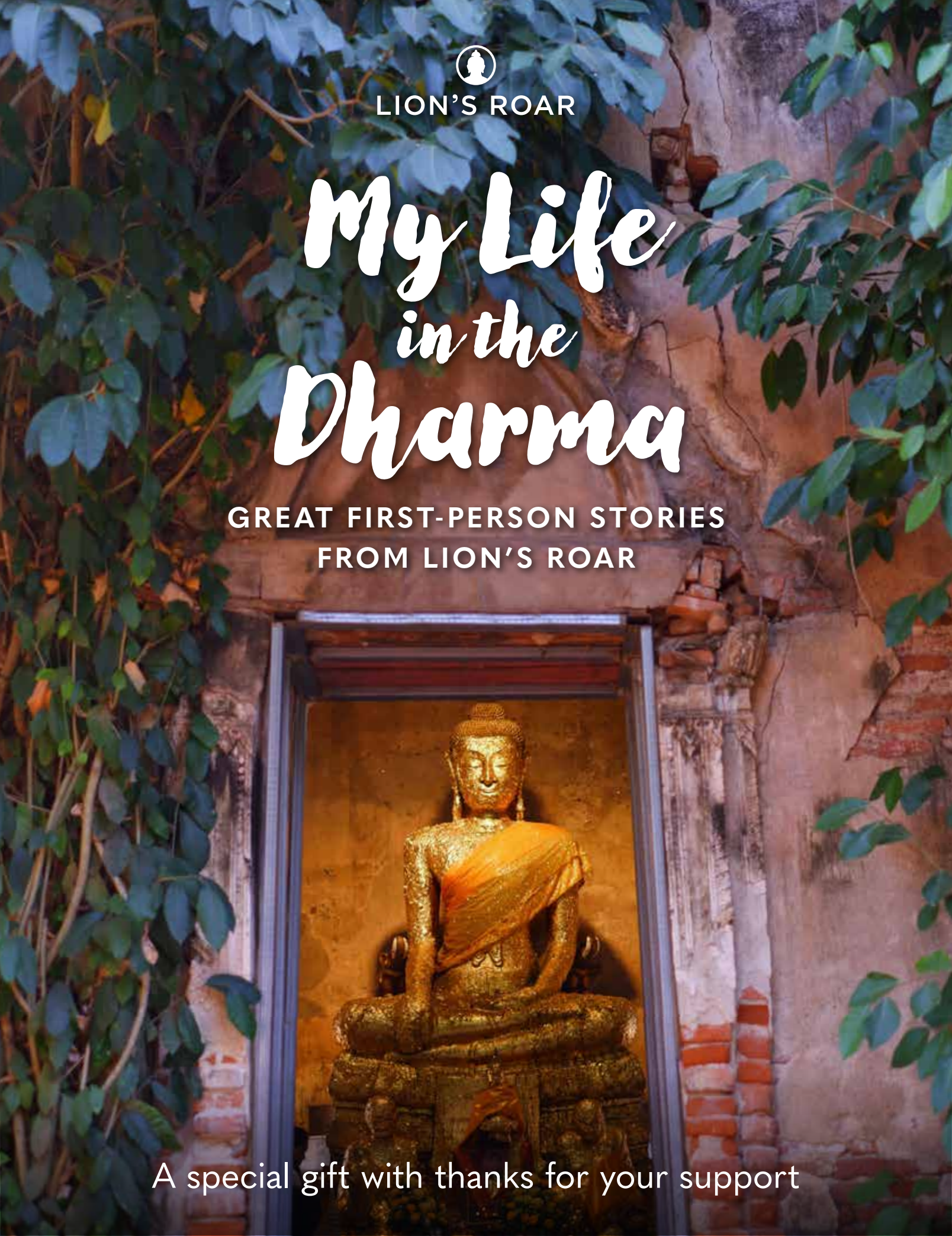
LION'S ROAR
My Life in the Dharma
GREAT FIRST-PERSON STORIES FROM LION'S ROAR
A special gift with thanks for your support

Introduction

By **MELVIN McLEOD**

Where do you really find the dharma?

Buddhism is renowned for its texts and philosophies and teachings. Perhaps the real dharma is found in them.

Buddhism teaches us many transformative meditation practices, and you can make a good case they are the real dharma.

But I think the real dharma is found in people's lives. In your life, my life, and the life of everyone who is sincerely trying to practice the dharma. I think the real dharma is found in our real lives.

I am most moved and inspired by the great first-person stories we publish. To me they are the most powerful teaching. In them, our fellow practitioners open their hearts to us about the difficulties and rewards of trying every day to bring the dharma into their lives. We see our own struggles reflected and learn how others have dealt with them. We feel a deep bond of community among all of us who are doing our best to practice the dharma.

Over the years, Lion's Roar has specialized in offering honest, insightful, and beautifully-written first-person stories. They are the stories I am most proud of, and most affected by. When I read them, I see that I am not alone in finding the work of the dharma difficult and progress uncertain. I see that even well-known Buddhist teachers are on the same up-and-down path I am, and that only makes their teachings more relevant and helpful. I learn about many different people's lives in the dharma, and how they meet diverse challenges and circumstances.

In this digital publication, I've collected thirteen of my favorite first-person stories from the pages of Lion's Roar. I am very happy to offer them to you as a gift in thanks for your support for our work.

These thirteen writers, some well-known, others not, have opened their hearts and lives to us. I hope you will be as moved and inspired by their stories as I am. In their lives, like yours, you'll find the real dharma.

MELVIN McLEOD is editor-at-large at Lion's Roar.

Hungry Ghost, Let Go of This Woman!

Zen priest and chaplain **RENSHIN BUNCE** tells the dramatic story of the time she performed a successful exorcism. The key was respect and compassion—for the haunted woman and the spirits

RENSHIN BUNCE is a Zen priest in the lineage of Shunryu Suzuki Roshi and the author of *Love and Fear: Stories from a Hospice Chaplain.*

I DOUBT THAT many priests, let alone chaplains, have had the opportunity to perform an exorcism. I did once, and the best thing was—it worked.

A social worker called to ask me to help a young Japanese woman. She told me that the doctors were working on controlling the pain that came with the patient's cancer, but the patient said that spirits had taken over her mind. That's where the social worker thought I, as a hospice chaplain, might be able to help. I was glad that she trusted me, and I hurried to her office so we could talk about the case.

She explained that sometimes the patient was silent, head tilted, listening as the spirits spoke to her, and at other times she shouted in Japanese, apparently becoming the spirits and giving them a voice. She was living at home with her mother, who had come from Japan to take care of her. The spirits weren't evil. The problem was their talking kept her awake all night. She and her mother were both exhausted.

I said that of course I'd do it—in fact, I had time to see the patient that very afternoon. I didn't mention that, although I'd been thoroughly trained as a Zen priest, exorcism had never come up. But I felt sure I'd performed enough ceremonies that I could create one for the patient that would be convincing. We speculated about the cause of the phenomenon of the spirits, but what we thought in the safety of the office and what I saw when I entered the patient's house were completely different.

I heard the patient before I saw her. She was at the end of a hallway, in the kitchen, howling and leaning forward on a walker, the top of her head pressed against the wall. I hurried to her, dropped my bag in a chair, and sat on the floor so my face

was close to hers. I could see her arms quiver from the stress of holding up her body. Her face, when she turned it toward mine, was surprising; I hadn't expected her to be so young and pretty.

I told her I was a priest, and that the social worker had sent me to help.

She answered, "They want to go to heaven."

From this moment on, we were in her reality—and it was a relief to hear that the spirits were ready to go. Now all I had to do was provide a pathway for them.

I asked her whether she'd like to sit down. She agreed, and her mother and I helped her lower her body into a white plastic chair. I never learned why she had been standing in that tortured way.

She sat on one side of a large kitchen table. Her cellphone, wallet, pill bottles, notepads, Japanese newspapers, and other clutter were spread out before her. Her mother stood facing her, by the stove. She was a small, anxious woman, a long way from home.

I cleared off a couple of square feet on the short side of the table and said it would be our altar. I set out my ritual items: two fancy incense bowls filled with ash, a lit piece of charcoal in one; a candle; a figure of Manjushri poised to cut through all delusions with his sword; and a small figure of Kwan Yin, also known as Kanzeon, the bodhisattva of compassion.

I asked for flowers, and her mother rushed to the other room and brought back a vase with camellias and pine boughs. Realizing I'd left my bell in the car, I asked if they had one. They did not, and I decided to go ahead without it. What mattered now was maintaining momentum.

The *rakusu* is the garment that shows I've taken priestly vows. To begin, I put it on my head and said, as I have done hundreds of times when entering a sacred space: *Great robe of liberation / Field far beyond form and emptiness / Wearing the Tatagatha's teaching / Saving all beings.*

I explained that I was going to perform a Buddhist ritual to help the spirits inhabiting the patient go to heaven. I asked the patient and her mother to do three bows to the altar with me. Lighting a stick of incense, I pressed it against my forehead

and the foreheads of the Manjushri and Kwan Yin statues, and placed it upright in the first incense bowl.

Then I began chanting and putting pinches of incense chips on the red-hot charcoal in the second bowl to create clouds of smoke. The room began to smell wonderful. My voice filled the space as I chanted to Kwan Yin: *Kanzeon / namu butsu / yo butsu u in / yo butsu u en / buppo so en / jo raku ga jo / cho nen kanzeon / bo nen kanzeon / nen nen ju shin ki / nen nen fu ri shin.*

Art from the Bakemono-zukushi scroll, 18th or 19th century, Japan. Artist unknown.

That is, in English: *Kanzeon! At one with Buddha. / Related to all buddhas in cause and effect. / And to Buddha, dharma, and sangha. / Joyful, pure, eternal being! / Morning mind is Kanzeon. / Evening mind is Kanzeon. / This very moment arises from mind. / This very moment is not separate from mind.*

The chant is simple and can be repeated endlessly. The compassion of Kwan Yin was what we needed. I chanted, waiting to see what would happen, when suddenly the patient cried out, rose from her chair, and stepped toward me, shaking her head violently and yelling, "No! No! No!"

She clutched my upper arms. I leaned forward and grabbed her above the waist to keep her from falling. I kept chanting. She kept shaking her head. Her short black hair, inches from my face, smelled clean and fresh. I somehow held her body with one arm so I could use the other to put more incense on the

charcoal. The smoke billowed in the room and I spoke to the spirit, loudly, firmly, invoking all of the authority I had in me:

"You hungry ghost, haunting ladies on this plane, it's time for you to be released. Follow the smoke to heaven! With this ceremony you can let go and your wish will come true! The time is now!"

She continued to shake her head. She cried out that he couldn't let go. I was still bent forward, holding her. "Don't be afraid!" I called. "You have courage! You know courage! Use that courage now to let go of this woman. Let go and go to heaven at last!"

Now, I can't say how long this went on. Then, it seemed timeless, the two (or three) of us locked in this quasi-embrace, incense smoke and my voice filling the kitchen, her mother nearby, watching us, crying and wringing her hands.

My back hurt from supporting the patient, but I continued until she calmed. Then I signaled to her mother to move the chair forward so I could gently maneuver her into it. I pressed my back against the kitchen wall to ease the pain and continued the chant to Kwan Yin in a softer voice.

Finally the patient looked up at me and smiled. She nodded her head.

"Is he gone?" I asked.

"Yes." Then she said, "But the others are still here."

Oh. I hadn't known that there were others.

