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Dharma Practice in the Tradition of Ven. Thich Nhat Hanh & the Order of Interbeing



The annual newsletter of
Open Way Sanghas, Inc.

IN THIS ISSUE:

The clichés to describe 2020 are many. Our experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic mixed with political and social upheaval left us all feeling in even greater need for caring, grounding, and kindness than ever before. Contributors to this issue share the ways they have creatively watered and manifested the seeds of mindfulness, deep looking, and compassion.

Our Practice In the Year 2020

Sue Kronenberger

Co-listening, Holding the Earth, Eating for Life & Justice

Thay has said that the greatest gift we can give to others is our presence. He has also helped me to see the importance and necessity of being present to the seeds of fear, anxiety, and sorrow when they arise, so that I can embrace them and look at them head on. This is an essential part in the transformation of my suffering and the collective suffering. Living through a pandemic is one thing. It is an additional stressor to navigate the field of the pandemic with strong opposing factions. Values, understanding, and perceptions are clashing in ways that can feel quite difficult to heal and transform. It is also a time of the numerous harmful tendrils of racism laid bare. For most of us, some emotions such as anxiety, fear, and sorrow are arising or will arise. It is our human experience for that to happen. For me, the pandemic and my growing awareness and understanding of social injustices trigger these feelings. Luckily, this generous path of the awakened heart and mind helps me to embrace and take care of these feelings. Through the four noble truths I know that I am called forward to transform suffering – to realize a liberated life in which I take an active part in tending to a healthy soil in which seeds of fearlessness, generosity, compassion, joy, and true happiness can flourish. While there are several practices that help me transform fear and water seeds of fearlessness and equanimity, there are three especially alive in me now that I share with you.

Several months ago, a Sangha sister invited me to share co-listening. Co-listening is a body-centered practice. It is very different from brainstorming, analyzing, or trying to figure things out. Simply put, two people share equal time speaking and listening. In that time I have a full twenty minutes (or it can be any amount of time) to share whatever is up for me – including both joys and difficulties. When I share, I know that I am held with compassion and respect. Whenever I have shared in co-listening some tears have come. I experience a release, a lifting of a burden, and usually a kernel of clarity arises. I see

more clearly. I often feel settled and renewed. When I am the listener for my partner, I make the intention and gentle effort to offer the solidity of a mountain, the freshness of a flower, and the quiet reflective presence of a calm lake. Trauma therapist, Resmaa Menakem writes in *My Grandmother's Hands*, "When one settled body encounters another, there can be a deeper settling of both bodies." Thus as the co-listener, I offer presence from a place of generosity without judgment and without any need to fix or problem solve. So part of the practice for me does not just occur when I am in the co-listening session, but also taking care in my life to nurture the seeds of solidity, ease, and equanimity.

Another budding practice has begun with my intention to grow as a caretaker and protector of the Earth. Mother Earth has great patience and ingenuity. Her creativity is immense. I know she will continue in some form, no matter what we as humans do. I am and want to be an enlivened cell in the collective process of healing damage already done to her (and thus to ourselves). I want to create paths that lead to greater health and sustainability. I have joined the international Earth Holder Community (EHC) and begun the process of educating myself about what EHC offers, and utilizing the resources of these Earth and Social Justice centered meditations and presentations in my daily practice.

"Earth Holder Community is an Earth Justice Initiative in the Plum Village Community of Engaged Buddhism – bringing mindfulness, compassion, healing and non-violence to protecting each other, all beings and the Earth" (earthholder.org). I invite all of you to have a look.

I have asked some interested members of Flowing Mountains to join me in this exploration and action process. I do not know where this will lead, but I trust in the strength, inspiration and collectivity of our local sanghas and larger sanghas such as Earth Holder Community.

A third practice is moving into eating a more plant-based diet. A tipping point for me a few

months ago, was watching the documentary, "Cowspiracy." I let myself see and look more deeply into the unsustainability of the meat industry, its overuse of the earth's resources and the inequity it holds for all populations to be fed in a healthy way. I am experiencing a great amount of support from my husband and several friends. It has been a joyful practice as I embrace creative energies to cook and shop in new ways.

