



TAIL OF THE OX

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DEAR SANGHA AND FRIENDS, After a long, deep sleep, suddenly – Spring. As my daughter says, “the Root Children are waking up,” and the words of the most recent of her many classroom songs fill the house... “all around is the promise that springtime will bring.” Crocuses, the early risers, show us the way, while cool April rains wash away salt, grit and grime – the last, hard crust of Winter. At my parents-in-law’s bird-feeder (so long the almost exclusive domain of Black-capped Chickadees and American Goldfinches bedecked in their drab winter plumage) a wayfarer dazzling in brilliant orange and black alights and continues the long journey toward his summer home. The seal on the house broken, the sunrise is once again ushered in by bird-song; warming winds carrying their tunes through now open windows. But elsewhere there is flooding, riverbanks breached, houses destroyed, livelihoods and lives turned upside down. What to make of it all? Dogen Zenji wrote:

*The colours of the mountains,
The sound of the valley streams
Just the body and voice of
My Shakyamuni Buddha.*

~Bruce Roberts



Sesshin: Now, and Then

by Ana Pérez-Leroux

WHAT IS RIGHT HERE, right now, this very moment, in front of us? Who are we, right here, right now? Trying to understand this, we begin practice. Different people are attracted to the Centre by different things. I wandered into the Centre casually, at the advice of a friend, and immediately realized this was important, and that I needed to be here. But let’s be honest, when I joined the Centre, I was as much terrified as attracted.

After a couple of years of sitting, it felt like it was time to join a sesshin. It was real practice, someone said; daily sittings are not at the same level of intensity, said someone else. So I signed up!

Then the day came, and I showed up with my bags, mildly apprehensive. Would I be able to manage three full days without talking? Not easily! I spend my days in speech: teaching, in meetings, counselling students, making plans during lunch with colleagues. Then, at home, I’m on the phone with my mother, or talking with my sons, checking on their days, and so on, and so forth. I even talk to my dog. Would I be able to handle all that silence? There was also the apprehension felt at sharing a house with so many people I didn’t know. However, I thought to myself, Zen folks

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Now, and Then...

The biggest surprise was the relief that came from not speaking, and not being spoken to.

seem so sturdy and sensible and quiet, it should be OK.

In the kitchen, Marilyn, whom I hardly knew at the time, gave me a hug, congratulated me on my first sesshin, and wished me good practice. I felt grateful for the welcome, but somewhat puzzled for the camaraderie that reminded me of when I was a swimmer, about to start a demanding event. I was also afraid of the physical challenge of practice, but simultaneously pleased to be testing myself. A chair was required for first timers, so I knew my knees would not be a problem. Keeping my back upright would be the challenge, without the structure provided by the lotus posture.

On the first day, I was dizzy and hyperventilating. The monitor noticed, and provided quiet but effective advice which solved the problems. The hours went on; the strict routine; the impressively formal meals. My mind was constantly rebelling against the intensity of practice; my ego up in arms about the small comforts surrendered: the scheduled washing and shower times, the advice not to eat too

much, the short breaks, the careful procedures, the small space in the bedroom.

There were many moments of intense irritation and incomprehension, and a strong desire to walk away. Eventually, my focus changed from outside to inside. The quiet grew in mind and heart. Admiration grew as well, for the work of a full household being conducted in effortless harmony, for the help of senior students who seemed to be able to support me without even sending a glance in my direction.

The biggest surprise was the relief that came from not speaking, and not being spoken to. Even the exchange with Sensei during dokusan seemed like too much language.

As the end of sesshin approached, contradictory feelings grew. There was relief to know it was coming to an end, and sadness at the many flaws in my practice. Sesshin shows us up,

Sensei once said. But there was also more. Everything within myself, and outside seemed new. At the end of that first sesshin, the first time I looked at my face in the mirror, I expected the pain, negativity and confusion I had felt so strongly to show. Instead, tenderness and calmness were in my expression.

There have been other sesshins for me, each surprising and different: each one providing a much-needed jolt to my practice. Over time, I am learning that the struggle is the path. I have learned not to be startled at the things the ego presents us with. It is almost incomprehensible that in doing nothing we are doing so much.

During my last sesshin, the collective practice was so strong, that it felt as if the whole house was humming and glowing with goodness and sincerity. At the closing ceremony, knees aching, and my back a mess, all I could think of was, how soon I can sign up for the next one?!♦



Ana at home in Toronto

Riding the Bus

by Candice Eisner

FOUR-THIRTY IN THE MORNING is an ungodly hour. That's the time I have to get up in order to get to the Centre for the morning sittings. I take public transit, and at that time of day I have to take the overnight bus, which is unreliable. So, four-thirty it is.

