

Before you dive into reading...

...we would like to express our deep gratitude to everyone who has helped bring this special place into being and continue offering these beneficial programs. Through your ongoing generosity, Mountain Gat: is able to provide these programs and the guidance that accompanies them:

Daily Zen meditation
Loving Kindness meditation
Zazenkai [meditation days]
Frequent sesshin [meditation
retreats]

In addition to these offerings, our unique, nonsectarian, RegainingBalance® Retreats for Women Veterans with PTSD provide respite and teach tools that are known to help relieve stress. They are offered free of charge to qualifying women veterans several times each summer.

You have made all this possible! Thank you so much for your kindness and generosity!

—Mitra Bishop, Roshi

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Mountain Gate Journal

Summer 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.

Metta Bhavana - Lovingkindness Meditation

As an adjunct practice to our regular Zen meditation and a step on the Long Maturation path (more will be spoken of this later), doing regular metta practice can be of great benefit. And in fact, it's so beneficial that at the beginning of every formal evening sitting at Mountain Gate we do a guided lovingkindness meditation, and during sesshin it's done daily at the beginning of the mid-morning section of zazen.

The traditional story is that when the Buddha was teaching in his earlier years and monks had gathered around him, there was a group of his students meditating in a forest. As it happened, the tree spirits in the forest began to play tricks on them, which annoyed them greatly, interrupting their focus and concentration on their practice.

Here we might mention a couple of things: In Myanmar (known previously as "Burma," which was as close to the pronunciation of "Myanmar" that the British colonials could get) many people still believe in "nats"—tree spirits, and at night avoid walking near large trees in fear of their mischief. But there's a more different way of seeing this concern of the monks in ancient India—and relevant as well to our modern Zen practice. And that is "makyo," otherwise known as "devilish phenomena." It's something that can appear in anyone's meditation practice. Our yearning to come to awakening brings pretty much everyone to encounter a major obstacle to

reaching that awakening, and that is the fear of the unknown, the fear of disappearing, the fear of letting go who and what we familiarly take ourselves to be—our self-image. As we move closer to opening to the deep truth that makes itself known in awakening, we can unconsciously put up all kinds of seemingly legitimate resistance. As we are inherently creative beings, that can manifest in many different forms, visual, auditory, or as senses of bliss or fear. Perhaps that is what the monks were experiencing. Then again, perhaps it really was the tree spirits?

At any rate, these monks were concerned that they were not able to do their meditation practice effectively, and took their concern to the Buddha. His response was to teach them the lovingkindness meditation—metta bhavana, translated as "the cultivation of loving kindness."

"The Long Maturation" is actually more essential in the development of Zen practice than is awakening itself. As we go more deeply into our meditation practice, if we're doing it correctly we become more subtly aware. That awareness includes insight into our own behavior, something Shunryu Suzuki termed "mind weeds," adding that we can use them as manure (natural fertilizer) to fertilize our practice. He might as well also have said, "When we use those mind weeds to fertilize our practice we manifest more of the wonderful human beingness that we already are but don't realize because it's buried under our negative habit patterns." Awakening is important, but unless we have done the work of developing the basis to support that deep insight,

it will be wasted. Moreover, without that basis in maturation that the Long Maturation provides, we could easily misinterpret it and fail to live the truth it gives insight into.

Where does lovingkindness meditation come in this? It helps move us in the direction of seeing where we're caught, for one thing. If we find it uncomfortable offering intentions of lovingkindness to ourselves, that discomfort offers a "Dharma gate"—an opportunity for insight and positive change. We can work with that discomfort by focusing in on the "felt sense" in our body that represents resistance. So many of us have grown up with a negative, not-good-enough, self-image that we are uncomfortable honoring ourselves. We may feel, unconsciously, that we don't deserve to experience lovingkindness. That unconscious assumption drives our interactions with other people in negative directions. When we reach a point where we can freely, without conflict or resistance, offer intentions of lovingkindness toward ourself, we will find our encounters with other people, not to mention animals and plants, more free, more positive, more embracing. It benefits us and it benefits others because of our more positive interactions and our greater feeling of self worth.

But there is something important to take into consideration. It IS possible to use lovingkindness meditation—as with any meditation—to put up a wall against uncomfortable feelings that arise and/or a recognition of and "owning" of any dysfunctional or negative behavior we have engaged in. Since our practice includes uncovering the wondrous human beingness that we inherently are, to block any such feelings or recognition of past behavior or negative attitude goes in contradiction to that work.

