

山門寺

Mountain Gate Journal

Fall 2022

Mountain Gate is a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization established to provide the environment and training in the specific mindfulness practices of Rinzai Zen, focusing on meditation and work with koans [traditional paradoxical anecdotes or questions]. Regaining Balance, a nonsectarian outreach program, was established by Mountain Gate some years ago- to offer free, nonsectarian retreats for women veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress, and for women who are wives or partners of veterans with PTSD.

Sesshin - Zen Meditation Retreat

“Sesshin” is a Japanese term meaning “to touch the mind.” It is commonly referred to name for Zen Buddhist meditation retreats in much of the Western world as well as in Japan. A vital part of Rinzai Zen practice, it was inspired more than two millennia ago by a young man in East Asia, Siddhartha Gautama, who became known as “the Buddha”—“the Enlightened One.” His story, familiar to Zen practitioners, also resonates in many ways with our own lives. Roshi Rafe Martin, author and Dharma nephew, has just written a new book, **A Zen Life of the Buddha**, in which he describes the life of Siddhartha, and shares how we ourselves share some of the same experiences and feel the same yearnings, the same wish to find peace in the midst of life characterized by wake-up calls or simply challenging experiences. And so we, too, find our way to meditation practice, and to sesshin.

When Siddhartha realized that the prevailing spiritual practices of his era, namely, asceticism, would eventually lead him to death without finding the peace he sought, he left that practice, recognizing that the only way he could find lasting happiness and peace even in the midst of old age, sickness and death would be through an interior search. So he sat down beneath a tree, now known as the Bo Tree, short for Bodhi, or Enlightenment, vowing not to rise until he found his answers.

For seven days and eight nights he sat, tuning

in to increasingly subtle sensations and insights until, early on the eighth morning he glanced up and caught sight of the morning star, triggering a deep and profoundly freeing experience; he had awakened to the truth of all existence, of reality.

Here needs to be inserted a comment about reality. Some of the teachings of the 10th century Tibetan Buddhist teacher, Longchenpa, in a book titled, **You Are the Eyes of the World**. And indeed we are the eyes of our world. Those eyes see through the lens of our personal history and the assumptions we’ve made in response to the things that have happened to us. As a result, our view is remarkably biased, and unfortunately, our behavior reflects that bias. The experience is insidious and universal. And the result of that is, in Sanskrit, called “*dukkha*.” *Dukkha* can range from simple boredom to profound suffering, and is something every human being experiences at one level or another—which makes the Buddha’s story quite relevant to our own life, as Rafe writes. But in that glance at the morning star, Siddhartha found expansive clarity; he saw beyond the conditioning to the True Reality that is always there and always has been—and moreover, can be **realized** by us!

That seven nights and eight days of searching inward established the model for retreats in what later became known as Buddhism, and that model continues to be offered in centers and temples throughout the world, in countless languages. It is offered as well in Mountain Gate, where we engage in sesshin every month of the

year, offering the opportunity of a period of concentrated deepening of understanding to everyone who practices this meditation.

All sesshin at Mountain Gate are seven days in length except for the traditional Rohatsu sesshin, which ends on the eighth morning. That sesshin takes place in December each year on the purported anniversary of Siddhartha's original retreat and honors his enlightenment. Though calendars have changed since then—the East Asian calendar was—and still is in some countries—determined by the cycles of the moon—the impetus to repeat that experience of enlightenment in our own lives remains.

So how do we do that?

Sesshin at Mountain Gate includes many hours of meditation, beginning with chanting and interspersed with meals, a work period, some rest, exercise, sanzen—the private, one-on-one guidance by the teacher—teisho, the daily Dharma talk by the teacher, and a mid-morning guided lovingkindness meditation. Our motives are the same as those of Siddhartha: to open to that profound, innate understanding of the true nature of life and find peace. Along the way, if we do our meditation practice in the appropriate way, we will become aware of where our misperceptions, our conditioning, our assumptions, and especially our self-image, keep us caught in a life of dukkha—that "pervasive dissatisfactoriness."