I stepped back in front of the altar, threw more incense on the charcoal, resumed the chant in a louder voice, and called out to the lesser spirits, saying that they could follow the boss's example and go to heaven. I told them this was their chance. Much more quickly this time, she nodded her head and said they were gone. I finished the chant, offering a dedication of gratitude. Then the three of us did three bows to close the ceremony. I passed the figure of Kwan Yin through the remaining incense smoke and gave it to her.

I was exhausted.

The magic I'd brought that day resided in my vow as a priest, in my beautiful Japanese ritual implements, and in my willingness to believe the young woman's description of her reality.

We trusted each other, and it worked. I phoned the social worker from my car to report on our success, and she and I cried together.

The following morning, I spoke to the patient. The spirits were gone, and she and her mother had been able to sleep through the night.

The doctors admitted her to the hospital that day and, to my relief, she was referred to the medical ward for pain control, not to the psych ward for the spirits that had inhabited her.

She died at home two weeks later. The spirits never returned.

Committing to Impermanence

It doesn't have to be a forever thing, For **RACHEL NEUMANN** and her partner, their marriage ceremony is a celebration of love amidst impermanence.

RACHEL NEUMANN is the founder of Wave Literary and author of *Not Quite Nirvana: A Skeptic's Journey to Mindfulness*.

THIRTY-FOUR YEARS AGO, when I was ten, I stood in a wooded field, far from a crowd of children and adults who had come to celebrate a birthday, and made two vows: I would have a daughter, at least one, and I would never get married.

I imagined this daughter would be dark and skinny and serious. Together we would travel around the world by train. In the evenings, we would retreat to our little rented room and read books late into the night. There was never a partner or a second parent in this vision; any extra grownup would just get in the way.

In my childhood, impermanence was an obvious truth. The scabs on my knees disappeared and made room for new scabs. Adults came and went. We moved here and then there. So-and-so was my best friend and then she was someone else's. Marriage, from the little I'd seen, seemed a strange and false ritual: a public display of certainty about something that was by its nature private and transitory.

Fourteen years after making this vow, I met a man on a bus. We began hanging out, but I was very clear: I wanted to be together for as long as we had fun, but not a day longer. He nodded, easy, and said he felt the same.

Together, we moved from Seattle to New York and then to Oakland. Along the way we had two daughters, both rounder and lighter than I'd imagined, but good travel companions nonetheless. The man from the bus and I did not plan a life together, but over two decades a life formed around us: a community, a daily rhythm, a home, and an understanding.

The bride and groom set the rules for the cermony: No using the words "husband" or "wife," no pretending the world isn't full of dirt, and no promises. Photo by Sarah Peet.

Then, this past spring, pulled by a growing awareness of the limits of time, the man from the bus had a desire to name what we'd created. He wanted to get married. I agreed, but immediately I knew it was a mistake. Our relationship was doomed. One of the things that had worked so well was that we were good at pointing out the elephants in the room, acknowledging the awkward and messy truths around us and in us. My 40-year-old self knew what my ten-year-old self had figured out: I couldn't pretend a forever I didn't believe in.

Still, unsure how to stop the momentum once we'd set a date, I forged ahead. During the day, I worked out the details of how to take 200 people down a steep and windy road to a rocky beach with no address. At night, I secretly drafted an email cancelling

the whole event. To soothe my dread of the separation I knew the wedding foretold, I stayed up late each evening refining the cancellation email, keeping the tone ever more breezy and cheerful.

My father came by to talk to us about the ceremony, which he had agreed to officiate. "Am I still not allowed to use the word 'marriage'?" he asked. The man from the bus and I looked at each other. You can use it once, we conceded. At the end.

"At least promise you won't use the words 'husband' and 'wife,'" I said. "I hate those words." We made a few more rules: No promises we couldn't keep. No pretending that the world wasn't full of dirt and mess and shards of glass. No promises period. After a few hours, having crossed out almost all of his initial speech, my father went home to try again.

The night before the wedding, a huge storm hit our tiny spot on the Pacific Ocean. Perhaps, I thought, we could cancel the wedding after all. The waves turned into a white and frothy soup, the rain drove straight into the windows, and the wind pushed hard against the thin wooden walls of our cabin. The man and I tossed and turned and curled into each other for warmth, safety, and a semblance of sleep.

When morning came, the sky was gray and almost clear. The rain had faded to the softest of drizzles. The cancellation email stayed at the top of my drafts folder, unsent. I felt the warmth of the man next to me and smiled. Sometime during the storm, my fear had washed away. I'd thought if I clung to nonattachment hard enough, I could avoid the hurt that was coming when things changed and people left. But there was no protection against that hurt except knowing I'd loved as proudly and bravely as I could.

The man from the bus and I walked slowly down the path to the beach, proceeded by our four sets of divorced parents, their partners, our siblings, our stepsiblings, and our children. A huge handmade-painted cardboard elephant, carried by good friends, lumbered down the steep and still slippery path. We had committed, after all, to acknowledging all the elephants in the room.

Standing in front of family, friends, and the ocean, I found I had not even the last vestiges of fear, only a sense of awe. We

were celebrating not a commitment to forever but the certainty of impermanence. As sure as we were standing there together today, one day we would be separated—if not in this lifetime than at the end of it. How glad I was that I didn't pass up this chance to honor the 20 years' worth of days we'd had so far.

We turned to each other. We didn't say anything we didn't believe or make any promises we couldn't keep. We just stood, breathing in and breathing out, aware that in this one moment we were completely surrounded by love. And then, hand in hand, we ran from the crowd and jumped into the freezing and still wild Pacific Ocean. As a large wave crested over us, we dove under, hands clasped. Dripping, laughing, we came out shivering. Our daughters gathered us in warm blankets, and we four stood—arms wrapped tightly around each other—and looked out at the sea, as wave after wave crashed down to the shore, a new wave already forming in the last one's wake.

It! It! It!

With a crow's cry—*It! It! It*—language and thought fall away and **PETER COYOTE** finally gets the point of Zen.

PETER COYOTE is an actor, writer, activist, and Buddhist priest. He is the author of two acclaimed memoirs, *Sleeping Where I Fall* and *The Rainman's Third Cure*, and winner of the Pushcart Prize for non-fiction.

The Rohatsu (Great Cold) sesshin—a week of intensive Zen meditation—takes place in early December ending on the eighth, the day commemorating Buddha's enlightenment. At Green Gulch Zen Center, near my home on the fog-shrouded slopes of Mount Tamalpais in Northern California's Marin County, meditation begins at 5:00 a.m. and lasts until 9:30 p.m. each day punctuated by service, meals, walking meditation, and two short rest periods. Talking, except for essential communication, is discouraged, as is eye contact and any behavior that might distract others from their concentration. It takes enormous collective effort to organize a sesshin, with volunteers cooking, serving, and maintaining the temple on behalf of those

sitting. Consequently, great care is taken not to waste the opportunity or the gift of their service.

I knew none of this when I signed up for my first sesshin after only a year of meditating, sitting, at most, two forty-minute periods a day at the San Francisco Zen Center.

Nor did I know that in sesshin meals would be eaten in place at one's sitting cushion, in the same painful cross-legged position one had been meditating in. They are served in a highly efficient manner, done precisely this way for hundreds of years. Each monk's eating utensils—chopsticks, a wooden spoon, a cleaning apparatus called a *setsu* (resembling a doctor's tongue depressor with a cloth pad sewed on the tip)—are laid across three nesting bowls called *oryoki* (meaning "just enough")—covered by a napkin and cleaning cloth, the whole wrapped in a bandanna-sized cloth that, when unwrapped, is efficiently used as a place mat.

Because Buddhism is not precisely a religion like the Abrahamic trio—Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, (Buddha was a normal man—neither supernatural nor a prophet)—what appears to the uninitiated as prayers and worship of a deity are actually expressions of gratitude for the Buddha's compassionate teachings. By the end of the first highly ritualized meal, I was convinced entirely too much gratitude was being displayed and began wishing harm on the officiant whose changes and offerings had to end before I would be allowed to leave my seat and mercifully straighten my paralyzed legs.

There were chants of thanks when food was offered, chants after it was served, and more when the first bowl was raised. Before the servers entered bearing the food, the wooden bar in front of the sitters' places had to be cleaned. A damp towel was introduced and then either passed from hand to hand down the length of the room, or if one was graced with an elevated seat, propelled by a runner racing down the aisle between sitters scrubbing the "table" (the edge of the raised platform) as he went.

The servers moved quickly, but no matter how efficient they were, I wanted to scream with frustration, impatience, and pain, because until the meal is over and one's bowls washed and put

away and the last chanted syllable uttered, you cannot rise from your seat. Furthermore, it is an arduous and delicate maneuver to change the position of crossed, cramped, insensate legs without sending the delicate bowls in front of you skittering into the lap of the person facing you. The frustration was akin to being trapped behind a comatose driver at a stoplight that changes once an hour for twenty seconds while the moron in front of you misses it while texting. Imagine this occurring repeatedly, over and over again while you are on fire, and you'll have a clear idea of my state of mind.

Coyote was a member of the 1960s radical theater troupe called The Diggers. Their credo was personal authenticity. Photo courtesy of the author.

Every task proceeded at its own proper (agonizing) pace. You cannot simply eat, wash your bowl, and leave to go fart and pick your teeth. At the signal of clacking wooden sticks we wait while the food is brought into the zendo, served into each outstretched bowl, (the serving bracketed by stately bows) and then, before it can be touched, a complex grace is offered reminding us where the Buddha was born, taught, and died, and what virtues each portion in our bowls is dedicated to. Then, (still on fire) we are asked to consider "whether our virtue and practice deserve this offering" of food. I was deranged with discomfort and frustration at the slowness, the waiting, the ritualized cleaning of the bowls and the collection of the last scraps of food for "the hungry

ghosts." ("Fucking ants! They're feeding *ants* while I'm dying here!") All of these ritual steps inserted between my wretched self and the post-meal relief I desperately needed. I was furious. Every cell in my body was intent on inhaling my food as quickly as possible so that I could flee the zendo and straighten my legs. This was day *one*. By 7:00 a.m. I had forgotten that I had chosen to be there because I was desperate for help.

It's quite normal in sesshin for the knees to be in pain, and the muscles in the upper back and shoulders to be burning with tension or even in spasm. It matters not. The pace of meals and services is glacial, and from my perspective that day, pitiless. The older monks sat quietly erect and maddeningly patient with no evidence of discomfort. By the second period of zazen, compounding my discomfort with embarrassment, my body began shaking violently, twitching and jerking as if I were experiencing a grand mal seizure. After awhile the shaking enervated my muscles and made me gasp for breath. It was distracting, exhausting, and embarrassing. The monks on either side of me resembled oil paintings while I writhed and flapped like a landed fish between them. Restarting my recently abandoned use of heroin began to appear tantalizingly preferable to another sixty seconds of Zen.

In such a situation one is forced face-to-face with one's body and mind and their discomforts. There are no distractions and no places to hide. There is no way to pretend that your suffering is not occurring nor is there any way to philosophize it away. The sesshin demands everything you have and then takes a big gulp of more. An old Zen adage states, "Pain in the legs is the taste of zazen."

Even after a year of regular zazen, I was completely unprepared for the rigor and determination required by a sesshin. By lunch of the second day, my body was trembling and shaking and tears were spilling over the edges of my eyes. "I can't do this," I thought. "I have to get out of here." Internal narratives chronicling previous failures and self-betrayals were flashing like neon signs in my psyche and I began rehearsing excuses that might offer me the excuse to flee; *anything* that would afford me the

opportunity to rise from this odious, smug, self-satisfied cushion, and move spontaneously again.

