

# 山門寺

## Mountain Gate Journal

Winter 2022

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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.

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### Day 7, Rohatsu Sesshin Teisho

We will shortly be entering the seventh, and final night of the Rohatsu sesshin here at Mountain Gate. Each year throughout the world, sesshin—meditation retreats— such as what we are in right now are conducted so that we might comprehend for ourselves the Buddha’s own experience culminating in his great Awakening. That sesshin took place when he had decided after six years of doing the intensive spiritual practices of the era, that really the only way to come to awakening—to find the answers to the deep questions, the profound yearning that arose in him six years previously, was to go inward and search within his own mind.

This is something we all struggle with until we, too, commit to a practice that allows us to explore within. Until we really get a handle on the fact that exporing inwardly, beyond words, does make a difference in the process of uncovering what we are yearning for—that ineffable unnameable we long to return to, we remain unsatisfied. Thus, attempts to come to awakening by reading books will not bring success. We might find inspiration in them, but we can’t really come to awakening from them. We can’t come to awakening by talking to people, unless that inspires us to seek inward. To tune into our bodies and really go inside is perhaps the most important thing a spiritual practitioner can learn.

Over countless millennia people have been searching for that ineffable something, whatever

they wanted to call it, through various forms of practice. Ultimately the highest forms involved forgetting one’s self, and various spiritual practices developed ways through which to do so. In zazen when we search wordlessly, deeply within, we begin to forget ourselves, notably through becoming aware of our assumptions as to who/what that “self” is. There are various means through which we accomplish this, the most effective being *susok’kan*, the extended outbreath, especially effective when coupled with that yearning

The earliest Christians didn’t have a name for what later became known as “God”; sometimes they referred to the Unnameable with the pronoun “she,” though in later centuries dominated by male priests, God was referred to as “He.” The contemporary Sufi Imam (Islamic priest) Jamal Rahman, writes,

*Sufis are Moslems who emphasize essence over form and substance over appearance in their spiritual practices. If the institution of religion can be compared to a cup and the water in it is the spiritual message, Sufis lament that we spend too much time polishing the outside of the cup and neglect to drink the water.*

— p. xiii, **Spiritual Gems of Islam: Insights & Practices from the Qur’an, Hadith, Rumi & Muslim Teaching Stories to Enlighten the Heart & Mind**,  
by Imam Jamal Rahman,  
2013, Skylight Paths Publishing

The 14th century Sufi poet Hafiz wrote,

*We have all come to the right place.  
We all sit in God's classroom.  
Now  
The only thing for us to do, my dear,  
Is to stop  
Throwing spitballs for awhile.*

—p.41. **I Heard God Laughing:  
Renderings of Hafiz,**  
by Daniel Ladinsky

Islam forbids images of God; how can one picture what is beyond pictures? In order to help his students not to get attached to forms, the Buddha, as well, forbade the creation of images of himself. And so the very first images in Buddhism were of the burial stupa, where his bones were supposedly interred.

At Mountain Gate, above the altar we have a scroll, brushed by Harada Shodo Roshi for Mountain Gate, in lieu of a Buddha figure. It reads, "Out of not one thing arise the 10,000 things." ( Standing on the altar is a figure of Kwan Yin, known as Kannon in Japanese, representing the compassion innate in everyone, whether obvious or not, and regardless of political or spiritual inclinations. When the Japanese government cracked down on imported religions—mainly Roman Catholicism introduced by Portuguese missionaries—and required all Japanese citizens to be listed members of a Buddhist temple and maintain a Buddhist altar in their home, Japanese Catholics placed a figure of Kannon on their altars—Maria Kannon, representing the profound compassion of Mary, Mother of Jesus.)