Our practice, especially the extended outbreath known as susok'kan in Japanese, is the tool that effectively chisels away the entrenched assumptions of who we are and what life is, to ultimately—if we persist long enough—reveal the truth.

Opening to such insights can be uncomfortable, and our normal way to deal with them is to deny them, to shove them out of sight. But if we are truly to become free it is imperative that we don't run from the truth, but own it, including any uncomfortable feelings (sensations) that accompany it. Too often our impetus is to override those

feelings by attempting not to feel them. This way of going about things does not free us but keeps us caught, with the consequence that we ride above life, not truly present except perhaps at sporadic moments. We live much like a stone skipped across water, apart from that water except very occasionally, and feeling something is missing. What can bring us to the commitment to do Zen practice if the feeling as if life is two- rather than three-dimensional. We may also come to it simply through the natural wish to escape the pain that may characterize our life. There is normally the additional sense that there has to be something better, something freer, something more real, something less painful.

Centuries ago a Tibetan Buddhist master of great renown, Longchenpa, taught the following way to work with those uncomfortable feelings, and with emotions as well. The process works magic regardless of whether you're experiencing grief, anger, emotional numbness, or whatever. Here is what he said:

Though attachment, aversion, dullness, pride, and envy may arise, fully understand their inner energy; recognize them in the very first moment, before karma has been accumulated. In the second moment look nakedly at this state and relax in its presence. Then whichever of the five passions [and here we could include any uncomfortable mind state] arise becomes a pure presence, freed in its own place, without being eliminated. It emerges as the pristine awareness that is pure, pleasurable, and not conditioned by thought.

If we are truly to become free, it is essential that we work in this way. We are not free to fully experience life, to fully *live* life, as long as we are trying to live a life determined by how we want to appear and what we are willing to feel.

During sesshin such opportunities can arise. Here is some advice if and when they do. this is

from a talk given during a sesshin:

A quick mention with regard to sesshin [Zen meditation retreat] since this talk was originally given on the second day of a seven-day sesshin, When we have a sense that sesshin is going by quickly—maybe even too quickly—that’s a good sign. If it feels like it’s dragging then we need to tune in and feel what’s going on in that moment—within. We are talking not about analysis but about tuning into any inner sensations. Doing so will often give rise to an understanding of what’s really going on, and can bring us back to where we can work more deeply—if we allow ourselves to remain with the sensation until it dissolves, regardless of whether it is pleasant or not. Doing that to completion brings us to a spacious presence such that there is no hindrance, and we can easily dive back into the meditation practice that had previously seemed blocked or stalled.

This is exactly what Longchenpa was pointing to in the previous quote. It’s also what Eugene Gendlin discovered as a grad student in psychology when he was involved in a study to determine why some people could undergo psychotherapy for years and even decades without moving into any level of freedom, and why others, within a very brief space of a few therapy sessions, could do so. Quickly it was discovered that what made the difference is what Gendlin later termed, “focusing on the felt sense”—what Longchenpa was pointing out. When you get the hang of how to do it, it’s magical! And it works outside of sesshin, too, and in a myriad of circumstances.

It takes time to go against the current of habit patterns, of years of self-training to avoid negative feelings. But once it’s mastered, you will find it makes an enormous positive difference both in your life in general and in your meditation practice. It smooths the road you’re traveling on.

THE GIFT

How do I give back to you
this sense of being Alive?
Of holding a jewel
so beautiful, it contains
all the love our hearts have ever held?
Or how do I speak
of the way we wander the world
asleep and unknown
to ourselves, searching for
the preciousness of love in others
because we have somehow
lost it in ourselves?
How can I give you the gift
of your own beautiful
Self, that glows with a radiance
that is equal to a star?
What mirror can I hold before
you to let you see
with your own eyes
that you are precious beyond believing?
What spark can I kindle within you,
so you may catch fire, flaming
with a Light that will
illumine the world?
This gift is already given—
you came to this world to find it,
to set it free.
Only you can unearth this treasure—
but to help you, I would hold
and rock you in caresses,
whispering over and over:
You Are, You Are,
You Precious One,
You One Beloved
Star.