Unfortunately for my craven and indulgent self, I was pinioned firmly in place by pride. There were a number of Zen students in the sesshin whom I had previously dismissed as fools, certain that my spiritual development exceeded theirs by a comfortable margin. I would never be able to maintain this imagined sense of superiority if I crawled out of the zendo on the second day; my ego dictated that I stay put.

Miraculously, near the end of the third day, my physical pains began to diminish. Though still shaking, I could investigate the pain in my knees more attentively, and noticed how that investigation actually changed the quality of the pain. I still shook and twitched, but a certain amount of the emotional charge that shaking carried diminished as well. It was simply shaking.

On the very last day's break period, walking up the dusty road in a high, chilled wind, I had the distinct feeling that the entire center of my body had disappeared or become transparent. I could feel the wind whistling through it. I felt feather-light and momentarily problem-free; as if the back of my head had disappeared and the space behind my eyes opened out onto the universe. Before me, the world was extraordinarily vivid and alive, shimmering intensely. I had not taken a drug and yet I was truly "high." I thought, "This is nice! I'm gonna check Zen out a little further." Forty years later I'm still checking.

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In the first week of December 2009, I was sixty-eight years old. Infirmity and dying were in the forefront of my mind. Forty-five years earlier I had contracted Hepatitis C from shooting drugs. It had remained undiagnosed until the late 1990s, by which time the disease had been conscripting and destroying my liver cells for all those years.

My youth had left, snatching as it exited the firm outlines of my body and my once distinct jaw and un-creased neck. The backs of my hands were dotted with liver spots, and shadows pooled below my eyes. My stamina had diminished and like

most people who have aged beyond the notice of today's youthful diversions, my acting career had settled into a stasis with no promise of any breakthroughs pending. Sickness, old age, and death had become tangible to me in ways that had been only romantic posturing in my twenties.

It was now incontrovertible that in a conceivable future, everything I held dear, every memory and achievement, every treasure, including my own body, would be stripped from me. That is the central, unavoidable fact of human existence (and a fundamental tenet of Buddhism) and when it changed from a notion into a certainty, my perspective changed with it, particularly my ideas about time. Looking backwards, the lengthening succession of dead friends and family disappeared into emptiness like a black thread being unspooled into a tub of ink. The only uncertainty in my future was speculation about how savagely sickness, old age, and death would claim their due. With these thoughts as unpleasant companions, I decided to sit another seven-day sesshin. It was December again, time for Rohatsu, the Great Cold sesshin.

Sesshins are always rough, and the first three days were particularly difficult this year. Though my shaking and convulsions had subsided many years before and I could sit as solidly as those senior monks I'd once envied, my body was forty years older. The pain in my knees was intense, debilitating, and distracting to the degree that during a private audience with my teacher in the middle of the third day, I confessed to him that I would have to leave the sesshin because I could not bear the pain any longer.

He was mildly critical of me for not paying closer attention to my body and for trying to bull my way through. "You're nearly seventy," he said. "It's hard to admit that all your cards are on the table now and that you have none left to draw. You'll have to play the ones you have as best you can. *That is the central fact of your existence*. That is reality and you'll have to adjust to that. You are *living* what we mean when we say, 'seeing without delusion.' You only have one set of knees and you need to take care of them. If you have to sit in a chair, sit in a chair. Don't cripple

yourself trying to be tough or refusing to recognize the reality of your body or your age."

He was correct of course and had pinpointed the underlying depression amplifying my physical pain. After our conversation, I began alternating meditation periods between my cushion and a chair, calculating backwards from mealtimes so that the meditation period before a meal (which I preferred to take on my cushion) was done in a chair. This relieved the stress on my knees and the consequent reduction of pain allowed me to refocus and dedicate my efforts wholeheartedly. I aligned myself to the schedule without resistance, and was able to focus my concentration on a question that had arisen for me on the sesshin's first day.

Peter Coyote on his ordination day with fellow priests and their teacher, Chikudo Lewis Richmond, who is standing to Coyote's right holding ceremonial Zen whisk. Photo courtesy of the author.

It was a simple question I had condensed into a short mnemonic phrase—"What is it?"—mental shorthand for the larger question—"What is it I'm missing or still searching for?" By the end of day four I was completely absorbed by it. My question accompanied each inhale and exhale, and resided within me, simmering on a back burner, whether meditating, walking, or eating. It floated through my dreams.

On the sixth day, in the late afternoon, the light outside was thinning and we began a period of rapid *kinhin* (walking meditation). Our route began by exiting a side door, circumambulating the rough porch girding the building, reentering through the

door at the opposite corner, threading a path through the zendo and out the first door again. The wood underfoot was bracingly cold and its rough texture stimulating; the rapid walking increased my circulation and alertness and was a balm to my sore joints and muscles. The afternoon fog, creeping in from the ocean, was obscuring the edges of the hills, sending tendrils slithering through the grass like a vigorous living entity.

I had just stepped out the door onto the porch. Perhaps it was the second or third round, but I had just begun my course down the building's long side. I remember that my hands were folded formally against my navel and my gaze was unfocused, and I remember a portion of the swishing black robe and flashing heels of the person in front of me. Several paces after passing through the door, a bird began to shriek from very nearby. It was as loud and startling as if it was sitting on my shoulder, and its plaint was unrelenting. Today, I know it was a Camp Jay, but I wasn't aware of that at the moment because my concentration was purloined by my question, and the bird's shriek was an irritant.

Eeek! Eeek! Eeek! Eeek! Eeek! it cried—strident, insistent, obliterating all thought. Suddenly, in that momentary emptiness, its cries were transformed and I heard them as *It! It! It! It!*—the indisputable answer to my question. I took one more step and the world as I had always experienced it ended.

I cannot describe what happened next because in that instant language and thought fell entirely away from my existence. The boundaries between "in here" and "out there" disappeared. The world remained recognizable, as it had always been, but completely stripped of descriptive language and concepts. Everything appeared to be a phantom of itself, luminous but without weight or substance. "I" had been replaced. The closest I can come to describing what I felt was an awareness with no physical location, inseparable from the entire universe. Everything was precisely as it had come to be. The world was perfect, without time, eternal, and coming and going as it had always been. Every doubt that I had ever harbored about Zen practice fell away. The timid fearful self I had been defending, aggrandizing, comforting, and trying to improve for my entire

life had been relieved of duty and everything was fine without him. There was nothing I had to "do." I knew irrefutably that this was what I had been searching for since I first picked up a book about Zen when I was sixteen years old.

In the next instant, I understood that it was not all that important.

In It for the Tea

HILARY SMITH came for the company and stayed for the Buddhism.

OUR FIRST WINTER on the San Juan Ridge was bleak. My husband and I had moved to California for the sunshine, but our off-grid homestead was shrouded in fog, and torrential rain carved deep ruts out of the long dirt road to town. The sky was dark for weeks at a time, starving our solar array, and in the evenings we went about like monks at a particularly austere monastery, living by the light of a single light bulb, even turning off the internet to save power. The river we could see from our kitchen window, emerald green in the summer, turned into a milky white demon sucking entire trees into its churning jaws.

It wasn't long before my husband slid into a deep depression. I was determined not to follow him.

"We need friends," I said. I'd stumbled across the website for Ring of Bone, a Zen meditation center located in the forest a few miles from our house. I had no interest in Zen Buddhism, but their schedule showed potlucks and work parties in addition to a twice-weekly sitting schedule. Showing up to a randomly selected meditation group just to get some social contact felt a little humiliating to me—like going to church just for the coffee and cookies—but we'd experienced intense isolation in our previous life in Oregon, and I wasn't going to let the same thing happen again.

HILARY SMITH is the author of the bestselling mental health book *Welcome to the Jungle: Facing Bipolar Without Freaking Out*. She is also a YA novelist.

"It's not as close as you think," grumbled my husband. "Seven miles of dirt road is a totally different story than seven miles on pavement. If the car breaks down we're screwed."

"Look around," I said, pointing to the windowpanes weeping with rain and the silent forest beyond. We lived on a dead-end road and the closest neighbor was a mile away. "Do you think we're going to make any friends sitting at home?"

I emailed the zendo contact person, who gave me detailed directions and asked me to show up a few minutes early so someone could show me the ropes. That Sunday I left the house before my husband woke up and carefully navigated the car down a series of increasingly washboarded roads. I parked at the mysterious spot the contact person had described, and followed a footpath that led past the poet Gary Snyder's house before arriving at a fairy-tale complex of hand built wooden buildings surrounded by pines, oaks, and madrones. A handful of people in dark clothing and warm hats were silently sweeping the wooden porch and tending the grounds.

I felt clumsy and out of place as a woman named Chris showed me how to bow before entering the zendo, then twice more once I was inside. My sense of awkwardness only increased once the chanting began, and I found myself mumbling along to a text

whose claims struck me as highly dubious: "Those who try zazen even once / Wipe away beginningless crimes."

I suffered through the sitting meditation, fumbled the walking meditation and the bows, endured a second round of chanting, and decided I was an idiot and would never come again. But finally the service was over and one of the members announced that it was time for tea.

We gathered in a small circle close to the woodstove, and someone brought a tray of beautiful clay cups out from the kitchen, along with a reassuringly large kettle. There was one more round of bows to fumble, and then it was as if a spell had been lifted. The zendo members, so silent and inscrutable while meditating, took on faces and personalities. They updated each other on mutual friends and compared notes on winter conditions at their own farms and homesteads. The teacher, Nelson, asked me to introduce myself, and as I described our recent move to the San Juan Ridge, the group listened with interest.

The social time lasted only a few minutes, but I felt like a capsized sailor who had been allowed, ever so briefly, to step onto dry land. I returned home jubilant.

"It was terrible," I said to my husband. "I'm going back next week."

For the rest of that first, difficult year, the zendo became my lifeline. I found the practice sheer torment and often vowed to never return, but the moments of human contact were so precious, the zendo members so interesting and sincere, that I put up with the discomfort. It was like taking an extremely bitter pill in order to get the grain of sugar hidden inside of it. Soon, my husband began to tag along just to get out of the house. On the drive home, we enjoyed complaining to each other about the inscrutable chanting and the pins and needles in our legs.

Sure enough, the people we saw at the zendo every week turned into the first friends we would make on the Ridge. Sensing my loneliness, one woman invited me to join her for weekly hikes. Upon discovering that we were writers and musicians, a German psychologist invited my husband and me to dinner to meet his poet friends. A young couple moved to town,

both Zen practitioners, and soon we were at each others' houses several times a week, listening to reggae and having long conversations over craft beer.

It was better than sitting alone in our fog-shrouded cabin, listening to the river roar. But it couldn't stop the landslide that had already begun inside my husband's mind. He sobbed, tore at his hair, sweat out the bed, crawled onto the floor, and lay shaking under a blanket. The doctors at the tiny rural health center told him to drink valerian tea. The psychiatrist in town was booked five months out. The rain went on and on, soaking the firewood, filling up the channels beneath the sliding glass doors, spilling into the house. In the morning I'd mop up the puddles on the floor.

"I don't think I can be here," my husband wept. "I'm so sorry."

I went outside. Standing among the leafless trees in the tiny, doomed orchard, I called his mother. "He needs help," I said. "The doctors here aren't helping him. If I put him on the afternoon train, will you pick him up? Can you get him a doctor's appointment in the Bay Area?"