Thank you for this opportunity to share what is



Rita Kauneckas

alive in me at this time.

Greg Grallo

Softening in Hard Times

At the end of February, 2020, the hospice organization where I had worked for 11 years was sold by its single owner to a corporation out of Idaho. I was in the middle of a unit of Clinical Pastoral Education (clinical supervision for chaplains) and the boys' spring break was coming up. I had also recently enrolled in a training program to become a transformative mediator. Our youngest son when asked if he was going to do something with his dad had recently answered, "He's never home anymore." It seemed like this might be an opportunity for a change. So I made the decision to leave my job with hospice and to work on building a business in mediation.

In mid-March, we heard that the kids would not be going back to school right away because of

COVID-19. The school and teachers were optimistic that students would return to the buildings before the end of the year. As we all know, nothing has turned out the way we planned. The Open Way Sangha Care-Taking Council back in May set a potential reopening date of October 2020, which has come and gone. Our kids have not returned to school since March, instead engaging in online learning at home. The sangha continues to meet via video conferencing and a weekly outdoor walk in support of Black Lives Matter and communities that suffer as a result of systemic oppression. I have remained home with the kids supporting them in their school work and being there for them.

The suffering brought about by the SARS-CoV-2 virus itself and the resulting economic and behavioral adaptations to the virus has been immense. And yet, in some ways this is something we have been practicing for. By this I mean our practice invites us to welcome whatever is in front of us, whether it is suffering or joy. During this time, I have learned profoundly the meaning of not pushing anything away and receiving everything in life. There have been times that I have been overwhelmed and nourished the positive seeds by reading fiction, watching a favorite show or movie or cooking. There have been times that the tears fall after reading an article about another example of systemic oppression, or after tending to families and patients isolated and severely ill in the hospital. I have loved being with my children and providing stability so my wife can pursue her

dreams and new work. It has been a powerful time of being present to whatever arises.

I have observed that during this time where much of my work, social life, spiritual life and family life is within my house, often in the same room, that practicing mindfulness and moving to end suffering is gentler and more focused. My ability to concentrate in general feels diminished, but rather than being replaced by diffuse attention, the concentration feels softer. Awareness feels more open and less sharp. But being present to what is feels more natural and easier. Maybe because we are

engaging in this time of collective grief and suffering, it has been easier to allow the emotions to come and go. Rather than being numb or feeling flat, with many of the habits and stimulation of working, shopping, and being in community absent, life feels richer and the emotional landscape feels more varied and full.

I look forward to being able to gather on retreat or during our weekly meetings, to

sending the kids back to school, and to not worrying about the people I love being devastated by this virus. Until then, I am glad we have the gifts of practice and of finding ways to maintain and even build community through phone calls and video conferencing. I am grateful for my breath, when others struggle to breathe either through oppression or illness. I am thankful to touch the Dharma and to love the world now and tomorrow.



Steve Allison-Bunnell



Theresa Wiegand

Seeing Through the Keyhole

It was dark, early in the Autumn morning; the sun had not yet risen. As I sat, having just finished meditating, I hesitated for a moment and absorbed the vibes. I pushed open the door to the hallway. Still sitting, I took in the light with another deep breath. I looked up and noticed that on the other hallway door, I could see “perfectly through the keyhole.” Perfectly, in that exact moment.

“I am looking through the keyhole” I thought. And in that very moment those words described



Theresa Wiegand

precisely for me the year of 2020. We are looking through the keyhole to the other side.

I have had this same discussion with my husband, family, friends, and colleagues more than just one time. It’s somewhat of an optimistic attitude, where hope has found its way through the doorway of my mind.

