



TAIL OF THE OX

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AS WE FIND OURSELVES arriving at what is hopefully the end of an extremely challenging time, there is much to reflect on and to be grateful for. Fifteen months ago, when the Centre officially closed its doors, no one had any idea how long they might stay shut—but stay shut they have—and yet, so much activity. Life and practice have carried on and a whole new set of connections have been formed. Who would have thought when the pandemic began that there would be multiple sesshins, several with over a hundred participants, that would bring together Sangha members from Vermont, Costa Rica, Toronto and all around the world—all of us zooming in from our own home zendos. From daily zoom sittings and ceremonies, to teisho, dokusan and so much more, our dedicated teachers and so many of our Sangha sisters and brothers have stepped in to help keep us on the path. But there has also been great sadness—the passing of our beloved Sangha brother, Schoel, and our dear Vermont Sangha sister, Tian, were made even more difficult by the physical separation that prevented us from grieving together—and the millions who have died, fallen ill, or lost loved ones and livelihoods. And so we recommit, with every breath, to staying the course—to continuing to walk together along this difficult, beautiful endless path of practice. And we wait patiently for the doors of our Centre to open once again and for the chance to great each other face-to-face and hug-to-hug. ~ Bruce Roberts



Zoom Sitting from Afar

by Allan Bitz

LET'S TRY A THOUGHT EXPERIMENT. Let's imagine that we were caught in this pandemic shutdown from early 2020 to now. Then imagine that, during that time, none of us had been able to go to the Centre for practice and we were all cut off from the Centre and our teacher, except for a few occasional emails. I am not saying it would be good, bad or ugly, but I am asking everyone to imagine

what our world would have been like without Zoom.

For me at least, I imagine it would be a much more hollow period for my practice. Zoom changed everything.

Prior to the pandemic, for me, living in Woodstock, I could almost never go to regular sittings. Now I can...virtually. In the past I could only go to sesshins and I went to all of

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From Afar...

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them, in Toronto and Vermont. But without Zoom, sesshins too would have been cut off. So there very likely would have been no (or very little) contact for me with the Centre and the Sangha. With Zoom I can go to both regular sittings for the first time, and also sesshins, albeit virtually. Please notice I did not say "only" virtually. We should probably try to keep an open mind about new opportunities.

Zoom is a magical blessing, in so many ways, for all of us in this downtime of pain and golden opportunity (as Roshi called it early on). Zoom sittings (and sesshins) are much better than we might have predicted. True,

the sesshins may not be quite as powerful as they are in person, but these virtual sesshins have their special advantages, like not having to pack and travel and more. For me at least, the regular sittings are a whole opportunity (that I have not taken full advantage of yet, to be honest) that I did not have until now. Zoom is a blessing if you are really practicing from afar.

(I have talked to a Tibetan Lama who can Zoom visit

directly with his teacher(s) in northern India without having to go thru the psychic exertions of "Seeing the Guru from Afar", i.e. using out of the body travel, as was often the only way in the mountains and valleys of Tibet. He says it is way better than email.)

Of course, there are some problems using Zoom, but I will give just one. While, "Zoom fatigue" has not been a problem for me, my main challenge is that while I can see and relate to all of you whom I know and love – like Barb and Fran and Duncan and Simon andyou know who you are – it is not that easy to get to know and love those of you who I have not yet had the chance to meet in person. So, that's hard, but then without Zoom it would be that much harder still. ❧

Zoom is a
blessing if you
are practicing
from afar



Barbara's Temple Night Altar

Tuning in to Temple Night

by Barbara Lamb

TEMPLE NIGHTS ARE A VERY SPECIAL EVENT at the Toronto Zen Centre. Traditionally held over two nights preceding the spring Jukai, these inspiring evenings are dedicated to devotional practices, with the main floor of 33 High Park Gardens transformed into a resplendent Buddha Field. Altars are decorated with sumptuous fabrics, beautiful flower arrangements, fruit, sweets and tea, and presided over by a wonderful array of figures. A particularly beloved altar is the one displaying figures belonging to members. In the flickering candlelight, participants move quietly from altar to altar, sitting for a time at each one, offering incense, making prostrations. Periodically there is soft chanting, and at the end a special circumambulation. On the last night, in the Opening the Eye ceremony, Roshi addresses our cherished Home figures and rededicates them to practice.

