



Water Wheel

Being one with all Buddhas, I turn the water wheel of compassion.

—Gate of Sweet Nectar

How to Grow a Lotus Blossom

by Wendy Egyoku Nakao



A monk asked Chimon, "What is it when the lotus has not yet come out of the water?"

Chimon said, "Lotus flowers."

The monk asked, "What is it after the lotus has come out of the water?"

Chimon replied, "Lotus leaves."

—Blue Cliff Record, Case 21

In this second year of the Covid-19 Pandemic, we are plunging into the *Lotus Sutra*, a renowned Mahayana text. Composed over a span of a hundred years, about seven to eight hundred years after the parinirvana of Shakyamuni Buddha, the *Lotus Sutra* contains many shocking revelations which we now consider staples of the Mahayana path. An important revelation is the path of the bodhisattva as the main path of practice—specifically, its inclusivity, that everyone, without exception, can realize Buddhahood. Extending this further, you and I, in the midst of our lives now, can take up the vow to make it happen. In the midst of this Pandemic, let us view this time as a Buddha field.

The *Lotus Sutra* itself is considered as the body of the Buddha. Regarding a sutra as the very body of a Buddha is not uncommon in the Mahayana tradition. Even so, the *Lotus Sutra* is afforded a particular kind of reverence. For example, when we chant the Names of the Buddha during meals, closing ceremonies, or even funeral services, we find *Saddharma Pundarika Sutra* among the Buddha's names. This is the name of the *Lotus Sutra* in Sanskrit. Hence, the *Lotus Sutra* is regarded as a name of the Buddha. The title itself is also regarded as encapsulating the entire Sutra.

The Japanese title of the *Lotus Sutra* is *Myo Ho Ren Ge Kyo*—The Wonderful (*Myo*) Dharma (*Ho*) Lotus (*Ren*) Blossom (*Ge*) Sutra (*Kyo*). This title is chanted as a mantra by the Nichiren Buddhist sect—“*Namo-Myoho-Renge-Kyo*.” In the mantra, the word *namo* is the same word as in *Namo ki e Butsu*, or “Be one with Buddha.” *Namo* or “Be One”



The Lotus art sculpture donated by Jill Shinjin Peters.

means “Plunge!” Plunge into Buddha— enter completely into Buddha! You and I enter the Wonderful Dharma of the Lotus Blossom Sutra completely. This supreme Sutra is worthy of you; you are worthy of it. Why? Because you are it. Let's take a look at what we are by examining the title itself.

Myo-Ho means “wonderful dharma.” What is a wonderful dharma? It is that which defines reality. In other words, it is everything—all forms, all phenomena, all manifestations of life. Although you yourself may consider certain dharmas (as defined above) as wonderful and other dharmas as not wonderful, this sutra tells us that everything, without exception—including every person without exception, is a wonderful dharma. The dictionary

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LOTUS BLOSSOM (Continued from page 1)

definition of the word “wonderful” is “inspiring delight, pleasure, or admiration; extremely good; marvelous.” This can easily lead us to eliminating all that this definition does not apply to in our opinion, such as unethical people, cruel people, or people with radically different views that we find offensive to our own. Such persons are not wonderful to us from a conventional or personal viewpoint. They are, however, in essence “wonderful” because each is thoroughly penetrated through by its essence. *Myo-Ho* points to the fact that a dharma—any and all dharmas—is wonderful because it is *precisely essence in its being*. Why is such a view useful to us? Because this fact pierces us with a big view—it speaks to the possibility and potential of fulfilling Buddhahood.

*"...Without mud, there is no lotus."
—Thich Nhat Hanh*

You yourself are a wonderful dharma. Realize the thoroughness, the completeness, of your being—the Thusness of your being—just as it is, prior to being distracted by your thoughts—your opinions, judgements, likes and dislikes—about yourself. Know yourself as that which is already pierced through by Buddhahood, as the one whose Buddhahood is predicted in the *Lotus Sutra*. Although this may seem a remote possibility to you, or at least one that creates great doubt, know that you are already included in Buddhahood. It is like the monk in the koan who asked Chimon, "What is it when the lotus has not yet come out of the water?" Chimon replies, "Lotus flowers." Already thus; already whole and complete!

