



striking the great bell
entire mountain resounds
silent snowflakes fall

It's been three years since I became abbot. I'm sure you all know the Chinese saying (actually, I think it's a curse): "May you live in interesting times." And, indeed, these years have certainly been interesting. They've been challenging, to say the least—and have posed the most difficult koan of all my years of practice. I'll let you know when I pass it!

In the beginning, when I first had to do all the things associated with being abbot of ZSS, I couldn't help but feel like an imposter. The learning curve was steep, seemingly insurmountable. The atmosphere was dark and grim. There was a lot of negativity. All transitions are difficult, but this one, especially, in the wake of great tumult, with a Sangha overcome by grief, anger, hostility, suspicion, confusion, and consternation of all kinds, felt overwhelming. Where to turn? How to continue?

The dean of the chapel at Syracuse University, who herself had been what is called an "after-pastor," the term for someone who succeeds a spiritual leader accused of misconduct, told me that an after-pastor rarely stays on for more than three years. Sayonara!

Of course there were many times when I wanted to say that, many times I just felt inside, Enough! I quit. But this is not our way. Right? No matter what, we just put one foot in front of the other, not knowing where this path is leading us, just continuing, just doing our utmost. Marching on, as Soen Roshi so often put it.

You've all experienced this in your own practice and your own lives. Perhaps working with a koan or life situation and feeling it cannot possibly be comprehended. Over and over, beating your head against an impossible wall. So confusing! How to resolve something that seems beyond your capacity! No solution possible. What to do?

We can't run. We can't hide. Nowhere to run! Nowhere to hide! Can't get over it, can't get under it! Where are we gonna go? The poet e. e. cummings said, "There's a hell of a good universe next door/ Let's go!" But so far, we're still here. And we simply persevere. It's not a matter of success or failure. Sometimes it's just a matter of enduring what cannot be endured, right? Just endure. We might remind ourselves of Abraham Lincoln's favorite saying: "This too shall pass." And then what? We always want a map of what comes next. OK, this too shall pass, and then... But there is no map, no GPS, no fixed point; it's not out there.

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Yet little by little, with persistence, with faith in the Dharma, gradually things have begun to change. Through the enormous efforts on the part of the wonderful students who have continued by my side throughout these difficult three years – to you especially, I bow.

As they always do, things change. I really felt this at Anniversary Sesshin this summer, which we ended with an Atonement Ceremony and Healing Council, and again at Harvest Sesshin. The atmosphere was quite different; buoyant, somehow. And then at Rohatsu Sesshin, there was an extraordinary feeling of unity and kindness, a positive sense that everyone wanted to be here, that we were really walking this Way together. We were taking part in creating something vibrant, harmonious and new, yet with profound gratitude for all that has come before us, and all that we have been given: the great tradition of Rinzai Zen, the beauty of this practice and this place.

The last line of the Five Reflections that we chant before every breakfast and lunch goes, “In order to continue our practice for the sake of all beings, we accept this offering.” What is this offering? Well, of course, when we’re chanting, we’re happy that we are about to begin eating something delicious that has been prepared lovingly and presented beautifully. Of course, we so appreciate this offering, which makes it possible for us to keep on keeping on. But what about the offerings we don’t want?

What about illness, loss, disillusionment, confusion, enmity? These actually are the very offerings that we must gratefully accept. These are what can help us transform greed, anger, and folly to generosity, compassion, and wisdom. As Tibetan Buddhists say, your enemy is your greatest teacher. From our self-centered concerns, we move to a feeling of profound gratitude, not only to all those who have helped us, who have shown us this path and have cultivated our aspiration, but to all those who have taught us in ways that have brought bitter tears.

This is really the essence of the Buddha-Way. We are generating resolve as this new year unfolds. Every day is a new day, a new way to purify our karma and offer ourselves to the Dharma. No matter what, inexhaustibly offering ourselves.

In 1958, Soen Roshi wrote in his journal:

Human knowledge has come to the point where living beings can spin around outside the earth’s orbit. If we do not turn the light toward true wisdom, we will go off the track and destroy ourselves. Does a dog have Buddha nature or not? An ancient Buddha said, “MU!” Investigating this Mu, we celebrate the New Year with a wish for humanity’s inexhaustibility.

And then he wrote this haiku:

Buddha Mu Mu Mu Mu
Buddha Mu Mu Mu Mu Mu Mu
Buddha Mu Mu Mu Mu

In the Chinese zodiac, the Year of the Wood Horse began January 31. The horse was one of the twelve animals that gathered at the Buddha’s deathbed. Some of the qualities attributed to the horse are impulsiveness, energy, heroism, nobility, power, swiftness: galloping, galloping!

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The Year of the Horse is said to be a time when we can experience everything directly, when all is out in the open, not secretive. Bringing the imperatives of our practice to bear, we can see that there are great possibilities for breakthrough in situations that have felt stagnant or hard to grasp in their slithery, serpentine form of last year. Invigorated by this horse year, we can engage in honest, direct communication, have the courage to face what needs to be changed, and find new ways of collaboration that can bring resolution and renewal.

Through deep and unwavering introspection, we have become acutely aware of the things that we do not want to carry with us into this new year: old habits, karmic impediments, self-centered thoughts and deeds, ego-driven resentments and frustrations. All these we vow to relinquish. However inexhaustible our delusions are, we vow to extinguish them all.

A white celestial cloud horse is associated with Kannon Bodhisattva—Kanzeon, she who hears all cries. It's said that her white horse flies through the heavens bringing peace and blessings to all. Chanting Enmei Jukku Kannon Gyo, uniting with Kannon, the Great Bodhisattva of Compassion, we pray that all beings will cultivate and actualize true peace and extend all the blessings of Buddha's wisdom.

Shantideva, a prince who became a great philosopher-monk and lived in India from the late seventh to the early eighth century, wrote "Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life" and also "An Aspirational Prayer," which I will share here:

May I become at all times, both now and for forever
A protector for those without protection
A guide for those who have lost their way
A ship for those with oceans to cross,
A bridge for those with rivers to cross,
A sanctuary for those in danger,
A lamp for those without light
A place of refuge for those who lack shelter
And a servant for those in need.
By the power and the truth of this practice
May all beings have happiness, and the causes of happiness.
May all be free from sorrow and the causes of sorrow.
May all never be separated from the sacred happiness
Which is sorrowless.
And may all live in equanimity,
Without too much attachment and too much aversion,
And live believing in the equality of all that lives.
May all beings be filled with joy and peace.
May all beings everywhere,
The strong and the weak,
The great and the small,
The mean and the powerful,
The short and the long,
The subtle and the gross:
May all beings everywhere,
Seen and unseen,
Dwelling far off or nearby,
Being or waiting to become:
May all be filled with lasting joy.
Let no one deceive another,

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Let no one anywhere despise another,
Let no one out of anger or resentment
Wish suffering on anyone at all.
Just as a mother with her own life
Protects her child, her only child, from harm,
So within yourself let grow
A boundless love for all creatures.
Let your love flow outward through the universe,
To its height, its depth, its broad extent,
A limitless love, without hatred or enmity.
Then, as you stand or walk,
Sit or lie down,
As long as you are awake,
Strive for this with a one-pointed mind:
Your life will bring heaven to earth.