We only had one car, which we shared with our friend Rik, an elderly man who lived in a cabin on our land. I couldn't just abandon the homestead, or Rik would be stranded with no way to get groceries and no one to help if a tree fell across the road in a storm. My husband's parents' house was crowded to bursting—he would have to sleep on the back porch—but at least there were people there, and unlimited electricity. There he could watch movies, keep the lights on all night, and find some relief from the mountain silence that was boring a tunnel through his soul.

I drove my husband to the train, then returned home. Over the confusing days and weeks that followed, the relationships I'd built at the zendo kept me from going into freefall. The Zen folks were matter-of-fact about the crisis without being cold. Many of them were in their sixties or older; they'd witnessed death, disease, and all manner of disasters and lived to tell the tale. Unlike some of the people I'd met in yoga studios and other "spiritual" settings, they didn't give me syrupy platitudes like,

"Everything happens for a reason." If I could sum up their perspective, it would be more like, "Everything happens." Somehow, that was more comforting to me, more respectful of both my intelligence and my pain, than the more mystical version.

I agonized over whether or not I should become a Zen student, a formal commitment that marked the beginning of serious training under the teacher's guidance. It seemed wrong to keep showing up, taking advantage of the community, without becoming fully part of it. Was I some kind of freeloader, bowing out of koan study week after week, abstaining from attending the lengthy and arduous meetings in which zendo business got hammered out? I'd sworn not to let myself become isolated, and thanks to the zendo I'd succeeded. But surely by now they were wise to my game.

To compensate for my freeloader status, I brought my chainsaw to work parties and bucked beetle-killed trees into rounds. I baked cookies and made devilled eggs for the potlucks. I sang the chants with a full voice and even memorized a few of them. Privately, I fretted.

"I just don't think I'm a Zen," I confided to my husband on the phone.

"So don't be a Zen," he said.

"But they're so nice. I want to want to be one."

I was taking the Greyhound to the Bay Area every week to see him. The trips left me exhausted and disoriented; I couldn't fathom a universe that allowed for such suffering. Going to the zendo didn't make sense of anything—except when it did. During walking meditation, tromping silently along the wooden deck that wrapped around the zendo, I had the feeling of being in a strange sort of chain gang, all tied together on this earth. Everything wasn't happening for a reason, but everything was happening, and we were happening with it. This wasn't a beautiful or comforting thought, but it had some light inside it, and I sensed that this was why the zendo people came here—to gaze on that curious light together.

My husband and I ended up leaving the San Juan Ridge two short years after we'd moved there. The homestead was too

remote for him, the dirt roads too much of an obstacle, and the weather too severe. We started our lives over in Hawaii, where the sun never pulled a three-month disappearing act and the river would rise but never freeze. My husband got medical care, recovered, started living again. On weekends we'd hike to a black sand beach and play in the enormous, dangerous waves. I was afraid of those waves, but there was nothing for it. I learned to dive under the breakers and not worry too much if I got sucked under and dragged along the gritty sand.

"Moosey!" my husband would shout, gesturing at the green cliffs and the unmistakable sun. "Look where we are!"

I knew that in giving up the homestead we'd probably saved his life. Still, I was sad to leave the Ridge. It felt like changing the channel halfway through a movie I still wanted to watch. I felt a lingering sense of confusion and shock; I wanted to know how it ended. Perhaps eventually I would have joined the zendo after all, gone to my first meditation retreat, received my first koan. Maybe someday, sitting by the woodstove in that simple wooden building, I would have experienced *kensho*—awakening.

More likely than not, I would have carried on as I was before. Showing up for the incense and tea and the pleasure of pulling weeds from the gravel walkways. Feeling torn and conflicted about my presence, about my own existence. Twisting in the wind like some dry leaf, never realizing it doesn't matter to the tree if it hangs on or blows away.

I Won't Fight Death to the Death

Our dear friend and longtime Lion's Roar colleague **CINDY LITTLEFAIR** on life with a terminal cancer diagnosis. She draws wisdom from her Buddhist practice and what she learned from many experiences of death in her childhood.

DEATH FEELS TO ME LIKE an invitation, one that we reject at our peril. We can overthink it, worry it. Not now, we might say to death. Later would be better, or never. As adults we develop an opinion about it. I tell my ex-partners I will help them with their goals of care—detailed end-of-life instructions for their caregivers, possibly our kids. I want the kids to be spared any unnecessary heavy lifting, decisions for which they're unprepared. I'm not going to die, each of the exes says. Yes, I say, that's excellent. Let's call that Plan A. Now, let's talk about Plan B. I know that at least one of them wants nothing to do with Western medicine. This is the time to say so.

Death tells us what form it wants to take. Sometimes it comes with a bit of wiggle room. I've been told I have three months to three years to live. It's a Goldilocks-style plan: not too hot, not too cold, not too soft, not too hard. People invariably pooh-pooh it when I tell them about it. Three months to three years? What's the use of giving someone such a wide range? You could drive a truck through a prognosis like that, a hearse. But it's all I've got, and at the very least it tells me that death is imminent. I've been given notice. This is a first for my family of origin. Those family members who predeceased me all died more suddenly. We're all going to die, but I have the luxury of knowing more or less when it will happen.

Obviously, I've never had to die before—not the big and final death. But I've had enough losses to have a sense of what's to come.

I grew up with death. I was a Littlefair child, part of a collection of brothers and sisters that happened to dissolve at an alarming rate—births alternating with deaths, birthdays with funerals, and death anniversaries always operating in our background. Four of my siblings were dead by the time I was twelve. Memories dragged the past into the present. How many times

did my mother see her daughter slip beneath the ice, grabbing unsuccessfully at solid ground? How many times did my mother drown along with her?

Frequency and proximity did not make me like death. It was always just there, like the scent of bleach and cooked cabbage was always in the air at my friend's house, or like old cigarette smoke always sat like mustard gas in another friend's rec room where on Saturday afternoons we watched horror movies and smoked old butts. I did not warm to death, but death gave me the opportunity to be with it and to develop an acceptance of it.

CINDY LITTLEFAIR, see here with her son Allister, was on staff at Lion's Roar for eighteen years. She is a graduate of the MFA program in creative nonfiction at King's College, Halifax, Nova Scotia. Photo by Sam Littlefair.

For someone who writes about life, there is much to be said for death. It is irrefutable. An objective fact. Left to my own devices, writing my own version of Littlefair history, I might unwittingly or wittingly falsify memory. I might be an unreliable narrator, but having a smattering of dead siblings in my past gives me at least that much of a solid start with which to work. Their deaths could never be a product of my imagination or a matter of speculation. Four of my siblings died; that part of my history is clear.

I was a nervous child. Perhaps it was all that corporeal coming and going. I was shy, mute, hid in my mother's skirt at silver-service Saturday afternoon teas at the YWCA. I tried to wrap her around me. Cocoon. Five years old. Six. At five I had

hand-me-down items from all my siblings living and dead—a panther lamp, a stuffed tiger with a secret-zipper belly, 4-H prize ribbons, photos. Items from an abruptly interrupted past intruded on my present.

It's not as if I knew death well or distinctly enough to see it and pick it out of my food like it was a hair, and no one else seemed to see it and want to pick it out for me. We just carried on. As a family, we kept ourselves in the dark. Being the youngest, I have no way of knowing what really went on, and the memory of my one remaining sister is nonexistent. But one thing was for sure: We were once a good-sized family, six kids. But in the end, we grew small, and it is as if we were always small. That did not sit well with me. I felt cheated.

A few years ago, I was given the chance to reconstitute my family. It was a therapeutic exercise. I was invited to use seven workshop participants to represent my siblings and parents. It was like being given free tokens at a video arcade—I was delighted. For my parents, I chose and arranged two people whose positioning was meant to express both love and weariness. For my brother Thomas and sister Sharon, I chose people at random to stand in for them. Both had died before I was born, so I never knew them. My choice for Greg was informed by my love of him. And Jeff, he was tricky because I'd always hated him. Whenever I think of the person I chose for Jeff, I want to apologize again. It gave me so much satisfaction to all but yell and spit in his face. The real Jeff had molested me. But seeing the rest of my family as it might have been brought me extreme joy. We were a force.

When I was growing up, death lived in the most unsuspecting of places. In my case it was at the end of the first-floor hall where the phone hung on the wall. Black. In my fifth and twelfth years the phone became an instrument of torture and stayed that way. It was by phone that one of my brothers last attempted to contact my mother in hopes of finding acceptance and instead got my father and his wrath. It was also by phone that another brother's fate revealed itself courtesy of a nurse calling on a Sunday night to ask to speak to one of my parents.

It's for you, I said to my father, the receiver in my hand becoming a starting pistol for a race he did not yet know he'd need to run. One more time.

Death was intrusive and uninvited and while we didn't deal with it with anything approaching awareness or curiosity, we nonetheless accommodated it. One of my siblings once found a box of discarded sweaters outside the local Sears and brought it home—freebies! But every item had come in contact with fiberglass, and we couldn't get away from the glass slivers. Death was like that.

This is the past I bring to the present and to my own death and dying. Acceptance is a given. I see dead as easy. I see it as easy to die and to be dead. It's those who remain behind that I worry about. My heart goes out to them. I've been there; I've been them. I experienced my parents' deaths, a close friend's. I was sure I wouldn't survive.

Questionable though it may seem, I have the advantage of thinking I know what comes next, the part where I die. It even comes with a set of directions: From the lower parking lot at Point Pleasant Park here in Halifax, where I live, head due south along Sailor's Memorial Way to the place where the Northwest Arm, a narrow ocean inlet, meets the rest of the harbor. Look left, out to sea.

It's really just open water, but to me it's become a deep vertical expanse of welcoming, the air shimmering with its presence. It feels to me like emptiness itself, and it grounds me. Welcomes me. It reorients me whether I see it in person or recall it in memory from the dry, upholstered comfort of my home, and it's where I think I'll be in spirit, first stop, when I die.

I don't think I'm the first one to see the spot this way. At least one other person has seen it before me: Audrey Parker. As coincidence would have it, I knew her. There's a bench there on the shore with her name on it, and it looks seaward. East. It's as if she was inviting people to see what she saw as she approached her own death. Look, look, she said. Urging. The bench is at the very place you'd put such a thing if you had something important to communicate, in this case the exact location of a good disembarking point from life. Point Pleasant. Indeed.

When it comes down to it, I don't see the point of fighting death to the death. I'll go toe-to-toe with it a bit, wring what I can of goodness from what remains, but ultimately, I accept that death has business with me, and I won't stand in its way. It would be silly to attach myself to opposing it too vigorously. Cancer has as much right to me as the rest of the cells in there, the Team Life cells—the two having spent decades in near-flawless lockstep, one always slightly ahead of the other.

I've seen too many siblings come and go to make a big deal of death. Feeling that good health has no greater claim on these physical parts than illness makes it okay to go with the flow. I'm not opposed to the flow.

Sweeping My Heart

When Zen teacher **ZENJU EARTHLYN MANUEL** was assigned to clean the temple, she felt generations of oppression rise in her. Conversing with her ancestors about what this work really meant helped her see how it could be healing.

ZENJU EARTHLYN MANUEL is an ordained Zen priest. Her most recent book is *Opening to Darkness: Eight Ways for Being with the Absence of Light in Unsettling Times* (Sounds True).

ZEN PRACTICE IS a return to the ordinary.

It is only in the secular world that Zen is perceived by some as a high and holy practice. The robes are seen as holy, but there is no holiness in Zen. Everything that is done in the temple is of an ordinary nature, including washing dishes, cleaning toilets, mopping floors, cooking, and doing laundry.