There’s 2020 on this side of the door, and through the keyhole on the other side there is our uncertain future. Does a key unlock a vaccine for COVID-19? What is the key to solving the climate crisis, injustice, and oppression? How are we going to treat immigrants fleeing their home asking for political asylum?

The door has been blown wide open revealing police brutality. Too many black and brown men, imprisoned for minor charges, locked up and the key thrown away. Can we right the wrong?

What is the key to becoming enlightened? How do I meditate more and get this Buddhist stuff right? Am I there yet?

Can I walk through the door and come out on the other side a better person?

How can I practice the Mindfulness Trainings and get through my own criticism? Will the door finally open and will this become second nature to me?

There are many obstacles we place in our own way. Can we open our minds to the realization that we sabotage ourselves and keep our own self from evolving with excuses? Just. Do. It.

We possess the key; it is in our hand. Are we going to stand here and wait for someone else to open the door? Or are we going to use the key, unlock the door, and open it for ourselves?



Steve Allison-Bunnell

Zangha-Building

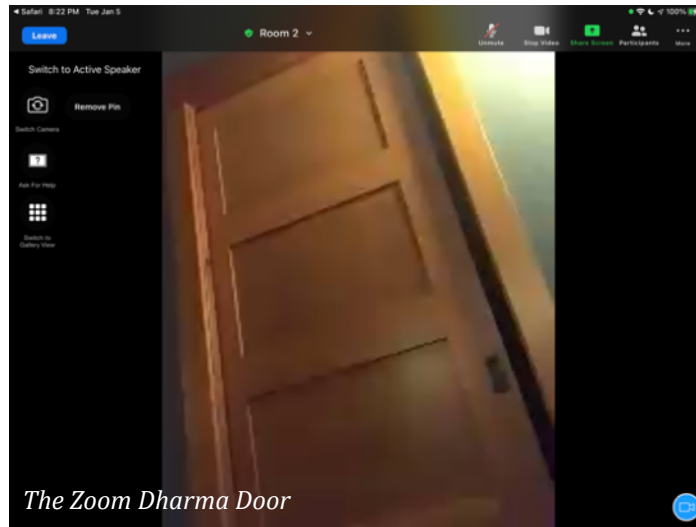
The fourth of the Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings of the Order of Interbeing says, “We are committed to finding ways, including personal contact and using the telephone, electronic, audiovisual, and other means to be with those who suffer, so we can help them transform their suffering into compassion, peace, and joy.” That commitment was clearly aimed at inspiring us to remember those with whom we are not in regular, direct contact,

and to reach out to shut-ins, prisoners, and far-away loved ones. Suddenly in the Spring of 2020, we were all shut-ins, prisoners in our own homes, and most of our loved ones were indefinitely far away. We were suffering from uncertainty, fear, and loneliness.

But we Plum Village practitioners are also innovative, resilient, and playful. The pandemic became another dharma door to open and enter. Like countless groups around the world, Open Way Missoula took to Zoom to gather and connect as well as small screens and inadequate bandwidth

allowed. Our dear sangha friend Peggy Mallette soon coined the term “Zangha” to describe our efforts to recreate a practice container using “electronic, audiovisual, and other means.” As with all paths to transformation, we began with resistance and aversion. Our dear friends were trapped within a tiny, pixelated box, their voices distorted and delayed. The sounds of bells were swallowed by noise-suppression algorithms. We still felt disconnected and even more lonely in the “look, don’t touch” environment of Zoom.

But we practiced with diligence, and after nine months, have gotten a lot better at it than we thought we could (or would have to). Our skillfulness in Zangha goes beyond the technical bits of “original sound” for bells or remembering to mute ourselves. Through it all, our practice has deepened, and our Sangha energy has grown. We have developed patience and an almost greater comfort with, or perhaps just tolerance for, silences and pauses that even in person could feel awkward. People who could not have attended in person even before the pandemic could join the circle.



Having moved from Missoula to Bozeman this summer, I am delighted to be able to continue practicing regularly with my sangha family.