This very fact of your completion as the foundation of your being also reflects other aspects of *myoho*. The great teacher Nichiren says that *myo* has three meanings. First, *to open*. Specifically that the *Lotus Sutra* opens up the meaning of all other sutras. For our purposes, we open up ourselves and our lives as the meaning of the *Sutra*. Second, *perfectly encompassing*. Each word of the *Sutra* encompasses all the other words within itself. That is true of ourselves—each of us encompasses all other beings within ourselves; we are encompassed by all other beings as well. And third, *to restore life*. The reference for the *Sutra* is that by reciting and practicing the *Lotus Sutra*, the seeds and causes of buddhahood are restored in those who have neglected them. For us, it raises awareness of the importance of our effort to nurture the Bodhi Mind.

Ren-Ge means lotus blossom and its usage here refers to bodhisattvas—as a bodhisattva, you are like a lotus plant. The lotus plant, which dates back to 5,000 BC, was esteemed in ancient Egypt and China and continues to flourish throughout Asia even today. In Los Angeles, Echo

Park lake has a section of lotus flowers, which bloom in the summer. According to the website Leading Lotus, the lotus plant's “survival has been attributed to its powerful genetic system that allows it to self-revive and regenerate. Scientists in 1990 were able to re-germinate a 1,300 (+/- 270) years old seed back to life, after laying dormant. That is equivalent to reviving a frozen cave man.” Due to its remarkable characteristics, such as its genetics, rooting in mud, and stalks that emerge five feet from the water to bloom as a spectacular flower high above the surface of muddy water, the lotus flower has symbolized spiritual journeys for centuries.

The lotus plant develops a complex and deep root system in the murkiest mud and muck, roots vast enough to sustain the emergence of a stalk with large leaves resting on the surface of muddy water and a flower three to five feet above the water's surface. The Venerable Thich Nhat Hanh wrote, “The Lotus grows out of the mud. Without the mud, there is no Lotus. Suffering is a kind of mud, that we must use in order to grow the flower of Understanding and Love.” The mud is the hard stuff in our lives, and it's in rooting in the muck that we find the nutrients—the resources and strength—that are the hallmark of spiritual growth, of becoming a Buddha. The Buddha seed grows continuously in the muck because you have an innate capacity to seek out the very nutrients that enable you to grow.

Upon reflecting on mud, I am reminded of a libation ritual of reconciliation that I witnessed recently. Soil had been collected from the spot where Mr. Lee Snell, a Black man, had been lynched in Florida. As part of the program, water in elegant stemmed glasses was poured into the soil in a ritual act of libation. At that moment, I felt my own ungloved hands turning the wet soil, making mud, stirring the essential nutrients to encourage something to grow from the spot of such an inhumane act of racial violence. So, too, for you—the buddha seed takes root in the mud of your life. You are of mud and, at the same time, you are not defined by it. As Shakyamuni Buddha said, “As a lotus flower is born in water, grows in water and rises out of water to stand above it unsoiled, so I, born in the world, raised in the world having overcome the world, live unsoiled by the world.” This interesting quotation reflects an early teaching. From the viewpoint of the primordial or eternal Buddha of the *Lotus Sutra*, this might be rephrased to read, “As a lotus flower is born in mud, grows in mud and rises out of muddy water unsoiled, so I, born in the world, having drunk deep of the nutrients of suffering, have realized buddha essence and act to help everyone to awaken.”

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After the Fall

by Eihei Nanfū Peter Levitt



Peter with his wife Shirley

My wife Shirley and I live on an island off the coast of the larger Vancouver Island in British Columbia. It's where we raised our son, Tai. As if being surrounded by water on this island is not enough, our home in the woods is also situated on a lake. And because we live in this part of the world, there is often a good deal

of rain to nourish the forest that surrounds our home and make everything green. Often people remark that the air here feels unusually soft and moist, and that the leaves and needles on the pine and maple, alder and cedar that we consider our neighbours are so vividly green. "It's just so benevolent and nourishing," some have said, "as if every breath is an entire meal!"

For us, Spanish poet Federico Garcia Lorca expressed the feeling this soft, moist world provides when he wrote, *Verde, que te quiero verde*: Green, how I love you green. We feel so fortunate to live where we live and call it home.

But we have all lived long enough to know that a seeming paradise is never that alone; the trees are tall, at times the shadows they cast can be dark and long.

One recent January afternoon, I was walking on our deck with an aluminum ladder in my hand. I was going to do a quick climb to see if the roof repair I had made against the coming rain had held. As I walked, I noticed that parts of the northern side of the cedar deck where I was walking had grown a pervasive, almost unseen web of slippery moss, so I had to walk with great attention and care in order not to fall. But it turns out that noting something and doing it are not the same thing—in this case getting my thought all the way down to my feet—and suddenly I was flying through the air, heading for the glass wind screen that surrounds the deck, the ladder in my hand threatening to trap me against the glass; that is, if it didn't push me through entirely.

