



# TAIL OF THE OX

VOLUME 16, ISSUE 2

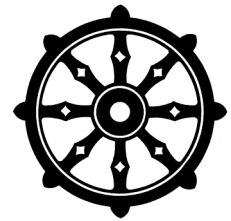
DECEMBER 2011

## INSIDE THIS ISSUE:

Animal Realm	3
Great Jukai	4
Sesshin & Sangha	6
Reflections	8
Gift of Sangha	9
Everywhere Sangha	11

**D**EAR SANGHA AND FRIENDS, Working together on the Hell realm, we think carefully about the rocks we have decided to place along the path participants in the Great Jukai ceremony will tread. The stones are sharp, uncomfortable, even painful to walk over. Is this too much, we ask? We elect to put down blankets, to make the path a little easier to negotiate. Not too thick mind you - this is supposed to be hell. Now, I have to come clean. I didn't want the blankets. After all, compared to the hellish conditions so many find themselves in every day, what's a few moments of foot pain. And those rocks can sure get our attention - can force us to be mindful of every step. In a way, our sangha brothers and sisters are like those rocks. Every day, we witness each other's efforts and actions and, in so doing, become ever more mindful of our own. But they are also like those blankets. Sitting together - mornings and evenings at the Centre or day and night in sesshin - the earnest effort, deep compassion, kindness and love of our sangha sisters and brothers make every step on the path worth taking.

~ Bruce Roberts



Toronto Zen Centre

33 High Park Gardens

Toronto M6R 1S8

416-766-3400

## Friendship: Friday mornings with a Bullet

by Barbara Lamb

**I**N THE UPPADA SUTTA the Buddha emphasized the importance of spiritual friendship. When Ananda asked, "Is it true, Lord, that noble friends are half of the holy life?" The Buddha answered, "Don't say that, Ananda. Noble friends are the whole of the holy life."

As we can see from the quoted passage, Kalyanamitta, or the spiritual friend, is someone to be deeply valued in our practice.

The Buddha emphasized on many occasions how critical the support of Sangha is to our growth. Certainly people who have tried to maintain practice on their own can attest to how powerful group zazen feels, because our concentration is deepened and filled out with others. It's like a symphony. One cello is lovely, but when blended with all the other instruments of the orchestra, something richer

(Continued on page 2)



## Spiritual Friendship...

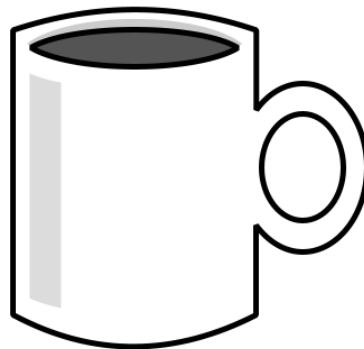
*(Continued from page 1)*

than the part develops.

We also need spiritual friends because we are swimming upstream. Working on ourselves in this way is not mainstream, and it helps to be around people who understand why we sit in silence, facing a wall. And who understand our failings. The apt analogy is of a rock tumbler. We bounce off each other, and our rough edges become smooth. We can frustrate, confuse and hurt our Dharma friends, and in their compassion, they will let us know, and love us still. In the Sangha we have a model for relationships built on honesty and care, which we can use in our interactions in the larger community. The Pali word "mitta" or friend, has the same root as metta, loving kindness. It is the loving kindness we experience in the Sangha that with time we learn to radiate into the world around us

Spiritual friends can be peers or mentors, and both are precious. Those who are at a similar stage in practice are our allies in the struggle, working shoulder to shoulder to move forward. Those who have come before are sympathetic guides, who can encourage us and point out pitfalls along the way.

Spiritual  
friends can  
be peers or  
mentors, and  
both are  
precious.



One of the strong attractions for me at my first workshop was the sense of camaraderie amongst the Zen Centre volunteers. There was a relaxed, playful quality to it that I had never seen before. I began attending morning sittings and one morning, the other two sitters in the zendo invited me to Alternative Grounds for a coffee. As it turned out, I had no money with me but my new Dharma brother offered to pay. Socializing in this kind of setting allowed me to see for myself what these Zen Centre people were like: relatively normal, though more awake and cheerful than most at 7:30 in the morning.

