, with whom we share the planet?

Well, lots of things, I think, but first of all a good story. Included in the *Entangling Vines* koan collection; it concerns an encounter between the prominent poet, government official, and Chan layman Po Chu-i and a master known as Tao-lin, Bird Nest, because in his latter years he roosted in a pine tree, living, practicing, apparently even teaching from his perch:

Po Chu-i questioned Bird Nest Ho-shang, saying, "The Chan master's sitting place is extremely dangerous." "This old monk lives in extreme danger," agreed Bird Nest. "The high official's danger is even more extreme." "Your disciple's position is to protect the country," said Po Chu-i. "What's the danger of that?" "Fuel and fire attract one another; the intellect doesn't quit," Bird Nest replied. "There's nothing as dangerous as that!"

This reflects the classical Buddhist teaching that "sensory contact" (Skt., *sparsha*; Pali, *phassa*), the sixth link in the twelvefold chain of causation, makes life in the world, particularly a secular life, inherently dangerous. The "fire" of delusive passion and the "fuel" of worldly things inevitably come into contact; they meet and ignite. Bird Nest Ho-shang doesn't deny the hazards of sitting where he does but points out to his visitor that his circumstances are actually more precarious.

I cite this as a reminder that our tradition hasn't presented safety as an option; practice, even in a tree, can't be a refuge in that sense. Historically speaking, Chan and Zen developed in medieval times, when rebellions, persecutions, droughts, famines, and other upheavals were by no means rare.



Teachers, lineages, and temples underwent sudden reversals of fortune as they fell in and out of favor with rulers and other patrons. Hardships and uncertainties have always been features of the path.

It seems unsurprising, then, that practice and realization bring us tools and perspectives that will be helpful as we negotiate our current stretch of the path, rife with its distinctive perils and uncertainties. Perhaps the most basic and most necessary contribution practice makes to us is grounding. If zazen can be said to have a direction, it's down. Sitting still, keying practice to the breath, to the flexing and relaxing of the diaphragm, we sink into the gut, the hara. We settle down, out of the busyness of our brains.

This precipitates a sort of homecoming to immediate phenomena: to breath itself and to taste, touch, sounds, things. We come down to earth, so to speak, out of the clouds. We become more attuned to the bodily, the palpable. To this – just plain this, as it is, nothing added. We find some measure of relief or ease in simply settling down, settling where we are.

Of course, our tradition has long taught and extolled the Dharma of this. The kotsu I took for these talks, inscribed by Yamada Rōshi, reads, "The dharma of the king of the dharma is just this!" It's a quotation from a koan, and I could cite lots more along the same lines. This occasion being the Robert



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Aitken Memorial Dharma Study Program, though, instead I decided on one of the Old Boss's teachings on the subject, from a chapter of his first book, *A Zen Wave*. He credits a contemporary poem by the title of "That" as his inspiration for the chapter, but unquestionably it's about this, beginning with a haiku by Bashō:

In the morning dew,
Dirtied, cool,
A muddy melon.

There! A poem perfectly chosen to make his point, but leaf through the book and it may occur to you that Rōshi could have picked virtually any of Bashō's haiku to exemplify this, including the famous one featured in his first chapter:

The old pond;
A frog jumps in—
The sound of the water.

Again, there! Just the bare fact, nothing about it. Rōshi underscores the potential impact of a just-this experience with a responding haiku by the master Sengai:

The old pond;
Bashō jumps in—
The sound of the water.

Frog? Bashō? More likely just that resounding guh-lump! Such experiences may bring a turning point in practice, triggering realization, and some who've studied Bashō, including Rōshi and evidently Sengai, consider this the splash that awakened Bashō.

Whether or not it brings awakening, experience of this sort has real consequences. Most relevant to our topic is that it puts one in touch with a species of certainty in no way opposed to uncertainty but important as a complement to it. This always shows up in particulars: as a cool melon, speckled with dirt, as the inimitable kerplunk of that old pond, as your sole meeting the wooden floor. We feel the indubitable reality and virtue of this. Such contact is wonderful, not to be feared. To the contrary, it rein-

forces the grounding we find in our own zazen and in absorbed functioning of other sorts.