Eventually over the centuries, Buddha statues did begin to appear, however. They were created in the images of the people who sculpted them; everyone is the essence of Buddha [Awakened] even as we have work to do to uncover it. And so the earliest Buddha images in India were fashioned after the Greek-heritage sculptors, because it was they who actually created them

in Gandharan India. If you go to Indonesia, you will see that the Buddha figures there have Indonesian facial features. In Thailand, they look like the Thai peoples. In Vietnam, they have Vietnamese facial features. There aren't many Western Buddhas as far as I know yet. For one of the dedications of the Rochester Zen Center, a very large figure of the Buddha was commissioned by a modern sculptor, to be placed in the garden. Roshi Kapleau wanted it to have a modern face that represented all peoples, but this proved to be an impossible task; the final result has no facial features. It wasn't as successful as had been hoped, still, it is possible that it might help people understand that **every** being IS Buddha.

Every being has this awakened mind, whether it is called Buddha or not—that it is called God, that is called Allah, that it is called Pure Essence, the Unnameable, Mu, our Original Face, or any other of many names. Although throughout the world now, Buddha figures abound, in Islam that mandate not to picture Allah has remained in place, and except for depictions of the Virgin Mary in Catholic Christianity, and depictions of Jesus Christ, largely it is crosses that decorate Christian churches, Roman Catholic or otherwise. And again, there is a really good reason for this: Our True Nature cannot be pictured.

Though there is nowhere "It" isn't, the Unnameable can only be recognized through inner search, even as there actually is no 'inside', as there is no 'outside.' It is closer to us than our own eyeballs. Someone long ago once said, "The eye with which I see God is the eye with which God sees me."

Since time immemorial, we human beings have been searching for this ineffable, unnameable something. We have called "it" different names in order to communicate with each other. And of course over time this search developed into specific religions. Yet as well, the teachings and practices of many of those religions have become frozen into dogma, making the essence

originally taught in them more difficult to access.

As was said earlier, the only way we can come to awakening, or know God intimately, experience our True Nature—whatever you want to term it—is to forget ourselves. In Turkey, the Mevlevi—known as the “whirling dervishes”—experience this by turning to the mournful sound of the nose-flute. Jews throughout the world search through prayer and other means. Various spiritual groups use meditation of different types. To forget ourselves deeply enough in prayer, allows a deep Understanding that comes forth. Zikir—recitation of the names of Allah, in Islam, zazen and chanting in Buddhism, Gregorian chant and prayer in Christianity: In every religion, there is some means for forgetting ourselves. Long ago an unnamed Christian wrote a guide, **The Cloud of Unknowing**. It is about becoming so present with whatever is, allowing oneself to be forgotten through allowing oneself not to know and yet continuing to search without words, that who we think we are, who we assume we are can be forgotten. And when that is forgotten, a major mountain has been dissolved—a mountain that otherwise stands in the way of comprehending our Original Face, experiencing Mu, knowing truly who we really are, meeting God face to face—except there actually is no external God outside of “me” and no “me” to face.

It’s very, very difficult to express this in words, but let me share the words of Wang Po. Known as Obaku in Japanese, he was a great Zen master Rinzai’s master in ancient China. This pretty well sums it up:

*All Buddhas and all ordinary beings are nothing but the one Mind. This Mind is beginningless and endless, unborn and indestructible. It has no color, no shape. It neither exists nor doesn’t exist. It isn’t old or new, long or short, large or small. Since it transcends all natures, limits, and comparisons. It is what you see in front of you. If you think about it, immediately you are mistaken. It is like the boundless Void*

*that can’t be fathomed or imagined.*

—p.65, **The Enlightened Mind: An Anthology of Sacred Prose**, edited by Stephen Mitchell, Harper Collins Publisher, 1991

And of course “the boundless void” is not void, but is filled with potential, through which arises everything. When the karma for something is ended, then whatever that is returns to the Void, disappearing back into potentiality. That is the case for us as well. What does happen when we die? Ponder this deeply!