Temple Night in 2020 was scheduled for early April, at which time the Centre had already been closed due to Covid 19. Not wanting to cancel the event, Roshi came up with the idea of members creating altars in our own homes, and Simon organized a schedule so that we could visit each altar in turn via Zoom. We began and ended in the Zen Centre and during the course of the night sat before altars in 14 homes, one of which was in Japan!

The experience was deeply moving. The uniqueness of the altars, the fascinating ways that they were decorated and the glimpse they afforded us into each other's practice space was so comforting during this unsettled time. For some of us it was our first time setting up an altar at home, guided by an article which Roshi posted on the website early in the pandemic.

The 2021 Temple Night was held via Zoom at the Zen Centre. Roshi, Bonnie and Simon put together six beautiful altars, all housed in the Buddha Hall, each with its own dedicated camera. By "pinning" the view, one could focus on a particular altar and have the sense of actually sitting in front of it, watching the incense rise, admiring the skillful arrangement of offerings and gazing at the faces of Buddhas, Bodhisattvas and Ancestors.



Kannon Altar on Temple Night

*During the course of the night we
sat before altars in 14 homes,
one in Japan!*

One highlight was the Kannon altar. Our beloved Avalokitesvara figure was flanked on one side by the graceful Kannon figure given to us by Roshi Rafe Martin and the Endless Path Zendo during the Buddha Hall Dedication Ceremony. On the other side was our new Senju, the Thousand

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Temple Night...

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Armed Kannon holding in her hands tools for helping sentient beings.

Being a Zen student during a pandemic has been an incredible experience, to witness how the rounds of our practice life - daily sittings, sesshin, memorial services and ceremonies - are still available to us in the midst of a lockdown. It has been so interesting and inspiring to

see these events in our calendar reinterpreted for an online format. Perhaps one benefit of this past year has been the necessity of adaptation, breathing new life and creativity into practice.

Having Temple Night back in the Temple is a promise: though we are still practicing at home, the lockdown will lift and we will sit together once again. What a joyful day that will be. *o*



the milky moon has no rivers
just dusty seas
named in a dead language -
perfect repositories
for faint hopes
and faceless fears

but you, restless river,
pull hard, clear and mean
at my most cherished
and extravagant retributions -
leaving me knee deep
washed clean, and watching
you laughingly carry
my swords to the sea

mia burrus

Taking Refuge in a Shed

by Eric Demore

Address directly!

— Susan Sontag (1933–2004)

Look directly!

— Bassui Tokushō (1327–1387)

IT'S A MODEST SHED. Nothing fancy. You won't find it featured in any home & garden magazine. It's dusty, and it's musty, but what can I say? It houses garden tools and the occasional family of squirrels. It's not the Ritz. It's a shed.

I guess you could say the shed is climate-controlled, which is to say it's controlled by the climate. Thin walls and a leaky roof mean conditions in the shed reflect the weather. Inside is outside.

Early in the pandemic, when my partner and I began working from home, I turned to the shed for a quiet place to write. I swept the floor and washed the window and cleared the workbench to serve as a makeshift desk. Above it on the wall I used a sharpie to scrawl some writing advice by the American essayist Susan Sontag:

SPECULATE,

RUMINATE,

ADDRESS DIRECTLY

As the days shortened and the nights cooled, I brought in a space heater to cut the chill seeping in through the shed's permeable shell. By autumn, it became clear the heater wasn't going to cut it. If I wanted to keep working here, I would need to renovate. Otherwise, come December,



The shed

the shed would be an icebox.

In this way, though the weather was still fine, I had winter on my mind.

But how does one winterize a shed, exactly? For generations, my colonial ancestors built log cabins to survive unforgiving boreal winters. I'd inherited their scoliosis. Why could I not have inherited their knack for building shelter, too?

I envisioned the steps. Okay, I thought, the walls go first. Then pink stuff, poly, plywood, prime, paint. Straightforward, I reasoned.