The teacher is also ordinary. There is nothing for the teacher to be or show other than the ordinariness of life and how to embrace it. If there is any status thinking and being, that is an inevitable tangling of our worldly views and the path of enlightenment.

For me, a dark-skinned person of African descent, cleaning the temple as Zen practice felt inappropriate and uncomfortable when I was at the beginning of my training. When you are an

older black woman and a young white man tells you how to mop the floor during work period, the experience is akin to being a maid or a reminder of slavery. Ordinary temple work is the kind of labor often relegated in this country to folks of color and poor people. It is work that can ensure a lower rank in society.

ILLUSTRATION BY ARAKI KOMAN

In my early days as a student, I felt the prescribed daily bowing was not for me as a black woman. Because so many of the work leaders were white, in the beginning I could only see the work as what my ancestors did as slaves, sharecroppers, wet-nurses, and maids. The memory of my black ancestors and slavery was visceral.

Of course, Zen students of many ethnicities were also working. Did their experience remind them, as it reminded me, of oppressive conditions of labor? Did women feel they were just continuing what folks call "women's work"? Were there immigrants who felt they were doing menial work imposed on them because they were not considered citizens?

On the other hand, did the white male students feel the work was beneath them? That, I believe, was traditionally the point of work practice in Zen temples. Part of Zen practice is to recognize the consciousness of superiority and inferiority, the dangerous explosive line between "us" and "them." The temple experience of young Japanese men was intended to humble and prepare them to take on jobs and families in the world. But as the prescribed work

of Japanese Zen temples was passed on to white American practitioners, did they consider that the cultural context of the practice would change as different folk embraced the Buddha Way?

Many people of color, and especially black people, come to Zen practice with unavoidable past experiences of strenuous and demeaning work. In essence, they have done the work long before they arrive. In fact, they have overworked to survive blatant discrimination and rejection.

For those who suffer from internalized "isms" like racism and sexism, to be humbled by spiritual practice is counter to their task of wellness and healing from dehumanization. If anything, they are looking to emerge from the place of submission. They are looking for a place to speak rather than be silent, to communicate the suffering of all "isms" being played out while sweeping the temple's floor.

Yet, I stayed with Zen practice, doing the mundane, and years later I scrubbed the toilets when I was head student, in order, they say, to remain humble. The more I bowed, the more I scrubbed. Eventually, I felt my ancestors moving my body, back and forth. They told me this work was good. I was skeptical.

Me: "Really? I don't need this."

Ancestors: "Exactly. You feel you have become better than us."

Me: "I went to school because you said education was the best thing for black people. I got a Ph.D. so I don't need to do what black folks have always done."

Ancestors: "Your pride is no good to us. Your degree is no good to us. We need your heart to be healed. Don't let intellect take the place of love. You must love more."

I swept longer, breathing, listening, crying. This is true, I say to myself.

Me: "But I worked so hard not to be oppressed as you were. I worked for justice. I prayed. I ate well. I did good deeds most of my life."

Ancestors: "We need more than that from you. We don't need you to be a good Buddhist, Muslim, Christian, follower of African Orishas, or whatever. We need you to remember the dust from which you came. We need you to remember a time before things went crazy, when they sold Africans like us. There was something before. It is still

hidden from you. Find it. Keep sweeping—not to clean but to see and hear where your heart is blocked from what we see for you. We put you in a place where you would be bothered enough to change."

What would Zen training (not just temple cleaning) look like for those who come from a lineage of ancestors who were mistreated and exploited? Mistreatment in the past will create mistreatment in the future, even within our spiritual sanctuaries, if we are not aware of such a consciousness within all of us.

If ancestral memory of slavery arises in our practice, as it might for dharma practitioners of African descent, it must be acknowledged and used to open our eyes to the consciousness of hatred. If we ignore what is stored in any of us, then how can we know what paths we have already suffered?

Today when I clean the temple, I know it is my ancestors calling. I know that the memory within me of their existence as slaves is being understood and transformed. I know that temple cleaning is the motion arising from sitting meditation, not history repeating itself.

If I am fortunate enough to be offered a chance to sweep, it is a profound time with my own heart—to use the broom as a ritual connecting this life and the lives of those in my past. I am not replicating what my ancestors did as slaves. On the contrary, they have brought me to this moment. How else would I appear in such a temple?

In sweeping, I had to climb down from who I thought I had become. The practice was to move beyond easily-accessed, well-served black pride into seeing the ways I suffer. I began to see the ascendance from enslaved Africans as a sanctioned and gifted walk toward the very liberation the Buddha spoke of, and what the ancestors saw for me and everyone else. While economic reparation for enslavement is true and relative justice, the ultimate reparation is true freedom from the poison of our oppression. We need both.

Free as a Bird in the Sky

YONGEY MINGYUR RINPOCHE was one of the best-known Buddhist teachers in the world. Yet one night in 2011, he disappeared from public view to fulfill his lifelong dream to become an anonymous, wandering yogi. When he returned four years later, he revealed in this exclusive story for Lion's Roar what happened during his life-changing journey.

FOR THE LAST FOUR YEARS, I have been wandering from place to place in India and Nepal, living on the streets, doing retreat, and trying not to stay anywhere for too long.

I had done a traditional three-year retreat when I was young, but since childhood I have had a very strong longing to do a kind of wandering retreat. I like mountains, I like caves, and I have been very inspired by the great meditators of the past and some of my own teachers, such as Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche, who have done retreats like this. Even today, there are many masters in Tibet doing wandering retreats like this. I am not the only one.

"Don't Tell Anyone"

THE REASON I KEPT MY PLAN SECRET was that if I told people, I knew that it would be difficult for me to go. My father, the Dzogchen master Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche, told me that he had wanted to go on a solitary wandering retreat like this. But when he tried to do it, his students begged him to return to his monastery and his teachers encouraged him to stay, so he didn't end up not going. Because of this, he told me that if I really wanted to do this, I shouldn't tell anyone about it. He said, "Don't tell anybody what you've been doing until you come back."

The final inspiration to start my retreat came from another one of my root gurus, Jamgon Tai Situ Rinpoche. A few years before I began my retreat, I was fortunate to receive extensive teachings on *Mahamudra*, the nature of mind instructions of the Kagyu lineage, from him at Sherab Ling monastery, along with many

YONGEY MINGYUR RINPOCHE is founder of Tergar, an international meditation community. Author of books such as *The Joy of Living and Joyful Wisdom*, he tells the full story of his wandering retreat in *In Love with the World*.

After returning from his retreat. MINGYUR RINPOCHE sports the hair, beard, and joy of a carefree yogi. Photo by Paul Macgowan.

other monks and nuns. He encouraged us to take the teachings and put them into practice in retreat.

This really inspired me. I already had the plan to do this retreat, but I had been putting it off. Hearing one of my heart teachers talk about the importance of retreat made me remember the promise I had made to myself. Soon after that, I made the decision to set a date to begin.

Onto the Streets

I DIDN'T TELL ANYONE my real plan. I left my room at the monastery in Bodhgaya in the middle of the night and took the train to Varanasi.

I wanted to live completely on the streets. In Varanasi, there were many people lying down on the train station floor, and I tried to stay there with them. I had a strong determination to be on the streets, but when it came to the reality, it was very difficult for me because I'd been living in comfort. In the monastery, I'd had many attendants, nice food, and everyone treated me like a prince.

So I was naive to think I could live on the streets right away. It took me awhile. The first day I tried to stay on the street for a few hours, but I felt like everybody was watching me. It was very

good to face my fear and feelings of embarrassment and shyness. But in the end, I couldn't stay on the street for the whole night, so I stayed in a dormitory at the train station. The next day I stayed longer on the station floor, but again spent the night in the dormitory.

After a few days, I bought a map of India in the station bookstore, since I didn't have any plan and I didn't know where I should go. I saw that the map had train lines, bus routes, and all the important holy places in India, and I was very happy.

I decided to go to Kushinagar, the holy place where the Buddha died, and took the train to Gorakhpur, the closest big city to Kushinagar. I still wasn't ready yet to be on the streets, so I got a cheap room for 400 rupees (about $6) a night. I was still training, trying to adapt to this new environment.

I was practicing around the Parinirvana Temple in Kushinagar and trying to stay as anonymous as possible. By this time I had run out of money—I hadn't taken much with me when I left—so I had to leave my hotel. I changed from my Buddhist robes and started to dress like a *sadhu*, the ascetic Hindu yogis who beg and live on the streets. I had bought sadhu clothes in Varanasi, because when I wore Buddhist robes everyone would look at me. Even the police were curious and asked me, "Are you Chinese or Japanese?"

After I left the hotel, I went to the cremation temple about two kilometers from the Parinirvana Temple and slept on the streets there. People didn't notice me because I looked like just another sadhu. It was very difficult to change my attire, because I had such strong attachment to my robes. It was a good way for me to practice my meditation on letting go.

It was a difficult transition to be out on the streets. Giving up my identity as a monk was one thing, and of course I had to let go of my desire for comfort, food, and the basic necessities of life, and even the desire to be safe. There were wild dogs around, and when I would get up in the middle of the night, they would chase after me, barking.

A Near-Death Experience

In Kushinagar, I got very sick with vomiting and diarrhea. Probably it was the water I was drinking living on the streets. That lasted for two or three days, I think, and then one morning my health got so bad that I was sure I was going to die. This near-death experience was actually the best experience of my retreat.

As a Dzogchen practitioner, my main meditation is simply to rest in the nature of mind. The main advice in this kind of practice is to simplify—to really, really let go.

When I got sick, it felt like I went through some kind of a wall. It was like a wall of subtle stone, of solid attachment to my body, my comfort, my robes, and even the idea of Mingyur Rinpoche. So many things. I slowly let go, let go, let go, let go.

In the end, I even let go of myself. I thought, "If I'm going to die, okay. If I'm going to die, no problem." At that moment, I didn't have any fear.

Then I had some kind of dissolution experience, as they call it in the texts. I saw different colors, and then slowly I could not hear or see. The elements of the body were dissolving, and then I lost touch with my physical body altogether. I watched this process happening.

Then I had a wonderful experience. There was no thought, no emotion, no concept. Mind was clear and wakeful, like a blue sky with the sun shining, transparent and all-pervasive. There was no inside and outside, no subject and object, no sense of body and no ordinary senses. At the same, mind was pervasive, knowing, and very clear. I knew what was going on, but it was not like normal experience. It's very, very difficult to describe. It cannot really be put into words.

I don't know how long that was in normal time. But at a certain point, something stirred in my mind. I felt the movement of compassion. and tI had the thought, "Okay, this is not the time for me to die." This thought was somehow related to compassion mind. First there was the thought, then it became compassion, then the compassion got stronger and stronger.

Then I could feel my body again. Slowly, mind narrowed into my body and was no longer all-pervasive. Then I heard a sound like *SSHHAAAA*. When you first hear sound, it's like *SSHHAAAA*, but normally we don't hear this subtle level of sound. Then I could hear many normal sounds around me, and I opened my eyes.

I was feeling thirsty, so I stood up to get some water. As I was going to the well, I suddenly became unconscious and collapsed.

I woke up in a local clinic with a glucose drip in my arm. For one day, they gave me injections and some medicine. The next day, I recovered and left the clinic.