Now Friday mornings at AG are practically an institution. The sitting is followed by a dedicated chanting service in which merit is offered to friends and family members in physical or mental distress. The love and concern is palpable, and we carry that with us to the café. I am probably too attached to a spicy hot chocolate drink called The Bullet. As I sip it, I look around the table at my Dharma friends. What a splendid diversity of ages and backgrounds. If I had never come to practice, I would never have met these people. How fortunate we all are!♦

## Being an Animal

by Shelley O'Brien

**D**ON'T TALK TO ME, don't ask me any questions, just don't... "Grrrrrrrrr" was what was going through my head as my realm team and I worked, wading and creating, chin-deep in pine trees, taxidermy animals, blacked out dimness and head-ache-inducing odors of acrylic paint.

We were mid-conversion of the men's change room into the animal realm, and I was a big boorish brown bear.

Well, technically, I was wholeheartedly molding crumpled painted paper into the shape of a bear. Considering the number of hours we had each spent conceiving and creating our animal world, it wasn't really a big surprise that I was fighting the strong urge to roar at someone, crash through our forest set, burst out of the dark room and go find a nice sunny spot for a "well-deserved" nap.

Preparing for the ceremony of Great Jukai showed us the depth and visceral reality of the six realms as physical places that we have all circled through in past lives, and that we see in our human realm. But a very important lesson that I took from journeying the realms and building an animal realm was that each realm also clearly exists within me.

Greed, attachment and aggression are there; a feeling of entitlement for special treatment and comfort too. Ignorance, absolutely. And, well...you already heard about my inner bear. To enter the human realm? While it brought

*(Continued on page 4)*

An important lesson  
from building an animal  
realm ~  
*each realm also exists  
within me...*



*The Animal Realm*

## Animal...

*(Continued from page 3)*

the comforting trap of familiarity, faces, and familial connections, the accessories of old age were stark reminders of the inevitable changes to come.

And so what to do with our inner deva, hungry ghost, animal and titan? Above all, I am slowly learning to practice with the whole kit and kaboodle of constant change and the suffering and consequent behaviour that results. This is included with the package. It's an all-inclusive, package deal, our precious life. So we sit, and gradually learn how to acknowledge and accept, and to really look at it all with our hearts wide open. While I'm not sure I'm

all that enthusiastic about my bearish tendencies, I have come to this: a thank you.

Thank you to this stew of salty, sometimes caustic, sometimes wounded emotion and reactivity that makes up part of my human self, because the discomfort it has caused rubbed and rubbed and continues to rub. This rubbing has helped open a small inner space that looks like a question. This question holds no pain or afflictions but has revealed itself due to both the marvel and anguish of being alive. This question has no smell, but the scent of incense passes effortlessly through it. I can't hear it, but it resonates perfectly with low timeless voices of my

sangha friends chanting:

*Kanzeon! Praise to Buddha.*

*All are one with Buddha,*

*All awake to Buddha.*

*Through the day Kanzeon,*

*Through the night Kanzeon.*

*This moment springs from mind.*

*This moment itself is mind.*

A deep gassho to all of you for conceiving such powerful depictions of the realms. Another gassho for your continuous efforts in practice. May we all follow the precious trail of incense smoke to our true homes! ♦



## Great Jukai

*by Anne Redston*

**I**N THE STILL OF THE ZENDO, the quiet mood of anticipation was jarred by resounding footsteps and grisly growls. A touch of the shoulder launched our journey in to a world beyond words.

Hanging the weighty cloak of preconception at the door, we descended the gaping stairwell. Yama Raja

beckoned us through the veil of darkness, onto the rocky road of hell. Braced against the frigid winds, we stepped gingerly into the cool blue light of suffering; syringes, images of anguish, a child lying lifeless amidst the squalor. A tear would freeze and shatter before it hit the ground in this forsaken realm.

The barren, icy emptiness of the Hungry Ghosts' realm was chilling. Translucent figures lit by only the dimmest of light within; insatiably hungry, ever grasping, and alone. The pounding footsteps and ghoulish groans grew ever louder as, stooped and wary, we passed through a cave in to the depths of the Animal realm.

