



# The Oak Tree in the Garden

Journal of the Hidden Valley Zen Center

## This Precious Life

*The following is an edited transcription of a teisho Mitra-roshi gave earlier this year during a sesshin at Mountain Gate.*

Today is Day 1 of this 7-day sesshin here in July 2015 at Mountain Gate in northern New Mexico. This afternoon I'd like to share with you some of the teachings of a woman I met in 1996 at a conference for Western ordained Buddhist women in Bodhgaya, India. At the time she was in her 20s, the daughter of a renowned meditation master trained in two Tibetan Buddhist traditions. There was a sense of real connection with her, and as well, a recognition that she was the "real deal." What she had to say to us was clear, deep, and no-nonsense. Her name and title is Khandro Rinpoche—"Rinpoche" being her title—and she is fluent in English, having been born in Dharamsala, India. Being the daughter of an important teacher she was born into a very, in a sense, rarefied atmosphere. It seems her mother was also well known as a result of her own practice. From a very young age she was trained—initially by her father—and besides being a lovely person, she is clearly very deep in her understanding. We nearly met again in Santa Fe some years ago when we were both teaching at a Zen center there—she was to give private instruction there once we vacated the space, but there were a great number of people wanting to see her and so I didn't try to reconnect at that time.

**This Precious Life: Tibetan Buddhist Teachings on the Paths to Enlightenment**—in her book Khandro Rinpoche speaks of "the Four Reminders" important in Tibetan Buddhist teaching. We would do well to remember them

as well, in particular, the first.

Here is how they are spelled out in the book:

*This human existence with all its freedoms and endowments is extremely difficult to attain.*

*It enables one to accomplish the meaning of one's being.*

*Having attained such a precious existence, if one does not accomplish benefit at this time, how could one achieve this perfect treasure in the future?*

*The three realms are as impermanent as autumn clouds.*

*The births and deaths of beings are like a dance performance.*

*Flashing by like lightning in the sky, the life span of beings races swiftly like a waterfall over a steep mountain.*

*When the time comes for even a king to depart, neither his riches nor loved ones, relatives, and friends will follow.*

*Wherever beings abide, wherever they go, karma alone follows them like a shadow.*

*Overpowered by existence, craving and ignorance, all beings—humans, gods, and beings of the three lower realms—Circle unwittingly in the five realms of existence like the spinning of a potter's wheel.*

*The three realms blaze with the sufferings of old age and sickness, And there is no protector from the raging*

*flames of death.*

*Born into cyclic existence, beings dwell  
in ignorance, circling like bees trapped  
in a jar.*

—translated by Jetsun echen Paldrun  
& edited by the Dharmasri Translation Group,  
Baltimore, 2001

This life is very precious. It's so because it's only from this life that we can come to awakening. It's in this life that we have the capacity and the ability, and if we are fortunate enough, the contact with the teachings and a good teacher as well, to do so. And then the rest of it is up to us.

There's no point in thinking that rebirth after we die might lead us to a life where we would have an easier time of practice because we have no way of knowing what will happen to us after we die. Consider the Hindu saying that following a human life the next 50,000 or so lifetimes are as a bird. That makes the 500 lives of Hyakujo's fox seem like a short interlude, doesn't it!

We so often assume that in order to come to awakening we need to get into some special mind state. But our awakened mind is actually our natural state of mind without the encrustations of greed, anger, and delusion that have accumulated over lifetimes of ignorant living. With practice, little by little, step-by-step, we can open to that innate wisdom and compassion that is who we are. Although it's innate, to awaken to this takes a great deal of effort. It takes a great deal of work. It takes a great deal of patience, and it takes faith that we can, if we keep at it, doing the appropriate practice under the guidance of a teacher who's been there before us, bring truly liberating results.

It's not instantaneous. Although most people these days want instant results, we're not going to get it with the practice. The "Sudden Awakening" taught by the Sixth Patriarch of Zen, Hui Neng, refers to a sudden opening of the mind after long practice, not to instantaneous awakening a few moments or hours after we have first sat down and crossed our legs. However, if we do stick it out it's going to make an enormous difference in our lives. The trajectory that

our lives would take if we do practice sufficiently is very different from the one that it would follow if we don't. And that is why this life is so precious: because we have a chance here and now to make a difference.

