

山門寺

Mountain Gate Journal

Winter 2021

Mountain Gate is a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization established to provide the environment and training in the specific mindfulness practices of Rinzai Zen, focusing on meditation and work with koans [traditional paradoxical anecdotes or questions]. Regaining Balance, a nonsectarian outreach program, was established by Mountain Gate some years ago- to offer free, nonsectarian retreats for women veterans suffering from post-traumatic

The following article was written by a senior student who is seriously engaged in ongoing Zen practice. Zen practice involves seeing for oneself one's sources of suffering and working to "unhook" from them through the insight that ongoing meditation can bring forth.

The Art of Letting Go

Let Go - a simple expression that is part of the basic vocabulary of Zen Practice. Let go of being stuck, let go of ego, let go of concepts...the list is endless! What is this letting go? Is it something that just happens by itself? Or is it, like an art, something that can be learned, a skill that can be cultivated. Here is a place to begin: what isn't letting go?

Two words stand in opposition to letting go – attachment and resistance. Attachment is grasping, holding on, clinging, pulling in. Resistance is pushing away, closing off, denying, putting up a wall. Both attachment and resistance are fundamentally physical/body experiences, not mental concepts. Sometimes the body sense is only a hazy experience, a kind vague 'fogginess.' Sit with awareness and search for the body sensation of these opposites of letting go. With time and persistent practice, a felt clarity will emerge. To quote Tara Brach:

*Sensations in the body are ground zero,
the place where we directly experience
the entire play of life. (emphasis mine)*

— **Radical Acceptance: Embracing Your Life
With the Heart of a Buddha**, by Tara Brach,
pg. 95 (Chapter 5: Coming Home to Our Body)

If we can improve our skill at feeling letting go's opposites, attachment and resistance, can we also improve our skill at feeling letting go itself? Yes! Letting go is movement, flow, freedom. Letting go is a feeling of naturalness, lightness and ease in the body. Letting go is opening to everything we are feeling, in a deeply sensed, wordless realization. Letting go includes 'good' feelings: joy, contentment, happiness. And letting go includes the 'bad' feelings: aches and pains, discomfort, sadness, and a deeply felt compassion in encountering the suffering of others. But letting go is not a goal attained one time only. It is the '-ing' part of letting go that is important: a process unspooling over time, developing, reaching temporary goals but never stopping. It opens us to the 'changing, contingent, ambiguous, and creative character of reality' as Stephen Batchelor says in **Buddhism Without Beliefs**. He adds that this reality is 'by its very nature free.'

Imagine you are holding a hose, watering your garden. The hose gets kinked, and the flow of water stops. When you undo the kink, the water flows again. This is the flow of reality, changing, contingent moving, like water in a hose. The kink in the hose blocks this flow just as attachment/resistance can block the free flow of reality exactly as it is. To do zazen is to patiently and persistently 'unkink the hose.' Here are few of those 'kinks in the hose' – places where the art of letting go can be skillfully applied.

Concepts are predetermined thought-forms, convenient containers into which we can classify our experience. They can provide a way to manage reality, allowing us to recognize an aspect of life, and fit it into a picture of how things are. Concepts can also become traps. Something bad happens to me. If I carry around a deeply conditioned concept that I am

a failure, or fundamentally bad, then this bad thing becomes proof that that my concept is true: I am fundamentally flawed. The opposite also happens. If I carry around a fundamental concept of being not only unique, but also special, then when something good happens, it just confirms the sense of entitlement that my specialness gives me. Sit long enough with attention, and concepts, big and small begin to fall away. We can keep some as useful tools, but we can let go of others.

Time Anyone who has meditated has probably experienced restlessness, asking “how soon will the bell ring? when will this be over? when can I get on to the next thing?” This restlessness is resistance to the flow of time, wanting to finish one thing in order to get on to the next. To be present at each moment, to give up time, to let go of getting on to the next thing (what one psychologist called ‘nexting’) to just be totally with what is happening now: this a door to freedom.

Self *My name is X, I am this old, I am male/female, I am this tall:* all this and more make up a self, a ‘who I am’ – is this self our essence? Can we, through sitting, see the arbitrary, conditioned nature of this self? Can we see it as constructed, but not essential? Can we see it as ever changing? Can we let go of the self? What happens then?