*The one Mind is the Buddha, and there is no distinction between the Buddha and ordinary human beings. Except that ordinary beings are attached to form, and seek the Buddha outside themselves. By this very seeking they lose it. They are using Buddha to seek for Buddha, using Mind to seek for Mind.*

—Ibid

When we try to analyze, when we try to investigate through words, through research, we’re not going to do anything except add to our own burden of words. To forget the self, that is the most important thing. As 13th century Japanese Zen master Dogen said,

*To study the Way, is to study the self. To study the self, is to forget the self. And to forget the self is to become enlightened by the ten thousand things. To become enlightened by the ten thousand things is to remove the barrier between self and other.*

And from Wang Po:

*Even if they are able to continue for a million eons they will never be able to find it. They don’t know that all they have to do is put a stop to conceptual thinking and the Buddha will appear before them, because the mind is the Buddha, and the Buddha is all living beings. It is not any less for*

*being manifested in ordinary beings, nor any greater for being manifested in Buddhas.*

—op. cit/

And we can substitute any word we want for Buddha. Buddha simply means awakened.

So here we are on this seventh day, and we have a big push ahead of us—although push is perhaps not the right word, because we don't want to get into any striving mind states. It's more about sinking deeply within. Sinking ever more deeply within, letting go the edges—searching so fully, that we do forget ourselves. And whether or not we come to an awakening tonight, is in some ways irrelevant, because the work is being done—that work is being done underground, normally beneath the conscious level. Every now and then, you may have an encounter with someone, or some other experience that makes you realize, “Oh, things have changed.” And usually it's change for the better, the more positive, even if it may feel that things are getting worse. (If it feels like you are becoming a worse person, what is actually happening is that you are becoming more clearly aware of how you have been behaving, a very important precursor to making positive change in your life.)

But there's no grading system, and that's very important to recognize. We don't come to sesshin, and take quizzes on our practice. There's no final exam; there are no grades. **It is especially important to recognize this.** And that's very challenging for people who aren't accustomed to working that way. Our whole society, except for a few pockets here and there, is geared to measure and weigh, to separate through often arbitrary measures, to determine progress. But in Zen attempting to measure assumed “progress” is meaningless. Meditation, coming to Awakening, is an ongoing journey. It's an ongoingly evolving process and sometimes it feels like we're being successful, and sometimes it feels like we're being utter failures. And unless you have a teacher to guide you through this process, you can really get caught. Please

let go the assumptions! They're meaningless and only serve to impede us.

As I have said rather often, when it feels like you're having a real struggle in practice, you're most likely actually making progress. And then there are times when it feels like you are sailing through, and practice is going great, and everything is wonderful as far as your focus—but this is actually a very dangerous place, because you can sit down and hang out there, and dampen your seeming progress. The most important thing is not to judge your practice.

This is why it has been said that faith is so very important. We're flying blind.

Faith is important in pretty much any religion. And for good reason, because what we are seeking, in any religion, is not an obvious thing. And it cannot be found in ways that made us clearly successful in our schooling. So the most important thing a person can do in Zen practice, or any practice, is not to try to estimate where you are in any assumed—and artificial—grading method. Practice can be very difficult, it can be very easy, and it can be both at different times. The most important thing is to keep going. This is why great stubbornness, if you want to call it that—persistence, patient endurance—is so important. What you are doing is reaching beyond the ordinary. And there are no guidelines for that, other than don't think about it and keep exploring. It is as if you were suddenly put into a dark room. A pitch black room. A very strange room in a very unknown place. And you are told, “OK, now you have to get out of this room.” How are you going to figure out how to get out when you don't even know there a door might be? You stumble around bumping into whatever happens to be in the room. Putting your hands out trying to find a wall, a door, a window, you search blindly, trying to find some way out. That's what Zen practice is really like. Hakuin painted a famous picture called “Three Blind Men Crossing a Bridge.” They are reaching, stooping, trying to feel their way across without



tumbling into the water beneath the bridge.