Regarding this precious life, Khandro Rinpoche points out that "This human existence with all its freedoms and endowments is extremely difficult to attain." We don't have to buy into that Hindu saying that we'll get 50,000 lives as a bird before we can manage another human life, but the point is that we are alive now and we have the chance now to practice and it really can make a big difference in our lives—not only in our lives but the lives of all beings because we are so much more than interconnected. Although in appearance there is separation between each of us and the rest of the world, the rest of the things in the world, in reality there really isn't. And science is beginning to catch up with this. It's known that there is more space, for example, in a human body than there are cells. And regarding those cells, more than half of them are not "our" body cells, they are the cells of hitchhikers. They're cells of bacteria and other microscopic creatures that live within our body and—most of them—help us survive. There are others not so beneficial that live benignly within "us" so long as things are in balance, but when things get out of balance can cause disease. There is much talk these days about gut bacteria and how having the right assortment of these probiotics can lead to optimal health or even cure disease. There is growing emphasis on the "biome"—the bacteria living within us—as deeply influencing our level of health. It's even thought by some scientists that not having the right assortment of them in our gastrointestinal tract can lead to Parkinson's, for example, even though that condition is considered a neurological disease.

It's hard to know at this point what the real story is except that there are more and more reports of people healing from intransigent illnesses by adding particular probiotics to their diets. One of the most recent successes, amusing or nauseating depending on your outlook, is to import the poop from someone else who has a bet-

ter arrangement of flora into the gastrointestinal system of someone who doesn't and is ill. It has actually been shown to make a very positive difference and can even cure people of certain conditions. If you are listening to or reading this teisho or it is being read to you, you can practice even if you're ill—and that is a vital aspect of this precious life! Consider Yaeko Iwasaki, whose story is told in **The Three Pillars of Zen**: Dying of tuberculosis, unable to even sit up, she had a series of increasingly deep kensho experiences before she died.

This precious life: Even to be born is pretty phenomenal. And then to survive past childhood is more so. By the time we grow into adulthood and then older than that it is increasingly a question of how long we will survive. We've just recently learned that Shouzen, who trained here at Mountain Gate and was ordained here, has died in a car accident; he was only 34 years old. And in a bizarre and recent case at a hospital in northern NM, a suicidal man was brought in who had drunk an extremely dangerous form of rat poison. That poison is so toxic that legally it can only be sold to people holding special licenses and trained to handle it carefully, as if it comes into contact with water it produces a toxic gas that attacks the lungs and the cells in one's body with deadly results. Before the man died he threw up several times in various places in the hospital, resulting in any number of people being exposed to the deadly gas. It was so serious that the hospital had to be shut down and a HAZMAT [hazardous materials] team brought in to clean it up. It's not clear yet how many people working or visiting in the hospital were affected and may die, but we know personally of at least one. Who would have guessed?

And at that meeting in Bodhgaya, the inadvertent theme of that conference was death. India being India, although we thought we had made full arrangements ahead of time, when we arrived in Delhi and were met by the people who were supposed to have made our train reservations, and arranged for us to stay in a monastery, everything had changed. They had not made train reservations after all; we never found

out why not, and a group of monks had arrived at the monastery which precluded two women—ordained or not—from staying there. So we ended up having to pay to stay in a guest house. When we finally were able to get train reservations we couldn't depart until a couple of days later to travel from Delhi to Gaya (and from Gaya to Bodhgaya by taxi or tuktuk [motorized rickshaw]). The night we had originally planned to arrive in Bodhgaya two foreigners were murdered in that very, very small town. Bodhgaya is where the Buddha came to awakening under what is now known as the enlightenment tree, or the Bodhi tree. The great-grandchild of that original Bodhi tree is growing in that same place where young Siddhartha Gautama sat, committed to finding his true source regardless of how long it would take him.