Expectation This can be simple: Enter a dark room, feel for the light switch, and expect there to be light. It can be complex: We may expect our life to unfold a certain way. Things may turn out as expected (a dream come true, a successful career, true love.) Things may go contrary to expectation (far more likely!) We may identify with failure and find ourselves mired in resentment that fate did not fulfill our dreams. Letting go of expectation means living in the bracing freedom of not knowing. “Clear mind, don’t know” is a commitment to the certainty of uncertainty.

Insight Regular, committed sitting [Zen meditation] can lead to insights into how we got to be the way we are. We may uncover hidden aspects of our behavior that are uncomfortable to face. We may finally be able to understand, at a deep level, why we have acted in the past in certain ways. We can become attached to our insights, carrying around a completed puzzle titled ‘My Brilliant Insight’ with that final insight-piece fitted into place. Letting go means

leaving insights behind, realizing that *what’s so* becomes *so what*: today’s profound insight becomes tomorrow’s interesting observation. Life is not a static puzzle to be solved but an evolving process.

Narration Anyone who has undergone therapy has probably been asked by the therapist “how are you feeling?” This is a legitimate question, as frequently we go into therapy with blocked feelings, areas of our life that are confusing, or covered with a shroud of fear. A skilled therapist can help us ‘get in touch with’ our feelings by talking about them. This can develop into a habit of self-narrating feelings – the moment something comes up, we begin to talk to ourselves about the feeling as if a therapist were present. What could be felt in the body ends up being analyzed by the mind. Letting go of the habit of narrating our feelings can free us to actually feel them.

Worry This mental habit is the imagination looking for an answer before time. Letting go of worry means accepting that the future, while it can be imagined, either negatively or positively, can never be known.

Drama For some people, attachment to drama, acting out our feelings by shouting, creating conflict or emotional scenes with (one hopes!) a tearful reconciliation, can become a habitual way of creating intimacy. For some it can be the only way to be intimate. Letting go of drama may mean moving into situations without a preconceived scenario, being totally present with the other person right now and in new ways.

Being Right We know we are right; the other person just doesn’t get it. But insisting on being right means the other person must be wrong. And no one wants to be wrong! Putting life’s situations into a binary choice: “I’m right/You’re wrong” leaves no room for a creative understanding of what is really happening. Letting go of being right means not being attached to a position. It means allowing the other person to also be right. It can mean living with ambiguity - different points of view of the same reality. Someone once said “Paradox is the only basket big enough to hold the truth.” Can I let go of being right? All of us carry around a story about our life. And the older we get, the longer that story becomes. Our

story can become who we are. I saw someone wearing T-shirt recently that said “My Bad Choices Then Make for Good Stories Now.” Let go of my story, and who am I?

Attachment to results So many self-help books (and there are hundreds of them, and more published every day) make extravagant promises. The blurb on the book jacket may read “follow this method, and you will find....” Fill in the blank – true love, success, wealth, lasting youth, on and on. We think “if I just do what this book says, I will find happiness.” A self-help book or even meditation may give you some relief from suffering. And if we don’t find relief, we may think we’ve read the wrong book, or that we are using the wrong meditation technique. Our search for help can be endless. Letting go of our attachment to results means seeing this unfolding existence as an adventure with no map, no script and no guaranteed result.

And finally let go of everything written above! These observations are like broken twigs left along a path by a fellow traveler saying “This is where I’ve walked, this is one way forward.” Each of us has unique ways of attaching and resisting. But all of us have the capacity to practice the art of letting go!



Fear and anxiety are in full bloom these days. At the least we’re in the midst of a worldwide pandemic that has caused millions of deaths and keeps on making people sick, many to the point of death. The constant fear of aggression and possible death daily experienced by minorities in our culture has also been pushed into mainstream consciousness with the deaths of Black men such as George Floyd and the invasion of homes and apartments of Black women such as Breonna Taylor by White police. And then there’s the fear that can come up at a certain time in our Zen practice.

The following is an excerpt from the first pages, titled “Fearlessness,” in the book **Fear**, by Buddhist monk, Thich Nhat Hanh, who understood deeply how to work with fear .

Most of us experience a life full of wonderful moments and difficult moments. But for many of us, even when we are most joyful, there is fear behind our joy. We fear that this moment

will end, that we won’t get what we need, that we will lose what we love, or that we will not be safe. Often, our biggest fear is the knowledge that one day our bodies will cease functioning. So even when we are surrounded by all the conditions for happiness, our joy is not complete.