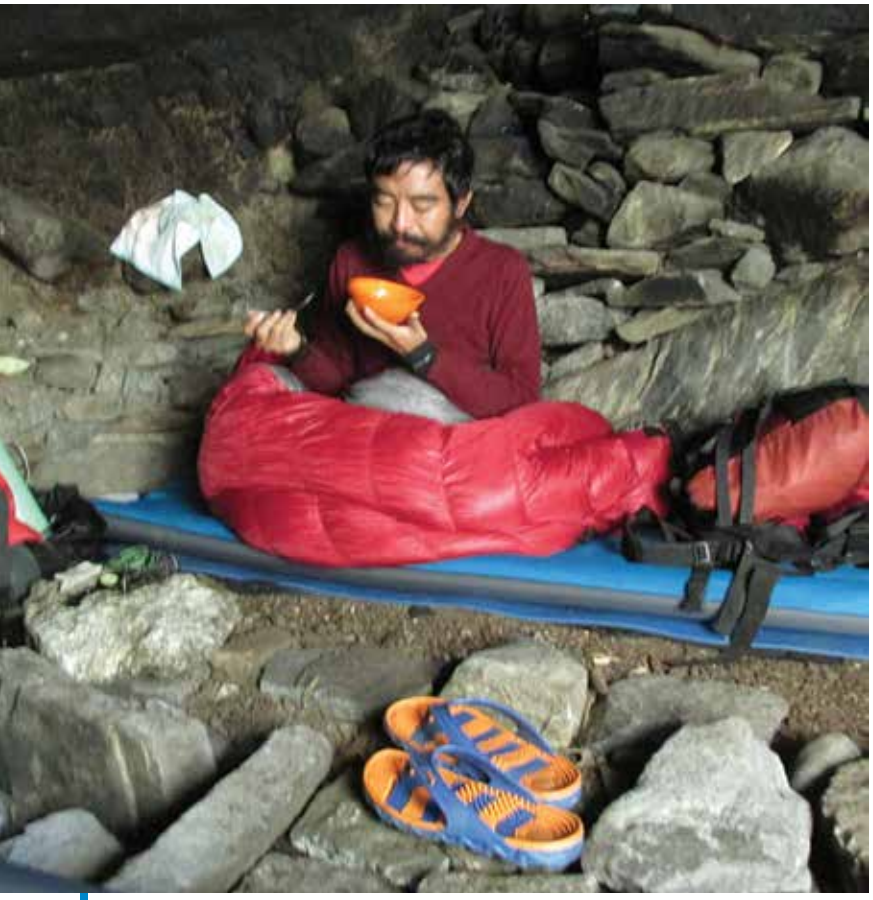
After this experience, my mind felt so fresh and my meditation really improved. My boundaries and hesitation were totally gone. I could appreciate being alive. I could appreciate everything. All resistance was gone, and I felt like I was one with the environment. I could go on the streets and rejoice in everything.

Happy Wanderer

I DIDN'T FACE ANY BIG PROBLEMS after that. At that time of year, it is quite hot on the plains, so I went into the Himalayas. I went to Buddhist pilgrimage places such as Tso Pema and Ladakh. That was the pattern I followed in the remaining years of my wandering retreat: in the summer I would go up into the Himalayas, and in the winter I would come down to the plains and spend my time in Buddhist and Hindu holy places in India and the *terai* of Nepal.

The best part was being able to travel freely, with no commitment and no schedule. It was complete freedom, like a bird flying in the sky. After my near-death experience in Kushinagar, this was very easy for me. I might plan a month or two ahead, and after that go wherever I wanted, depending on my mood.

When I was in the Himalayas, though, I couldn't stay in one place for too long. Many lamas do retreats in the mountains, and when people found out I was there, they would come and ask for my blessing and invite me to their homes. Then it would



On the Nepal–India border: "I like mountains, I like caves, and I have been very inspired by the great meditators of the past who have done retreats like this." Photo by Lama Tashi.

just be like my previous life in the monastery. So I would have to move on.

I used that map I'd bought at the train station in Varanasi for half a year, until I lost it. I wasn't experienced with maps, but if I focused really hard, I could visualize my route. Then I would ask the local people, Where is the train station? What is the best bus to take? and they would tell me. Somehow it always worked out in the end.

It was good for me to have this kind of challenge. It was really helpful for my practice. Of course, it was not without fear. I was homeless, and at times my money would run out. Sometimes I would beg, and people would give me some money or *tsampa*, the roasted barley flour that is a Tibetan staple. Other times, they would just tell me to go away. But even when I felt a natural fear response in my body, my mind still felt free.

I kept my meditation practice very simple. My main meditation was nature of mind practice. I didn't do any big rituals and I only carried a couple of texts with me. In some caves, I didn't even have a shrine or an image of the Buddha. It was very simple.

Spending time with the sadhus and living like them was also good for my practice. My teacher Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche inspired me to do this. He had told me stories about spending time with the sadhus and recommended it.

Many of the sadhus in Indian cities may not really be sadhus. Some of them fooled me! But in the mountains, some sadhus have profound understanding. Some were very successful

businesspeople who had given up everything. The great ones don't want to talk too much. They don't share much about their practice. On the other hand, the city sadhus may not have much realization to talk about, but they want to talk all the time!

We Are All Buddha

Now that I have returned from my retreat, I would like to share what I have received—the lineage, the meditation practice, and my own experience. I want to help others get a taste of this great wisdom—this great, ancient wisdom.

This experience will change the way I teach dharma. Now I want to teach in a more experiential style; not just meditation and practice, but also behavior and conduct. View, meditation, and conduct—these three together are very important. Maybe in the past I put more emphasis on view and meditation. Now I want to emphasize day-to-day life experience, how meditation can transform our day-to-day life activity. Not just intellectual understanding, but direct heart experience. Intellect, heart, and behavior—all three together.

Self-development is very important. Nowadays, everybody wants to change the world. But I think the best thing to do is to change yourself. We are all part of this world, and we influence each other every day. If you can change yourself in a positive direction, then you can influence three or four other people. Then they can positively influence another three or four people, and so on.

Everyone today talks about happiness. But I feel that happiness is really found in appreciation and rejoicing. Everything is a display of clarity, love, and wisdom. Everything is wonderful, even small things. This is related to the main view of Vajrayana Buddhism: that we all are buddha. This enlightened nature is not just within you. It's everywhere. You can see it and appreciate it. That's the main cause of happiness—gratitude and appreciation.

I feel this wandering retreat has been the best time in my life. I had been meditating for many years, and of course I'm

a meditation teacher, but I still had subtle pride, subtle ego. Previously there were so many things happening in my life that I couldn't see that. But when I went onto the streets, I could see them very clearly, because I didn't have any other things to do. There was just me and my mind. That was really helpful for nature of mind meditation.

I'm so happy that I did this. I have wanted to do it since childhood. Through this experience and my practice, I feel I am free like a bird soaring high in the sky. I am free and can fly everywhere.

(NB That doesn't mean that I can fly, okay? Don't think that I can fly!)

Waking Up to the World

Travel broadens the mind and opens the heart. Three personal stories of transformational travel in Thailand, Ethiopia, and Yemen.

"Buddha, Please Bless My Family"

In a silver temple, in the country of his ancestors, **IRA SUKRUNGFRUANG** bridges the generations.

IRA SUKRUNGRUANG'S books include *This Jade World* and *Southside Buddhist*.

As our van pulls in, drums reverberate in the small temple courtyard, the music of celebration and grief. A funeral is taking place at Wat Sri Suphan, one of the oldest temples in Chiang Mai, Thailand. Some mourners exchange wrapped lotus buds, candles, and incense. Some sit on plastic chairs, hands pressed together in prayer. Some clench tissues tight, eyes rimmed red.

My mother lives on the outskirts of the city, and every time I visit her, I explore Chiang Mai's Buddhist temples. What makes Wat Sri Suphan special is that the main hall is entirely silver. Wat Sri Suphan isn't shy about its radiance—the silver exterior

blinds with the afternoon sun—but women aren't allowed inside, a reflection of the sexism pervading the country.

"It is what it is," my mother says. "It's how things are here. Explain it to them."

Them is my new family—my stepdaughter, my wife, and our one-year-old son, Bodhi. This is their first trip to a country I consider my second home, the country of my ancestors. This is the first time my son has met his grandmother, and my first trip back since my father passed away less than a month earlier.

The silver and aluminum Wat Sri Suphan in Chiang Mai, Thailand, has modern touches. For example, the word "GPS" decorates the floor, as the temple is intended to help visitors navigate their lives.

The funeral of a stranger continues. Not many take notice of us snapping pictures, dropping coins into silver bowls for good karma. The air is fragrant with incense, candle wax, and the wet smell of Thailand's rainy season. I'm not sure we're supposed to be here, but my mother says not to worry, says I worry too much.

I convey the information that women aren't allowed inside the temple, and though my stepdaughter is disappointed she is quickly distracted by a kitten sunning itself in the palms of a Buddha statue. My wife tells me I should take Bodhi inside. She says not to worry, says I worry too much.

No one is in the temple. I put Bodhi down on the carpeted floor. His legs splay in front of him. His stillness is a rarity. He takes in the silver ceiling and the gaudy European chandelier.

"Let's pray, Bodhi," I say. When I kneel, he kneels. When I bow to the floor, he does, too. When I press my hands together, he mimics me.

"Buddha, please bless my family," I say.

Bodhi says sounds I don't understand.

"Bless my boy and the world he's born into."

Bodhi says sounds.

"Bless all that is lost, like my father."

Bodhi says sounds.

Then I don't say anything else.

I remember attending a Thai funeral for a grandmother I never met, my father's mother, when I was five or six. I remember smoke rising out of the crematory, and my father whispering that my grandmother was floating into heaven. I thought how odd to be a body and then become smoke.

Bodhi totters to the front of the temple. He stares at the Buddha above, saying sounds to him. I marvel at my son, the wonder he embodies. I want to believe my father felt the same thing—felt that it was a miracle to witness his boy grow day by day.

My father did not know my fractured future—the divorce, the hurt I would carry with me for years. Nor did he know I wouldn't be at his funeral, because he would die alone and there'd be no funeral. There'd be only me, on the other side of the world in America, rocking my son to sleep, as I mourned. And I am still mourning.

"Grab what's here," my father once told me during my long bouts of worry, "before it disappears."

I grab Bodhi. I squeeze him tight.

When we leave the temple, the funeral procession begins. The casket is being taken to the crematory down the street. The van pulls out of the temple, and because it's a small road, because there's no other way to go, we follow the procession. Soon, Bodhi is asleep, his cheeks red from the heat, his hair wet on his head, but his closed eyes and lips are in deep peace.

The Territory of Love

ANITA N. FENG on a wedding, a war, and a world that is always in flux.

WE WERE SURPRISED at how easy it was to carry a voluminous, white wedding dress all the way from Seattle to a small village in Africa. It was difficult to navigate taxis and conveyor belts with this unwieldy item, but whenever anyone asked about what was in the huge bag, we offered up our daughter's love story, and quickly all barriers melted away. Everyone was only too happy to help.

The story went like this. Our daughter, Tasha, was a Peace Corp volunteer in Tigray, Ethiopia, and she fell in love with Goitom, a bright, big-hearted young man from that village. We, her family, were on our way to celebrate their wedding. The expected guest list from the groom's side was about 1,500. From the bride's side? Three.

We arrived and the celebrations began. Wonderful and chaotic, delicious and bewildering, the party lasted for the better part of a week. Granted, there were a few challenges. It was the dry season, and there was no running water (except for two hours one day, when we all scrambled to take brief, cold showers). Electricity was intermittent, and an incompetent wedding photographer hijacked events with equipment that didn't work.