And the more grounded we become, not just in zazen but in other activities, the easier it becomes to recognize the thoughts and feelings that bubble up out of fear, fantasy, supposition, and the like – a useful ability anytime and especially critical now. Clarity of perception will be a much-needed asset in facing such a welter of uncertainties, necessary to read our situation with reasonable accuracy and to discern what responses it calls for.

Grounding also promotes steadiness, another critical asset in negotiating unfamiliar and shifting terrain. We don't become, presto, as unshakeable as Buddha under the bodhi tree in the face of Māra's attacks nor as immovable amid the flames as Fudō Myō-ō, but we get a taste of that at least – and a taste for it. A virtuous circle takes shape: since it feels good to feel settled, we aspire to settle more (and in more situations), and we grow increasingly aware of the times and places where we feel unsettled, and so on. Like this, steadiness imperceptibly grows.

I don't mean to paint an idealized picture here. These effects vary from person to person as well as with circumstances. Jarring events and strong emotions may still throw us off balance, but even the flightiest of us, if we persevere in our practice, will become less flighty. We develop a sort of ballast like those little Bodhidharma toys. Though they tip over, they immediately and always right themselves. "Seven times down, eight times up," as the old Zen saying goes. All of us are going to need such resilience in years ahead.



Alongside these developments, with practice and realization a subtle shift begins in how one relates to others. Often it begins with others typically regarded as inanimate – the wall you face in zazen, the chopsticks in your hand, the growl of a distant jet, water glittering as it runs into the sink. Just so. Perhaps only for the briefest moment, any differences between It and Me fall away, and the other isn't other at all. Aitken Rōshi liked to call this experience intimacy. To the degree that it erodes the sense of the other's differentness from me, naturally it also erodes the sense of my differentness from the other, too, a change that can alter our priorities big time. Looking out for Number One becomes another matter when Number One is properly confused with the ten thousand things.

Such intimacy is not the least abstract, not some woo-woo, fancy notion of oneness but a concrete, day-to-day, thoughtless familiarity and identification with things that had seemed 'out there.' The conventional lines separating me from not-me, outside from inside, inanimate from animate, and so on seem increasingly weird and uncertain in a happy way. We wind up with an enlarged sense of sangha, a limitless sense of sangha, really. Another of Rōshi's favorite literary allusions comes to mind – Whitman's "I am large; I contain multitudes." This naturally leads as well to an expanded sense of responsibility to and for the myriad sangha members.



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That, of course, can feel heavy, oppressive. How can anyone bear responsibility of such a magnitude? Fortunately, as Me grows more porous, less defined, it also grows light or lighter, at least. To the degree that one sees through the capital-S Self, it becomes difficult to take oneself as seriously as in the past. The self seems more and more a remarkable, surprising byproduct of lifelong happenstance, not a private accomplishment and definitely not the “self-made” person described in certain fictions, novelistic and political. Genetic endowments and personal history lend Me – your Me as well as mine – specific features and capacities, to be sure, but we become less apt to pride ourselves on them. Recognizing them as constituting a me that’s truly not me enables us to wear our bodies, minds, failures, and achievements more unselfconsciously, thus lightly. We’re form, alright, and empty. And what’s lighter than emptiness? Here oldtimers may recall another of Aitken Rōshi chestnuts, G. K. Chesterton’s aphorism “Angels can fly because they ... take themselves lightly.” Ah, yes!

This lightening up tends to produce a rather unusual combination of characteristics in a mature student of the tao: personal levity coupled with profound groundedness and steadiness. I couldn’t have expressed it that way at the time, but that’s the impression Yamada Rōshi made on me when we met in 1973 – great weightiness complemented by a truly Hotei-like belly laugh rare in my experience among cultivated Japanese of his generation. Gravitas plus levitas! That’s a good combination in anyone living anytime and a sure boon in times of great uncertainty.

It’s not one confined to Zen people, luckily. Spend a little time with Wendell Berry, and you see him manifest it abundantly. Utterly serious as he is about the fix we’ve gotten ourselves and other beings into, the man loves to laugh and does so often, and he refuses to let problems dominate his social interactions, rejecting

repeated rounds of what he calls the “ain’t-it-awful” conversation. Awful as things are, all the more we need to enjoy the beautiful, the wondrous, and definitely the humorous. Being deadly serious all the time won’t do anyone or anything any good.