The fear of the unknown, the fear of loss, is really why we fear death. Yet those people who have had near-death experiences have lost that fear. How? Through the direct experience of the process of dying. What does that say about how to work with fear?

We think that, to be happier, we should push away or ignore our fear. We don’t feel at ease when we think of the things that scare us, so we deny our fear away. “Oh, no, I don’t want to think about that.” We try to ignore our fear, but it is still there.

The only way to ease our fear and be truly happy is to acknowledge our fear and look deeply at its source. Instead of trying to escape from our fear, we can invite it up to our awareness and look at it clearly and deeply...

...We may think that if we ignore our fears, they’ll go away. But if we bury worries and anxieties in our consciousness, they continue to affect us and bring us more sorrow.... But we have the power to look deeply at our fears, and then fear cannot control us. We can transform our fear. The practice of living fully in the present moment—what we call mindfulness—can give us the courage to face our fears and no longer be pushed and pulled around by them. To be mindful means to look deeply, to touch our true nature of interbeing and recognize that nothing is ever lost.

Modern psychology has reached the same conclusion. If we turn toward our fears instead of running away from them, we have the opportunity in embracing them through profound awareness of the sensations they bring forth in our bodies, to melt them through that very presence. Doing so we can gradually become free of them “without eliminating them,” as the Tibetan teaching about working with difficult feelings says. This is not necessarily an instant shift, since most likely we have for years reinforced a habit pattern of avoid-

ance. But with commitment to a willingness to taste, to sense beyond thought, that background energy that we recognize intellectually as fear, we can become increasingly free of it.

For some people it can help to work with a therapist, especially one who does Zen or mindfulness meditation. Sometimes it can help to work with a trauma therapist, especially one who offers somatic experiencing or EMDR. As we do our Zen meditation we naturally become more aware of that background unease; meditation brings it to light, where we can effectively work with it. This is one of the many ways in which Zen meditation can ultimately bring us peace.



What's wonderful about susok'kan is that I could meditatively pierce through my thoughts and physical discomforts no matter where we were or what we were doing while we were traveling. Prior to introducing susok'kan to my practice, I found it challenging to find zazen when I wasn't sitting. Now, I feel as if zazen can be found everywhere, which brings me back to the line from The Gospel of Thomas that we spoke about during sanzen: "Split the wood, I am there. Turn the stone, and you will find me there."

—in an email from a student



The following is excerpted from an email from a concerned student:

"Roshi, I just read something that has struck me very hard, something I did not know before, and which has me looking at sesshin [extended meditation retreat] in a new way. It is this (from the words of someone else):

Sesshin is the daily life of monks/trainees at the monastery. To me, sesshin is a very serious matter. There is no difference between seniors and beginners, monks or lay and old or young in sesshin. Even [if] one removes from the monastery/temple, he/she is conducting sesshin every moment.

"I thought of sesshin as a kind of special or intensive retreat, a kind of rigorous ordeal to be endured and passed through, rather than simply a training of how to live one's daily life (or, for monastics, just a normal day)! I think I have seen retreats/sesshins as something special, or as opportunities for a kind of intensive endeavor leading to transformative or peak experiences. Maybe this is incorrect on my part.

"So then, what is emphasized if it is not a temporary entrance into something different from daily life? Is it a re-training - or a reminder - of what normal, everyday life must become for a Zen practitioner? In other words, Is it a place to go and gain something that you can use in your daily life and to go to in order to learn how to change completely what your daily life looks like? How do I then incorporate practice, even TI [Term Intensives—a temporary period of increased concentrated practice, done outside the monastery but in contact with the teacher] as part of EVERYDAY life, seeing it ALL as how my life should function?

"This is important to me, and I do feel I need to adjust my thinking towards practice in all ways, and make it ALL my life in every aspect and detail.