But these inconveniences were minor compared to my daughter and son-in-law's happiness and the embrace of new family. We danced every day, celebrated well, and returned home exhausted—this time with a well-used wedding dress stuffed into a suitcase. It had been a trip that enlarged our world, our family, our hearts, and our minds.

Travel is a meditation because we must constantly inquire: Where am I? What is this? And this? The jolt of foreignness can spur awakening—flooding us with change, that mark of existence we often don't notice in our daily lives. The truth is, we're always traveling, always in flux. We just don't realize it most of the time.

ANITA N. FENG is the guiding teacher at Blue Heron Zen Community in the Korean Zen lineage of Seung Sahn.

So when I returned home, I thought we'd pick up where we left off, but it's impossible to enter the same river twice. The world had already changed.

vThen came war. In the Tigray region where Goitom and his family lived, all communication outlets were cut. There was no travel. Medical facilities were looted and destroyed. Soldiers from Eritrea and the Ethiopian national army killed and violated countless citizens of Tigray.

Anita Feng's daughter got married in Tigray, Ethiopia. A traditional wedding took place three days after the main wedding. Photo courtesy of the author.

We had no idea if Goitom and his family were safe. Was he fleeing with other refugees into Sudan? If so, how would we find him? Had he been conscripted into the Tigray army? Was he wounded—or worse? We were compelled to wait, all the while exploring one implausible solution after another.

But meditation teaches us that alongside the punishing physical distances that can separate us from loved ones, there is another space, which is most intimate and takes no time at all to traverse. That's the territory of love, which, I'd suggest, is another word for what we do when we meditate. It's a space of sanctuary and vulnerability—both at the same time.

Tasha and Goitom persevered with great courage and determination, and finally they were reunited, in February 2021, here in the U.S. Now they, just like the rest of us, are steering their way into the stream of being, and becoming.

The Broken Town

PICO IYER meets the good people of a maligned place.

GOATS WERE FORAGING along the empty, cracked main street. My taxi stopped at a red light—the only car in sight—and a hollow-cheeked old woman hammered at the window. There were no playgrounds to be seen, few shops, no bright lights. After forty years of unceasing warfare—the Brits, the Soviets, every group from North Yemen—the little town of Aden, on the oil-rich coastline of South Yemen, was as shattered a place as I had seen.

I'd been there, as it happened, when I was two years old. In those days Aden was the busiest port in the world outside Manhattan. Great ships stopped for refueling as they traveled between Britain and British India, and the place throbbed with all the energy that arises when East first touches West. Now it seemed a crying illustration of the Buddha's first noble truth. Not many seemed to grow old here, and when eventually I found a place to sleep, I had to walk through a metal detector every time I approached the lobby.

All across the broken town, however, people extended more kindness to me, a relative millionaire, than I had any right to expect. A young man who spoke good English offered to show me around. We spent a long, hot afternoon in the cemetery where his mother, his sister, and some nuns who'd tried to be of help to the country now lay. When my flight out was abruptly canceled, the veiled matron in the airline office who rebooked my ticket took meticulous pains to hand me the forty dollars I was due as a refund. She could so easily have kept the money for herself. Forced now to travel across the country in the dead of night, past one roadblock after another manned by teenagers with assault rifles, I found an old man ready to drive me through the war zone for six long hours so I could fly away.

In its wounds, as in its kindness, Aden reminded me of so many of the other outposts of our global neighborhood where I seem to spend my time: Phnom Penh, Port-au-Prince, parts of L.A. Back in my mother's house in California upon my return, as

One of the most renowned nonfiction writers of our time, **PICO IYER** is the author of fifteen books, most recently *Aflame: Learning from Silence*.

I was wondering how we in our gated communities could ever begin to do justice to our neighbors, my mother raced into the room, uncommonly agitated.

"That place you just came back from," she cried, "the one we visited when you were a child. It's on all the TV screens. There are planes flying into the World Trade Center, and it's said they're masterminded by a man whose ancestral village is in Yemen. We're being told it's a menace to our security."

People in Yemen like to say that their current capital, Aden, is as old as human history itself. It's believed that Cain and Abel are buried somewhere in the city. Photo by Mohammed Mahdi.

Suddenly everyone around me began talking about the long-forgotten country, pronouncing curses on it, claiming our first responsibility was to attack. It was all the fear, confusion, and hatred—which the Buddha had warned us about—that belonged not to real life but to our own turbulent heads and hearts.

I, simply by virtue of bungling through the country as a traveler just the month before, saw in my mind's eye something very different. I saw the old man who had risked his life to drive me through treacherous roadblocks. I saw the friendly stranger walking slowly among the graves of almost everyone he cared for. I saw the veiled women in a back alleyway, tapping away on

borrowed keyboards to try to track down loved ones—and new futures, perhaps—in Manhattan.

The world is always larger—more human—than our ideas of it. Pulling out the arrow of suffering the Buddha talked about is of much more help than speculation about where the arrow came from. And projections never throw off as much light as even the most bewildering meetings in the flesh.

The Ultimate Gift

MUSHIM PATRICIA IKEDA's parents gave her baby sister to an aunt living an ocean away. This changed the way she thinks about generosity.

And which are the three factors of the donor? There is the case where the donor, before giving, is glad; while giving, his/her mind is bright and clear; and after giving is gratified. These are the three factors of the donor.
—The Dana Sutta, translated by Thanissaro Bhikkhu

I REMEMBER BARREN TREES, the gray winter sky pressing down like a sheet of dull metal, and a snowy parking lot next to low rectangles of brick buildings. This was the hospital in Ohio where my mother almost died from a burst appendix when she was seven months pregnant. I was only eight or so. My father would drive my younger brother, sister, and me to the hospital, parking the car where we could see the window of our mother's room, and he would leave us. Children weren't allowed inside the hospital.

This did not seem unusual. We wore hats and coats and mittens. We were okay. After a few minutes, our mother would wave to us from her window, and awhile later our father would return and drive us home. He'd have a handful of a few different kinds of Smucker's jams in small, white plastic cups that our mother

MUSHIM PATRICIA IKEDA is a writer and social activist and a Buddhist teacher at East Bay Meditation Center in Oakland, California.

saved for us from her hospital breakfast tray. They felt like jeweled talismans from the world we weren't allowed to enter, proof of our mother's love.

My parents didn't talk very much about this time. They must have told us that the mysterious and tiny baby, named Mary Beth by our mother, was not ours to keep. After we had repeated the parking lot routine for weeks, our mother came home to the trailer in which we lived, and her older sister, Aunt Mildred, flew in from Hawaii. When our aunt returned to Hawaii, she took the baby with her.

Mushim Ikeda and her sister-cousin, Rev. Mary Beth Jiko Nakade, raised their children in similar, loving ways. Photo courtesy of the author.

All of this made sense to my eight-year-old self because there were, after all, three of us children sleeping in the narrow back room of the trailer and two adults in the front bedroom. There wasn't really room for another child. Our aunty and uncle had no children of their own, and they lived in a house.

It was only very late in his life, shortly before he died, that my father spoke to me about his memory of that time. I was his first child, and part of my role was that of confidante.

"Leaving you kids in the car, I'd go inside the hospital to visit Mom, then I'd look at Mary Beth in the incubator," my father said. "She was so little, with long arms and legs like a spider. Her wrist was the width of a pencil. I'd look at her, but I never touched her. I knew if I did, I'd want to keep her."

What do we keep, and what do we give away? My aunt, my little sister's adoptive mother, decided to keep the name my mother had chosen for her.

"She was born near Christmas, so I named her Mary for Jesus's mother and Beth for Bethlehem," my mother once explained.

"Mom, none of us is Christian," I said.

She laughed.

My parents' generous gift of a child who grew up thousands of miles away on a tropical island never felt strange or strained. My aunt regularly sent us baby photos, then little kid photos, then bigger kid photos of her daughter, and while she definitely looked like us, her life was separate from ours. Hers was a different culture, a different way of speaking, a different climate.

My sister-cousin, Rev. Mary Beth Jiko Nakade, grew up to be a Soto Zen priest. She and I occasionally joke that when we give dharma talks on *dana*, the foundational Buddhist practice of generous and selfless giving, we think about how our parents set an extremely high bar.

Both of us raised our own children in very similar ways, breastfeeding and sleeping with them until they were ready to leave the family bed. As adults and Buddhist teachers, we have forged a bond of mutual admiration as well as the affinity of Zen meditation and practice, and our children know they are first cousins. My cousin, who is my youngest sister, is in her kindness and good-humored patience a dharma role model for me.

> *And which are the three factors of the recipients? There is the case where the recipients are free of passion or are practicing for the subduing of passion; free of aversion or practicing for the subduing of aversion; and free of delusion or practicing for the subduing of delusion. These are the three factors of the recipients.*
> —The Dana Sutta

In Buddhist countries in Asia, laypeople learn never to go to the temple empty-handed. However, things are different here. I teach at East Bay Meditation Center in Oakland. Because we're centered in diversity, inclusion, and social justice practices, we

operate on a gift economics, with no set fees. We've gotten comfortable with "giving the dana talk" and asking people to give generously. However, very few of our teachers can live solely on dana. In a capitalist culture, where people are conditioned to shop for products on sale at the lowest price, or no price, this has often felt like swimming upstream, occasionally leaping dams. Many of the communities we serve are low-income ones.

"I sometimes fantasize about saying, 'Hey, if you find yourself wondering how much to give, consider this: my parents gave their fourth baby to my aunt and uncle in Hawaii,'" I've joked to Mary Beth. "But of course, I'd never actually say it."

I'm nearing seventy now, and I wonder how they did it. My parents, who died in the nineties, were Japanese Americans who in some ways seemed so unremarkable. Yet they were capable of a generosity that was perfect and quiet and completely inconceivable to me. Although I'm a parent, and my son and I have lived together in Oakland for so many years, through a pandemic and anti-Asian violence, as well as thousands of the daily interactions that together mean "you are the one I love," my own parents' stories remain unknown to me.

What did my mother think and feel in the hospital when she carefully stacked the little plastic cups of grape and strawberry jam? What was in my father's heart when he marveled at the baby in the incubator, his hands by his sides?

It's not easy to take the measure of the merit of a donation thus endowed with six factors as "just this much a bonanza of merit, a bonanza of what is skillful—a nutriment of bliss, heavenly, resulting in bliss, leading to heaven—that leads to what is desirable, pleasing, charming, beneficial, pleasant." It is simply reckoned as a great mass of merit, incalculable, immeasurable.
—The Dana Sutta

Have You Got the Time?

A Buddhist hospital chaplain and professional watchmaker, **SHERRI POSEY** reflects on how time's fleeting nature connects everyone.

REV. JYAKUEN SHERRI-LYNN POSEY is a watchmaker, interfaith minister, and Buddhist chaplain in the Soto Zen tradition.

FOR TWENTY-SIX YEARS, I've been a watchmaker in the luxury timepiece field. Every morning I sit at my bench with my tools laid out and a watch movement ready to be disassembled, cleaned, lubricated, regulated, and reassembled. Lowering the magnifying loupe to my left eye, I select one of my many pairs of tweezers or appropriate-sized screwdrivers and begin to work. I assess how damaged or worn the parts are. Perhaps it's just the tiniest piece of lint caught between the teeth of a wheel, stopping the whole mechanism. Sometimes I have to replace the entire movement because it's gotten wet and is now an immovable ball of rust. Other times the job requires putting in a round calendar disk and setting the hands in the center. I look, I listen, I diagnose, and hopefully I fix. Then I move on to the next timepiece.