I used to tell myself that no person in his or her right mind would get up at that hour for any reason. Jokes about Zen practitioners not being in their right mind aside, I just figured the morning crowd had schedules that allowed them to go that early. Besides, I'd managed to negotiate my work hours so I could leave early on Thursdays to attend that evening's sitting, and I could go on Sundays. That was enough, right?

Then I did my first sesshin last June. Suddenly, one or two days per week were not nearly enough - my practice deserved far more than that. Four-thirty didn't seem so early after all. I could do this!

The summer went fine. My resolve seemed unshakable, and I went almost every day. Then, winter hit.

Standing at a bus stop at five in the morning, waiting for a bus that might be quite late, in -20C weather? That was enough to start to break me down. My resolve to go to morning sittings was crumbling around me. The winter seemed to drag on endlessly. Dharman Rice recently shared a quote from Zen Master Mumon on his Facebook page:



At Candice's bus stop

If your mind is
not clouded
with
unnecessary
things, no
season is too
much for you.

"If your mind is not clouded with unnecessary things, no season is too much for you." Well, my mind must be clouded with a great many things, because, boy, was this winter more than too much for me!

I stopped going to sittings as often. I also sat less at home, and what sitting I did do seemed useless.

It wasn't until a couple of Sangha members who also attend morning sittings noted my absence and asked me if I was OK that I fully realized what I'd done. I'd attempted to put my practice on hold, and for what - a bit of bad weather? How ridiculous! It's so easy for the mind to find an excuse in anything to pull us away from practice.

There are many reasons why I love going to morning sittings. The benefits of going nearly daily are immeasurable. The group energy is fantastic. The fact that we usually go for coffee at Alternative Grounds on Friday mornings certainly doesn't hurt, either! But an unexpected benefit is how much we look after each other. If someone who is regularly attending stops showing up, a Sangha member will usually contact that person and see if they are OK or if they need help getting to the sittings.

Practice is difficult and contains many obstacles. But walking the path is a lot easier when you've got Dharma friends helping you along the way.♦

Turbulent Waters

by Bruce Lyon

MANY YEARS AGO, ROSHI PHILLIP KAPLEAU gave me the Buddhist name of "Stillbrook." In keeping with his marine metaphor, I would like to begin by quoting a line from one of Josh Ritter's songs, Change of Time: "Rough seas, they carry me wherever I go."

The past six months have been difficult for me, having lost both my Father and my home last August. While both events were very hard, looking back over that period today, it makes more sense now that being uprooted and vulnerable is a karmic gift that can deepen practice when one opens and surrenders.

During this tumultuous period in my life, I have noticed a fresh buoyancy emerging in my practice – a renewed energy and commitment aided by people

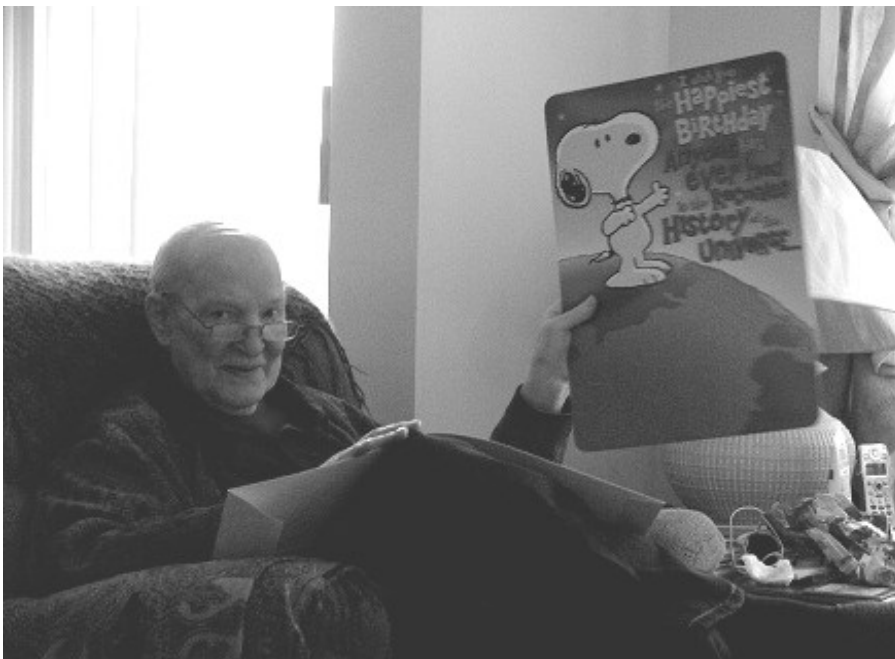
reaching out unasked in all kinds of ways from many directions. From kind words and acts of condolence, to the silent support conferred by sitting regularly together in the zendo, I have been so grateful for the Sangha and this wonderful place of practice during this time.