"Warmest thanks,"

Roshi responds:

An interesting comment by whomever said or wrote that quote. In a training monastery that has a strong, ongoing schedule including lots of zazen and frequent sesshin—as Sōgen-ji does—"sesshin is the daily life of the monks in the monastery" would be true. When I was living and training at Sōgen-ji there was so little difference between in or out of sesshin that it all melded into one ongoing process. There was ALWAYS sanzen [private meeting with the teacher for spiritual guidance], most often twice a day, and it was required attendance. The only exceptions were the three days of the month that followed an ōsesshin (full schedule sesshin: 12 hours sitting plus at least twice a day and often more, sanzen) and two kosesshin (7 hours minimum daily sitting plus sanzen twice a day). There were only about four "normal" days of each month where we only sat five hours a day and there was sanzen only in the morning. It made for deep sitting that carried over into what "daily life" was left in a day. At the same time, the duties during every day, in or out of sesshin, were such that you had to keep your practice going in the midst of activity—whether, as tenzo [head cook],

answering the telephone (in Japanese), preparing the meals (on time), responding to guests (who came frequently regardless of whether we were in sesshin or not), answering the door, etc.—because you were going to be the first person going to sanzen that day, and in sanzen you HAD to bring in an authentic response to your assigned practice; you HAD to stretch, you could not say, “Well, I didn’t have time...”.

Most North American Zen centers do not have such an intense schedule. And most Westerners are not monks living in monasteries, but lay people living in the outside world, with jobs and families. That makes sesshin indeed a special time where everything else can be—should be—let go of in the interest of giving ourselves without distraction to the practice.

However, “the practice” is not just zazen on the cushion, but true mindfulness in **every** moment including sleeping. “True mindfulness” is not simply paying attention. It is forgetting oneself so completely in the process of doing that whatever one is doing is simply unfolding clearly and without distraction. It is opening to any uncomfortable sensations/feelings/emotions within oneself and making use of that true mindfulness/total presence to remain present until the discomfort resolves/dissolves (vs. being dissociated from). And that would be true whether or not one was at work, in the kitchen, enjoying a movie or a book, taking a walk, or on the cushion doing zazen, in OR out of sesshin.

If we see it as a “rigorous ordeal to be endured and passed through” we are losing a precious opportunity to free ourselves in profound ways—and we are priming ourselves for pain and suffering! Yes, fear comes up for most people anticipating attending a sesshin, but in turning and facing and 100% embracing the feeling of “rigorous ordeal” there is liberation from it—right in the midst of it!

That said, as someone long ago said, “The zendo is a laboratory; in it we’re learning how to do zazen!” The more one can put oneself into the practice—no repression, no dissociation, but also no chasing after pleasurable moments and trying to reject the difficult ones!—the more TRULY free we can become! (And of course it’s important to recognize that it’s a life work in process! There is no point in judging ourselves for assumed failures!) As someone else long ago said: “This practice is truly bodhisattvic! First it shows us where we’re caught—and then it sets us free.”

A New Year Begins!

And with it, infinite opportunities! Happy 2021 Unfolding!!!

In Japanese temples there are a number of events associated with welcoming the New Year. Perhaps the most famous one—and one in which local Japanese families line up to take part in it before midnight December 31—is the ringing of the big temple bell 108 times. Why 108? Because traditionally that’s considered the number of attachments, afflictions, or “sins” human beings have, and ringing the bell 108 times ostensibly (with some work!) relieves the ringer of those attachments.

And with this new beginning we, too, whether or not we ring the temple bell 108 times, have a greater opportunity to truly take a look—necessarily, beyond words—at where we’re caught, and work with commitment to let them go. This is the vital work of the Long Maturation so essential in true Zen practice.

As part of the preparations for opening to a new beginning, the entire temple is super-cleaned, top to bottom. It is the same in people’s homes, and that is a tradition not limited to Japan. In many countries in the world the new year’s beginning is considered to be a time of starting fresh. This is such a strong cultural imperative that in some countries people will actually burn down their houses or businesses to collect the insurance in order to pay off any debts that would otherwise cross over into the new year. The imperative to start fresh, with nothing hanging on from the year that is ending, is that vital. But it’s also part of the process of letting go the past in order to welcome the present as it unfolds moment by moment as this new year begins.

While it’s not necessarily advisable to burn down one’s home—nor is it legal—in order to collect insurance, the motivation to begin anew in the new year is admirable and—if we’re truly to become

free—essential!.

An aside: The home my parents built when I was in 8th grade was purchased after they retired and moved to North Carolina, by a man who seems to have had some unscrupulous business practices which finally caught up with him and sent him to prison. The house, while he was in court, burned down, and the rumor was that he had had it torched in order to collect the insurance to support his family while he was locked up.