Every human being is trying in our own way to reveal that innate perfection and live it, despite outward appearances. If we add lovingkindness to our practice on a daily basis, it can make a vast difference, not only for us, but for so many others seeking to express their innate perfection.

Satori, Kensho, Awakening

Despite appearances, insights, whether deep enough to be considered kensho, satori, or awakening, are not random events. They come forth as a result of deep, ongoing exploration beyond the level of words. "Sudden awakening" comes forth suddenly, but as a result of that extended exploration. And that exploration depends on awareness and attention.

It's not so easy to focus our mind on a quest without distraction; very few people are able to sustain that attention. But we can, thanks to the plasticity inherent in our brain, work toward that. And here's how to do it.

Whatever we do, whenever we do it, offers an opportunity to work in the direction of training our mind to focus and attend to the moment and the task before us. In these days, that is a monumental challenge because of our electronic toys, all the way from televisions (since the 1940's!), computers, cell phones, tablets, video games, and any other form of flashing screens including some action movies. All of these on the one side, entertaining, task assisting products have a negative side that significantly impacts human attention, and that is the rapidity with which the images on them change. Pediatricians have warned that children younger than two should not be put in front of the tv or tablet, something often done to provide instant babysitting relief for parents. Why? Because it trains developing brains to demand instant change, and in the process to be less and less able of focus and concentration. Think about it for a minute. When was it that you actually read an entire novel, much less a long work document, without very frequent breaks—if you managed even to read a full page without distraction? There are people whose profession is writing who admit that they can no longer read more than a paragraph after years of dealing with bits and bytes.

This directly affects our Zen practice. Our mind is programmed these days, through constant exposure to our rapidly changing screens, to demand change—entertainment?—and refuse extended focus, awareness and attention.

Add to that the challenges of anyone who has had less than optimal early childhood experiences, or traumatic events later in life, and you find yourself with a mind that wants—

no, seems to need, escape from any given moment. This makes zazen challenging.

But there are ways we can retrain our brain to focus our attention longer on a given task. How? Through mindfulness. Going through our day, most of us do a high percentage of it with our minds elsewhere than on what we are doing. Memory is such that we can indeed accomplish many tasks such as walking, sitting, bathing, riding bicycles, driving cars, automatically. (Hence the urgency to develop and market “self-driving” vehicles.) We get bored and easily distracted when we engage in these day-to-day activities. Emptying the dishwasher, our hands put away the utensils and bowls and plates and other things automatically washed—yet how many of us actually remember the actual act of doing so? (No wonder we have to search for things that ordinarily would be put in their specific, respected places each time we finished used them.)

Anyone who is blind needs to have significant body memory to find things wherever they placed them, and that takes great awareness. We can take a lesson from that.

Mindfulness-based stress reduction is big these days, with countless courses offered for, in some cases, thousands of dollars, to help us train those readily distracted brains to... pay attention. Yet, attention—real, ongoing attention—is essential for coming to awakening.

What else can we do to help ourselves pay that attention? For starters, take periodic breaks from our electronic toys. Make one day a week the week you don't turn on the tv, you don't open your computer, you don't check your phone. If you need access to your phone, at least turn off the alerts except for significant phone calls. Then during those days, get out in nature, feel the air, smell the just-rained smell or the scent of the forest or park. If you can't get out into nature, take a stroll around the block—or longer—and get to know intimately the sights and sounds and smells in that environment. Resist lapsing into thought and automatically walking. Explore! Take notice!

And back at home, keep your environment neat—this, too, will affect your mind state. A cluttered environment results in a cluttered mind that is more difficult to focus.

When you leave a room in the evening or early morning,

turn out any lights you've turned on there. Don't leave the water running when you shave or brush your teeth. And when you do shave or brush your teeth or wash your hands or take a shower or bath, pay close attention to the sensations that arise during those experiences. Eat mindfully, which means not in the car while driving, not in front of the tv, not in front of the computer, not while talking on your phone.

And here is an unusual one: get aerobic exercise, and do some level of weightlifting, even if it's parking further away from the store, and carrying bags of groceries into your house after shopping. Why? Because it will help keep your brain from aging as fast, and aid in the development of attention.

Centuries ago a monk asked a master, who happened to be doing calligraphy at the time, “What is the most important thing to do to come to awakening?” The master took his brush and wrote the character for “attention.”

