



# TAIL OF THE OX

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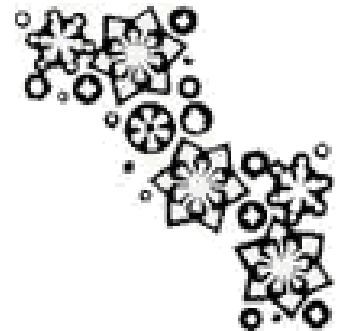
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**D**EAR SANGHA AND FRIENDS, the past year has been one of great dedication and commitment. After nearly seven years of planning, fund-raising, more planning and more fund-raising, followed by just over a year of construction, our beautiful temple at 33 High Park Gardens re-opened its doors and welcomed us all back into its heart – that heart of practice we had all carried with us and tended to while we were away. Whether we sat together next door at the Montessori school that had welcomed us so warmly, on our own in our homes, or in Sesshin with our Dharma sisters and brothers in Vermont – that powerful heart of practice continued to beat even in our absence. And, in many ways, we were never really gone. Always keeping a mindful eye on every step of the renovation, our Teacher kept guiding us, while the Dharma kept supporting us and our Sangha kept strengthening in spite of, or perhaps because of, any and all disruptions we faced. And then Spring came, and the doors opened, and we walked back in and we sat and we chanted and we worked and we ate and we laughed and we got busy. Throwing ourselves into the work of completing the final details of the renovation and preparing for the wonderful Dedication Ceremony that took place in October, we committed to a more rigorous schedule in the autumn Term Student program and pressed on with our practice in all its forms. So many hands coming together and supporting each other in the Dharma – always with a deep resolve to continue walking this ancient, wondrous, often challenging, but ever beautiful, endless path of practice.

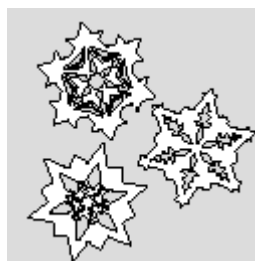
~ Bruce Roberts



## Putting Practice First

by Jeff Irving

**S**EPTEMBER IS SUCH A LOVELY TIME of year. Our neighbourhood fills with activity after a sleepy summer, the trees hint at colours soon to come, and sweaters are unpacked as cooler winds start to blow. For us Zen students,



practice at the Centre gains momentum to meet the fall schedule. And a centerpiece of that schedule is the Term Student program.

Last year, sittings and ceremonies were being held next door at the Montessori school,

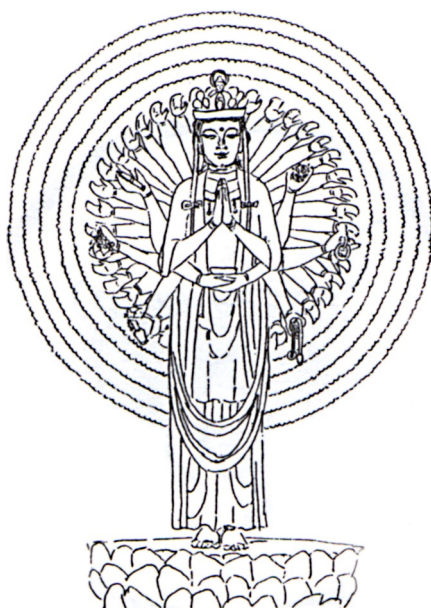
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## Practice First...

our generous neighbours. Their willingness to host our Sangha and practice during those many months warms my heart and offers yet another beautiful counterpoint to the divisions so often presented as insurmountable in our society. I still smile when I think of those little shoes paired and lined up in neat rows on the way to the makeshift dokusan room.

During that particular practice period, a number of conditions combined to limit my participation to level 1 of the Term Student program. In many previous years, I was able to participate in the second level of commitment, but what a challenging, productive, and ultimately humbling four-week experience this proved to be. Even such a modest period of increased practice helped surface all kinds of unhealthy habit-patterns. And yet, in perfect balance, the support of fellow Term Students, guidance offered by Roshi, and the practice itself combined to enable the work necessary to meet and chip away at that ego delusion. As that practice period ended, I felt a renewed appreciation for, and commitment to, these Three Treasures. An outcome shared and expressed by many during the closing

*So much work and effort unfolded during the Term Student period within our newly renovated temple – our beautiful place of practice.*



ceremony.