I don't know that we would consciously choose some of the challenges life throws at us, yet the saying: "Still waters do not a skillful sailor make" has special meaning for me now. Regular practice has helped me to tap inner depths and allowed me to find a rhythm to keep rowing during those unexpected storms. A humbling recognition of unusual karmic patterns as opportunities, rather than as insurmountable obstacles, has focused my energies and

stretched me in acknowledging my sorrow and pain.

Amidst the turbulence, I gratefully opened and continued the activity of fulfillment through the vibrant simplicity of playing instruments at the Centre. From ringing the inkin bell during timed rounds, to inviting the temple bell to sound at the New Year's Ceremony, energy was reawakened and vows of compassion for all beings were joyfully affirmed.

Although there now appear to be calmer waters ahead, I am more mindful of the unpredictable and fragile quality of this precious, temporary life. Coming through this challenging period, with the support of Sangha, family and friends I have an even stronger sense that Kannon's helping hands will always be there guiding us through our personal and collective karmic difficulties. ♦



Bruce's father

Regular practice helps to tap inner depths and to keep rowing during unexpected storms.

Tami Tamitegama

by Karen Stenning

ON APRIL 5, SANGHA MEMBERS attended a memorable talk given by Tami Tamitegama. Tami, a friend to Sensei since childhood, was pleased to have the opportunity to speak with us about the Lanka Alzheimer's Foundation which he founded. This important organization has been the recipient of TZC donations collected at a Ceremony of Aid. Tami expressed his deep appreciation for our contributions and shared with us the story of his life and the work which we are helping to support.

Tami was born and raised in Sri Lanka. He recounted how his lifelong spirituality was influenced by a Buddhist mother and a father who practiced yoga. His mother wished to "give" him to a monastery to become a monk but his father interceded, believing this would go against Tami's own karma and that he should determine his own path. Tami stressed the importance of learning to follow one's intuition in setting one's course in life. He entered the military as a young man. At age 29, at a time of growing conflict within Sri Lanka, Tami emigrated to Canada with his wife.

After Tami retired from a successful career as an accountant, a sense of purpose pulled him back to Sri Lanka. He knew that he could be of service in his former country in some way. He found this purpose upon learning of the growing numbers of adults suffering from Alzheimer's disease. When he

realized there was little public awareness and no support or education in Sri Lanka, he founded the Lanka Alzheimer's Foundation in 2001. Tami showed photographs of the Lanka Foundation's work: caregiver support groups held in his home; the annual Memory Walk that raises awareness of the disease; and the new Centre under construction which will house education services and a new day program for adults with A.D. Tami is also a voice for Alzheimer's care at international gatherings where input from the developing world is rare; he was in Toronto at the time of this talk in order to attend one such conference. When asked what he has learned through his work, Tami stated that he has discovered how to interact with individuals with Alzheimer's disease: to show them love and connect with them from the heart. He said this is what every human needs.

Tami shared with us his belief that we can reduce the likelihood of contracting Alzheimer's disease by living a healthy life. He discussed the five pillars of a healthy life: meditation, diet, sleep, positive thoughts, and community service. He commended the Sangha for already taking the important step of practicing meditation and urged all to find further ways to act as a positive example for others and to be of service in the world.

Tami, with his gentle and vibrant nature, embodied the ideal of selfless service. He

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Tami...

demonstrated how working for positive change helps one find a clear focus in a distracting world. Service truly changes oneself and the world. Donations were collected at the talk that will allow the Lanka Alzheimer's Foundation to continue its mission of service; for this, Tami expresses great gratitude. ♦



Tami with Sensei Taigen Henderson

No Wasted Moments

by Kirby Kim

AS MANY IN THE SANGHA ARE AWARE, my five year old daughter Maya has pediatric cancer called neuroblastoma. Dealing with her illness has been the single most challenging event that my family and I have had to face. I could never have guessed that challenges put in front of us would be of such an epic proportion. I could have never imagined that such an illness would have so many dimensions. While our challenges have been many, in the midst of our chaos and mental anguish, we've discovered that even something terrible, such as pediatric cancer, can have a profound and positive impact.