Please don’t understand this either as encouragement to feign jolliness when you feel despair or as a statement that gloominess is somehow wrong, proof that you’re a bad Buddhist. Nonsense. We don’t come to practice to engage in pretense. Pretending one thing while feeling another is, to adopt the classic phrase, “putting another head on top of your own.” Despair is a dharma deserving our respect as much as any other, not wrong or right, born naturally out of causes and conditions, a challenge to allow, see into, and perhaps even learn from. As a sangha, I hope, we can hold despair as such, whoever may be feeling it, not attempting to talk ourselves or anyone else out of it.

The not-right part of despair may be as important to remember as the not-wrong. The uncertainties that we face surely give us cause for grave concern, but that doesn’t make despair correct. You might feel it’s the only appropriate emotion for our circumstances. And when you feel it, you

may believe that others should feel it, too. Okay. Feel that, as it is, free of correctness and error both.

When Michael and I were discussing this program, he sprang a question on me in true Michael fashion: “Nelson, what’s your teaching on hope?” It actually had never occurred to me that I had, or might need to have, a teaching on hope. Now that I have one, I’m afraid it sounds an awful lot like my teaching on despair: a dharma deserving our respect, not wrong or right, born naturally out of causes and conditions. It’s more pleasant to feel than despair is, perhaps for that reason a bit more challenging to see into and learn from. Some people definitely seem to consider it the emotion du jour, the emotion we should all have, the one that will spur us to act. Okay. Again, I’d say, feel that, as such, free of correctness and error. Hope and despair alike are fine as such, only pitfalls if we stick there or get stuck there.

But I discovered another piece to my newfound teaching on hope, one that my dear old mother contributed a very long time





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ago: "Hope springs eternal." True, she usually declared it ironically, after asking if I'd brushed my teeth or completed a chore, and I won't claim to know anything about eternity, but in at least some of us, including me, hope does seem to bubble forth as if from some inexhaustible wellspring. Rarely do I experience it these days as a grand sort of hope, a hope that some wonderful outcome will be achieved, brought by news of a positive turn in human affairs; it more often corresponds to something simple – a leaf looping through the air, a patch of moss with its fronds raised in response to rain, the unexpected and resonant dong of a kitchen spoon striking a steel bowl, a pair of gray squirrels chasing through the trees. It's a lift in my spirits, a sense of unrealized possibility, more a hopefulness than a specific hope. Although I don't know where it comes from, I associate it with my practice and think I observe it in fellow sangha members, too.

I'm quite content not to know what it is or why it comes when it does or whether it truly derives from practice or if my perception that it enlivens other sitters, too, is accurate – and that brings me to a more certain benefit of practice and realization: an ease with not knowing that's likely to be important in times ahead. In the literal, usual sense, not knowing pretty well defines uncertainty. We don't know either what's going to happen or what we should do about it; we're uncertain on both fronts. As I acknowledged earlier, a high degree of such uncertainty, such not knowing, tends to breed feelings of precariousness, vulnerability, and anxiety. Let's call this not knowing Type One.

A danger of such uncertainty is that it creates a vulnerability to illusions of certainty. We see this all around the world at present: politicians vociferously asserting their views as gospel truth, their solutions as the Only Means to remedy our problems, and themselves, of course, as saviors. A warning the psychologist James Hillman issued years ago seems worth remembering today: "Absolute certainty, utter conviction – these ...



are signs of the demonic." I wouldn't put it exactly that way myself, but surely this isn't the sort of certainty to seek or trust as an antidote to not knowing Type One.

Not knowing of Type Two brings people to practice and holds us into it when the going gets tough. This is one of the well-known Three Requisites of Zen, usually translated "great ball of doubt." A dictionary specific to the era when this term appeared in a Chan text defines it more broadly: first, to "be uncertain about, have doubts" and second, to "wonder whether...; wonder if one might..." It's uncertainty of the existential sort – a profound curiosity about the self, about buddha-nature, about birth and death that motivates and drives practice. In dokusan, it frequently takes the form of frustration, especially when a student is working on a first koan. "I don't know what Mu is!" the student bursts out. "I don't even know how to work with it, and I don't know what I'm supposed to do here in dokusan either!" In the throes of such uncertainty, it's hard to see any virtue in it, but resolving Mu or another such koan is impossible without it.