Many of us have developed personal practices to be even more present with our community on Zoom. Below, Jennifer Baylis describes her beautiful practice of painting portraits from Zoom.

I have been practicing what I’ve come to call my “resting Zoom face.” When you can see yourself in that little thumbnail, you are confronted with how others see you rather how you think you look. I noticed right away that I was often frowning or knit-

ting my brow when I was concentrating or listening during Zoom. That didn’t seem very friendly or inclusive to me. Wanting to manifest outwardly what I am trying to create inwardly, I have been practicing a more relaxed, at least half-smiling face. And rather than feeling fake or forced, that effort has also helped me to actually feel calmer and more joyful. So it has been even more beneficial than I thought.

Some Tuesdays I begin the sitting period by looking at each person’s video box and saying their name and “I see you” — “Peggy, I see you...Carla, I see you.” With each name, my sense of connection and gratitude for the presence of each person grows to overflowing. And thus I have walked through the dharma door and transformed my suffering for that moment.

Instead of fear and loneliness, I know I can truly experience the “peace and joy” the mindfulness training invites me to find.



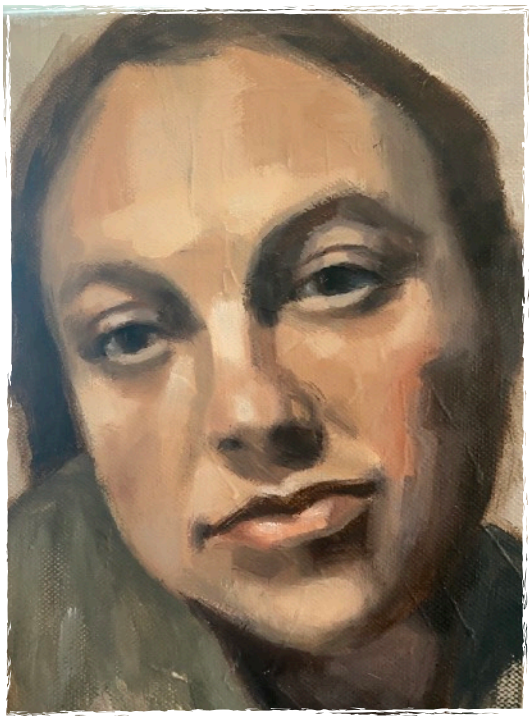
Jennifer Baylis

Sangha Zoom Portraits

The pandemic drags on and what does an artist do when she can't have live models? An idea popped in my head while in Zoom sangha. My mind says, "Look at the simple shadows and lighting conditions when a person is in Zoom! Look at my friends and see the compassion in their faces, a vulnerability expressed. Their moods and feelings expressed through this novel new way of connecting online. I've got it, I will paint people via Zoom

ors onto their skin, like purple and pink, as you can see below. Each oil painting was painted *alla prima*, which is Italian for "at first attempt." That means that each of the portraits was painted in one sitting, wet-onto-wet paint. This provides for an immediacy of capturing someone's essence and not overworking or overthinking the painting. It really is a mindfulness practice of its own. Being right there in the moment, I lose myself in the process...mind, paintbrush, and paint totally present as each stroke is laid down.

Here are some of my portraits of sangha members and maybe you might recognize some of them!



Jennifer Baylis

photos."

With their permission, I started painting simple portraits on both canvas paper and linen canvas. This was the perfect practice for applying some techniques I was learning. Using reference photos from Zoom was an interesting substitute for the live model. Some people had interesting light and shadow on their faces, and some light cast different col-

Rowan Conrad

In Gratitude: Practicing with COVID-19

On December 13, Dharmacharya Rowan Conrad tested positive for COVID-19. After initially using oxygen at home, he was hospitalized for nine days. On January 5, he was well enough to give this Dharma Talk for Open Way Missoula's Tuesday practice over Zoom. We are all so relieved and grateful for his rapid recovery.

Thay says we practice every day so when we need the practice it will be there. So it was a joy that when COVID-19 arrived, it seemingly automatically activated breathing, remembrance, and especially gratitude practice.