With great good fortune, the ladder went flying in another direction, and instead of striking the glass, my body struck one of the wooden support posts just beside it, but

it struck it with such force that I was knocked back toward the house in a rebound and landed on my back. Then I felt my head hit the deck with a sharp blow. This all must have happened in a matter of three seconds or less, and I was stunned. I could feel pain immediately in my back and shoulder and neck, and my head felt cracked.

After a few seconds, I realized the shock to my body and mind was severe, but I was able to ask myself, "Do I have a concussion?" Lying there supine, determined not to move, I tried to answer the question by looking up at the sky. It was a beautiful pale blue, with wisps of white clouds floating through, and, most importantly, I could see it clearly. My eyes were focusing as they should. "Okay," I heard myself say out loud. That's when I heard my breathing, which was rapid, and my heart beat, which was racing far too fast, pounding against my ribs. "I could have a heart attack," I thought, and in the next moment, "Do *za-zen*!" And, so, I did, lying there on my back, the dampness of the cold deck starting to moisten my shirt and skin.

It was a curious kind of instantaneous lying-on-a-wet-deck *zazen*. After the first few breaths, I began to hear myself say on every inhale, "I'm so lucky! I'm so lucky!" and then I'd breathe out, releasing the shock into the air. I was saying this in my mind, of course, but after a minute of *zazen* I started to hear the words out loud, "So lucky! So so lucky!" and I noticed my breathing had already started to slow down.

That's when I heard something else. Someone was chanting. Underneath "I'm so lucky," something or someone had laid down a track of the Enmei Jukku Kannon Gyo as we sing it in our sangha, the Salt Spring Zen Circle. Our manner of chanting *Kanzeon Na Mu Butsu, Yo Butsu Un In, Yo Butsu U En* is somewhat different from the way most Zen sanghas chant because it has a melody I created for the chant when my children were young to help calm them and surround them with *Kanzeon* as they snuggled up in bed, moving softly, slowly, into the world of their dreams. And so it is more sung than chanted. This is what I was hearing.

It really was so strange, because as I focused my mind, still aware that my body was hurting, the chant/song seemed to come closer and closer to me, as if someone was walking out of the forest to help me, while singing the chant into the air. That's the sense I had as the seconds passed; with each repetition, the melodious chant was becoming a bit louder and more easily heard.

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AFTER THE FALL (Continued from page 3)

And then, slowly, I realized that it was me; I was the one chanting. Or rather, I was the one being chanted because, of course, there was no benevolent witness to my fall coming out of the forest; the chant was going on entirely in my heart, my mind. I hadn't decided to chant; not in the same way I had made the decision to do zazen to calm my heart and breathing. No. Chanting had just spontaneously begun, all on its own. In response to the shock of my fall; from somewhere deep inside, there was chanting.

As I listened, I felt the chant wrap itself all through and around me, and with a smile at how odd the mind can sometimes be, I also found myself recalling the famous dialogue about Avalokitesvara where Yunyan asks Daowu:

"What does the bodhisattva of compassion do with so many hands and eyes?" to which Daowu replies:

"It's like someone reaching back for their pillow at night."

So, Yunyan tells him, with some excitement, *"I got it! I got it!"*

And Daowu inquires, probing his response: *"What did you get?"*

"All over the body are hands and eyes," says Yunyan. *"How about you, elder brother?"*

And Daowu tells him: *"Wherever the body reaches are hands and eyes."*

Yes. *"Wherever the body reaches,"* the hands and eyes of the bodhisattva of compassion will be found. Sometimes they reach to help, bringing comfort, or food, or support of another kind, in a way that is as natural as someone reaching back for their pillow in the middle of the night, or as the life of the planet, like the green air that rises out of the forest where our family makes our home. And sometimes the bodhisattva's reach will be found in a voice.

The hands and eyes of Avalokitesvara, of Kanzeon, were chanting, and as they did, I began to feel a sense of ease that had not been there before. *"Wherever the body reaches..."* Daowu had said. That *wherever* was just right there.

I closed my eyes and lay in the chant, feeling profound gratitude for my good fortune not to have gone through the glass, not to have been knocked unconscious, but to have ended up with the gift of this chant. And, as the chant went on—for I lay there a good five minutes or more until I felt ready to try to move—I remembered Dogen's fascicle *Continuous Practice* in his Shobo Genzo. Yes.