When details of this year's Term Student program were published, I reviewed them with a feeling of anticipation, hoping that I would be able to participate fully. Sure enough, this year's schedule of events and ceremonies was particularly full. The Term Student program would unfold over a nine week period, with three inauguration ceremonies, one for each of the three levels of commitment. This period would be given shape by the annual yard sale, and ceremonies of gratitude and of hungry ghosts. It would also feature a Bodhidharma sesshin, the long-awaited Buddha Hall dedication ceremony, and finish off with Jukai and the closing ceremony a few days later. Nine full weeks of putting practice first.

Conditions at home and at work were as steady and undramatic as one could hope. Sarah and I sat in front of the calendar, looking for other commitments that would need attention and some coordinated planning. Attending the Bodhidharma sesshin wouldn't be possible, but everything else would be. I asked "Well, what do you think? Nine weeks is going to be a stretch." Sarah summed things up nicely by simply saying "Go for it!" I double-checked my commitment

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## Practice First...

form and sent it off to Roshi.

We formed a small group of three students pledging our commitments to Roshi and the Sangha at the first inauguration ceremony. A strong feeling of intimacy and responsibility was operating. But we felt far from alone as the entire Sangha was already building momentum as the Bodhidharma sesshin approached. Three weeks later, a large group of term students entered Level 2 of the program. Five weeks later, the Level 1 cohort joined in. Those not formally in the program continued their practice alongside us in the Zendo and Buddha Hall. Practice at the

Centre was in full swing.

So much work and effort unfolded during the Term Student period within our newly renovated temple — our beautiful place of practice. Morning sittings were so well attended. A strong, healthy, and determined practice energy was tangible. Each weekend offered a new opportunity to bring the week's work together, to breathe life into a ceremony, then wipe all traces clean before continuing our day-to-day practice commitments. The Buddha Hall Dedication ceremony stands out to me as particularly wonderful, because it was shared with

Roshi Graef, Sensei Martin, and so many of our dharma brothers and sisters who made the long journey from Vermont.

It's impossible to do justice in such a short article to what unfolded over the course of this Term Student period. Perhaps it's enough to say that the Tuesday evening group meetings consistently featured students expressing feelings of gratitude. Gratitude for our teacher, for this practice, for our Temple, and for each other. Let's continue down this path of practice together, with feelings of gratitude and expressions of generosity. ॐ



## Everyday Metta: On Getting Unstuck

by Deirdre Flynn

**M**Y HUSBAND IS ALARMED by the idea of sitting cross-legged in silence facing a wall, so when I invited him to take Roshi Henderson's Metta Bhavana (loving-kindness) course with me, I led with the flyer. Surely its calming pastels, pretty flowers and inspiring promises would outweigh that single bold-faced noun, **Meditation**. But before the leaflet even reached the kitchen counter, he asked, "Are they going to make me meditate?" I looked down at the picture of Kannon, and nudged the flyer toward him. If she couldn't convince him, who could? He nodded thoughtfully as he studied the fine print, lingering, I suspected, at the line, "Includes meditation instruction, practice and discussion." Perhaps not altogether helpfully, I blurted out, "There are chairs!" At this he looked up and said, "At least we'll be together during the drive."

I don't recall what I said next, but I do recall how I felt, because even as I write these words three months later, I experience a similar feeling. Only now, after taking Roshi's course and integrating what I learned about Metta and the practice of lovingkindness into my daily life, I understand and appre-

ciate the transformative power of this feeling – the feeling that arises through the deliberate, attentive practice of Metta Bhavana. What's more, I am gradually developing more skillful ways to cultivate and direct this feeling of lovingkindness and compassion toward both myself and others. And I have to say this is really coming in handy at the moment.

When I say "at the moment," I mean right at this very moment as I'm typing these words. For six months I've been stumped by the longest, deepest, widest writer's block I've ever experienced. So, when Fran asked if I'd like to write a short personal essay about the Metta course, I immediately said, "Yes, I'd love to," before instantly thinking to myself, *But what if I can't?*

Here's the thing: I really need to be able to write because I basically write for a living, and I'm going back to work in a few weeks. So . . . yes, indeed, I truly would like to write a short personal essay, and, "Yes, Bruce, I can get you a draft within two weeks." *But what if I can't?*