Then I speculated:

Was plywood too cumbersome? Drywall too messy? Cedar smells nice: too pricey? Would I need a table saw? Buy or borrow? And which insulation? three-inch or four? Should I spring for the sound-proof kind? Why does the roof leak but only sometimes? What if I found water damage? Or termites? Or mold? Did I want to know what's behind these walls?

And ruminated:

Am I in over my head? Should I hire someone? Could I even afford it? Couldn't I write in the house? Maybe the shed was fine as is. Maybe I couldn't take on this project right now. Maybe it would be best to put it off, again.

Speculation, rumination: solid advice for building a novel, but pretty much useless for building anything else.

No. The voice seemed to well from deep within

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Refuge...

(Continued from page 5)

me. From my very bones. No, it said. No more waiting. No more excuses.

It was time.

And so, one afternoon last fall, guided by the resolve to confront this challenge — directly — I picked up a hammer. And in one swift, unthinking motion, I drove its face into the wall. Words and walls came apart, throwing up dust and doubt.

See, there was more on the mind than just winter. The effects of the pandemic — months of self-isolation, the news cycle's relentless ticker-tape of human suffering — left me feeling untethered, dissatisfied, anxious.

I began to sit again. I'd attended a workshop at the

The day I picked up the hammer, you see, was the day I signed up for sesshin

Centre years ago, and have been meditating on-and-off for over a decade. But a laundry list of excuses kept me from consistent practice.

On learning that the TZC had pivoted (like much of the world) to Zoom, I decided to log on one morning. Then again the next morning. And the next. I relished the discipline required to show up daily, and the synchronous act of sitting with others doing the same.

In the weeks that followed

I leapt into practice. I re-read Three Pillars, procured a robe, and started sitting in the shed. What had been a quiet place to write was now an ideal place to sit.

After attending Jukai, I braced myself for the virtual Rohatsu sesshin, for the challenge of what lay ahead, and for the all-but-certain discomfort of sitting in one-pointed concentration over several days. So while my first experience of sesshin promised a number of hurdles, I wanted to make sure hypothermia would not be one of them ...

The day I picked up the hammer, you see, was the day I signed up for sesshin. These two actions cannot be separated. It marked the beginning of a preparation.

In the weeks that followed, the work progressed. Materials came together and the shed became a construction site. The leak was found and patched, the insulation cut and inserted, the walls replaced. The smell of paint was still fresh when I took my seat for opening ceremony.

Sesshin was — well, you know.

With a first sesshin under my belt, I approached Roshi and asked him to take me on as a student. Our dialogue had been entirely limited to email and Zoom. What

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Shed before | Shed after



Eric outside the shed

Sesshin in the Time of the Pandemic

by Fran Turner

ON FRIDAY, MARCH 13, 2020, our working person's sesshin at the Toronto Zen Centre concluded. That same day the first covid-19 lockdown was announced in the city. With the ensuing restrictions on face-to-face gatherings, it felt as though our TZC sesshin morphed into a city-wide one.

Almost immediately--the following Monday -- the Zen Centre began to Zoom our daily sittings. The strong attendance at the virtual sittings in the early weeks demonstrated a deep need among the Sangha to stay connected while following the covid-19 restrictions. In June, Roshi Henderson organized our first three-day online retreat.

The virtual retreat was different from a "real life"

This support
has encouraged
and sustained
our practice



one. Instead of sitting in the zendo with our Dharma brothers and sisters, our faces peered through little squares on Zoom from our home zendos.