On March 26, 2010, we found out what was going on with our little girl. I will remember that day for the rest of my life. I remember having to turn away from Maya as I could not stop the tears. And since that day, we've shed enough tears to last a lifetime. There have been countless treatments, many of which have been as insidious as

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Moments...

the disease. The complications from the therapies were beyond my imagination, and often life threatening. If Maya survives, we may not know the full impact of these therapies until later, perhaps in her teens. Many times Indira, my wife, and I have broken down because we were unable to deal with the situation. We would ask, how can our daughter be so sick? Breaking down and crying seemed to be the new norm. Maya's illness would also impact every member of our immediate and extended family. At times, life seems comical because to think of it in any other terms would be devastating. But karma is nothing to laugh about.

We have been extremely fortunate to have received so much support from our friends, family and the community. While I don't know why we have the great fortune to receive such kindness, I am certain beyond doubt that the support I have received from the Toronto Zen Centre and the Sangha has helped me in my darkest times.

Support from TZC has come to me in many ways, often unspoken, but nevertheless overwhelming in its generosity and strength. The dedicated chanting services on Friday mornings, as well as when Maya is unwell, provide me with comfort. Also, having Maya's picture in the Kannon room, overlooked by Buddha has been a constant source of comfort to me as well. Then, there are Sangha members who watch over me and Maya. Many Sangha members, including Sensei Henderson, chant on behalf of Maya privately. But the



Kirby's daughter Maya

support can be as subtle as receiving a hug or finding a concerned look in a Sangha member's eyes. These unreserved acts of kindness at times were needed to help me face my day. That is, I may break down under stress, but then I am able to pick myself back up again. I am able to go to work, research new therapies, new clinical trials, and call doctors all over North America. I am not debilitated. For all the love and kindness, I am grateful. And in Zen, I see that the universe is kind.

Even so, there are days when it's just very hard to get up to practice zazen. And as I falter, I know that I must never lose my grip on Zen. Without zazen and the Three Treasures in my life I really don't know how I might have fared. Being mindful and being in the present has never been so poignant. I don't know what the future holds for Maya and our family. We need to be here and now and enjoy what we have.

We all have our own reasons that brought us to Zen. The details are not that important, in my opinion. The important thing is that the reason is great enough to bring us to Zen. Stopping the practice seems pointless because it will only take us back to that uncomfortable place from which the act of sitting started. And so, regardless of the challenges that may be put in front of us, we must persist, we must never give up. Keep sitting!

I am humbled and grateful to be part of the Sangha that have already offered so much.

Moment...

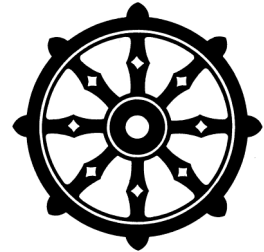
With the help of Three Treasures, I will persist along with the rest of you. I am also hopeful that someday, I will be able to repay all that I've received, to TZC and to the greater humanity.

There are two statements that are quite poignant to me. I see and hear them every time I sit at the Zen Centre.

Tock...tock tock... Tock...tock tock.

*Great is the matter of life and death.
Wake up! Wake up! There is not a moment to waste.*

I vow to penetrate the great way of Buddha. ♦



Overcoming Obstacles

by Marilyn King

LIFE PRESENTS US WITH MANY OBSTACLES; it seems we always want to do what is difficult at this present stage in life. Thus it was with me when I undertook to attend my first sesshin at the age of 61. A person is not very supple at 61 and beginning practice at that age is a quixotic, if not foolhardy thing to do. But if it was quixotic and foolhardy, it was also one of the best things this person has ever done. To be at last on The Path, to come "home". A wonderful thing.

Being a wonderful thing does not make it any the less difficult and my first sesshin was something I will never forget. My children's names, I might forget; my first sesshin - never! I was very nervous and felt as if I was undertaking an adventure comparable to climbing Everest. Would I be able to do it? Did I have the strength? Was I too old at 61 to be undertaking something so arduous? What if I couldn't do it?

With gritted teeth and a stubborn determination, I left home for three days. My room assignment was up

on the third floor so I lugged my bag up the stairs and settled in. My sleeping bag and pillow were laid out on the foamy, my toiletries were arranged close at hand. I carefully looked at the charts taped to the wall of the Buddha Hall for my assignments and jobs. And I prepared my place in the zendo, gathering the cushions necessary and arranging everything to make it as easy as I could.