*May I have well-being.*

*May I be free from internal and external harm.*

*May I be free from afflictive obstructions.*

Words have been among

my dearest friends for over half a century. They've brought me where I've never been. They've shown me what I've never seen. Maybe they can be my friends again. If I give them a little time to ebb and flow wherever it is they want to go, maybe when they come round again, they'll do what only good friends do and tell me something I didn't know I knew. *But what if they don't?*

*May I be peaceful and at ease.*

*May I be healthy.*

*May I be happy.*

By taking what I learned from the Metta course and directing lovingkindness toward myself, those words formed a Metta bridge for me. Then I just stepped right across it – tap, tap, tap – and reached this next line, here, where, I am pleased to say, I hear more words I love now calling me to cite them:

"Each word has all the magic of a living thing, and each living thing can be shaped." (James Joyce)

Metta seems to operate on a similar premise as those words by Joyce: it provides a method by which people shape words into aspirations, that, when repeated wholeheartedly in meditation, rather magically soften the heart, focus the mind, relax the body and, in the process, dissolve afflictive obstructions.

I'm not saying it works quickly or effortlessly –

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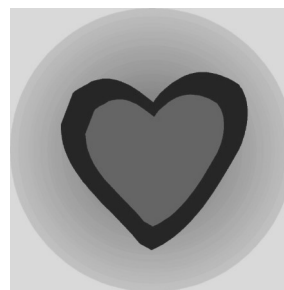
## Metta...

actually, I repeatedly deleted every word you just read as I typed my way through loads of overheated thoughts and stalled ideas. The practice of Metta has, however, given me a way to transmute common words into aspirational solvents – relaxing the grip of writer's block in a surprisingly direct and practical way.

It's true, the block is still there: seven days after I started to write what you are now reading, I am still deleting most of the words I

am typing, but the block doesn't have quite the hold on me it had before I started doing Metta. Instead, it feels a bit like being stuck in traffic with my husband every Wednesday as we drove to Roshi's Metta class. We were still stuck in traffic, but the traffic didn't get us stuck. Just as it helped carry me through the writing of this article, our new found practice of Metta – of sending lovingkindness to ourselves and all beings – gave us the power to get unstuck in traffic. ∞

*Metta –  
sending  
lovingkindness  
to ourselves  
and all beings.*



## Term Student: Finding a New Level

by Adam McDowell

**I**FLOATED ON THE PERIPHERY of the Toronto Zen Centre sangha for years, on and off. Sometime earlier this year though, I started coming more often. As we walked from the Montessori school to a work period at the Centre one sunny Sunday morning, Roshi said something along the lines of having noticed me around a few times recently. I said I'd run out of excuses not to come to the Centre. He smiled, and said that's an important step in one's practice.

In the middle of October, I went a step further. On the

last day to submit a form to sign up for term student level one, I hesitated over the piece of paper, wondering whether I was ready to make a set of firm commitments to the Sangha – even modest ones, in my case. For years I had disappointed myself by making private resolutions to deepen my involvement, only to fall short.

There must be others like me: people who practice Zen to some degree (perhaps primarily alone, at home), but are shy or reticent about actually connecting with the community of people on the same

path.

What keeps us away? Excuses, valid and otherwise, certainly come into play. But I would guess the biggest factor is self-doubt – namely, the sense of intimidation that can arise when a novice encounters more experienced members, who can come off as impossibly disciplined and self-possessed – and intimately familiar with each other. A newcomer can feel like an outsider, a person who doesn't necessarily feel they belong with this tight-knit group of people who make a beautiful Zen Centre hum along like clockwork.

You wonder whether you

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## Term Student...

*No one who has done zazen will be surprised to hear that I found wellsprings of wisdom and patience inside myself.*

deserve a place here.

For everyone who, like me, has been dipping their toes into the sangha without really taking the plunge, the good news is: You do belong, and if you want to advance at last, sign up for the term student program. It worked for me.

Sitting every day, chanting, coming to the Centre more often: I don't think I really have to sell anyone reading this newsletter on the virtues and benefits of these things. (The term student period coincided with some significant challenges in my life; but no one who has done zazen for any length of time will be surprised to hear that I found wellsprings of wisdom and patience inside myself to get over the hurdles.) It was a welcome, eye-opening experience for me.

The unexpected highlight was the term student meetings — specifically the moments when members admitted to setbacks and interruptions to their practice. In those admissions of failure and vulnerability, I recognized my own challenges in making Zen practice a more central and con-

sistent part of my life. It made the sangha seem more approachable, everyone in it more relatable and human, and, paradoxically, it made the way seem more attainable.