Soon after we arrived we learned that a French Buddhist nun, also scheduled to attend the conference, had been riding in a rickshaw in Delhi when it was struck by a truck. She was gravely injured and wasn't expected to live—she had suffered major brain damage. So for the first two weeks of the conference until she died, other Western Buddhist nuns who knew her personally travelled back and forth from Delhi—24 hours away by train—to take care of her in the hospital. (In many parts of the world, including India, it is the family, not the nurses, who do the major care of the patient, including cooking for and feeding her or him.)

Then shortly before the conference ended after three and a half weeks I got a fax from my brother saying that our father had quit eating. Suffering from advanced Parkinson's, legally blind and 80% deaf, he was choking on his food even though it was being liquified by then. With the handwriting on the wall he chose not to prolong the inevitable by accepting a feeding tube, and because the alternative was choking he simply quit eating. My medical doctor brother had asked the nursing home where he lived to offer him food and drink if he wanted it but not to force it on him, and to have someone there to hold his hand. I thought about trying to get to Virginia to be there with him at that critical time, but trying to make it to southwestern Virginia

from a relatively remote part of India was clearly not possible to do speedily. As it turned out, by the time I got to Delhi a couple of days later, he had died. Our fourth encounter with death was in the taxi on the way from Bodhgaya to Gaya where we would take the train back to Delhi, when we passed a corpse in the road.

This life truly is precious and because we really don't know how long we'll live it's important to, as the American saying goes, "make hay while the sun shines." That potential to come to awakening is innate in each of us. To open even a bit to the freedom that we are endowed with—to experience even momentary freedom from anger, freedom from greed, freedom from delusion, freedom from our habitual reactions in life—this is what our practice offers to us.

*This human existence with all its freedoms and endowments is extremely difficult to attain. It enables one to accomplish the meaning of one's being. Having attained such a precious existence, if one does not accomplish benefit at this time, how could one achieve this perfect treasure in the future?*

*The three realms are as impermanent as autumn clouds. The birth, the death of beings, are like a dance performance. Flashing by like lightning in the sky, the lifespan of beings races swiftly like a waterfall over a steep mountain. When the time comes for even a king to depart, neither his riches nor loved ones, relatives and friends would follow. Wherever beings abide, wherever they go, karma alone follows them like a shadow.*

Karma is of course the results of our actions, and whether the actions are major actions such as giving one's life or limbs to save someone else or, conversely, murdering someone, or very, very subtle actions such as a raised eyebrow conveying disbelief or scorn, or a smile of understanding, they all count. Karma is complex and too complicated to try to trace back

because each succeeding moment's action has the potential to influence previous karma. It's like a self-guided missile, adjusting its trajectory here, then readjusting it there. All we can be assured of is that whatever we do there will be a result. So what are we going to do? How are we going to live?

"*What is enlightenment?*" Khandro Rinpoche writes that it is not about becoming something or someone else:

*It is the recognition of our intrinsic human nature which is absolute truth. This absolute true nature is called Buddha nature. The term Buddha from the Sanskrit, "Tatha" or "Tathagatha," means gone beyond, going beyond an ignorant state to become completely inseparable from absolute truth, which is our genuine ground. This is the essence of Buddhism and the main focus of our understanding and practice.*

So as was said before it's not about getting into some particular mind state, it's about letting go the surface distortion that can occur in our minds, and opening to the deep profound truth of our being that we are never without. When we can do that, when we can live from that, our life is very, very different.

*Enlightenment goes by many names. Absolute truth. Nirvana. Liberation. Freedom from suffering. Freedom from ignorance. Buddha mind. True nature of mind. Fundamental ground. Tathagatha garba. Sugatagarbha. Nature of suchness. As it is. Primordial wisdom. Emptiness. Luminosity. Bliss and emptiness. And wisdom and compassion. All of these terms refer to ultimate realization. This is the fruition that brings sentient beings from the state of ignorance to complete freedom. And this is our aspiration as we begin to practice. Never lose touch with this. When the fruition is truly understood the ground we stand on and the path we walk on must be maintained with the*

*same understanding.*

And that is also a very important point in practice. What is not so often emphasized in Buddhism these days is that it is not sufficient simply to awaken. We need to bring that awakened mind state to everything we do or say or think. Then the karma we create will be positive. But beyond that our practice is simply incomplete, it's just a nice memory if we bring ourselves to awakening, uncover that truth and then don't live it. It's also the cause of a lot of suffering. It is a sad thing in contemporary Buddhism that some of its teachers have abused their students. This happened because they have not taken their practice deeply enough to manifest it in their daily lives; their training was incomplete.