But it's important to say that it was not just my practice that I was aware of, not at all, because I can't say with any certainty that the chant really began only after I went down. When I think about it, isn't it possible that the chant is always going on, just as the *wherever* of the body reaching, and the *so many hands and eyes* are without beginning or end in the boundless and continuous practice of what we call "this world"? And that circumstances were just lined up so that in those particular moments following my fall, the sweet Ten Phrase Avalokitesvara Chant for Prolonging

Life that invokes Kanzeon *in us, around us, and as us*, could be heard?

I feel this well might be the case. So, perhaps I can end this writing with a poem:

*Whether hoeing the garden,
or washing bottles at the well,
making soup for a sick man
or consoling someone else's child,
studying books, stacking logs,
writing to the local paper
or pulling that stubborn lamb
into our world, I hear
the song that carries my neighbor
from one thing to the next:
Earth feeds us
out of her empty bowl.*



Peter and Shirley's home with the deck showing in snow time.

Peter is a poet and translator. He is also the founder and teacher of the Salt Spring Zen Circle, in the Soto Zen lineage of Shunryu Suzuki Roshi. ZCLA often currently uses Peter's lullaby version of the Enmei Jukoku Kannon Gyo.



On the Machinery of the Mind

by Eberhard Konin Fetz



As a neuroscientist, I take the view that the neural networks in our brain form the machinery of the mind. In other words, our conscious and unconscious mental activity is mediated by the dynamic interactions between populations of neurons. The mind-brain relation is certainly a complex and still mysterious phenomenon, but there is good evidence that neural activity is the

necessary precursor for mental events. As a Zen practitioner, I appreciate the alternate view: that consciousness is the primary reality, manifesting throughout the world, and that the brain is simply a receiver of this more fundamental awareness rather than its generator. OK, fine. This is ultimately a distinction without a difference. For one thing, the brain needs to interact with the world to create mental events.

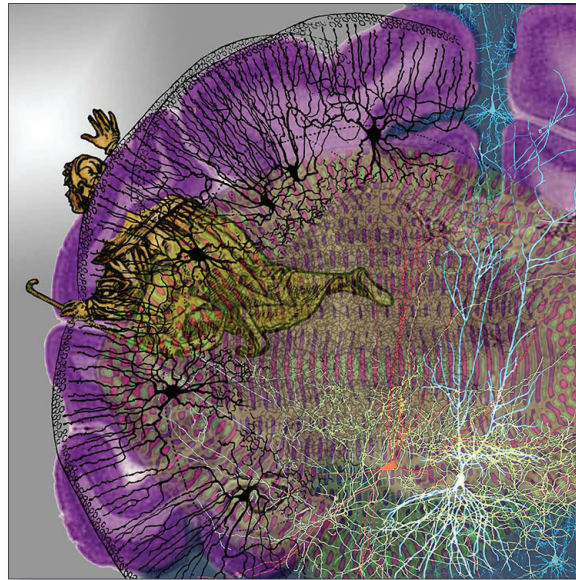
Rather than argue that point, let's consider the practical question: whether our knowledge of how the brain works can elucidate our spiritual practice. In particular, consider two examples: the neural basis of conscious experience and learning.

Many functions and quirks of the brain can be seen to have evolved for their survival value. The ability to perceive sensory inputs has obvious benefits for survival, so those ancestors whose brains had the circuitry to better represent the world lived longer to pass on their genes. And this capacity evolved to include mental representation of agency, in both others and ourselves.

Recordings of neural activity in awake subjects have revealed remarkably close correlates with the contents of conscious experience, including sensory perception, volition to move, thinking and emotions. Moreover, stimulating those neural systems can generate associated mental events. And lesioning brain areas destroys the capability for the associated functions. So this all points to the primacy of neural mechanisms as the underlying machinery of the mind. My rule of thumb is that anything we can be aware

of emerges from some associated neural activity. This includes mechanisms of attention, meditative states, awakening experiences, etc. (And more immediately: whatever is going on in your mind right now is all done with neurons.)

As any meditator who has tried to maintain attention on the breath knows, the mind relentlessly comes up with other things to attend. This “monkey-mind” tendency for attention to jump from one thing to another probably also evolved because it has survival value: in the past, an ancestor focusing on their meal and ignoring the rustling brush behind might have ended their incarnation. For today's sitter trying to maintain focus on the breath, the same neural mechanisms continuously create distracting diversions.



Awakening

These issues concern neural correlates of the contents of consciousness. What about consciousness itself? I like the current view that the brain has many systems processing information simultaneously, and while the contents of one of these reaches conscious awareness, most continue their activity in the subconscious background. And practice can help train the mind to strengthen sustained concentration.