Cleaning house, decluttering, organizing, in one's environment affects one's mind state. When our surroundings are simple, spare and organized it makes a difference in how easily and efficiently we work and the level of stress we build up in the process. When our environment is clean and uncluttered it is much easier to focus. This is one reason why traditional zendos—meditation rooms—are so simple and so spare. It is so with our mind states as well; if we are constantly mulling over the past or fantasizing about the future, or trying to multitask as we do our work (which ends up being impossible and fractures our attention), it's a bumpy, unsatisfying process. But when we commit to, as Harada Roshi explained one day in tea, doing JUST one thing at a time, and when that one thing is done it is let go of and ONLY the succeeding thing on the list is being done. This results in a feeling of much greater ease and the quality of the work we do in that way is also higher than if we are working in a scattered way.

When we work in this way—just one thing at a time, just one focus at a time—we are able to be more clear and aware and settled physically as well as it's affecting our mind state.

When we sit on the cushion, we are less distracted when we accustom ourselves in our moment to moment off-the-cushion time to being present with just one thing in each moment, to TRULY focus. Distractions come up when we are in the zendo. But that is due to our habitual patterns

as well as to the fact that when our body is still, as normally required in the zendo, we become more aware—without the distraction of movement—of how many distractions we can come up with to avoid just being present with the deep, wordless questioning that is our practice whether we are working on the extended outbreath or doing koan work. Here is the fertile ground of practice! To observe deeply, to be fully present as possible, we are little by little able to drop below the yadda-yadda of habitual mind talk into the quiet depths where the wordless questioning, the sense that there's something we can return to, something we can open to is more accessible. And in that deep quiet, Understanding begins to emerge.

The power of the extended outbreath—susok'kan—is tremendous in opening us to this depth because in order to extend the outbreath to the degree expected in this practice, other things, other distractions must necessarily be let go of. If you find yourself multitasking doing the extended outbreath you are not really practicing susok'kan, and need to sit up straighter, relax your belly—your tanden/hara/tan'tien—focus more completely and start anew.

This new year in particular appears to be the beginning of a new paradigm, one in which harmony, cooperation, acceptance, openmindedness, and spirituality are already beginning to emerge from the chaos and suffering of this past year. This offers immense potential for truly deepening our Zen meditation practice, and what better time to do so! The past year has been particularly stressful for many, many people, with the great unknowns surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic, the enormous number of deaths resulting from it as well as the fractured political scene. More in our face than usual is the fact of our own mortality, and with it the unknown timing of our dying—something Tibetan Buddhism emphasizes contemplating. The coronavirus seems to strike almost randomly, adding impetus to this.

So in this time of new beginnings, if we want to

take advantage of it, it's truly an optimal time to make "out the old, in with the new" our plan of action. Sitting zazen, get out of that rut! Explore more deeply than you have before! Sit longer! Try a different posture—it can help change a stuck or plateaued mind state! Make sure you're sitting in a balanced, erect posture whether in a chair or on a cushion. If pain is a problem, observe the sources of that pain; sometimes it can be more in our attitude than in our physical being. Sometimes a shift in posture will make a difference, sometimes a shift in attitude will. Explore! Tune in! Here is your amazing opportunity to explore your own mind, using the innate ability you were born with to search beyond words and assumptions and habit patterns—and to become free!



Human life, so fleeting, is but a brief instant;

*How can you dwell for long
in the evanescent world?*

*At thirty-two, I emerged from the mountains;
now over forty, I return to Fukien.*

