

Volume 8, Issue 4

July/ August, 2005

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Up Against the Great Matter, Part One

Joan Sutherland

This past year or two many of us have pressed right up against the Great Matter in a very real way, through illness, accident, and the death of loved ones. So I thought I might talk a bit, beginning with illness, about dealing with these intimate reminders of our impermanence.

For half my life now, I've been dealing with the effects of having been exposed to a big dose of an organophosphate. That means I've done a lot of meditating with, through, on, and in spite of not feeling well, and a lot of thinking about the relationships between practice and disability. When someone asked me lately if I'd write about that, I also realized that I hadn't turned my attention in that direction for awhile, basically because it doesn't anymore seem like a direction to turn towards—it's become just a part of life, like gravity or the fact that I'm a woman (on most days, anyway). So I thought it might be interesting to look at that movement from Really Serious Emergency through Ongoing Difficult Condition to Pretty Much Just Another Aspect of Life. I'll begin with a time when I was struggling to come to terms with being chronically ill and something shifted as profound as any kensho. Here's what I wrote about fifteen years ago:

Beginner's Heart

i.

For months I've been lying here, in an old pine bed under a blue comforter, in a house in Northern California at the end of the twentieth century. This interesting thing has happened. Forced by illness to give up, one by one and with a particular grief for each, the activities, qualities, and even the states of mind I had come to believe were essential to me—were, in fact, me—I lie here watching as, day by day, old habits of being slip out of the room. One tips her hat gently, a little wistfully, as she turns her back on me; another, furious, sweeps a vase off the table before yanking the door closed behind her.

I get very still. When there is nothing left but to stare out the window, that's what I do. For weeks I look into the bare limbs of a mulberry tree. Finally buds form on the branches, and the tree begins to unfurl leaf after delicate leaf, hundreds of small hands semaphoring spring into the garden. Then, as the weather heats up, the whole bark of the mulberry begins to exhale little clouds of pollen, which drift away on the afternoon breeze.

Now, when I feel a seizure coming, I relax into my breath, not, as in meditation, to still my wandering mind, which has already been brought to an exquisitely one-pointed attention

Springs Mountain Sangha's
Monthly Newsletter
The dharma rag
Editor: Judith Steed
Published the third week of
each month, mostly.

Submissions of articles related
to Buddhism are encouraged
from all readers and may be
sent to the editor at:

P.O. Box 60904

Colorado Springs, CO 80960
or at dharmarag@smszen.org.
Submission deadline is the
second Friday of each month.

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by the wave rising in my body, but because that is, in all the world, the place I want to be when it hits.

The experience of illness, in this room, with this tree as my companion, brings me unexpectedly to the same place meditation used to. There's no bliss this time, but no longer any sorrow either—just okay, the work of the moment, and lately even a thin trail of joy to follow cautiously through the green and sunny day.

It's a whisper, a rustle, something seen out of the corner of my eye that would disappear if I looked at it directly. Shimmer on the path, a small place where the earth has opened and light leaks out, how do I let it take me where it's going?

Ah, wait, here it is, not going anywhere at all. Here I am, and you are, and between us is so much life, each atom buzzing with it, rivers of micro-organisms flowing on our breath, the spirits who have passed through this place, leaving wakes of energy behind. And there is death, too—radioactive decay, old cells molting from our skin, choices that mean the end of other possibilities.

Here, now, the universe roars and skitters, planets die and a little patch of clover, sown only yesterday, emerges under the plum tree. This streaming wonder, this unstoppable power to burst and wither and burst once more, is right here in this room, right here in this bed of aching joints and fever.

This is what it means to be born: to fall headfirst into a world that will crack your heart open, so that the distant stars might fill it.

ii.

This illness is what's true, but not more than that. It's not a cross to bear, or a gift, or anything out of the ordinary: it blooms, fades, and buds again as part of the daily miraculous condition of being alive.

No longer the good patient, I rebel against having to succeed at disability, and my anger burns me through to an open, uncluttered place where my attention turns a few degrees to the left—to the full, voluptuous roses and the windy light in the mulberry tree.

And suddenly, like grass after wildfire, equanimity arrives. Months of feeling disconnected, constricted, terrified of dying in this state of gracelessness, and all at once I am here again, really here. Things can move through me, I am permeable, and tangible to myself.

Grace fills me, it falls from some unanticipated cloud, and I recognize, like the newly vivid edges of a familiar landscape after rain, my own beginner's heart.

iii.

I've been given the opportunity of a lifetime to be devastated, and I'm making the most of it. All my life I've risen to the challenge: Hard work, no problem. Loss, no problem. Violence, no problem. Hey, I'm a *meditator*. Near-fatal illness, the beginnings of a problem.

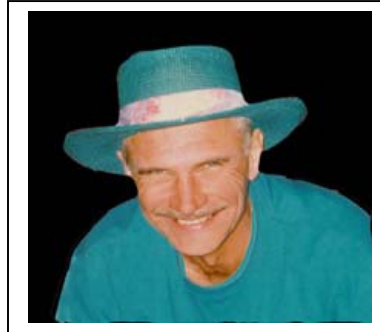
It got to where I couldn't fight anymore, where nothing I knew or believed made the slightest bit of difference. It felt like slow-motion *chod*, being cut into pieces and offered up to feed all beings, whether I wanted to be or not.

But I am flooded with gratitude for the fierce deity who wouldn't give up on me, who kept the pressure on, overwhelming the last rugged outposts of my resistance. How fiercely the ego fights for its life, and how fiercely life fights back!

This is the ripening of nonpractice. There is a wild dance inside me, celebrating my great loss.

In Celebration of a Life Lived

Richie Dominique died on July 3. He was the musician who wrote all the music for the liturgy we use, and he was as fine a person as I've ever known. He played a gig with his band, Gator Beat, on Saturday night, that everyone says really smoked. He got home about 3:00 am, went to bed, and died peacefully in his sleep.