One day we were waiting for Thay for walking meditation at the Upper Hamlet and a guy from the Washington, DC sangha was teaching us a song by his sangha sister Irene'dAuria, "In Gratitude." As is custom, we stopped singing as Thay approached, but he said, "Please continue." We did, and after listening to a couple of repetitions he commented, "Everyone should learn this song."

After Thay's second China tour I asked Jerry Braza if Thay had dropped any new gems of wis-

dom. He said one new thing had hit him like a ton of bricks and stuck with him. Thay said, "If you are not experiencing Gratitude, you are suffering."

At my Dharmacharya ordination in Plum Village, the only talk from new teachers Thay praised was a talk titled "On Gratitude." He said, "Now that's a Dharma Talk!"

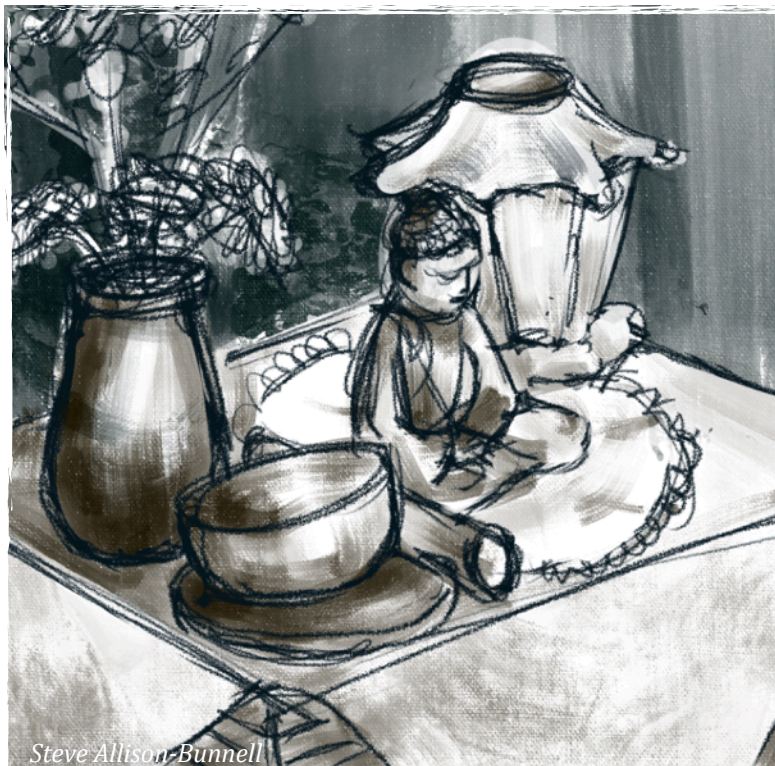
Thus Thay installed the seeds of gratitude practice over time. Other teaching automatically kicked in:

"...real happiness depends primarily on our mental attitude and not on external conditions,... we can live happily in the present moment simply by remembering that we already have more than enough conditions to be happy." The second remembrance: "I am of the nature to experience sickness. There is no way to avoid sickness." And just breathing in and out consciously with the present moment experience with what I can only call "radical acceptance." "This is what is happening, accept it and do it as practice."

I did not intentionally search out these practices. They just appeared. And of course, they inter-are, but the primary and integrating practice was gratitude. Gratitude I have Medicare, a doctor, a hospital, Peggy, a home, an income stream, sangha friends, Thay, technology, and the practice.

My doctor did a FaceTime assessment and ordered home oxygen, giving me more days at home and an earlier release from the hospital. She advised when it was time to give up on home and go to the hospital. Our neighbor nurse, who helped me to the car and made the car oxygen tank work. All the kindness and skill of all the doctors and nurses at the hospital who gave me care and their experience with dealing with Covid. And I also had sangha sister doctor, Laura, 24/7 on text and phone.