During the term student closing ceremony, when I blurted out “You were all wonderful,” what I ultimately meant was that you're not perfect. And for me, that was the perfect realization. For a person who's just becoming a member of the family, your imperfections can feel like permission to belong. What a gift! Now: How many other people out there are finally ready to receive it, after lingering at the threshold? ∞



## Creating a Home Altar

by Fran Turner

**A**S WE ENTER INTO A NEW YEAR, we often make commitments/resolutions to strengthen our practice. This might be the ideal time for you to consider a home altar if you do not already have one. A home altar can be an inspiration to your daily practice. It can serve as a reminder to bring your practice into your life and to sit at home. Since there are no set rules about a home altar, you can feel free to use your creativity. While some members are lucky enough to have a separate meditation room they can devote to their practice and to their home altar, others of us may use a nook in a space that we share with non-practicing family members.

If you are ready to create an altar, discuss it with others in your home to get their consent/acceptance. This can be an opportunity to talk about your practice and your efforts to bring it into your daily life. Sometimes family members are uncomfortable having spiritual or religious objects in their homes and you may need to start small. But that is fine. Your Zen practice is a lifelong thing and perceptions of those close to you may change as your practice deepens.

Some of the items on your home altar may include:

- ◇ A figure or picture of the Buddha or a bodhisattva
- ◇ Photos of your teacher or other spiritual teachers
- ◇ Spiritually inspiring figures, pictures or objects
- ◇ Photos of those who have passed away that you wish to commemorate or photos of others with whom you feel a special connection
- ◇ Offerings such as incense, candles, flowers, a bowl of water, fruit, and sweets
- ◇ Whatever adds to your altar's beauty and inspires your practice

Once you have your home altar set up, lighting incense, sitting, chanting and

doing prostrations in front of it will create an atmosphere of respect and reverence. Just as cleaning our temple is important, regular cleaning of your altar and meditation space is important and will strengthen your commitment to practice. Remove wilted flowers; keep the water bowl fresh; clean out the incense pot.

Your home altar may change as you find figures and other meaningful items to add over the months and years. You may also discover you feel less spiritually connected to some of those objects on your altar and wish to remove them after a while. With your care and attention, your altar will evolve just as, with care and attention, your practice will deepen. ∞





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## Famine Relief Figure

by Jim MacKinnon

**M**ANY OF US HAVE BEEN INSPIRED by the beautiful and profound bust of a starving child which graces the altar during famine relief ceremonies. Not many people know that this figure was created by one of Canada's greatest modern sculptors. John Fillion was a sculptor and professor of fine arts at the University of Guelph. He joined the Toronto Zen Centre in the 1970s.

John's path to Zen was an interesting one; growing up a devout Roman Catholic, he attended UofT, where he won renown as a pool player. Although a Canadian, he enlisted in the US Army and served in Korea with the 82nd Airborne. After leaving the military, he became interested in art and graduated from the Ontario College of Art in 1962. From the late 1960's, John taught in the Fine Arts faculty at Guelph.

His relatively small body of work was collected by some notables, including the jazz great Oscar Peterson. A major work of



his, a large bronze reclining male torso, can be seen in front of the office tower at 95 St. Clair West.

While teaching and sculpting, John studied karate, and like many of us he was eventually led from there to the practice of Zen. In the early 1980s, he created the bust of a starving child specifically for Famine Relief Ceremonies at the Zen Centre. It was presented to Roshi Kapleau during a reception in his honour, and Roshi was deeply impressed; several Sangha members will remember him silently kneeling before it for a long time. Roshi Kapleau and John soon began a series of discussions concerning sketches by Roshi for a new Buddha figure which would blend Eastern and Western cultural elements. This resulted in the large Universal Buddha figure which can be seen today in the garden at the Rochester Zen Centre.

We are truly fortunate to have this poignant work of art to inspire us at one of our most beautiful and meaningful ceremonies. ~

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### The Storm

*Now through the white orchard my little dog  
romps, breaking the new snow  
with wild feet.  
Running here running there, excited,  
hardly able to stop, he leaps, he spins  
Until the white snow is written upon  
In large, exuberant letters,  
A long sentence, expressing  
The pleasures of the body in this world.  
  
Oh, I could not have said it better  
myself.*

~ Mary Oliver (1935—2019)