I have also been a Buddhist hospital chaplain for twelve years. I go to a patient's hospital room. Before entering, I check the wall next to the door for any special instructions. Then I sanitize my hands, knock on the doorframe, and enter unhurriedly and with consideration for the patient, the roommate, and the space the patient is in. I scan the room, looking at the whiteboard announcing the patient's name, their doctor, and their evening nurse. I glance at the bedside table with, perhaps, a half-eaten meal, get-well cards, and a cell phone. Family photos on the wall in front of the bed mean the patient has been in the hospital for a while. A small dreamcatcher hanging from a machine that monitors vitals or a laminated prayer card taped to a bedside rail near the head symbolizes hope. I show my badge, introduce myself, and ask if they're up for a visit.

"What's happening for you today?" I ask.

I listen. Maybe they talk about a devastating diagnosis, irritation with staff, disappointment with being back in the hospital yet again, spiritual anxiety, or loneliness. Maybe none of their family or friends want to talk with them about their impending

death—no one's comfortable with that conversation—but they think the chaplain might be. I remain still, attentive. Is meditation wanted or prayer required? Or, is silence and presence desired? I look, I listen, and I don't try to fix. Then I go on to the next patient or staff member.

PHOTO BY ISTOCK.COM / RUDENKOI

A few years ago, I realized that my two professions had run into each other. Or perhaps they'd always matched up, and I hadn't noticed. Both jobs measure a "passing"—of time or of a life.

When people find out that I'm a watchmaker, they want to talk about time. People wonder where their lives have gone. Did they spend too much time at work and not enough with family and friends? How much time did they give to themselves? Often, they talk about regrets and that there isn't enough time to accomplish anything now because… time is running out *very quickly*.

I've always relied on my Buddhist practice for my life and work. While it's great if you meditate every day and "feel Zen" when times are good, it's when things have collapsed to absolute shit that keeping up with your sitting practice really means something.

A teacher once posed a question in a spiritual-path class that I attended: "What do you want from your practice?" It was a simple enough question, and it made me think of my mother.

My mom is an evangelical Christian. She *relies* on her Christian faith. She's consistent in good times and bad. I instantly said, "I want what my mother has."

I didn't want to be the Buddhist version of a "Black church lady," but I did want to *rely* on my Zen Buddhist practice, and I have. As a Black woman during these very racially tense times, I've relied on and engaged my practice much more these past few years. It helps me take care of myself and be there for others, especially the POC community.

The more I engage my practice the more I think about the connections between my watchmaking job and being a Buddhist chaplain. Death is not convenient. People often die wearing their watches. So, I've handled watches sent in by grieving individuals and families that—through their damage—tell me when (the exact time the watch stopped) and how (from the impact damage and blood) someone died. People never feel they have enough time. They speak about how the passing of time is so fast it's as if their clock's hands are spinning round and round. I hear this not just at the hospital, but also at the watch company.

Yet, it's time that connects all of us, casting its net over everything. I'm not separate from any of my patients or watch clients, and they're not separate from me. Acknowledging my own times of suffering allows me to acknowledge the suffering (and the joy!) of others. I remember my own suffering when my wife was rushed to the hospital and how in that dark moment, as I was feeling lost, a chaplain came to me.

I still have much to learn and experience. I continue to learn—again and again—that moment to moment, second to second, right here and right now, we are together in suffering and joy.

How to Draw a Dragon

TRACY FRANZ learns from her young son that mistakes and bad starts don't matter. If we engage wholeheartedly, we'll always capture the dragon.

I DON'T KNOW WHEN my ten-year-old son's obsession with dragons began, or why. What I do know is that I will encounter those fierce and powerful beasts at some point every day—be it an in-progress drawing tucked between the pages of a book, or an epic battle written out in harrowing detail along the lines of semi-mangled notebook paper, or an intricate Lego creation winging its way across the house, body held aloft by my son's small, steady hands.

Each time I discover another one of these creations, I'm reminded that dragons can have profound significance. While living in Japan, I learned that dragons symbolize clarity, truth, and enlightenment, and that gives me pause every time my son's favorite mythical creature appears. It's like a bell ringing in a quiet room—it brings me to the present moment. It makes me pay attention.

A couple of weeks ago, when I went to pick up my son from his after-school program, I discovered him leading a group of his peers in an impromptu art lesson. I stood in the doorway and watched as one of the program leaders helped him tape a big piece of paper to the wall next to a picture of a winged dragon that he'd drawn at home the day before. Eight or nine children sat at desks around him, paper and crayons in hand, all raptly engaged.

"Start with the head," he said, and he sketched out the shape of a huge dragon head in black marker. He then took them through each feature of that face, filling in the details—an elongated snout, fierce eyes and flared nostrils, a burst of flames extending from its wide-open, fanged mouth.

The kids were having a great time, but I could see that he had a problem. He had used up his canvas by filling it with just one part of the beast. There was nowhere else to go.

My first instinct was to jump in and rescue him, to get him to do it right from the beginning—and I almost did. "Look,

TRACY FRANZ is the author of *My Year of Dirt and Water: Journal of a Zen Monk's Wife in Japan*.

you start over with another piece of paper," I wanted to tell him. "You sketch out the key shapes—notice the relationships between them and also the space you've got available on the page, and then fill in the details afterward. That way you won't go outside the boundaries of the paper." I'd taken enough basic-level art classes to know what you're supposed to do. I knew the procedure. I knew how to do it *right*.

A Dragon, by Cormac Franz.

I took a deep breath, and I didn't say anything. I told myself that this is *his* moment, not mine. The truth is, he's getting older, and I need to step back more and let him figure things out by himself. I need to let him make mistakes and solve his own problems.

For him, though, there was no big problem to solve. He looked at his drawings for a minute—the small complete sketch and the large partial one. Then he turned to one of the program leaders, asked for more paper and tape, and began to expand the canvas. He used another sheet of paper for the body and forelegs, and put ample wings, back legs, and a long, spikey tail on three more.

The overall effect was a kind of patchwork dragon extending out at unexpected angles. It became a dragon without boundaries, a dragon that could not be contained within a single canvas. It was fierce, powerful, imperfect, beautiful.

The kids around him followed suit with smaller pieces of paper and tape. No one saw a mistake—it was just a way to draw a dragon.

When my son's time was up, he told everyone, "You can keep adding stuff—people or trees or buildings or whatever. Just tape on more paper. It can go on forever."

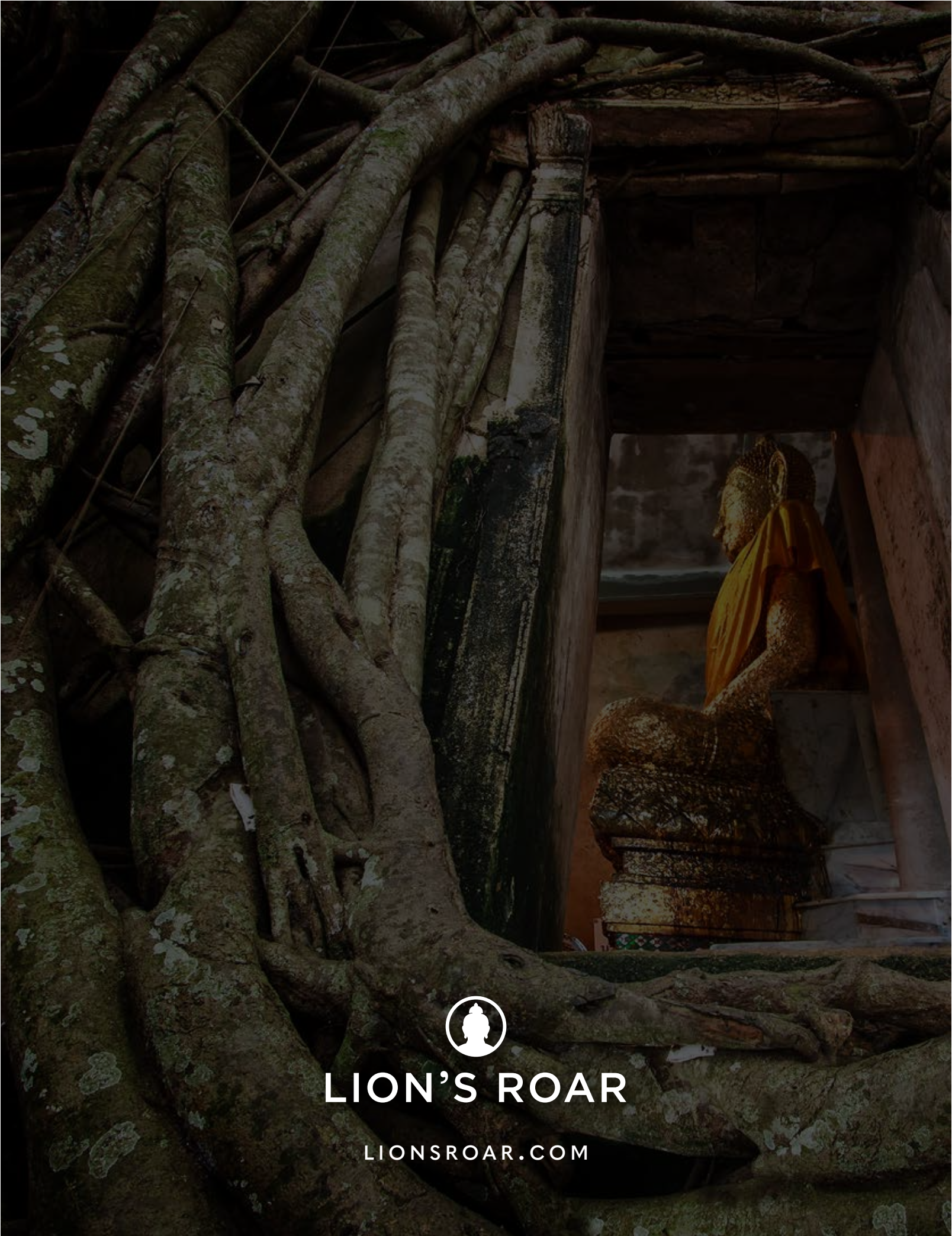
When he waved to his friends and met me at the door with a proud grin, I heard it—that little bell that goes off in my mind sometimes. *Oh, a dragon*. Hadn't I noticed? Wasn't I paying attention? All along, those fierce eyes remained *right there*, staring me in the face.

I'm a parent and a writer and a teacher and a Zen practitioner. Maybe because of all that, I'm a big believer in practice: you go through a process, you follow the steps. You show up and do it again and again. Making mistakes and failing is part of this—an essential part. I say this stuff all the time, wearing my various hats. I say it to others and to myself, over and over again.

But it's easy to forget that alongside all of this is seeing a thing through to the end, to encountering each instance of practice as the *real thing*, not "just practice." Because whatever you're doing, that is the real thing. That means engaging wholeheartedly, even if it's not quite going as planned. My son found a way to do that.

Over the years, I've seen him give up on various endeavors—something he's drawing or writing, a science project or a puzzle, his math homework. I've done the same thing. Many, many times. Maybe the task is too hard, or I'm not very good at whatever it is I'm trying to do, and I just walk away. We talk about this sometimes. We both struggle with it.

What happens, though, when you embrace your mistake? When you see something through to the end, even if you started out wrong from the very beginning? My son reminded me: one way or another, you capture the dragon. You do it every time.



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