When we reach a certain point in our training we don't want to stop. We've seen how far we've come, we've seen that we've opened to mind states we hadn't realized we had. We've seen that we have done things out of dysfunction that we didn't realize we were doing in that way. If we didn't see those things and now we do, what more are we not aware of regarding our behavior? We want to become as free of that conditioning as possible while we have this chance to do so—and that is possible if we persist in our practice with depth and commitment.

To continue with Khando Rinpoche,

*Buddha nature is the heart quality of all sentient beings. It is necessary to recognize this core essence in ourselves as well as in others. Our own basic nature is free from ignorance, grasping and conceptual judgements. There's no room for illusion or falsity in absolute truth. Because it's inseparable from wisdom and compassion, there's no room for evil, greed, selfishness, ignorance, anger and attachment.*

However, until we have awakened deeply enough, then completely integrated that mind state of awakening, that awareness, that deep encounter with our true nature, there are still habit patterns of greed, anger, delusion that, al-

though weakened, we need to work on to eliminate completely. And even with integration we may still be challenged by the residue of those negative habit patterns. (It is said that the Buddha was expiating karma the moment it arose—the moment those considerably weakened habit patterns of greed, anger and delusion made another appearance.) If we're not to fall back into pain-producing behavior we need to integrate that awakening experience into our daily life.

There's much ongoing research these days into how the brain works, reversing earlier thinking to the contrary that even once our brain is mature—once we're grown to adulthood—there is the possibility of changing it. It turns out there's all kinds of possibility of changing it, including changing bad habit patterns. For that matter, the reverse is also true, of sliding down the slippery slope of greed, anger and delusion, acting out of selfishness, out of self-interest, despite some level of kensho [seeing into the true nature of reality]. When we have opened to at least a small degree of the truth of who we are, then changing negative habit patterns is much easier. Moreover the more we practice the more we see more clearly where we are behaving in ways that are not in keeping with the generosity, kindness, compassion and wisdom that is innate to us. It is so much easier to change these habit patterns when we can see them! And they can be changed!

When we do Zen practice, assuming we are committed to it, at a certain point the honeymoon period comes to an end and we begin to start seeing our crap. At that point many people are quite disappointed, assuming that Zen practice is making them worse, that they're becoming bad people. But that's not really the case. What's actually happening is that we're seeing more clearly and in that insight we're becoming much more aware of our motivations and our behavior—of the tone of voice, for example, that we might be using with somebody. We may have been a little shocked at someone's reaction to us because we didn't realize we were using a certain tone of voice and communicating the negative message it conveyed. In actuality this painful experience brings to us a wonder-

ful opportunity. Until we can see where we're caught, until we can see where we are acting out of some level of greed, anger and delusion, there's not much we can do about it. How can we change something we don't even know we need to change or want to change? But the more we practice, especially with this powerful susok'kan practice—this extended out-breath practice—the more we discover it is a fast track to opening our mind. A significant part of that opening is opening to a clear view of our motives and our behavior. That brings us the option of the gift of being able to move in more compassionate and wise directions.

*There's no room for illusion or falsity in absolute truth because it's inseparable from wisdom and compassion. There's no room for evil, greed, selfishness, ignorant, anger or attachment.*

Once we are able to open deeply enough to that innate wisdom we are able to live much more freely from illusion and delusion, anger, greed, selfishness, and other negative mind states—if we remain aware and don't slide into old habit patterns of mind.