Hospital time morphed into a nine-day



gratitude retreat. People brought things to the hospital desk that we hadn't thought to pack. I hadn't been in my room very long before a note from Cy, Jody's husband, was delivered by my nurse which said I had a friend working on the floor if I needed anything. One of my traveling nurses was raised as a traditional tribal African (never owned a pair of shoes until about 15) in Tanzania, and we enjoyed conversations about Africa, both being delighted with discovering someone who knew traditional African life and current African politics. A tragic thing he said was, "This hasn't reached my part of Africa yet. When it does, we will simply die. We don't have these things."

So for nine days, I had my gratitude retreat. A big window with a view of the cloud show over the mountains by day and city lights at night, sometimes with snow or rain drifting in from the mountain, and fading away. I could breathe and watch. I only labored to breathe when on toilet trips. Otherwise breathing was rapid, causing a rewrite of breathing Gathas, but with oxygen, not difficult. In the hospital, I was grateful I had none of the painful or distressing manifestations many experience. I felt gratitude that when elderly covid brain forgot to order food, the food people would call me and ask if I wanted to order . . . and contrary to what you might think, the food was really good (as it always is on retreat). And a TV I could flip on occasionally to check the news, which was more distressing than the illness.

I have often asked myself how people without a practice get through life? I think the answer is "by avoiding it" until it crashes through the barriers of avoidance, indulgence, and distraction our society promotes. My understanding that those without a practice are easily taken in by people who will tell us (delusions) we want to hear, conspiracy theories, and the like—anything that reinforces denial.

So when in the hospital with a protein-cased bit of RNA doing its best to kill off its host, what to do? Practice. Breathe in and out. Experience gratitude



Claire Emery

for the facility and the care. Appreciate such care as a gift of the universe (via Medicare), and that it is a privilege that marginalized people here and around the world do not have. Enjoy the wealth of practices installed in my being, including absence of the fear of death which "went on vacation" some years ago. Enjoy the mountain and cloud show out the window. Enjoy the snow flakes that drift by. Stay fully in the present moment so nine days in the hospital becomes one moment long. One moment you came in and the next moment you go out. And somehow all day every day it is easy to be grateful for things big and small.

As Phap Hai so famously said, "This is what's happening. Get with the program!" Who would have guessed the program would be a nine-day gratitude retreat?



Jackson Parker

A Letter to The Mad Creator

I thank the mad creator and all that they've done.
For the swift hand of sunlight, peeling back the
fronds
Of a curled up fern.
For the watery halos that ripple the trees
In water's bright mirror.
For the winter's delicate air that teaches me
My body's warmth.
For the keen blue edge of sky
That shaves away the crust of sleep.
For the residue of dreams, that spread
The wings of longing.

For the spiders born in snow.
For the loneliness of dread.
For the scatterings of moths, spinning in silent
crescendos
Over the ghost-lit fields.

For the night's blue-dark cheeks beginning
To blotch with stars.
For the company of quiet joy
And true sadness.
For these words, that cannot compete
With the bird's language of flight.
For these words, each one a seance.
For the silence of the woods that thrills my soul.
For the silence beneath the silence.



Laura Csaplár

Signlessness: A Letter To My Sister

Dearest Carol,

You asked, who did I vote for?
What did I vote for...

I voted for the return of civility and respect in
our nation's speech and actions.



Claire Emery

I voted for the healing of the great divisiveness
our country is torn by. For a government for all our
people.

I voted for the end of holding power by dividing
citizens--by harnessing peoples' fears and direct-
ing that enraged energy towards "the other." To
end holding power by scapegoating our countries
challenges onto immigrants, people of color, or any
one different than ourselves.

I voted for the return of fact and science based
decision making and policies.

I voted to stand with our allies to overcome our
global challenges.

I voted to stand up against tyranny, dictator-
ships, and injustice.

I voted to open our eyes and look ahead for re-
turn of strength to our economy and jobs for our
workers. Massive good middle class manufacturing
jobs were lost with automation. Many, many more
are poised to be lost to robotics. We must look

ahead. The world is moving towards sustainable energy with tremendous development opportunities.