—Richard Wehrman



*The following writing is taken from an upcoming book of Mitra-roshi's talks, currently being undertaken by a team of her students who are interested in spreading her teachings more widely. The tentative title of the book is, **Dive Deeper: The Long Maturation in Zen Practice**, and the tentative publication date is late Spring 2023.*

Brain, Conditioning & Zen Practice

It's known that a child's brain is not fully developed when that infant is born. Science reports that it takes up to 25 years before our brains reach a level of mature development. Moreover, over time and with changing experiences, brain plasticity will continue to alter our experience of the world around us as well as our internal sensations.

But what is the point in bringing this up?

It is that infants develop not only their actual physiological brain but also the sense of who they themselves are. The experiences of safety or danger, of being loved or not, of being able to depend on a caregiver when we're hungry or wet or in distress, impacts the development of our brains (not to mention, our whole life). If our primary caregiver is loving and interacts joyfully with an infant in their care most of the time, then the child grows up with a sense of being worthy. But if a child has a caregiver who is abusive or abandons the child frequently, whether physically or emotionally, the child grows up with a distinct sense through that conditioning that the world is not a safe and secure place and they themselves are not worthy. To survive, they develop safety protocols as they grow up—ways of interacting that may not be healthy or, in some cases, even safe. If a child grows up with a caregiver that's both loving and then distant, inconsistent in their interactions with the child, then the child will have a mixed sense of security, sometimes trusting, sometimes not, but always unsure of their worth in the universe.

Many decades ago in France, a researcher

named Pavlov did canine studies that also revealed the impact conditioning can have on the behavior of dogs. Through these studies Pavlov learned many things that modern psychologists have begun to recognize as well about conditioning in humans. This is something that is relevant to Zen practice as well.

Let me share something that may initially seem unrelated, again from the book cited in the previous chapter: Seven and a Half Lessons about the Brain, by Lisa Feldman Barrett.

This is in lesson number four, titled "Your Brain Predicts Almost Everything You Do".

Lisa Feldman Barrett writes of learning of a situation in pre-Apartheid Africa in which a white African was drafted into the military and ordered to shoot guerrillas—the very people it turns out he was advocating for. In a mixed mind state but called upon to do that job, he was at the head of a small line of other military men when suddenly he heard a sound in the jungle and thought he saw another soldier, one with an assault rifle, leading a band of other armed guerillas. He was about to fire his gun, assuming the worse, when the soldier behind him whispered, "Don't shoot!" It turned out that the "soldier with the gun" was only a boy with a stick. And the line of guerrillas? It was a long line of cows following the boy. His brain had tricked him.

The author explained that, despite earlier assumptions, what our eyes see is not simply a photograph of what is in front of them. In actuality, the brain, driven by the shape-shifting form of memory conditioned by past experiences, determines what the eyes see based on prior conditioning. Because your eyes "see" only through light and pressure and not as photographic images, your brain then makes sense of what those eyes see. And that sense making is driven by our experiences, which provide the conditioning to pull away from fire or jump back at the sight of a poisonous snake—or mistake a child with a stick for an insurgent with a combat rifle.

The split-second decision to react is out of conscious control; if we were to wait until our brain analyzed the situation and then responded by triggering muscles to act, humanity would not have survived.

in other words, you're not pulling a photograph out of a metaphorical file cabinet in your brain that is an accurate memory of some past incident. What takes place instead is both that the need to respond rapidly to potentially save your life, when you encounter something your brain conjures as dangerous, and the inaccurate interpretation, can cause a response that doesn't match the actual situation. What does this say about our perceptions of reality?

It's a very pivotal point in our Zen practice when we realize that we cannot trust our thoughts—because we can't. Thinking is useful for certain kinds of endeavors but thoughts can also get us in a lot of trouble; arguments often begin because of misperceptions. The conditioning taking place in those early months and years of our growing up give us a sense of what the world seems to be. We react based on that conditioning, which influences what the brain comes up with in the future.