注意

when the monk responded, “Attention? What does that mean?” The master again wrote:

注意!

注意!

注意!

Yes. In order to come to awakening, we need to develop focused attention. Persist!



“Practice is truly being open and vulnerable to everything. That much is very clear since sesshin - this giving up the base fear of the uncontrollability of events.”

—from a Zen student following a sesshin

From a Student

I was watching the sunset by the beach today and was powerfully reminded that when I was a teenager, I used to love go to the beach and just watch the ocean. It was kind of a proto-meditation for me.....

Today, I was sitting there and realized that when I get into a deep state of concentration, it is the same feeling I get when watching the ocean. It very powerfully struck me today that we are all impermanent, that all things are impermanent, that we really have no independent state of existence and it is very frightening so we try to invent all of these ways for us to be permanent.

But when we try to divide ourselves from all that is, then we commit a violence to our true selves and we start to chase happiness further and further away from our true natures. (This is very similar to Ursula LeGuin's EarthSea series, where the final book is talking about how the dragons and humans got divided because the humans tried to make themselves live forever and outside of nature, but this cut themselves off from their true natures and they lived in a shadow world, which started to destroy the world. This is overcome by allowing human souls to die and become part of the cycle of nature.)

I've read that analogy about lives being like waves that crash on the beach and that these are just temporary manifestations of energy, which arise and then fall away. This really became real for me today and I had to struggle not to immediately dissociate and think about it, but be in that realization in my body. When I was able to do this, it felt like the wave was just going on and on after it had crashed, extending into light waves and sound and then finally fading away.

I used to be very scared by this kind of thinking and it would cause me to cling tighter to the illusion of separation and permanence but today I could really feel the wholeness in the arising

and passing away and that there is nothing to be afraid of.

Roshi's Response:

It's important to continue to become increasingly aware; there is greater depth to realize!



Kane Tanaka was the world's oldest person. She was born in 1903 and died last week, aged 119. She spent her last years playing the strategy board game Othello and studying mathematics. When she became the world's oldest person, Tanaka was asked about her happiest moment. Her answer was "now".

The power of presence is beyond any concepts—and it is actually the only moment we have, ever!

However, most people do not activate that level of attention. There are many reasons for this, several mentioned in the earlier article. Most human beings who grow up, while initially we have utter presence as infants and small children, the conditioning we experience as we grow motivates us to repress uncomfortable feelings and sensations, and the adults we grow up around mostly do not know how to do otherwise. Nowadays—and for the last several decades—psychologists, some psychiatrists, and other therapists have discovered, as Eugene Gendlin did more than 20 years ago, that tuning in to the “felt sense” in our body makes a huge difference in working with unpleasant feelings. Later, Tara Brach coined the phrase, “Radical Acceptance,” meaning we don’t have to like or enjoy the sensations, but they’re what we’re feeling at the moment, and when we can simply accept the fact that that’s what we’re feeling, it makes all the difference in the world. If we have spent years or even decades avoiding feelings, then it is going to be challenging at first, opening to that felt sense. But when we get the hang of it and experience the palpable sense of release and relief—not just the disappearance of that feeling—we understand and value the freedom from

being caught in difficult feelings that it affords.

With regard to attention and awareness, there's one more thing about the traditional Zen practice as taught in Japan and in many American zen centers. The traditional instructions have been "JUST MU!" In other words, to focus on the koan "Does a dog have the Buddha-nature" without gap and without thinking of anything else, by bearing down on the word, "Mu," which literally means "not" or "nothing." It is possible to use that way of practice to shut out everything else, including and perhaps especially, emotions, feelings, sensations. The result is the possibility of a kensho experience, but a very narrow one supported only by an extremely narrow focus.

In contrast, when using the extended breath [susok'kan] practice, the breath is not to be used to deny other sensations. Rather, coupled with an "openness to possibility" or an innate curiosity and "need to know," it becomes a practice of BOTH focus and, seemingly in contradiction, an expanded awareness. This openness—not shutting anything out—is quite important in reaching an experience of kensho. When we do that practice appropriately, we have a background, expanded awareness of our environment while our main focus is on the bodily experience of breathing out and then in, and the "openness to possibility" that what we are yearning for will make itself known. Continuing ever more deeply in this way, we gradually release our grip on our assumptions, including those driving our self-image, and ultimately, awakening unfolds.