*(Continued on page 5)*

## Great Jukai...

*In the realm of the  
Devas one could  
drink the nectar of  
ambrosia and  
smell the roses in  
the comfort of  
satin cushions for  
nine hundred  
kalpas.*



*In the realm of the Devas*

*(Continued from page 4)*

The piercing eyes of the owl were a disturbing reminder that only the fittest survive; one day predator, the next prey. At any moment someone could pull a trigger, then calmly walk away.

One was struck by the breadth and fullness of life in the Human realm; from the bureau covered in a disconcerting array of over-the-counter medications to the tranquility of the makeshift zendo. All the images, stories, and paraphernalia reminded us to be ever mindful, that every moment is a gift.

The Titan with blood red eyes, wielding a sabre, stood in stark contrast. Guns, knives and swords allude to the Titans lurking in the shadows. We dare not turn

our backs leaving this merciless realm.

Despite the alluring sound of flute music and trickling fountain, a thought harkened back to the lyrics of the Eagles' Hotel California. Through the corridor of comforts, the Devas drew us to the heart of their silken web where one could easily drink the nectar of ambrosia and smell the roses in the comfort of satin cushions for nine hundred kalpas or more.

With forbearance we proceeded to the Buddha Hall to await the purifying processional of elders through the realms of existence chanting "Homage to Shakyamuni." Sensei led the Great Jukai Ceremony with his customary dignity and grace. Our numbers filled

the Buddha Hall as we took the precepts. Six of our Dharma friends received rakusus. This affirmation of the precepts and journey through the realms of existence was a vibrant collective experience.

The entire process accentuated a remarkable abundance of creativity, collaborative spirit, skill and devotion within the sangha. In the course of a few hours the realms that took months of planning and considerable time and effort to install were dismantled. A great lesson in impermanence!

As a relatively new member, taking the precepts for the first time, it was a powerful experience. I am extremely grateful for the path that brought me to this extraordinary place and the warm welcome of the sangha. ♦

## Sesshin and Sangha

by Fran Turner

WHEN THE TWENTY OR SO people who attend sesshin at the Toronto Zen Centre climb onto their cushions the first evening, it is thanks to the work of many Sangha members. It is not just those who are on the list of attendees that make a sesshin happen. Planning starts well in advance—the menu is planned and the amounts of food required for the three meals a day are calculated. Shopping and preparation begin days before. The person who actually does the grocery shopping may not attend sesshin. For instance, Carol Ferrari who has a catering business is a valuable resource for gathering our food supply and her assistance is counted upon and valued, even though she may not be attending a particular sesshin. In the past, my husband who is not a member has helped me shop and transport the many bags of oranges, carrots, apples and tofu from the car into the Centre. As we chant at breakfast and the evening meal, “This meal is the labour of countless beings, let us remember their toil,” the earthworms, the truck drivers, the farmers, the clerks in the store are all contributors as part of the greater Sangha that supports and nourishes

our practice.

During the days before sesshin, Sangha members help with preparing the house by volunteering their time and by coming to the Centre those designated work evenings before sesshin starts. The kitchen is cleaned, the drawers and refrigerator shelves are emptied and tidied and refilled. The living arrangements are attended to—paper cups laid out with our initials in the bathrooms by someone who may not attend

sesshin, mattresses are distributed by our Dharma brothers and sister, the clocks are carefully attended to so that we are all coordinated on the same time. The bathrooms are made spotless, the laundry is laundered. There may be someone who will not be attending sesshin but who prepares the batter for the delicious muffins we will eat each morning for our breakfast.

Invisible but attentive, there is also a member or two who is “on call” during sesshin to make unforeseen purchases or to bring something that could not be purchased prior to sesshin. These visits are awaited—having unexpectedly run out of napkins, for instance, we await a supply purchased for us by this volunteer in time for lunch. If a sesshin participant requires some specific and unanticipated thing from the pharmacy, attendees can let the monitor know and that person will provide it.