There is a Japanese Zen story about a man who goes to visit a friend who is a kyūdo master—a master in the art of archery. He is seated in the seat of honor and offered a cup of tea. Glancing into the teacup he sees a small snake! But not wishing to offend his host, he drinks the tea and after the visit returns home. Over time, he begins to feel ill, convinced that the snake was poisonous. Eventually he returns to his friend to say his goodbyes, and explains what has happened. The friend points to the ceiling above the seat of honor, where there is an archery bow hanging on display. The reflection of the bow in the tea caused the guest to assume the worse; there was no snake in the teacup...

So if we can't trust our perceptions, what, in our

own ongoing lives, is the truth? This is our fundamental question in Zen practice.

In the Bible it is written that "the truth shall set you free ." When you are truly free you are unlikely to mistake a line of cows led by a kid for a line of guerillas with machine guns. What is the truth in each moment? What we think is not necessarily the truth; we are driven by habit patterns born of conditioning. We begin to see the power of that conditioning when as our Zen practice deepens, we begin to see more clearly, less caught in that conditioning. Before that it's so easy to mistake a situation because we are not free of our assumptions.

Many years ago when I was in grade school, unlike in schools today, we pupils sat in rows of desks; we were expected to sit with our hands clasped on our desk when we weren't actively writing or turning a page in something we were reading. We were also expected to be absolutely silent. In the row next to me across from my desk sat a little girl who was clearly sad. She had an obvious skin condition that was both embarrassing and seemingly painful— what I now recognize was psoriasis. She was very shy and kept to herself. Feeling her pain, in a gesture of understanding and sympathy, I reached across the aisle and gently touched her arm. I wanted to let her know she wasn't alone, that someone cared about her. But her immediate and unexpected reaction was to call out to the teacher in tears, saying I was trying to hurt her. Though I had just reached out and gently touched her, her perception was that it was not a friendly act but an attack. Most likely there were people in her life who were indeed hurting her and this influenced her assumptions about the actions of others. This is an example of how our history influences our interpretation of what we experience, to the point where we can so easily misinterpret the intentions of other people around us. This results in suffering.

What is the truth if we can't trust our thoughts, if we can't trust our conditioning—if what comes

into our brain is a miscellaneous barrage of sensory data? How do we know what's what? Buddhism teaches that there's a place of deep, profound knowing—a Knowing that is accurate and is true—and seeing through our conditioning little by little as we continue to do our Zen practice will reveal that Knowing. Zen practice—if done appropriately and for long enough time—is especially effective in uncovering that truth.

As for how long will that take? I remember a Zen student who always came to every Sunday morning sitting at the Rochester Zen Center, and was frequently at sesshin. John actually lived in Buffalo — an hour's drive on the freeway from Rochester, and he was dedicated. He was deeply dedicated.

But one day he told me that after 13 years of Zen practice —sincere, deep Zen practice, he began to get discouraged. In that mind state he went into dokusan with Roshi Kapleau and told his teacher, "I've been practicing thirteen years! Roshi, I've been practicing for 13 years and still no kensho!" Roshi Kapleau responded "Thirteen years...30 years..." and John said he didn't remember what Roshi said after that because suddenly it no longer mattered. Seven years later he experienced an especially deep kensho.

Joshu —the famous Joshu of the koan, "Does a dog have the buddha nature?" who lived and taught in T'ang Dynasty China, trained for decades under his teacher, Nansen, until Nansen died. After that he traveled far and wide for many more years, testing the depths of his understanding and taking it deeper, before finally beginning to teach at age eighty. It doesn't matter how long it takes because each moment we give ourselves to this Zen practice, to this reaching into this mystery of what is reality, work is being done. We are moving deeper, letting go more. It's not necessarily obvious to us though it's obvious to our teacher. Because seeming progress is not necessarily obvious to us, faith in the practice is so important.