Doing practice in this way is also effective in working with the Long Maturation, as we do not shut out feelings, sensations, etc., but allow them to carry on in the background while we focus on the inner search. On occasion we may have an insight into our past or current behavior. Should that happen, we mentally glance at it, tune in and own it, and return to the practice. This is a Dharma gate, and it is especially important at this stage NOT to use the extended breath to bump it out of conscious reach, tempting as that can be. Depending on our history and the depths and quality of our conditioning, this can be a challenging period of practice, longer or shorter depending on how much we have buried. But as the highly regarded Thai forest master, Achaan Chah, there are two kinds of suffering: the temporary suffering we can go through in our meditation practice, and the long suffering we go through if we don't practice.

Milarepa, Tibetan Sage

Milarepa lived sometime between the 10th and 12th centuries in Tibet. His story is one of grit, inspiration and ultimate emancipation, and expresses the hope that anyone regardless of previous negative behavior, can, with dedication and commitment, can come to deep awakening.

Mila, as he was called when he was young, has a backstory. When he was not yet fully grown, his father died, leaving his rich inheritance under the management of an aunt and uncle. Unfortunately, these relatives took advantage of the inheritance to use it themselves, and made Mila, his sister and his mother, household servants to them. Mila's mother became quite bitter over this, and urged her son to train in Black Magic, to cause repercussions to the relatives through that skill. And obedient son, he did so. He mastered the Black Magic training, and caused enormous suffering with his skill in it. Among other things, he caused an out-of-season snowstorm to arrive and freeze the season's harvest of grain, causing widespread starvation. And at his mother's urging, he caused the center pillar holding up the roof in his uncle's house to collapse, killing everyone inside.

Mortified, he sought teaching from the famous sage, Marpa. Marpa recognized that Mila had an abundance of negative karma that would impede his practice if he didn't purify himself of it. And so it was that Marpa refused to teach Mila until he had done a number of heavy duty projects, including building a house for Marpa, who, on inspecting it, instructed Mila to tear it down and rebuild it in another location. This was done several times. It needs also to be mentioned that the only building materials in those high mountains of Tibet were rocks and stones. When he had accomplished those projects, Marpa sent him to build a tower in a dangerous area in Tibet, at which point, Marpa's wife, taking pity on Mila, urged Marpa to begin teaching him and quit giving him difficult projects to build.

Marpa did let up on Mila, but told his wife that, given that the young man still had some negative karma remaining, Mila would still one day have to face it.

Dedicated to his practice, Mila became a great yogi, and is today known as Milarepa, “Repa” being an honorific term referring to an accomplished Tibetan Buddhist yogi.

Milarepa is famous not only as a great yogi and teacher, but also as a great spiritual poet, and his Hundred Thousand Songs of Milarepa are quite famous. [https://smile.amazon.com/Hundred-Thousand-Songs-Milarepa-Translation/dp/155939448X/ref=sr_1_2?crd=PII9L1D3KBKZ&keywords=milarepa&qid=1655748511&s=books&prefix=Milarep%2Cstripbooks%2C121&sr=1-2]

What can we learn from his story?

So many people drawn to spiritual practice have experienced challenge in our lives—even to the extent that Milarepa did. In the 1980’s, Frankie Parker, who was abused growing up, was sentenced to death, having been found guilty of murdering his in-laws—fueled at the time by alcohol, drugs, and hatred—attempting to kill their daughter, and holding his ex-wife hostage, eventually shooting her and also a police officer (both survived).

But one day in prison, still angry and belligerent and thus in a solitary cell on Death Row, a guard tossed a copy of the earliest teachings of the Buddha into his cell. Frankie changed, inspired by the linked verses in the **Dhammapada**, especially this pair:

*We are what we think,
Having become what we thought.
When we act from a negative thought
suffering follows us
As the cart follows the cart-pulling ox.*

We are what we think,

Having become what we thought.

*When we act from a positive thought
happiness follows us*

Like the shadow that never leaves us.

For Frankie reading those verses was transformative; his behavior changed radically, even to the point of learning and practicing Zen meditation and becoming a model prisoner.

For some years after that there were appeals of his death sentence, but in the end they failed. Frankie was executed by lethal injection on August 8th, 1996.