Sesshin started. The opening ceremony was strange and my eyes darted here and there, looking to see what was the correct thing to do. We sat. And sat. And sat.

The first day was amazing. Up at 0400 hours, standing in line at the washroom, the fast kinhin and then the sitting. When the morning rest period came I staggered up the two flights of stairs and fell exhausted and trembling with pain onto my sleeping bag, pulled it around me and crashed.

As the sesshin continued, the pile of cushions at my place grew ever higher and the struggle to focus on my practice grew more difficult. Day Two and then Day Three finally came. The

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Obstacles...

final ceremony started. It went on and on. Would it never end? Finally Mozart began to play and I said, "Can I talk now?" When given permission with a lot of laughter, I threw my hands up. "I did it, I did it!" followed by "When is the next one?"

That was the beginning of sesshins. I have since lost count. The difficulties were monumental but the rewards were immeasurable. Nothing is more rewarding than a sesshin and we are so blessed in having teachers who will put up with us and encourage us in our practice.

This last sesshin had other difficulties. Ten years have passed. This person is now 71 years of age and is no longer sitting on her cushions but in a chair. Health problems have intervened and made practice more difficult. Still, sesshins are wonderful things. Could I attend this October one? It was discussed with Sensei: some cardiac pain was being experienced but the nitro-glycerine spray was at hand. Should I go and perhaps inconvenience my fellow Sangha members? Certainly I would be as safe while on sesshin as I could be anywhere and certainly my teacher and the monitors would be more than adequate to any demands made upon them regarding health issues. So off I went. So glad to be there; so happy to be surrounded by the sesshin atmosphere which is so conducive to a focussed practice. Such a delight! Well, two and one half days went by before the crisis hit and I was hauled away in an ambulance to undergo open heart surgery.



After sesshin. Photo by Tim Marshall

Recovery is proceeding but it is a slow process. One does not recover from illness at 71 the way one could at, say, 31. Nevertheless, it is a means to insight and a road mark on the way to Enlightenment. One can learn even more from difficulty than from ease and comfort. And one of the good things about being old is that much detritus has been ground away by ten years of practice. One has had so many life experiences that one's inner being is much more open to insight and sees wonders in the midst of difficulties and pain. While this is not necessarily so, I think that the Practice has made it so. What a tremendous gift. How could I, how could you, have been so fortunate as to encounter our practice, our teacher and our Centre: to have our fortune, both good and ill bring us ever closer to a true understanding of Reality? ♦



Reflection: My Tumour, My Teacher

by Martha Mallon

I'VE BEEN TOLD THAT THE COSMOS gives us what we need to grow and develop. We are given circumstances that, like straw for a basket, we must weave together making patterns that are either strong and useful or weak and leaky. Last May I was told that I had liver cancer and that unless I was a candidate for a liver transplant, I had approximately three years to live. I can remember sitting in the tiny consulting room listening to the doctor and, instead of a feeling of fear, I felt curiosity. I realized that I had a great adventure ahead of me. While coming to terms with my condition I began to see that my little growth was not an enemy but a teacher. I learned to truly appreciate the present without worrying about the future or the past. Being confronted with death helped me to truly appreciate all the gifts that life had given me without comparing them to the way that I thought things "should be". My little growth helped me to realize that I have, and always did have, abundance, but desires made me blind. I could not see.

Jung says that developing the self is like climbing a terraced mountain: once you make a breakthrough, once you've climbed one cliff, you come to a flat terrace, a time of calm and relaxation, until you are faced with yet another cliff. I got to enjoy my grassy terrace for several months until two weeks ago the doctors told me that I was eligible for a liver transplant, but this would mean that I could never drink alcohol again—a cliff!

Drinking alcohol is ingrained in my being and my refusal to give it up has kept me from fully com-

I'm where I
don't want to
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mitting to Zen Buddhism. All my life I have seen family and friends come together over drinks. Alcohol was more than just a substance, it was good times, happiness, celebration, and joy. I love the warm cocoon of an alcoholic haze and I have no illusions about myself: if I'd had more money I would probably be an alcoholic. Though you may find this impossible to believe, hearing that I could never again enjoy a bottle of wine hit me harder than hearing that I may die in three years. What is a life without alcohol? What is a rose bush without blooms?