Meanwhile at our homes during sesshin, our spouses and partners carry on, filling in for what we are not able to do because we are devoting ourselves to our practice in this special way, sitting on behalf of all sentient beings. Our colleagues at work adapt to our absence. Our children at

*Meanwhile our  
spouses and  
partners carry on,  
filling in because  
we are devoting  
ourselves to our  
practice.*

(Continued on page 7)

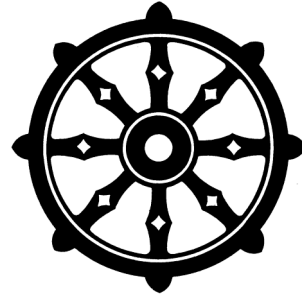
## Sesshin...

*(Continued from page 6)*

home keep us in their hearts and the thought of them sustains us as we practice moment by moment. Sesshin is finished and we stand in those quiet and overflowing moments before we hug, before we talk. There are photos to be taken of all of us who have spent our days facing the wall and someone often appears to do that, our joyous re-acquaintance with the outside world. Family

members may join us for the post-sesshin meal and they are welcomed and embraced into and by our loving Sangha.

It is a few days after sesshin, Barbara who was the head cook sends out a recipe that we can prepare at home and share with our families. There is another email with the post-sesshin photo of Sensei and a score of other smiling faces. Take a look and then close your eyes—behind them you see the World.♦



*From the October sesshin*

## Reflections on Sangha

by Candice Eisner

I CAN'T REMEMBER the first time I heard the word Sangha.

It was probably from reading a definition of it from a textbook on Buddhism, or something equally pedestrian. I do recall that it left a faint impression on me, one that made me hopeful of finding others to help me on my spiritual journey (whatever that was!).

At my first Zen workshop at a Buddhist Temple in another city, one of the participants asked the teacher if they, as monks, would support a lay Sangha. The teacher's response was quite nega-

*There is an entire world outside of our Triple Sangha, one that contains many Buddhists.*

tive; she commented that the temple was there to support a person's Zen practice and that was all, and any ideas about socializing, bake sales, or other such things were not something they were going to facilitate in any way.

I left that workshop confused. If the Sangha was not made of people one could turn to for support on *and* off the mat, what exactly was a Sangha, then?

Being a member of the Toronto Zen Centre has shown me the wondrous thing that Sangha is, and how it *is* supportive on and off the mat. Every day I have a new appreciation for what it is to take refuge in Sangha. I am fortunate to be practicing here!

However, even beyond the many benefits to practice and life that have come from being a part of our wonderful and supportive Toronto Sangha, I have come to see that there is an entire world outside of our Triple Sangha, one that contains many Buddhists from different sects, cities and cultures. Through the Internet I have been able to interact with a few of them on a regular basis.

There is John Pappas, a Buddhist in South Dakota, who recently shared a memorable poem he wrote for his 2-



Candice

(Continued on page 9)

## Reflections...

*(Continued from page 8)*

year-old daughter –the Heart Sutra, composed in the way Dr Seuss might have written it. Its playfulness reminded me to keep a childlike quality to my practice – a curiosity about the world around me.

There is Jaye Seiho Morris, a lay-ordained Rinzai Zen Buddhist from Maryland, who frequently shares his beautiful, inspiring calligraphy online. His writings about the ebb and flow of his own practice serve as another reminder that, yes, I am not alone on this path.

And yet there are even Sangha-like qualities beyond the formal Buddhist community, from those who have been influenced by the Buddha's teachings.

Recently I had an exchange with a friend on Facebook; she lamented that while she has worked hard to become more patient and unflappable, there are still people who can seriously ruffle her feathers. Others, myself included, sympathized whole-heartedly. Equanimity is something I constantly work on, and my friend's Facebook update was a gentle

reminder that everyone else does, too.