I respond along these lines: "That's right! You don't know. You're walking in the dark. But that's not a problem. In fact, that's ex-

actly the path. Not knowing is the way, not an error or obstacle or failure. Plunge into it as fully as you can from moment to moment." The late Korean master Seung Sahn made not knowing his signature teaching, telling students again and again, "Only don't know!" This instruction was by no means novel. Pai-chang quotes his teacher Ma-tsu saying, "Be like someone lost, unable to tell your whereabouts."

What's so great about getting lost? Why would one knowingly take up a path into the unknown? For thrills, chills, and adventure? Probably not. Zen practice is an adventure, alright, but its thrills and chills are too few, too mild, and too far between to tantalize a thrill-seeker or anyone else seeking excitement. The unknown, however, is where discoveries occur. Certainty tends to close one's mind; why go exploring what you already know? Not knowing, on the other hand, opens our minds to possibilities beyond anything we expect or can even imagine.

Sooner or later, the process of practice brings us to a third, very different understanding and variety of not knowing. Associated with maturity in the way, Type Three surfaces in koan study repeatedly. In the initial case of the Blue Cliff Record, no less prominent a personage than Bodhidharma



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answers "I don't know" when asked who he is. In the *Record of Ease*, case 20, the master Ti-tsang turns Fa-yen around with the words "Not knowing is most intimate." The Five Ranks of Tung-shan, examined near the conclusion of koan study in the Diamond Sangha, close with the couplet "In the Kalpa of Emptiness, no one knows; / why go south to consult the fifty-three sages?"

Zen embraces not knowing of Type Three as wise, fruitful, delightful. Among the classic sayings in Zen phrase books is this charming specimen: "Want to ask where flowers come from? The Lord of the East doesn't know either." No, even the Lord of the East, deity of springtime, doesn't know where the flowers come from. Such things rightly belong in the realm of mystery, a realm in which the ancestral masters made themselves wholly at home. Listen to old Lin-chi:

Followers of the way, what's left for a great person to doubt? The activity of the moment – whose is that? Taking up, putting to use, and never naming; we call this the mysterious principle. Reach such understanding, and there's nothing to disdain. A man of old has said, "The heartmind turns in accord with the myriad circumstances, / and this turning truly is profoundly mysterious."

This turning so profoundly mysterious in

nature goes on endlessly, in accord with the myriad circumstances, and the myriad circumstances of our particular times may make its mysteries especially difficult to fathom and hard to negotiate. No lord of the North, East, South, or West holds the key to the mysteries of the twists and turns ahead.

Notice, though, that instead of setting doubtlessness – "what's left for a great person to doubt?" – in opposition to this mysterious turning Lin-chi couples them. Amid the uncertainties of the mysterious turning, the agentless activity of the moment takes place – "taking up, putting to use, and never naming." If we get hooked on knowing or intimidated by not knowing, we're in trouble. As Nan-chüan instructed the young Chao-chou long centuries ago, "The tao doesn't belong to knowing and not knowing. Knowing is delusion; not knowing is blankness." Danger in each direction! Human delusion has gotten us into this jam, and we can't afford to perpetuate it, but neither can we afford to cling to blankness. Fortunately, as Nan-chüan went on to say, "If you truly penetrate the tao of doubtlessness, it's like space: vast, transparent, wide open." Here we stand our best chance of improvising the unprecedented responses that our unprecedented situation calls for.

We need to tolerate some measure, probably a goodly measure, of not knowing Type

One. In an emergency – and that's our situation now, it seems to me – a person rarely has all the information that would be helpful, so we work with what we have and go with our guts, too, to a large degree. Chuang-tzu says, "... glimmerings of the slippery and uncertain – by these sages gauge their course. So they don't take charge but make their home totally in the familiar. This is called using discernment." That sounds right to me. In light of Chuang-tzu's dedication to wu-wei, it seems reasonable to assume that "not taking charge" means not forcing things to conform to our own expectations or wishes and that "making their home totally in the familiar" refers to living in touch with this. Not knowing but well-grounded in actuality, a sage negotiates slippery and uncertain terrain by paying attention both to facts and to glimmerings of possibility.