You have heard about Native Americans who teach their children when they have questions to go into the forest and be silent, to quietly open—and that if they did it for a long enough the bushes and the trees would give them that answer. We're no different in our abilities except that our culture emphasizes intellectual prowess over working with intuition and a wordless level of inquiry. But through that miraculous *susok'kan*—that extended out breath coupled with the perplexity, the need to know—we, too, will find our answers. With patience, reaching deeply into the dark beyond the known, we will begin to see where we are caught in greed, anger and delusion. We'll become aware of where our conditioning is driving our outlook on life, our assumptions about ourselves and others, our relationships. Doing so we realize they no longer have any validity. We recognize that to continue being driven by them makes no sense and it's easy to let them go.

I have a metaphorical image of each of us through our conditioning becoming upholstered in one or the other of the two parts of Velcro; you know Velcro comes in two parts—the part with tiny hooks and the soft fluffy part. When you put the two parts together they stick tightly to each other. Self-upholstered in that metaphorical Velcro, every time we run into somebody who has the other kind, Zip! We're stuck, we're attached. With our ongoing Zen practice that Velcro gradually drops off. Then it doesn't matter if we encounter any kind of Velcro because there's none on us to cling to it. In this way we find our life changing in positive ways. That's because of the practice you've been doing: Every time you extend that out breath, you're letting go assumptions ideas, stories, bits of self-image, as if those Velcro pieces are falling off. Continuing, you are opening little by little to something deeper, clearer, freer, as you yourself becomes more free. That is what our practice offers us. If it didn't work and if it wasn't worthwhile it would not have prevailed for more than 2500 years. The only thing we have to be concerned with is extending that outbreath, fueled by that need to know, that

perplexity, and to have faith that if we keep going what we are searching for will be revealed.

And then we keep going beyond that, and that, too, reveals a different; yet more subtle layer. And we keep going deeper and deeper and deeper yet. Despite nearly 50 years of intensive Zen practice, I've yet to find an end to what can be revealed even more completely. How much more free we can become if we keep practicing!

The freedom is real, but of course that work involves not just seeing through where we're caught but also making sure that we don't re-invest in those caught places but continuously work seriously on what's called The Long Maturation.

That Long Maturation can start even before you experience your first kensho. It begins when you have insight into some aspect of your behavior and refuse to deny it but instead own it, feel the remorse and regret that comes up when we see clearly for the first time some uncomfortable aspect of our behavior. Doing so can bring forth a vow not to continue that way of being and the story that drove it. It's then so much easier to no longer indulge in that dysfunctional behavior. That is an absolutely vital part of our Zen practice—our very life!



Mountain Gate's Kannon-do

Many years ago now, when Mountain Gate consisted of a small, incomplete building that had a bathroom with running water but no kitchen, and two small, hastily built outbuildings, one of which, with electricity and gas but no water, served as our kitchen, the neighbor immediately northwest of us called up. "I haven't had a date in eight years! I'm out of here! Do you want to buy this place?"

There is no fence between the two properties, and until that neighbor brought a house trailer in and began living in it we had enjoyed the expansive space; it felt like part of Mountain Gate. Debbie lived there for awhile and eventually started building a small addition; the addition was never

completed. The trailer she was living in was quite old, well past its expected life, but there was a kitchen with running water in it. We'd been hauling water to cook and wash dishes with ever since Mountain Gate was first built.

Our immediate response to Debbie's question was, "Yes!" But on hanging up the phone, reality struck: How, with our tiny group of supporters, minimal income, no savings, and no possibility of getting a loan, could we possibly manage this? Miraculously, the Rochester Zen Center gave us a full mortgage and we made the purchase—and repaid the loan several years early. Wow! Running water! A real kitchen!

Kannon (in Japanese), or Kwan Yin (Guan Yin in Chinese), is known as the "Bodhisattva" of Compassion, a bodhisattva being one who is filled with compassion and wishes to do whatever possible to relieve the sufferings of others. "Hearer of the Cries of the World," is another description. At Mountain Gate we are deeply motivated by a yearning to do what we can to relieve human suffering, by teaching a meditation form that is known to be grounding and which, if done with intention and persistence, can make a big and positive difference in the lives of those who do it. We also offer a special program—RegainingBalance® Retreats for Women Veterans with PTSD—which is free to qualifying women anywhere in the U.S. We have as well offered ourselves in other ways, for example, helping to care for a dying neighbor who needed more care than the available hospice care could provide. So we named that little building the Kannon-do, or Hall of Compassion.