For me, the Sangha reaches out beyond the wonderful Dharma friends I have made in our Triple Sangha. It extends to Buddhists in other countries, and, in some ways, to others beyond formal Buddhist communities. All are a source of support and strength for my practice. I am truly grateful to be a part of this Sangha!♦

<sup>1</sup> <http://greatplainsbuddha.com/the-heart-sutra-to-a-2-year-old>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.digitalzendo.com/>

## The Gift of Sangha

*by Lynne Davis*

**I**T IS INDEED GOOD KARMA to be born into a Buddhist community that is rich in sangha. In 1996, when I first came to the Toronto Zen Centre, it would be fair to say that my life was light years away from the behavior and subtleties of Zen teachings. The “up” side of this gap was that daily life would become and continues to be a deep field of practice.

Whether someone has been at the Centre for a short time or a long time, they are role models for practice. All actions – large and small – matter. How they prostrate, how they place their feet while walking, their attitude as they clean fruit, how they scrub the

*(Continued on page 10)*

*It is eye-opening to discover that individuals whose practice seems to sparkle with experience must overcome many obstacles.*

## Gift...

*(Continued from page 9)*

toilet, how they rake leaves, how they make a bed, how they respond to the unexpected – everyone’s every action has the potential to shape the practice of others. Through many years, I have been inspired to transform and polish everyday activities by observing the extraordinary way in which dharma sisters and brothers enact the ordinary.

As someone who now lives away from both the Toronto Zen Centre and the Vermont Zen Centre, I have less daily contact with sangha members. However, the importance of sangha is no less powerful. Driving to Vermont for sesshins is one way in which deep bonds are formed and sustained. Whether chanting our way through the countryside, exchanging ideas, or just catching up on how families are doing, we continue to nourish deep relationships. On many a drive, I have received wise counsel on how to improve my sitting and my practice, and advice on how to approach a difficult problem.

Training programs are another way to build sangha bonds. As we work together, we learn together. Dharma sisters and brothers come

from Toronto, Vermont and Costa Rica – the Triple Sangha. Whether it is shopping for sesshin, ironing all the mat covers, cleaning the toilets, or preparing altars, our joint efforts weave us into a single cloth of practice that endures beyond the training program.

My husband Cameron and I live outside of Peterborough on a little island where Pigeon and Buckhorn Lakes meet. In addition to human residents, the island is populated with oaks and maples that extend the meaning of sangha. As the seasons rise and fall, we sit together through rain, wind, and snow, sunrise and sunset, joined by loons, herons, and singing birds that visit on their journeys north and south.

In the last couple of years, geographical distances have been spanned by Skype. It has been possible for out-of-towners to participate “live” at term student meetings. This means that we can share our progress, and hear the reports of all the resident Vermonters, in real time. As student after student explains their day-to-day practice and their struggles in meeting their commitments, one feels the unfolding of each person’s life in all its complexity. It is eye-opening to discover

that individuals whose practice seems to sparkle with experience must overcome many obstacles, no less than those of us newer to the dharma. It has been a blessing to have a dharma buddy over the past years for each training program. Marielle and I have worked our way through the precepts over and over again, always uncovering new dimensions as daily life throws recurring and unexpected challenges across our paths. The term student program, as a nexus of sangha co-practice, lays bare that we are all in the cauldron together.

As someone who is a member of the Toronto Zen Centre, although my teacher is in Vermont, it is always strengthening to visit the Centre, sitting with sangha members with whom there is long history. There are also members whom I haven’t met yet and with whom there may be special connections in the future. I am always struck by the clear, pure energy of the Centre that is sustained by a dedicated sangha under impeccable leadership. One can only accept this great gift with a heart of deep gratitude.♦



## The Sangha Everywhere

by Ana Pérez-Leroux

THE SANGHA IS ONE OF THE THREE TREASURES of Buddhism. Buddha, Dharma, Sangha. The potential for perfection inside each of us, the wisdom shared in practice, and the community that supports us on the path. Soon after starting practice, I came to understand that the Toronto Zen Centre is not the place where we meet to practice, but the people that come to it. Practice allows us to re-discover that you can find Sangha anywhere, and when you least expect it. Sangha is in the stranger that shares a kind smile, on a day when your heart is heavy; or in the friend that with a quiet look begs you not to make that mistake, on

*The sound of their prayers and bells  
spills to the clean air, and floats down  
to the valley and the bustle of the city.*

a day when you are blinded by anger, ignorance or greed.