That he had transformed so completely—many years of observation verified that—no doubt impacted the quality of his dying, and with it, future lives. Everyone has the potential to change, regardless of where they begin from, and our Zen practice, under the guidance of a true teacher, can make a big difference. Like Milarepa and Frankie Parker, we do have to deal with any negative karma we have built through past behavior, however. To face with courage and commitment the negative habit patterns that led to whatever unfortunate karma we brought forth, will not only make an enormous difference in our own lives, but also in the lives of many seen and unseen others. It was well recognized as he himself changed that Frankie Parker had a positive influence on his fellow inmates. Who we are, how we act, what we think, what we say, influences others as well as ourselves. The less we are caught in negativity, not to mention any self-image (and we all have one), the more positive our interactions and our experiences will be. And ultimately if we continue long and deeply enough, we will experience true liberation ourselves.



Adversity has the effect of eliciting talents which, in prosperous circumstances, would have lain dormant.”

—Horace

Sari Friedman has had three serious traumatic brain injuries. After the third—from a car accident—it took her five years to be able to read and write relatively well again. She coedited an anthology of poetry called *The Light in Ordinary Things* (fearlessbooks.com/poetry2.htm)

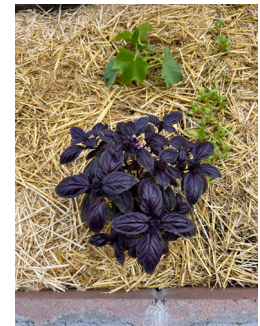
"For my Life Skills class at Alta Bates Summit Medical Center in Berkeley CA, on our last day":

*We are the light that curls off the waves.
We are the smoke that coils off nightmares.
It's hard to swallow.
Dangerous to walk.
Hilarious to watch us do math
and we may not remember the month.*

*But we all know the truth:
which is that everything's equal.
Snowflakes, skin color, test results,
space that may or may not extend forever—
None of the shadows or shadings are real.*

*It's like being under floodlights all the time:
Exposing every emotion.
Magnifying sensation.
Revealing our spirits eternal as the stones
shining, rough-thrown, lovely
in the furthest depth of the pond.*

—p 40, *Neurology Now*, May/June 2010
www.neurologynow.com



Top: With the addition of the new, larger greenhouse; just a few more things needed to complete the 26 years of building Mountain Gate...

Below left & right: A Red Kuri squash plant (another is outdoors in the raised bed with other squash), and a Purple Basil plant with a Lemon Cucumber above it. Basil Pesto, here we come!



Above: the requisite tomato forest!

There are only a few remaining items left to finish this amazing, 26-year-long journey to completion (from raw land, an outhouse, an old, donated travel trailer, and the beginnings of an adobe zendo). We still need a very large and expensive, 1500-gallon water storage tank to capture runoff from our back roof, to water the apricot and cherry trees, and to complete the housing for the outdoor hose bibb so that we can keep it from freezing. Then on to rebuild the Kannon-do before it becomes a complete disaster!

REALITY

So here it is—the reality:
time is running out.
As it has been forever,
but who among us
knows it?
We build a life of hope
on the quicksand
of tomorrow.
Yet where have you ever lived
but right here, right now?
In this very moment,
clear the connection
between your heart and
what you love: your garden,
your dog, the one
who cuts your grass,
the young cashier at the market—
make your own list,
it's endless.
There's only this instant
to share love with all of
those you treasure.
Are you afraid they won't
love you in return?
What does it matter—in the
next moment you may
be stardust!
Break open the vault of your heart,
spill in every direction.
You could be what the World
is waiting for—God made
only one of you in
all eternity!
So love with your incredible
limitless uniqueness—
Love like the ocean.
Love like the endless sea.



CALENDAR

July 13-17 RegainingBalance Retreat for Women Veterans with PTSD

These are free, nonsectarian, special retreats for women veterans diagnosed with PTSD only. During these retreats Mountain Gate is open only to participants in these retreats.

July 22-29 7-day sesshin at Mountain Gate.

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

August 3-7 RegainingBalance Retreat for Women Veterans with PTSD.

These are free, nonsectarian, special retreats for women veterans diagnosed with PTSD only. During these retreats Mountain Gate is open only to participants in these retreats.

August 13-20 7-day sesshin at Mountain Gate.

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

September 23-30 7-day sesshin at Mountain Gate.

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

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.

A note about attending retreats at Mountain Gate while COVID is still an issue: Everyone MUST be fully vaccinated, including booster shots, be willing to take a rapid COVID test on arrival and wear a mask in house. Anyone coming from out of State must have a negative COVID test within two days or self-isolate prior to arrival.

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