Which brings us to learning. A basic principle of neuroscience concerns the mechanisms underlying learning. We know

that neural activity creates changes in neural connections, producing conditioning. “Neurons that fire together wire together.” This explains memory and the tenacious grip of our egoic self in our mental existence. We have become egoholics because the concept of self has been continually reinforced from birth. We are always at the center of incoming sensory events and the perceived source of behavior, as well as having our personal identity strengthened through social confirmation. The current narrative of myself with past and future is continually reinforced as the brain ruminates and strengthens these mental/neural representations. Real as it seems, the egoic self is ultimately one of our conditioned mental constructs. And since the ego has been conditioned through experience, it can also be deconstructed and unconditioned. I thought for a while that the way to liberation from the conditioned self was to

(Continued on page 8)

DANA BOOKLET

January 1, 2020 – December 31, 2020

Dear Sangha and Friends of ZCLA,

We are so grateful to all of you for your sincere practice and devoted service during this past year. The people whose names appear in this Dana Booklet have given of their time, energy, material goods and money.

We achieve nothing alone. We experience this when we deeply realize the interconnectedness of all of life. Each year, the Zen Center relies on our Dharma Training Fund and Annual Appeal to ensure that we can offer regular zazen, trainings,

programs, sesshins and zazenkais and maintain our buildings and grounds. This year, your generosity allowed the Zen Center to improve our virtual offerings. There are also sixty donors who have joined the Zen Center's Legacy Fund, donors who have remembered the Zen Center in the form of future bequests.

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LOTUS BLOSSOM (Continued from page 2)

In the koan above, the monk next asked, "What is it after the lotus has come out of the water?" Chimon replied, "Lotus leaves." Leaving aside for a moment the thrust of this koan, let's further appreciate this complex lotus plant. The leaves, which can be as large as 2 feet in diameter, are ultrahydrophobic. Water gathers dirt from the leaves and rolls off the plant. The stalk and flower rises unstained by the mud in which it roots. When the lotus flower emerges, its pod already has the seeds, which, when it is time, will fall back into the pond. At night, the flower closes and sinks back into the water—the warmth of the flower petals preserves heat so any insects inside of it will have warmth for the night. As the sun rises, the flower re-emerges above the water. What amazing resiliency! You have this resiliency, too.

Under the water, out of the water—how about it? The aspects of *before and after* are obvious to us, but Zen wisdom always asks more of us—it demands that you go both deep and broad. You can make distinctions without losing sight of the one body, the completeness of being. Yamada Roshi says that this koan is similar to the koan "What was your face before your parents were born?" What is the totality of you?

This leads us to the last word of the title, *Kyo*. *Kyo* means *sutra*. In English, the word means *thread*, that which pierces through all layers and phases of life—that which

stitches life all together.

You may think that your notions of *my-me-mine* stitch together your perception of who you are and your life itself, but the *The Lotus Sutra* and Master Chimon tells you otherwise. What is the thread that stitches your life together with all other lives? What is the thread that you are constantly pulling through all the circumstances of your life?

I read that there is a way to make threads from the lotus stem—the wonders of this plant never ceases to amaze. You are amazing, too. The murky mud is rich, nutrient-dense, and just the right temperature for growth. Root deeply and let yourself bloom! Buddhahood is guaranteed.

Roshi Egyoku is ZCLA's Head Teacher and Abbot Emeritus.

MACHINERY OF THE MIND (Continued from page 5)

identify with the conscious witness, not with any contents of consciousness. The witnessing awareness is pure, able to see what the mind produces, but separate and free. But as the Buddha observed, even consciousness itself is one of the aggregates, like sensory perception, thoughts and emotions. Indeed, identification with the witness requires the mental machinery of self-identification.

Real as it seems, the egoic self
is ultimately one of our
conditioned mental constructs.

Reprogramming the brain to escape conditioned patterns involves well-known mechanisms of neural plasticity. Particularly important is repetition. For example, thanks again to evolutionary pressures to survive, the brain tends to remember negative experiences and to neglect the positive. Like "Velcro for the bad and Teflon for the good," as Rick Hanson puts it. However, by deliberately applying neural rules for conditioning, namely extending the awareness of positive experiences, one can train the brain to experience more of the upside and to "hardwire happiness." The same goes for dealing with other conditioned delusions like ego: repeated mindfulness practice leads to separation and eventual liberation.

Given the symbiotic interaction between mind and brain, it is not surprising that spiritual practice is consistent with basic principles of neuroscience. Which means that there are many ways that our understanding of neural mechanisms can elucidate those of the mind and facilitate effective practice.