This summer we went to Korea. This hidden kingdom, which for years kept away from the turmoils of other nations, is the birthplace of the Silla civilization, where Buddhism flourished at the beginnings of our current era. I was eager to see Buddhism as practice in the context of continuous, millenniums-length practice.

The primary reason for our visit was to see our son, who was teaching English in Gwacheon, a small city south of Seoul. Knowing my wish to learn more about Korean Buddhism, he proposed we hike up to Gwanak-san. He said that the mountain was beautiful, and that there an active temple lies in its summit, reachable through a two-hour climb. The climb was

*(Continued on page 12)*



A kimchi "garden"

Toronto Zen Centre



33 High Park Gardens  
Toronto, Ontario M6R 1S8

Phone: 416-766-3400

Fax: 416-769-4880

E-mail: [info@torontozen.org](mailto:info@torontozen.org)

[www.torontozen.org](http://www.torontozen.org)

*Gratitude for gifts,  
even snow on my bedspread  
a gift from the Pure Land  
~ Issa*

#### CONTRIBUTORS FOR THIS ISSUE

- Lynne Davis
- Candice Eisner
- Bill Forrest
- Taigen Henderson Sensei
- Kirby Kim
- Marilyn King
- Barbara Lamb
- Shelley O'Brien
- Ana Pérez-Leroux
- Anne Redston
- Bruce Roberts
- Vlad Sekulic
- Fran Turner

## Everywhere...

*(Continued from page 11)*

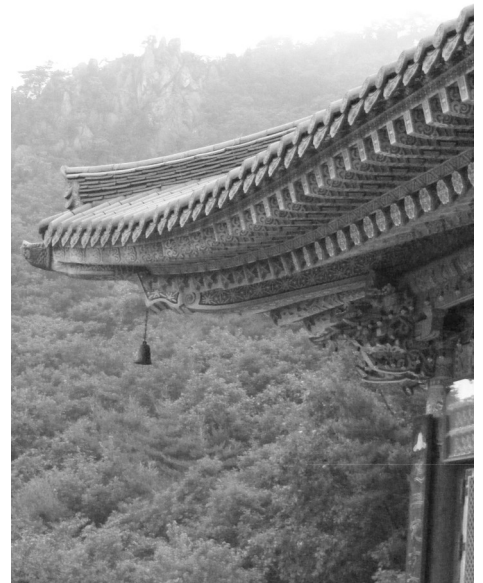
lovely, and we were continuously being passed by elders in climbing gear. We arrived at dusk; to find a well-attended chanting service in place in the larger temple. There were many hiking boots outside the entrance to the temple. I wondered about attending practice in the winter, and whether the monks who ran the temple lived here year round.

The sound of their prayers and bells spills to the clean air, and floats down to the valley and the bustle of the city. The other temple seems to be holding a quiet sitting; a teacher and two students in solitary zazen. The teacher was dressed no differently from our own teacher, but the students, perhaps monks, are dressed in pure white. I sat outside at the temple steps, and enjoyed the quiet of their practice. Both buildings are beautiful structures, restored in 1987 after substantial decay. A lower structure holds a dining room; through the open door we saw three people sitting at a table, planning meals and taking notes about it. One cannot help but remember Dogen's instructions for the Tenzo.

My son pulled me by the hand: "Come see the most wonderful thing. It is behind the temple." We walk around, and there it is,

a kimchi garden, with dozens and dozens of brown earthenware pots, each two or three feet tall, containing the spicy pickled cabbage that accompanies every meal in this country. In the air, incense and pickles and garlic mix their scent. In the halls, achingly beautiful Buddha figures, and images of Kannon, with every inch of the pillars and ceiling of the temple housing them decorated with tiny colorful patterns. They seem like thousands and thousands of petals of flowers spreading towards infinity in the eight directions.

In the garden, the thoughtful mind of the cook has planted the pots where these vegetables will sit and marinate for years. The kimchi in these jars will complete a Sangha meal, perhaps five years from this very, very moment. This cabbage will have to sit patiently before it ripens to full potential. Just like our practice.♦



Temple roof