*No use bringing up others' faults
again and again;*

*One's own mistakes must be cleared away
continually.*

*I humbly report to the scarlet and purple clad
nobles who fill the court;*

*The king of death has no awe of the golden
emblems of rank you wear.*

—Xuefeng Yicun (822-908); J: Seppo Gison

人生倏忽暫須與
浮世那能得久居
出嶺纔登三十二
入閩早是四旬余
他非不用頻頻拳
己過忝須旋旋除
奉報滿朝朱紫貴
閻王不怕佩金魚



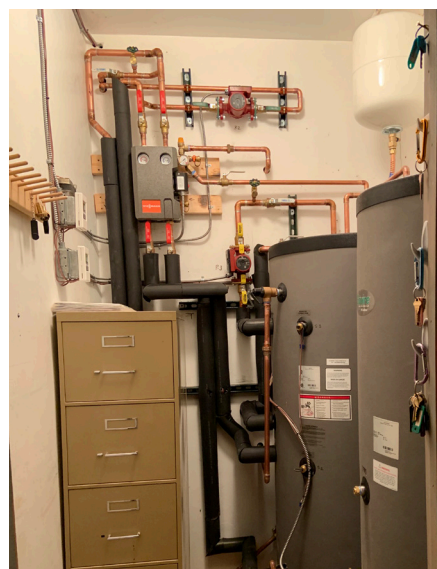
Six beautiful, powerful solar panels filled with glycol to transfer heat from the sun to the water feeding the boiler feeding the underfloor heating in the entire building and the hot water in showers and sinks in the new section.

The Solar Hot Water Heating System Is Up And Running!

After a number of adventures and misadventures the long-awaited solar hot water heating system is installed and up and running! It has taken several years to raise sufficient funds for the project, which is a big one but should save us quite a bit of money in propane bills. We are immensely grateful to everyone who has contributed to that Solar Heating Fund Drive and brought us to this exciting moment!

What you see in the above photo is just the sunshine collecting panels. Buried underground and highly insulated are the lines carrying the heated glycol from the panels to the double mechanical room, and the cooler glycol back to the panels to be reheated. There is a labyrinth of beautiful copper pipe inside, along with two more storage tanks (a heat exchanger allows the water in the tanks to be heated without direct contact with the glycol. Because of northern New Mexico's propensity to have temperatures as low as -32

degrees F up here where Mountain Gate is located, a water only system is a dangerous proposition. It took serious planning by a solar engineer to let us know what would be required, and it also meant that our inside storage closet would be reduced to only holding one file cabinet, with the rest of the room taken up by two very large storage tanks, several pumps, controllers, and another labyrinth of copper pipes. Yesterday afternoon our gifted, experienced, careful plumbers picked up the last of the debris, and double-checked that the system was continuing to work. It had been started up the afternoon before and was already providing enough preheated water to the boiler that the boiler itself was only running at 10% capacity! We decided to check the level in the propane tank to establish a benchmark by which to gauge how well the system is working—and we discovered the tank was reading zero, the afternoon of New Year’s Eve! We are supposed to be on a “Keep Full” status with the propane company, but as with everywhere, the COVID-19 pandemic is taking its toll and they were down two drivers. Amazingly, we were able to reach someone attached to the company, who called the driver who miraculously was in the area, and when he was able to refill the truck tank he came—just in the nick of time, as the pressure in the tank was low—and was able to refill the tank in time to avoid having to restart the various electronic systems in the building. Whew!



To say we are excited is an understatement! To be able to take advantage of the abundant, strong sunshine in these southern mountains is a gift, and we are so grateful to the many who have made this project come to life! Thank you!

Upcoming Events:

7-Day Sesshin at Mountain Gate - January 8-15; this sesshin—and all sesshin until further notice—will be Zoomed. Anyone attending any full day by Zoom or in person will be eligible to receive sanzen morning and evening on that day. Part time Zoom attendance is possible **Applications are required.**

Please note: While there will not be a 7-day sesshin in February the following zazenkai is scheduled.

Zazenkai - February 21, 9 am to 4 pm, with an hour break at lunch. There will be Guided Metta Meditation in the morning section, and teisho in the afternoon section. You may attend for morning or afternoon sections, or for both.

Normally, pre-COVID, Mitra-roshi would offer on-site sesshin at Turtleback Zendo. But since it is still considered quite risky to travel, the sesshin will be Zoomed and take place at **Mountain Gate, March 7-14;** anyone attending any full day by Zoom or in person will be eligible to receive sanzen morning and evening on that day. Part time Zoom attendance is possible **Applications are required.**

7-Day Sesshin at Mountain Gate - April 20-27; Anyone attending any full day by Zoom or in person will be eligible to receive sanzen morning and evening on that day. Part time Zoom attendance is possible **Applications are required.**

7-Day Sesshin at Mountain Gate - May 4-11; Anyone attending any full day by Zoom or in person will be eligible to receive sanzen morning and evening on that day. Part time Zoom attendance is possible **Applications are required.**

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

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