The Kannon-do continues to be of great use to us, and now that our main building—after 26 years of hard work—has been fully completed, we need to turn our attention to the Kannon-do, before it fails completely. We've already experienced evidence of its deterioration. For example, there have been two serious water pipe breaks due to inadequate insulation, and the outside of the addition was never finished, leaving bare the OSB siding; OSB is never meant to be exposed. The most we were able to do was paint it but that has only slowed the deterioration. Before the entire combination structure fails, we need to give away the trailer part—and there is someone who is willing to pull it away for free—and rebuild, expanding the current space, using as much of what is viable. Why do so? We have students who can benefit from solo meditation retreats, family guests such as the parents of one of our sesshin participants this

past April, who came from Michigan for the week of sesshin, participating in sesshin part time and providing some delicious meals as well as joining the annual Holy Week pilgrimage led by the local Penitentes (the Brotherhood of Penitents, a Catholic lay order originating in medieval Spain. Many of these humble folk are our neighbors.)



Top: West side of the structure, painted to match; the trailer is on the left. Bottom: front & a detail

The same wonderful, highly skilled neighbors who built the addition to the main building (and have helped in so many other generous ways), would do the renovation/rebuilding of the Kannon-do. We would build structurally sound, energy-efficient exterior walls and expand into the space vacated once the trailer is gone, building a new kitchen with modern plumbing and electrical wiring, a mechanical room with an up-to-date, energy efficient heating system. The current heating system is old and only 60% efficient, and one of the dangers of old trailers is deteriorating electrical wiring that can cause fires. An upstairs would be added, with one bedroom, a bathroom, and a meditation room.

We estimate it will cost approximately \$125,000 to do this essential renovation/rebuild. No one at Mountain Gate, including the teacher, is paid, so donations to Mountain Gate always go for repair and maintenance, operating expenses, and essential construction—which in this case is the rebuilding of the Kannon-do, an essential structure. If you would like to help, please copy and paste the link in the next column to make an online donation, or mail a check to Mountain Gate, 124 County Rd 73, Ojo Sarco NM 87521: We also can receive via PayPal, less processing fees.

UPCOMING CALENDAR

October 7-14 7-day sesshin at Mountain Gate.

Deadline for applications is one week prior to the beginning of the sesshin.

November 12-19 7-day sesshin at Mountain Gate.

Deadline for applications is one week prior to the beginning of the sesshin.

November 30 - December 8 Rohatsu Sesshin at Mountain Gate

Deadline for applications is one week prior to the beginning of the sesshin.

January 21-28, 2023 Sesshin at Mountain Gate

Deadline for applications is one week prior to the beginning of the sesshin.

February 4-11, 2023 Sesshin at Mountain Gate

Deadline for applications is one week prior to the beginning of the sesshin.

March 25 - April 1, Sesshin at Mountain Gate

Deadline for applications is one week prior to the beginning of the sesshin.

April 8-15, Sesshin at Mountain Gate

Deadline for applications is one week prior to the beginning of the sesshin.

A note about attending retreats at Mountain Gate while COVID is still an issue: Everyone MUST be fully vaccinated, including booster shots, and should check themselves for COVID symptoms, which can be as mild as cold or allergy symptoms, and if these are felt, then delay arrival until a PCR or NAAT test has been taken. If the test is positive, isolate for 5 days and after 5 days is up, wear a mask for 5 days. This information may be updated depending on changes in CDC rulings.

To donate to the rebuilding of the Kannon-do, please copy and paste this link into your browser—and thank you very much for your help!

<https://www.classy.org/give/429825/#!/donation/checkout>

For information about the RegainingBalance program and to offer support: www.RegainingBalance.org
For information about Zen meditation practice and sesshin [meditation retreats]: www.sanmonjizen.org