This amounts to a practice of not knowing Type Three under conditions of not knowing Type One, bringing the free heartmind of revelatory not knowing to bear in and on the anxiety-producing uncertainties of today and of the unforeseeable future. This will have to go beyond "thinking outside the box" because, in this instance, the box includes all of us thinkers and the entire world we inhabit. We don't have the luxury of dreaming up solutions to problems X or Y while sitting at our computers or brainstorming in comfy conference rooms. The





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uncertainties we face are complexly related, not likely to be managed or solved or checked off one by one, and they'll require much more of us than merely thinking.

Another challenge along the path will be meeting our losses squarely. Of course, coming to terms with impermanence has been integral to Buddhist practice from the start, but accepting that "all things pass quickly away" and taking it as inspiration to get to the bottom of the Great Matter is only the beginning. We may discover some equanimity in realizing that, impermanent as things are, buddha-nature doesn't come or go. Still, there remains the hard-to-swallow point that Tōrei Zenji expresses in "Bodhisattva's Vow," namely that

... all is the never-failing manifestation of the mysterious truth of the Tathāgata.

In any event, in any moment, and in any place,
none can be other than the marvelous revelation of its glorious light.

None? None! Every flood, each home incinerated by wildfire, a dying reef – anywhere, anytime, that's "the never-failing manifestation of the mysterious truth of the Tathāgata." Not your idea of "the marvelous revelation of its glorious light," I bet. But can you appreciate the fact? Tōrei's not saying we ought to celebrate every manifestation of this "mysterious truth." He's beckoning us to recognize that a bodhisattva's vision leaves nothing out, not even the saddest moment or the most deleterious event. It's a stiff challenge and a bracing perspective on the losses already at hand and the earth-shaking developments that likely lie ahead.

If we persist in practice, however, and get down to the root of birth-and-death, we may experience an unshakeable certainty that will stand us in good stead under any circumstances. It's beyond the steadiness I've spoken of, akin to the confidence Shakyamuni manifested under Mara's as-

sault. It's the no-doubt Ling-yun experienced at a glimpse of faraway peach blossoms, the dauntlessness Wu-men promises in his commentary on Mu. When masters of old detected it in a student, they would say, "From now on, no one will be able to deal with you." It might be called implacability or invincibility, as long as we don't superimpose an idea of imperviousness or infallibility. Such people aren't emotionally 'defended' or thick-skinned, and don't invariably succeed. They simply remain unperturbed even though events don't go a favorable way. Yuan-wu spoke of this phenomenon:

If you take a step further, not a single thing is established – after that, you are quiet and properly attuned, and you clearly see the original person. You get rid of all the affairs in your breast ... so that your whole being is liberated and at peace. You are for-ever beyond any possibility of retreating or regressing. You attain fearlessness, and with expedient means based on this fearlessness, you can rescue sentient beings.

This concludes my account of what our tradition can provide us – of how practice and realization can equip us to cope with the uncertainties now and to come. I hope it doesn't sound overly grand to you oldtimers on the path or overpromise what's possible to those of you newer to it. Of course, whatever one's experience in the way, perseverance has always been a necessity in making good on its potential, and with multiple forms of instability at hand and ahead, now seems to me time not just to persevere but to step up our practice, scaling back on anything that tends to disrupt it. Best to live in as settled a fashion as we can so that experiences of this punctuate our days and refresh our lives.

But what to do about the issues coming down the pike? How shall we answer the cries of the world? Practice and realization doesn't provide that sort of information, alas. Of course, we commit to carrying all

beings, without limit, to liberation, but how? Via heartmind, yes, and by offering the Dharma. But is that enough? What further responses shall we make? To what extent and in what manner shall we alter our lives practically to make effective responses proportionate to the problems at hand? Here we reach uncertainties galore, uncertainties about uncertainties.

One thing's certain, though: that I'm not going to attempt to answer those questions for you or for anybody else. I'm not sure how I'm going to answer many of them myself. Here lies an uncertainty that I haven't named yet – uncertainty about what my own scruples will require of me. I feel certain that the forces at work in society on one hand and in climatic and ecological processes on the other have brought the world to a crunch point, and I'm sure I'll feel compelled to respond in new ways as the unprecedented realities of our times continue to unfold (and as I become aware of these developments), but I don't know how far, how fast, or how dramatically my love for the ten thousand things will push me in that response.