Dr. Fetz (Konin) is a member of ZCLA and a Professor in the Departments of Physiology & Biophysics and DXARTS at the University of Washington, Seattle WA.

The Corner of DisOrder

by Sunshine*

Do not suffer, Fools!
Gladly.

*autocorrect Senshin



I Am Not Responsible

by Jane Radiant-Joy Chen



In January of this year, I attended a talk on racism by a white male Buddhist teacher. This talk made me feel very uncomfortable, because it felt geared toward white people only. It triggered feelings of exclusion and invisibility, as well as physical manifestations of the body freezing up. I gathered the courage to speak during the Q&A, sharing that I felt excluded, which triggered even more fear — the fear from childhood that if I did not blend in, I would die a social death.

I was in a heightened state of near flight-or-fight for three full days, until a chat with a (white) Sangha friend helped me realize that I was carrying responsibility for this triggering. *You're the one that signed up for this; you brought it on; it was your choice...* are words all too familiar, so familiar I don't even know I'm saying them to myself. But once I realized it, once I told her out loud, "I have a pattern of taking responsibility, like it's my fault what happened, *but that's not the case right now*," I was zapped back into the present and in a moment's notice felt fine.

When one is triggered and reminded of a trauma, one leaves one's own body and relives the memory as if it were happening again. It can be physically impossible to differentiate past from present. Trauma can get relived many times; the more it is, the less a person can engage in their day-to-day life. When even white people who organize events to help eradicate racism (unknowingly) further traumatize people of color, it can feel like the triggers are coming from all directions.

I told my Sangha friend that I wanted to give the event speaker some feedback about why I felt excluded, but didn't know how. I had been too triggered to clearly discern or remember much. Also, the idea of "proving" that my feelings were justified invoked painful memories of my experiences not being believed. So I asked my friend what her experience of the event had been, and if there were any moments for her that felt geared toward white people only. She relayed a few instances during the talk when she felt uncomfortable, which I resonated with, and she very coherently expressed why. I marveled at her ability to name what happened with such clarity.

The next day my Sangha friend emailed me, saying that she had submitted feedback to the organizers of the event, which included what she had shared with me during our chat. Witnessing how triggered I was even talking about

it with her, she hoped that it might "take any pressure off you to do anything further, other than take care of all that arose for you."

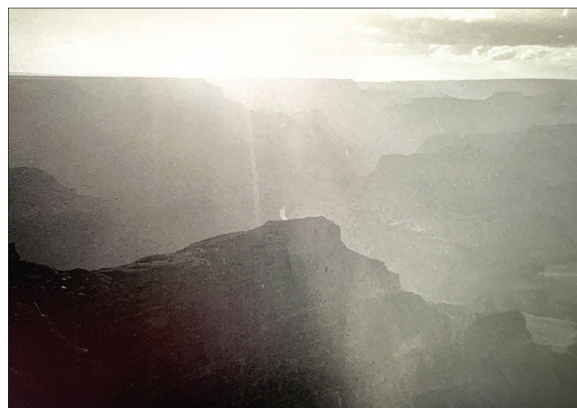
I feel a need to pause, to take in that gift.

Deep exhale.

Part of my meditation practice is accepting, really accepting, (and really accepting well) that there's nothing I need to do to change, become okay, prove myself, etc. It seems obvious to the left brain, but to truly embody it is a different story. I think all my life, from the time I started going to school, I have felt that I must endlessly prove myself to my white counterparts, never succeed, and thus continue the cycle forever. As a result, through my adult years, I've developed chronic conditions including debilitating back pain, frozen shoulder, digestive problems, chronic urticaria (hives), and most recently, arm pain for the past three-and-a-half years.

It can feel like a heavy burden to combat racism, explain myself, garner the energy to face what is. While I feel empowered to speak up, it is so nice to get a break. Really taking in this gift from my Dharma Sister, I'm feeling my body relax in a way I have only felt once before. It was during a therapy session, where I felt physically, in my body, that *I am not responsible*. It felt like, and feels like, a heavy burden was/is lifted off me, literally; my body feels relaxed and light.

So relaxed and light that typing this article is suddenly not causing arm pain, which typing usually does. Where triggers come (from all directions), so can healing.



Radiant-Joy is a practicing member of ZCLA and a member of BIPOC (Black Indigenous People Of Color) Group. (Headshot by Magdalena Wielopolska/Bird)

ZCLA Parents on Practice and the Pandemic



Tetsui, Isabella, Judah and Elana

sat sesshin together, our son might visit the grandparents or spend the day with a friend.