The more you can embody that practice, experience it, and reach, fueled by the yearning that has carried you into practice, eventually it will unfold and your clear awareness will grow. I think here of Flora Courtois, the American woman who was trying to find some something, some truth that was always true regardless of circumstances. Beginning in her teenage years, over time it became a very compelling search for her. She tried all kinds of outward ways of searching and finally realized that she could only find it if she went within herself, and searched there. You can't tell how to do that in words because, to say "search within", how can you describe that? It's a sinking into the yearning, that is most important, and the extended outbreath goes a long way toward the letting go that is essential in this practice. It's also essential to have faith that as you continue that long enough, gradually the veil will become thinner, so that understanding will come forth, and you will begin to see more clearly. Don't look for "enlightenment"—it is a process of unfolding, as the dawn begins with darkness and gradually the light builds.

Flora was deeply, deeply involved in this process. In fact at one point—she was in college at the time at the University of Michigan—she was seated in the center of the front row of the classroom, in front of a visiting professor from Great Britain, in some course or other. She was drawn so deeply within in her quest that suddenly she had an insight. She must have had such a surprised expression on her face, that the visiting professor halted his lecture mid-sentence to peer down at her and ask if everything was OK.

That search for a fundamental truth was an adventure but she was deeply committed to it and became even more deeply committed as time went on.

Interestingly, she had what she called a couple of "visions." In one of them she was part of a cave dwelling family in ancient times. They

decided to dare to go outside of the cave one day, instead of staying within the safety of that dark and seemingly protected place. That dark cave is a real metaphor for the human condition; so many of us live in our own cave. It's a cave prescribed—and proscribed—by society, and is invested in by most people in society. If you try to jump out of that cave, society tries to push you back in. Flora and the rest of the family went to the mouth of the cave, and she was just amazed at the vast landscape out there. She was entranced by it and eager to explore it. But to her dismay, the family decided to go back into the cave. She wrote that she realized at that point, that she was going to have to go it alone.

Remember, she was doing this in the very early 1930's, before Zen was very well known in the United States. It had come to the United States in 1896, when Shaku Soen, a Rinzai Zen monk, was invited to come from Japan and speak on Buddhism at the World Parliament of Religions. That Rinzai monk had trained at Sogenji. He came, bringing the then young D.T.Suzuki to translate for him, and they both helped Americans understand what Buddhism was. D.T.Suzuki stayed on and had a long career, writing and teaching in English in the United States. Philip Kapleau took classes from him at Columbia University; it inspired him to go to Japan and enter a training monastery in post-war Japan of the 1940's..

Beginning with the talk at the World Parliament on Religions and continuing with D.T.Suzuki's writings, interest in Zen began to trickle in, but only minimally. It wasn't until the 1960's when Zen teachers, including Philip Kapleau, began teaching Americans in America, that Zen practice began to become more widely available and more well known.

But, Flora kept searching inwardly, kept exploring within, driven by that need to find that Truth.

A second vision she had was also revealing—and inspired her even more deeply. In it she was

working in a very nondescript building. And without seeing them, she knew there were other people who were working in that building. Her work involved sitting at a gray desk, manipulating little colored blocks. But one day she turned around and was amazed to realize there was a large window facing her, through which she could see an a most enticing, beautiful view: a field filled with flowers with a stream running through, a brilliant blue sky, butterflies dancing in a soft breeze. Entranced, she walked out through the open window. It was one of those very tall windows that graced houses back in the old days. She was so excited by the experience of being in that brilliant, alive, environment, one she had never realized existed, right there at her back. So inspired, she wanted to share it with the other people working in that building. But as soon as she came back into her office, she found she had no words to describe it.

Fruits of her efforts, those two visions were the beginning of a deeper level of practice that eventually led to something much, much, much deeper—an authentic Awakening that was still alive for her twenty years later when she finally encountered Yasutani Roshi and he confirmed her experience and asked her to write about it..