I voted to judge the success of our economy on the happiness and thriving of all our population, not the stock market, GNP and the wealthy.

I voted to stand solidly against and not encourage white supremacy.

I voted to look at our country's darkest history, from slavery, to segregation, to current mass incarceration of black citizens. To look at our genocide and destruction of the cultures of America's indigenous peoples. To look, so we may see our true situation today and enable healing of all our peoples.

I voted to change the way we treat the earth, the source of life for all beings. To look at our country's overuse of the earth's resources, and the impact of this on the earth, the climate and poorer countries around the globe. To look at how each of our actions or purchases contribute to the development of massive climate migrants, the extinction of species.

I voted for all my patients to be able to afford the the food, housing and medications they require to stay healthy, to stay alive.

I voted for a country with ethics and actions our children may be proud of. With ethics and actions that benefit all of humanity.

I voted for a future to be possible....

I voted for our mother, whose heart is in mine.

Love, your sister,
Laura

Peggy Mallette

ROCK ME GENTLY IN THE CANYON CRADLE

In mid-November I took the risk of completing a long-scheduled bucket list trip to ride to the bottom of the Grand Canyon on a mule and stay two nights at Phantom Ranch. It was a breath-taking and awe-inspiring trek. Hiking in the bottom of the canyon surrounded by high rock walls inspired this poem.



Peggy Mallette

Rock walls stand sentry
Before me, behind me, and side to side,
Protective, solid and ancient.

Just when I feel certain there is no path,
I step up to the wall
And the rock opens to reveal the way.

A path awaits,
I just won't see it yet.

Trust each moment to open to the next.
If I search for the way
I miss it.

I miss the present moment where life abides.
I miss the wonder of the reveal.

Walk quietly,
Relish each step,
Relish each breath,
Relish each action skillful or not.
Boundaries will part.

My breath and my step
Rock me gently in the canyon cradle.

Carla Green

Iron Maiden

*Playing with views, perspectives, and illusions.
Whenever I go on retreat at Flathead Lake, my focal
point is often the island on the western shore. She
brought the poet out in me as I watched her from
different views, weather conditions, and times of day.*



From the Zendo Window

The ship still sails
With heavy lumbering hull and bow,
Pointed towards the other shore
Year after year.

Iron Maiden,
Lady of the lake
In your Sea Quine gown,
My eyes dance along your Milky Way.

You languish
On a sea of gems,
Glittering skyward like Sitka popcorn fish,
Exploding into the crisp spring wind and sun.

My enraptured heart follows your galaxy.
Across the dazzling laughing waves
My eyes see anew,
Forever sailing, but never arriving.

Morning: Cabin to Zendo

Ahh, but you moved last night!
I swear! As I stepped out my cabin door!
Into the morning twitter,
Gazing across liltng rolls of rose -tinged sky.

You sail on wispy clouds.
You made it half way to the other shore!

As I make my backward ascent
You sail backwards.
Sail on, Iron Maiden,
Sail on with your heavy, mysterious cargo.

Always treading on the waves.
Sometimes East, sometimes West,
To and Fro,
Through millions of lifetimes.



*Steve Allison-Bunnell
(left and above)*

Donate to Support Monastic Communities During the COVID-19 Crisis

We are aware that these are difficult and uncertain times for many people around the world. At our mindfulness practice centers, the monastics are also facing a challenge. While they usually depend on retreat fees to cover their basic necessities including food, housing, and health care, they now rely entirely on the generosity of people like you while the centers are closed to the public.

<https://thichnhathanhfoundation.org/ways-to-give>

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As of January, 2021, all of our sister sanghas are meeting remotely on Zoom. The mindfulness center is closed for all events (you can still mail donations to the center's address). For access to practice talk recordings, online donations, current schedules, and how to subscribe to email newsletters with Zoom access information, please visit www.openway.org.