*This intrinsic round of goodness is undeniable. All beings appreciate qualities of goodness, wisdom and compassion and kindness because this is our fundamental nature.*

Being aware of this is one thing. However, maintaining that awareness is something else. The first thing the Buddha taught after his enlightenment was the truth of suffering, the cause of which is ignorance—ignorance of our true nature—that's the overlay of conditioning of that perfect beingness that we are. Until we see through it we act out of that conditioning instead of out of the innate goodness, the innate perfection, the innate compassion and wisdom that is our true nature.

*Because of ignorance we are unable to see the compositeness of our perceptions, all the physical and mental forces that come together to create the*

*seemingly solid world. And this leads to grasping and the endless cycle of suffering called samsara. Samsara and all its suffering begin when we get caught up in solidifying external appearances instead of remaining on our fundamental ground.*

Charlotte Joko Beck, who was a therapist as well as a Zen teacher, wrote a couple of books. One is entitled, **Everyday Zen**. We have a copy of that in the library up in the Kannon-do here at Mountain Gate. It was either this book or her other book in which she spoke about how, for example, if we're out in a rowboat, rowing lazily on a lake on a wonderful sunny day, when all of a sudden, "Bang!" our boat bumps into another boat. We didn't see it coming and the initial reaction is irritation and anger. "How could anyone be so aggressive as to row right into our boat?" But then we realize that that boat doesn't have anybody in it. Nobody ran into us. The boat was floating on its own. Of course then we can translate that into anger at whoever left the boat untied, but maybe nobody left the boat untied. Maybe there was a storm and it broke lose of its moorings. This gives an indication how many different possibilities there are to a way of perceiving something as simple as being out there on the lake, happily rowing away and then being banged into by another boat.

If it's like that with something as simple as that, what is it like with our everyday life? Somebody says something to us: How do we interpret it? It's guaranteed to be an interpretation based on our conditioning. And so we get caught in a whirl of reactivity, and around and around we go. The more clear we can be, the more we can respond to life rather than reacting to it out of our assumptions about ourselves and others. Moreover, in that letting go of reactivity in a given moment, suddenly many opportunities present themselves. We may have thought we were at a dead-end in our attempts to accomplish something, for example, but when we let go our investment in a specific result other opportunities open up. "The way stands clear and undisguised"—as it says in Affirming Faith in Mind.

The more we can let go, the more we can truly enjoy our life, and the more we can live our life in ways that promote peace, joy and equanimity, not only for ourselves, but for others as well.

The practice, this incredible practice of susok'kan—the extended outreach, will take us there faster than any other practice I've experienced or witnessed other people practicing. It's a phenomenal practice. The challenge is that it is such a simple practice we may get bored. We most likely will get frustrated or feel like we're not getting anywhere. We can feel like there's something else, a different practice that would work much better. But if we are really to gain the benefit of this practice, it's important to stick with it. If boredom comes up, what does boredom taste like? What does the energy of boredom actually feel like in our body? Bring the breath out, exploring those sensations from a wordless stance. And always, always reach through the breath; there's a great mystery there, waiting to be revealed! Try to touch that which is just barely out of reach. Over and over again, do this!

At this point we have a very little bit more than six more days in which to continue deepening in this practice. Take advantage of it! Give yourself fully to it, especially during the times when it doesn't feel very productive, the times when it's the last thing in the world you want to do—because that's exactly where the most benefit can come from practicing.

Thank you for listening and we'll now recite the four vows.



The five-year-old son of a Zen Buddhist practicing father and a Roman Catholic mother recently sat zazen for a few minutes with his dad, then being a five-year-old, left to explore other things before it was time for school. Returning as his father finished his zazen for the morning, the five-year-old commented, "Meditating is like relaxing. When you meditate God is fixing your energy." His father, in sharing this, commented, "Kids just see things more clearly than we adults do!"