How did that Awakening happen? She continued searching inwardly. And by now, as you know, she was not trying to find any answers outside of her nor searching with words. She just kept searching inwardly beyond words. She kept searching, kept searching, and then one day when she was home, and in her bedroom, she glanced at her desk and, she wrote, "*The world turned on its axis.*" Nothing was the same for her after that. She had set out to get a PhD in Psychology, but she switched it to a Master's instead. Finally, trying to figure out what on earth had happened but finding no one who understood it, she resolved not to speak of it until she met someone who would understand it. She graduated, married, had a son, and moved to southern California. Her life was filled with ease and joy.

Eventually she discovered Alan Watts, who in those days regularly had a small group of people in his living room, discussing Zen. One day Flora began to realize, that this thing called Enlightenment, that they were talking about, was what had happened to her.

From Alan Watts, she discovered Taizen Maezumi, who was just Sensei back then, and began sitting with him and his fledgling group in the basement of a church. That group became the Zen Center of Los Angeles. It was when Maezumi asked her to drive some visiting priests up to Tasajarah in northern California that she met Yasutani Roshi. Perhaps finally she had found someone who would understand that experience she'd had two decades before. And so, with Maezumi translating, she described that experience in detail to Yasutani Roshi. It was so clear to the roshi that though that experience had happened so long ago, it was still functioning in her life, still alive for her. And here's the thing about coming to awakening, it has to function.

To have an insight, no matter how shallow or deep, is of very little use other than perhaps to metaphorically grow another head on top of your own head, amplifying your ego. It has to function in your life. In other words, what you realize through these insights, through this kensho or satorii—and hopefully multiple satoris—is coming to life in your own life. Thus, when you see where you're not behaving in line with what you have realized, you pull yourself up short, and you don't behave like that anymore. You stop behaving like that. One of the most impressive things, about Roshi Kapleau was that he constantly was working on himself. I wouldn't say constantly because actually he was **always** working on himself. And whenever he discovered, when it became clear to him, that there was some behavior that he was engaging in that was not as helpful, wasn't as compassionate, was maybe caught in self image, in an ego trip—as soon as he saw that, it was gone. It never happened again. It was remarkable to observe. I watched this happen over and over again. He continued

working on himself the entire rest of his life. And this is what authentic Zen practice involves.

It's about working to **embody** any realization that we have. And to continue to deepen and open—immeasurably. Torei Enji, the great Japanese Zen master Hakuin's first Dharma successor, called it "The Long Maturation." It is an essential aspect of any spiritual practice.

You can read Flora's whole story if you want. When she died, she bequeathed the rights to it to ZCLA, where she had continued her training through the entire curriculum of koans taught in that lineage. She didn't write about her experience until Yasutani Roshi asked her to do so. I'm very grateful that she did and that it was published. It has been a huge source of inspiration to myself, and to countless other people.

After Flora died, ZCLA didn't do anything with her story for some years, until finally when they republished a book of Maezumi Roshi's writing, called **Hazy Moon of Enlightenment**, her story was included as an extra couple of chapters at the end of the book. The original published edition of Flora's story by Quest Publishing, has been out of print for decades. But if you want to read her story, get a copy of the latest edition of **Hazy Moon of Enlightenment** and you can read the whole thing. It is a never ending source of inspiration to myself, and to many others.

Hers is the true story of an American woman, a contemporary American woman, who, knowing nothing of Zen practice, through her own persistent efforts, came to a deep awakening. I knew her personally, she was a lovely, generous, curious human being. Knowing that somebody contemporary has reached that depth of awakening gives us all inspiration that we too can do it. And we can. It matters not what religion we were born into. Zen practice is one way to go about coming to awakening. But there are also stories of political prisoners imprisoned in the notorious Gulag prisons in Siberia during the Stalinist Era in Soviet Russia, having genuine

awakening experiences. Jacques Lusseyran, a French man, was a prisoner in the Nazi death camp Buchenwald and had such a deep awakening there that decades after the Second World War ended, his American students—by then he was teaching at a university in the States—were so touched by his demeanor that they asked about his history. And of course then there were Meister Eckhart, Juan de la Cruz, and countless others in Christianity. In Islam, Rumi, Hafiz, and other Sufi mystics. And there have been countless others, most of them now unknown. Regardless of our religion, coming to awakening, as it's known as in Zen, is something that every single one of us can do, if we put our minds to it. If we are determined, if we have faith, we can do it—if we persist in the search.