I've read about a Buddhist monastery where the young novices that entered searching for enlightenment, rather than getting the instruction they craved, were placed in the kitchen to cook, clean, and serve, and there they had to remain until they were able to find joy in these menial tasks. Now I'm in the "kitchen". I'm where I don't want to be, forbidden to do what I want to do, and feeling desolate. I'm challenged to look upon my circumstances as an opportunity, to discover abundance, to find joy in a situation that at first glance appears joyless. I'm being challenged to submit and to grow.

I have been handed the circumstances and how I weave them is up to me. For now I'm sitting and feeling empty with my back to the sheer rock face, a face without toe-holds or crevices, and I'm looking out over the grassy terrace, once bright, now overshadowed by the huge cliff behind me. ♦



By Martha Mallon, 2011

The Value of Sesshin

by Tim Marshall

A FEW YEARS AGO, MY STEPMOM asked if I could go up to Barrie for a family get-together. I told her I couldn't, because a sesshin was scheduled. She got a bit annoyed: "Again?? Haven't you got your black belt by now?"

Most people in my life are a lot like her—they really don't understand sesshin. Sometimes I try to explain, but they never quite get it. One of my co-workers keeps comparing sesshin to a spa she went to in California, but sesshin is kind of like



After sesshin. Photo by Tim Marshall

derful) journey as a husband and soon-to-be father.

Looking back, the first sesshin I went on was particularly painful. My knees burned, my mind was restless, and I was tired and hungry. I spent a lot of time staring at the daily schedule, calculating exactly how many hours until the end. And when it was all over, the worst part was arriving back home and realizing that I would be going back for more! There was something about that first sesshin that struck a deep chord with me. Yes, it was painful. Yes, it was difficult, but I knew I needed to go back. Oh no! Why did it have to be so hard?

To find out, we need look no further than the lives of the Buddha, the ancestors, and our teachers. They did (and continue to do) lots and lots of sesshin! It's reasonable to assume, then, that if we really want to know what the Buddha knew, we've got to go to sesshin too. Plenty

of them! No matter what obstacles arise.

But why? What do we get from sesshin that we can't get from daily life? It's like Sensei's analogy of digging for water. At home, we dig for an hour. Then we go to work, ride the subway, cook dinner, do dishes, and by the time we get back, dirt has blown back into the hole. At sesshin, we're allowed to dig all we want and that hole can get very, very deep. Supported by the efforts of everyone working with so much energy and resolve, sesshin is a truly wonderful experience, and I feel downright grateful for the opportunity whenever I am able to attend. Sitting in the zendo during the Jataka sesshin, I thought, "Wonderful people, great food, and all the zazen my knees can handle! I'm so lucky!"

Still, I face the same problem as many of my Dharma sisters and brothers: How do I get to more sesshins with my full-time job, and family commitments? As a teacher I get twelve paid weeks off a year,

Finding the time to get to sesshin has consumed me lately, and not because I find them easy or relaxing!

a spa in reverse: most people would pay to leave!

With the circumstances of my life changing at a fast pace, the issue of finding the time to get on sesshin has consumed me lately, and it's not because I find them easy or relaxing! Knowing in my bones the importance of sesshin, I struggle with how to find a way to continue to deepen my commitment to Zen practice, even as I embark on my new (and won-

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*The sun's way:
hollyhocks turn toward it
through all the rains of May.
~ Basho*

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Sesshin...

but most are at the wrong time and my superintendent told me she won't let me use religious days for sesshin. Can I quit my job? Well, Andrea is pregnant and we just bought a house in the second-most expensive city in Canada. I need to be a grown-up.

After weighing options with Andrea, we've decided that one possibility might be for me to go back to substitute teaching. My job flexibility would allow Andrea to go on more retreats, and me to attend more sesshin, and we wouldn't have to wait until retirement to do the thing that has brought us so much joy. The downside is that the lost income would work out to at least \$800,000 and my pension would be reduced. But what level of in-

come can offset the true value of our spiritual practice? Should we make this decision to trade some of our income for time, Andrea and I are under no illusion that it won't be difficult. Whatever our decision, we are confident we will find a way to make our lives work.

When I was nineteen I had cancer, and I had a vision of how I would die. It wasn't pretty. Since then, I've known in my bones that death is just around the corner, and often gives little warning. After some years of Zen practice and many wonderful and difficult sesshin, I have discovered one overriding thing that keeps bringing me back - this practice works. I encourage everyone to find a way to do it now! ♦

New Members at the TZC

Simon Breslav
Richard Gervais
Stanley Ho
Veronica MacDonald
Philip Mason
Valentina Napolitano
Sarah Nobel
Anne Redston
Ashwin Seetharaman
Sander Vink
Nina Yanko