With the arrival of the pandemic, though, out went the visits to the grandparents and out went the playdates. Except for the unusual outdoor hike or socially distanced game, everything went online. This is, for many of us, a lonely time, and it's no less true for our kids. This has changed the outward activities of practice. Do I Zoom into that talk or do we play an evening game? Elana is heading out for a few hours in the morning -- is it time to sit with a group or is it time to make french toast? And if his friends are available online, how much screen time is that going to mean by the end of the day? Before, I could rely on a well-worn habit or that next regularly scheduled sesshin. Now, the regular activities that have supported my practice for years are no longer givens. And there's no formula for answering these questions. What I've found helpful, though, is remembering that I can pay attention, try to be open and aware of what's happening in our home, how everyone is feeling, and get a sense for what's needed right now. I certainly don't do this all the time, but when I do, I appreciate remembering that I don't need to figure it all out or have the perfect answer. I just need to pay attention and do the next thing life is asking for.



Amanda and Adam

ing Zen regularly just a few months before the pandemic

Bill Tetsui Press

Before the pandemic, the formal structure of practice in our house had settled into a rhythm: morning sittings, Zen Center visits, regular sesshins, and when my wife, Elana, would sit or attend sesshin herself, we would trade off being "parent on duty." If we

hit and felt the dharma was guidance on how to be truly present. In contrast, throughout the pandemic I've heard so much of "I just want this thing to be over." "We just need to get through this time." "I want life to go back to normal." This language could as easily be about parenting. The next phase/stage/age will be easier, right? The Zen of parenting is teaching me to sit with it. The fifteen minutes it sometimes takes to get a toddler down the stairs. "God Damn It!" says my two year old when I knock my coffee onto the floor. Thanks, kid, for the reminder of the swear word I said that one time months ago. "Read it again." And again. And again. And again. I try (and fail) every day to not just get through it. Parenting, daily zazen, and this pandemic.



Ryugen and Stella

Peter Ryugen Sample

My daughter (our first child) was born at the very beginning of the pandemic, so for me this past year has been an incredible plunge into not knowing in many ways. Being a new parent in the midst of the world turning upside

down has been a wonderful gift and at times a tremendous challenge. The phrase "nothing could have prepared me" comes up—again and again and again. My tangled web of thoughts, plans, hopes and anxieties getting swept away by the inscrutable reality of the moment: crying when seeing my daughter for the first time in the hospital; waking up in the middle of the night having barely slept to change diapers and give a bottle; rolling on the floor and playing; experiencing pure joy and love smiling together; feeling completely overwhelmed with so many competing demands and never enough time to do it all; feeling her wonder as she watches the birds in the sky. But the reality is that my practice deeply prepared me by teaching me to do just that: let go of ideas, return to the ground of not knowing, experience what is happening then and there, and take loving action. Being able to find center (or be ok not finding center) in the midst of not having control. And in turn, the experience of parenting has been a tremendous influence on my life and my practice; it is practice itself. Who needs a shout or a keisaku when your child is saying "Da da da da da da!"?

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PARENTING (Continued from page 11)

*Myōkan, Ben, and Solo***Fernanda Myōkan Schwartz Hughes**

The first time I walked into ZCLA, I pulled Sensei Senshin aside to ask her when there would be a break in the day and if there was a private place I could go to pump breast milk. I was still nursing my son. I needed to remove some of the

milk to ensure his supply and to regulate my body. Before having a child, I would check in with my body through my meditation practice and at various points through the day. When I needed to eat. Sleep. Use the bathroom. But there were large stretches of time I could ignore my physical presence and retreat into my head. After having a child, I had to pay much more attention to what was physically going on, for me and another person. My body, my heart, and my child hit me over the head with reminders whenever I checked out of the needs of the moment.

Before I ever stepped into a Zen temple, there was something ruthlessly immediate about the practice that attracted and terrified me. Becoming a parent, I found a similar ruthless immediacy. My newborn needed to be fed, his diaper changed. He cried, he woke up, he slept, he marveled. I marveled at every expression that flashed over his face as he slept. He fussed. He didn't sleep. I cried. He let me know what he needed exactly when he needed it, day and night. I let him know he was welcome by holding him when he needed to be held. Feeding him when he needed to be fed. Cooing and talking with him. Looking into his eyes and telling him he belongs here. There was no gap between his need and his communication of that need. And I did my best to keep the gaps small enough in fulfilling those needs. The days with a newborn unfolded like this. They were a persistent, deep embodiment practice. And a practice observing my mental and physical tendencies through overwhelming joy, love, exhaustion, anxiety, doubt, and storytelling. Becoming a mom has continually nudged my practice from far-off concepts to an expression of my full life. Increasingly, I've come to feel in my bones, in a way I'd only glimpsed before, that my life is continuously present at every moment and it is tied to beings around me. The relentless nature of this parent-child relationship continuously shows me that every second of my life, without exception, without breaks or gaps or time-outs, is relentlessly immediate and touches everything else. There is no way to tease out my body, breath, joy, awe, heart-break, and exhaustion from each other. Coming full circle, I'm learning my life has always been this way.