Although we are well into the seventh day of this sesshin I don't want to call it a final day; it's not final yet. Sesshin won't end until the Buddha's Enlightenment Ceremony tomorrow morning, during our regular chanting. So if you are up for it, sit the night through! It's amazing what can happen, even if you're sleepy, even if you're tired. And it can make all the difference in the world. However if you have been staying up all night, or a good part of the night, or waking up extremely early during sesshin, remember that—the Buddha taught the Middle Way. We don't want to go to extremes, but do we want to push the envelope; we want to go beyond ourselves, but we don't want to be extreme about it. So carry on in whatever way is optimal for you right now, whether you're attending via Zoom, or physically in the zendo. Remember that we are sitting along with millions of other people all over the world, and this support is palpable right now.

We will end teisho now, and recite the Four Vows.



*Practice is truly being open and vulnerable to everything. That much is very clear since sesshin*

—from a student

*But now I want you to understand that although in the beginning I told you to forget everything save the blind awareness of your naked being, I intended all along to lead you eventually to the point where you would forget even this, so as to experience only the being of God, It was with an eye to this ultimate experience that I said in the beginning: God is your being.*

—Chapter 12, pp 171,  
The Book of Privy Counseling



## 2022 Calendar

*In the interest of everyone's safety during the Covid-19 pandemic, anyone wishing to attend a sesshin or zazenkai in person MUST be fully vaccinated, including having had a booster shot, and be willing to wear a mask indoors. Anyone coming from out of State must either have a negative COVID test within two days of arrival, or have quarantined for two weeks in New Mexico prior to arriving at Mountain Gate.*

January 9 - Zazenkai, 9 am-4 pm, with an hour break from noon to 1 pm for lunch. The zazenkai will be Zoomed, and closer to the date the Zoom link will be emailed to those who are on the Zoom list.

January 24-31 - 7-day sesshin at Mountain Gate. Because Mountain Gate is an hour's drive from any food sources it is important for people to apply to sesshin early enough that applications are received at least a week in advance. Until further notice, all sesshins and zazenkai will be Zoomed.

February 6-13 7-day sesshin at Moun-

tain Gate. Because the October-November dual sesshins provided such an enhanced and successful zazen intensive, particularly to everyone who remained at Mountain Gate through both sesshin, we have scheduled the January and February 7-day sesshins in similar close proximity.

February 26 - Zazenkai, 9 am-4 pm, with an hour break from noon to 1 pm for lunch. The zazenkai will be Zoomed, and closer to the date the Zoom link will be emailed to those who are on the Zoom list. If you are not on that list and would like to be, please email [mountaingate1@gmail.com](mailto:mountaingate1@gmail.com) to request being added to the list.

March 13 - Zazenkai, 9 am-4 pm, with an hour break from noon to 1 pm for lunch. The zazenkai will be Zoomed, and closer to the date the Zoom link will be emailed to those who are on the Zoom list. If you are not on that list and would like to be, please email [mountaingate1@gmail.com](mailto:mountaingate1@gmail.com) to request being added to the list.

March 28 - April 4 7-day sesshin at Mountain Gate. Because Mountain Gate is an hour's drive from any food sources it is important for people to apply to sesshin early enough that applications are received at least a week in advance. Until further notice, all sesshins and zazenkai will be Zoomed.

April 10-17 7-day sesshin at Mountain Gate. Because the October-November dual sesshins provided such an enhanced and successful zazen intensive, particularly to everyone who remained at Mountain Gate through both sesshin, we have scheduled these upcoming 7-day sesshins in similar close proximity.

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

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