For me and probably for most of us, abandoning business as usual may prove to be not just the first step in rising to meet our new challenges but also the steepest. Rarely far from my mind these days is a phrase Sebastian Haffner used to account for Germany's slide into fascism: "the automatic continuation of ordinary life." That's what Haffner, a young attorney, observed as the Nazis rose to power – people doing the laundry, shopping, going to work, enjoying some entertainment. Not quite "fiddling while Rome burns." More normal and for that reason, to my mind, scarier: a society drifting toward disaster through force of habit. In our own case, the risk is that "automatic continuation of ordinary life" is ushering in a disaster that will be injurious or fatal not only to billions of people sooner or later but also to innumerable other beings, to whole ecosystems and species of being.



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If we're willing or even eager to quit the same old same old, then what? How should we proceed in light of the myriad uncertainties surrounding what's happening or likely to happen, what changes are needed, and which of them deserve our attention most? I'm afraid that many people get stymied right here, boggling at the volume and complexity of available information, paralyzed by conflicting opinions, too overwhelmed to absorb what's coming at them factually, emotionally, often both. This sort of uncertainty can be exploited, "weaponized," as notoriously demonstrated by tobacco companies in the 1950s and 1960s, employing bogus studies to foment doubt and delay effective response when reputable researchers proved a link between smoking and lung cancer. Oil and gas interests have utilized the same playbook to counter the evidence, which their own research has confirmed, that burning fossil fuels is heating the planet, with dire consequences. We need to pay enough attention to the science so that manipulation of this kind fails yet also avoid getting so wrapped up in studies, political debate, and proposed mitigations that we cripple our capacity to move in accord with evidence already at hand and glimmerings about both what's to come and responses we can appropriately undertake.

As I hope I've made clear, I don't think we need an antidote to uncertainty; we need

to live with it creatively. The 14th-century priest Yoshida Kenkō would concur and take it one step further. In his famous *Tsurezuregusa*, he says, "The most precious thing in life is its uncertainty." The value he saw in uncertainty lay in the relationship between transience and the power things have to move us, a relationship later enshrined as a key element of Japanese aesthetics – *mono no aware*, literally "the poignancy of things."

Seeing, feeling, the ephemerality of phenomena makes their beauty exquisite, touching us in a way that nothing else does. The prototypical case is cherry blossoms, lovely and brief as they've always been. But like everything else, today cherry trees inhabit a hotter planet than in centuries past, and they flower earlier, less predictably than before. With the transitory nature of the entire world becoming ever more apparent and with extinctions – impermanence in its final, permanent form – rising steeply, I wonder whether the sort of uncertainty Kenkō extolled will 'scale,' as people are wont to say these days. Will the poignancy of our current and impending losses give rise to more than aesthetic sighs and philosophical head-nodding ("It was ever thus")? Will it help bring us to our senses and galvanize creative responses? Don't know, don't know!

Finally, I've been asked what role I envision sangha playing in supporting and inspiring change at the individual level. As I've said, I don't dare to prescribe the response others should make to our predicament, and this question could take me in that direction, but let's see if I can address it usefully without veering into the realm of shoulds and shouldn'ts. For starters, I hope our sanghas can serve as communities in which

members feel safe expressing their hopes, fears, convictions, and uncertainties, a place where their thoughts and feelings will receive open and sympathetic hearing. By all indications, we're heading into a very hard, very trying time, and providing one another this kind of support will be an important first contribution, an important response, in itself.

At the same time, I hope our sanghas aren't so safe that probing questions go unasked and differences can't be sensitively explored. I hope we can accept the risks involved in posing questions about one another's thoughts, feelings, and decisions as well as the risks often felt on the receiving end of such probing. That's a lofty aspiration, I think, and crucial to its fulfillment is the sangha's capacity to see through and steer clear of the frames of right/wrong, either/or, good/bad thinking. It also demands respect for one another and for the validity of differences as all of us feel our way along, responding to circumstances imperfectly known.

Lately I've been on the receiving end of such respectful probing from a sangha friend in California, which my assignment here in Honolulu actually brought to a head. Writing at length the day that Masa and I flew out, he urged me to urge you to make collective efforts for political change at least an element of your response. Here's part of what he wrote:

Our disengagement, our half-hearted engagement, the extent to which we act only or mostly on our own personal and familial and group dynamics and health and avoid [the] political realm, that's the extent to which we leave the public arena to those who would plunder.