Ryan D. Schneider

The little buddha, Aviana Lily Schneider appeared at the tail end of a rocky part of my life. I had never felt so deeply about being in the presence of another human being before. Tears flowed out of me; a feeling of love and awe surfaced like I had never

*Ryan and Aviana*

felt before. I knew I did not want to pass on the harmful karmic patterns that had been dominating my life. My relationship with Avi's mother was very harmful and I was not going to subject Avi to that pain. In that moment I made an unconscious vow to be the best Dad I could be. After that vow was made, a deep part of me knew the way forward was to return to my sitting practice. Yesterday, we sat down to eat and Avi said, "Dad! You didn't do your bow." Together at the same time we bowed to the offering in front of us. Our evenings conclude when she jumps on my back after my first prostration. She clings to my back like a baby monkey through the rest of my bows. After the last bow we say, "May we exist in muddy water with purity like a lotus and thus we bow to buddha," or we say, "thus we bow to Avi," or "thus we bow to Grandma." I feel deeply fortunate to share this life with my little buddha.

**Dave Taian Goodsmith**

I love when the kids burst through the closet door and interrupt my zazen. What can I expect when I see our girls (2 and 8)? There are all kinds of parenting scenarios that my mind imagines—houses in the country, surfing lessons

with dad, writing a comic book together, learning languages, playing music, refining a sport. When I just look, any preconception of parenting, or rather of my view of the kids and me as a 'thing,' evaporates. With regular zazen as the support, I think I'm lucky to get to see this evaporation of my expectations happening all the time. The kids are never what I imagined them to be 5 minutes, 5 days, 5 weeks, 5 years ago...or right now.

*Look close at their eyes.
Now, who looks back at your eyes?
How old are these eyes?*

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Outreach Groups

**CMC Buddhist Fellowship Group
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 (San Luis Obispo, CA)**
led by Sensei Mark Shogen Bloodgood

Contact info@zcla.org for information.



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Our mission is to provide training and resources for realizing the oneness of life, to maintain the precepts, and to embody the Three Tenets of Not-Knowing, Bearing Witness, and Taking Action. **Our vision** is an enlightened world free of suffering, in which all beings live in harmony with each other and the earth, everyone has enough, deep wisdom is realized and compassion flows unhindered.

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Your Gifts are Received with a Heartfelt "Thank You!"

The Zen Center is maintained by the hands and eyes of each one of you.

To our First Quarter Day of Reflection leaders: **Conrad Butsugen Romo, Fernanda Myokan Schwartz Hughes, and Dylan Banto Neal;**

To those who went to the Evergreen Cemetery to honor Nyogen Senzaki Roshi and the Unclaimed Dead;

To our Exploring Your Zen Practice leaders: **Rev. Jitsujo Gauthier, Rev. Darla Myoho Fjeld, Rev. Jonathan Kaigen Levy, and Rev. Tom Dharma-Joy Reichert;**

To **Preceptor Lorraine Gessho Kumpf** for leading the Sangha Sutra Series Classes;

To Guest Speaker **Mark Eckhardt** for his talk on One Million Truths which featured personal testimony from Black Americans aimed at creating change;

To **Roshi Ekyoku, Sensei Katherine Daiki Senshin Griffith, Rev. Jitsujo, Rev. Myoho, and Preceptor George Mukei Horner** for their Dharma Talks on the Lotus Sutra;

To **Rev. Dharma-Joy** for leading the Parinirvana Zazenkai;

To **Rev. Myoho** for leading the Beginner's Mind Sesshin and for teaching the Jukai class;

To **Rev. Jitsujo** for teaching the Three Tenet mala class;

To **Rev. Jitsujo, Kristie Ryonen Valdez-Guillen, and Butsugen** for leading the Sitting with Racial Discomfort chat;

To **Rev. Kaigen** for teaching the How to Get Out of Our Heads and Into Our Bodies class.

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