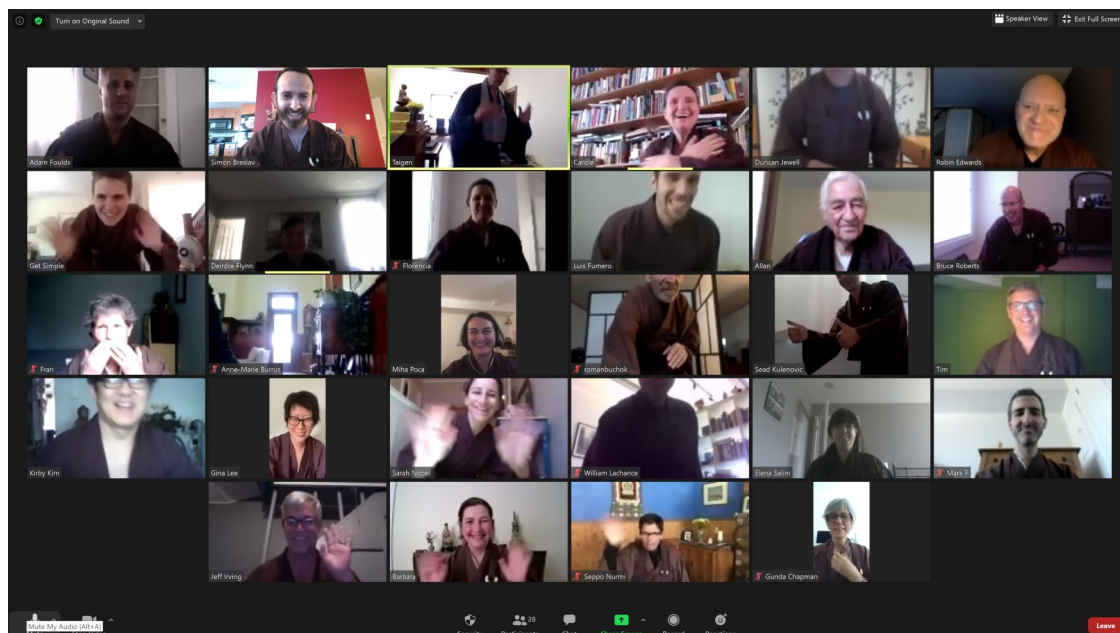
Despite the shortcomings, a virtual retreat from a home zendo was infinitely better than no retreat. One of the challenges

was figuring out how to navigate the multiple distractions of home life during extended online sittings. With the help of my husband, we created a sesshin-like environment navigating dog walks, meals and schedules. And it seemed many others managed to do this as well.

Over the past fourteen months, we've been able to hone our online home sesshin organization skills since we've had several. Roshi Graef and the residents of the Vermont Zen Center arranged three- and four-day online sesshins for the Triple Sangha, while Roshi Henderson has arranged other virtual sesshins at the TZC.

Our Triple Sangha has surely been grateful to sit for these extended periods with our teachers and the 60, 70 or more

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*"What would people look like
if we could see them as they
are,
soaked in honey, stung and
swollen,
reckless, pinned against
time?"
— Ellen Bass*

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Pandemic Sesshin...

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practitioners from Canada, the US, Costa Rica, Germany and elsewhere. Roshi Rafe Martin and students from Endless Path Zendo have also joined us for a number of these sesshins. This support has encouraged and sustained our practice.

While falling somewhat short of a "live" sesshin, one advantage of the online experience is that it has made part-time attendance accessible for more members. The taut and concentrated energy of extended periods of sitting each day permeates our homes. And, since we strive to bring our practice fully into our daily lives, virtual sesshins give us a powerful nudge to practice right where we find ourselves.

During virtual sesshin, many

members of the Triple Sangha have been able to participate—some of whom might not have been able to travel to Vermont or Toronto had the sesshins been held in-person. Vast distances shrunk as we sat together thanks to this amazing technology. The focus and practice during Zoom sesshins surely blesses our homes. Who knows the many ways we quietly transform ourselves, our families, housemates and homes by participating in virtual sesshins during this challenging time!

Hands palm to palm with gratitude and love to our teachers for all their work in making these virtual sesshins as rich as can be. Hands palm to palm to our Sangha for keeping the virtual connection strong. May we sit together soon. ☸

Refuge...

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would the patriarchs have thought of our medium? And yet, was this moment terribly different from the bare-footed aspirant showing up on foot at the temple doors? I was humbled when Roshi agreed, reminding me that while dokusan could begin, an 'official' ceremony will take place when it is safe to do so.

One morning after sesshin, when formal sittings were paused over the holidays, I found my place on the mat and logged on to find the screen populated with now-familiar faces. Faces filling boxes,

boxes filling the screen. The Sangha, each and together showing up, engaged in practice.

In the corner of my own box, the space heater whirrs. Outside these walls, with winter upon us, the chickadee trills. The chickadee knows winter; it is at home in it.

It finds me grateful. For refuge. For the job that is finished. And above all, for the work that is begun. ☸