*If you're thinking about financial planning, estate planning, or both, please remember that there are myriad ways you can help Hidden Valley Zen Center and/or Mountain Gate through planned giving. The right kind of plan can help you reduce your taxes significantly while providing for a larger, longer-lasting gift to Mountain Gate or HVZC. Because there is a wide array of bequests, annuities, trusts, and other financial vehicles to consider, you'll want to work with your financial advisor to decide what's best for you. Thank you for considering a gift to HVZC and/or Mountain Gate.*

## News of Mountain Gate

The August Regaining Balance Retreat for Women Veterans with PTSD ended with brighter and more relaxed faces all around. The one remaining 2015 RB retreat is scheduled for mid-October. These retreats are free to the women they serve, and both staff and participants find them deeply rewarding and helpful. For more information: [www.RegainingBalance.org](http://www.RegainingBalance.org)

## NOTICE

The morning following a weekend sesshin is a "sleep in" morning, i.e., there is no morning sitting that day; there will, however, continue to be an evening sitting the day following a weekend sesshin.

As usual, the day following a longer sesshin—one of four, five, or seven days—will be a "free day," i.e., there will be neither morning nor evening sittings that day. It's a day off.

**September 25-27 2-Day Work Sesshin** Mitra-roshi expects to be here September 22-29.

**October 3-10 7-Day Sesshin at Mountain Gate** Deadline for applications: Sept 20

**October 11 Benefit Concert for Regaining Balance** by internationally known concert pianist Peter Gach, 3 pm at the Unitarian Church in Santa Fe NM; call 505-404-0800 for details

**October 14-18 Regaining Balance Retreat for Women Veterans with PTSD, at Mountain Gate** These are special retreats for women veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress, offered free to the women they serve; for more info: [www.RegainingBalance.org](http://www.RegainingBalance.org)

**October 30-November 1 2-Day Sesshin** Mitra-roshi expects to be here October 27 to November 3.

**November 2** there will be a **Jukai [Precepts] Ceremony**, an opportunity for Sangha members to recommit to their practice and to working toward living the Precepts. This is the only time this year Jukai will be offered at HVZC.

**November 15 Benefit Concert for Hidden Valley Zen Center** by internationally known concert pianist Peter Gach, 2 pm at the Center; call 760-591-9893 for details

**November 17-24 7-Day Sesshin at Mountain Gate.** Deadline for applications: Nov. 5.

**November 30-December Rohatsu Sesshin at Mountain Gate.** Deadline for applications is November 15.

**December 6 Rohatsu Mini-Sesshin** led by Sozui-sensei; the sesshin will continue with extended sittings morning and evening through December 8th, the day of the Buddha's Awakening on seeing the morning star; members are welcome to sit all day as well on those additional days. Rohatsu sesshin will be continuing

at Mountain Gate through the morning of the 8th, and in sitting at HVZC as well we are combining our commitment and our energy—with the potential result of going much deeper!

## 2016 Calendar

**January 5-12 Sesshin at Mountain Gate.** Deadline for applications is December 28.

**January 26-31 5-Day Sesshin** Mitra-roshi expects to be here January 25-February 3.

**March 4-11 7-Day Sesshin at Turtleback Zendo** For more information: [seritas@comcast.net](mailto:seritas@comcast.net)

**March 18-23 Elder Sesshin at Mountain Gate** Deadline for applications is March 2.

**March 25 - April 1 7-Day Sesshin at Mountain Gate.** Application deadline March 17

**April 8-10 VESAK - Celebration of the Buddha's Birth** This is a most important celebration in Buddhism, and begins with Temple Night on Friday, April 8, continuing Saturday, April 9 with the Ceremony of Bathing the Baby Buddha, the Story of the Buddha's Birth, and a potluck meal with Sangha, families and friends, and concluding Sunday morning with a teisho, and of course, tea and sweets after teisho.

**April 26 - May 3 7-Day Sesshin at Mountain Gate.** Application deadline April 14.

**April 29-May 1 2-Day Sesshin** led by Sozui-sensei..

**May 4-8 Regaining Balance Retreat for Women Veterans with PTSD, at Mountain Gate.** These are specialized retreats for women veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress, offered free to these women; for more info: [www.RegainingBalance.org](http://www.RegainingBalance.org) If you would like to help support this effort, please send your tax-deductible check to Mountain Gate, HC 65 Box 78, Ojo Sarco NM 87521

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*A monk in all earnestness asked Joshu, "What is the meaning of Bodhidharma's coming from the West? Joshu answered, "The oak tree in the garden!"*