It's not enough to cry: "The world is on fire" and to recommend that each person respond with their own gifts and talents. It's also not enough to say:



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“Be sure that you do zazen and intensify your practice to address the anxieties that naturally arise and maintain balance and focus and perspective.” It’s also not enough to say: “Identify ways in which through your personal life choices you are contributing to the fire and bring your life ways into alignment.”

As in this case, if the fires are raging very significantly because of the deceit and greed and intensive mobilization of a plunderous oligarchy of plutocrats, then if we want to put the fires out, we need directly to address that reality.

You can feel the urgency in his words, and I welcome his directness even where it verges on the prescriptive. His message culminates months of careful probings back and forth, and he knows me well enough to know that I welcome his forthright expression.

Besides offering this as an example of the kind of intra-sangha dialogue I hope for, I also hope you’ll consider his argument seriously. The outsized political influence of big corporations and very wealthy individuals is well documented; through campaign contributions, aggressive lobbying, public relations work, revolving-door hires, and the like, these powerful entities assert their self-interest, corrupt the democratic process, and hamstring efforts to remedy the problems we face. Indeed, their power is one of those problems, and I’m grateful for my friend’s activism to assert the countervailing power of the citizenry and to put government to work for the good of the ten thousand things. I know that not all of us share his appetite and energy for the pursuit of change by political means or his faith in the efficacy of such means, and please don’t assume I’m out to persuade you to take that approach. If the path of political change isn’t for you, though, I think it behooves you to identify means of effecting change that you do believe in and to invest yourself in it with similar gusto.

Which brings me back to the question of the role the sangha might play in coping with the uncertainties ahead. Besides serving as a vehicle for personal exploration of how to meet the exigencies of our time, the sangha might become a locus for group discussion, strategy-sharing, and joint forms of response. We’ve long been careful to avoid politicizing the sangha, and I still think that’s wise policy in terms of making people of all persuasions welcome in the zendo, so any move toward coordinated response, especially public action, would have to be made with great sensitivity. But these times call for an unprecedented response, and perhaps this is an area where precedent needs to change. If the sangha decided to move in this direction, I hope that it could do so without the partisanship and divisiveness that has so terribly marred and distorted collective life in this country in recent years.

Let me close by saying plainly, if I haven’t made it clear already, that my reading of our circumstances leaves me convinced that we can meet the needs of the planet now only through concerted, comprehensive change in the way we conduct our lives. We can look for principled, articulate, inspiring individuals to lead us in this process, but I don’t think we can afford to wait for them to appear; the needs are too urgent. Besides, such people don’t emerge from a vacuum, though the tale is sometimes told as if they do, nor could they organize and sustain a movement on their own. A horde of us ‘leading from below’ has to provide the matrix that will produce the leadership we need and then to keep that leadership honest and on purpose, since beneficiaries of the current order will surely try to halt, slow, or subvert necessary change.

I believe, as I’ve detailed here, that practice and realization equips us not just to ride out the turbulence now and soon to come but also to contribute creatively. What those contributions might be, of course I don’t know. We’ll see! But a remarkable feature



of our predicament, owing to its very magnitude, is that opportunities to make a difference abound. How we eat, dress, get around, work, spend, shelter, dispose of waste – in these domains and many others, we can, as the saying goes, “Be the change” the world is crying out for. Sometimes that will involve doing something such as planting an insect-friendly shrub, supporting a minority-owned business, or joining a protest; other times, perhaps more often, it will be choosing not to do something such as traveling afar on vacation or purchasing a new gadget.

Another sangha friend who’s asked me many probing questions concluded a while ago that “We’ve gone over the falls” – that “we” encompassing the biosphere as a whole – with the only issues still uncertain being how long the drop will be and what will survive it. Others put such sentiments down to doomsaying premised on faulty science, arguing that we still have the means to avert ecological catastrophe. I admit both possibilities and feel no need at all to resolve the contradiction. My own path through the uncertainties is clear: to do (and not do) whatever I can to lighten the blow falling upon the ten thousand things now and in years to come. The one hope I do nurture is that the sangha will join in this project, consistent with our infinite vows. ✨