Richie was the lanky Cajun musician in black jeans and Mardi Gras beads who studied philosophy at the Sorbonne. He was outrageous and funny and outrageously funny, and he could put you on the ground by singing "Summertime". He loved his family. He loved his family. He had a bone to pick with Shakyamuni over the way he abandoned his own wife and child, and he worried that question over and over.

There is an empty space in the air here where Richie was. It's like he just walked out of the room in the middle of the night, when no one was looking. People's grief is deep, and so is their gratitude. It's the first two things everyone says, how damn much we're going to miss him, and how lucky we feel to have known him.

As for his own self, he would be saying now: Y'all don't know how much time you have, so love each other hard, and forgive what needs forgiving. And don't ever pass up a chance to dance.

With a sad, sad heart, Joan (7.2005)

Interview

Interview with Julia Archer on June 7, 2005
by Nard Claar. *Julia Archer will be teaching a Basic Course in Nonviolent Communication with Springs Mountain Sangha on July 9 and 10, 2005.*

Nonviolent Communication, also called Compassionate Communication, is a method to help us see self and others as creative, generous people with plenty of capacity to overcome differences and find solutions that work for everyone involved. Nonviolent Communication or NVC offers hope and

possibilities in all kinds of human interactions, even the really tough ones. It is a simple yet very effective way to use language that promotes mutual understanding, creativity, and problem solving.

For perspective, lets start with one of Julia's favorite images, called *Arrows into Flowers* from Thich Nhat Han's book *Creating True Peace*:

Arrows into Flowers

The night before his enlightenment, the Buddha was attacked by Mara, the tempter, the Evil One. Mara and his army of demons shot thousands of arrows at the Buddha, but as the arrows neared him, they turned into flowers and fell harmless at his feet.

Julia likes to reflect on the mysterious alchemical process of this story. Exactly how did those nasty arrows turn into sweet smelling flowers? It's a wonderful story, but how can we make it real? There are many philosophies that talk about this kind of miraculous event, but don't really explain how to actually make it happen. Philosophy is easy to talk about but hard to practice! The power of a philosophy is in the *doing*, having the ability to utilize the philosophy in our daily lives and integrate the process as part of ourselves.

Julia mentioned that one of the biggest stumbling blocks to practicing philosophies of compassion is the internalized programming we have that uses blame and judgment when we interact with others. This automatic process is a part of our socialization.

NVC offers a very specific method that enables us to see our own internalized programming and replace it with a way of relating that more accurately reflects our core values. She emphasized that there is a specific method to follow but that NVC is really a consciousness, a way of relating to others through feelings and needs rather than blame or judgment. The 4 step process helps us to access our natural generosity to create positive, life enhancing relationships. The use of NVC can bring about remarkable results, just like that story.

Julia discovered NVC about 5 years ago, during a time when she was experiencing great pain and inertia in a primary relationship. She sought this new knowledge to provide a more positive path. The results of using the philosophy and practicing the four steps within that relationship were remarkable to both Julia and the other person. At that point, she became deeply committed to NVC as a personal practice. As her belief in the process grew,

she became committed to sharing the information and then began teaching.

Julia is delighted to be sharing this method and philosophy with the Springs Mountain Sangha. She has seen that learning to perceive self and others in new ways can be challenging, and it is very helpful to have a community to learn together and support one another. She added that while NVC often focuses on solving communication problems, at its core its purpose is to recognize and celebrate the inherent good and desire for joy found in every human being.

Julia's enthusiasm for this way of relating is infectious. She has taught NVC at the Clouds In Water Zen Center in St. Paul MN and in a variety of other settings and groups.

To close, here is a poem that Julia said illustrates NVC for her which she wanted to share.

The Arabs used to say,
When a stranger appears at your door,
feed him for three days
before asking who he is, where he's from,
where he's headed.
That way, he'll have strength enough
to answer.
Or, by then you'll be such good friends
You don't care.

Let's go back to that.
Rice? Pine nuts?
Here, take the red brocade pillow.
My child will serve water
to your horse.

No, I was not busy when you came!
I was not preparing to be busy.
That's the armor everyone put on
at the end of the century
to pretend they had a purpose
in the world.

I refuse to be claimed.
Your plate is waiting.
We will snip fresh mint
into your tea.

Naomi Shihab Nye
From Prayers for a Thousand Years

VOICES

VIOXX

Rx: *one tablet by mouth one time daily*

Once again, four Am
 quiet is filled with hissing crickets
 traffic or leaves
 blown into the dark garden
 long before day arrives.
 The 4:10 out of Denver howls
 at each intersection.
 Coyotes yelp at the moon
 just now appearing from behind
 city-light-yellowed clouds.
 The rainspout drips steadily with
 last night's gift of dew
 the lub-dub, lub-dub
 from the beginning of my time.
 And into my empty bowl
 is dropped rice
 white rice
 the empty white of today's palate.
 This pure white is for me to cook
 to add ginger and soy sauce.
 Thus, am I not the Sistine Adam,
 given the touch of creativity each day?
 Thus, am I not commissioned
 to nourish and color this Life?
 This bowl may be a worn and old bowl,
 designed by its many cracks and dents.
 But into this bowl,
 already filled with rice, lands
 a single 20-milligram pearl.
 Do I live with the cracks and pains?
 Do they not color my day?
 Or, is this pill not like the white rice
 the alms given to my bowl
 freely by all that is?
 Is not this pain today's brush with which
 to color today's empty palate?
 Or do I take the pill
 hide the pain
 deny the reality of this old bowl
 ...and just go on?

Hal G.

In the last issue of the Dharma Rag, I submitted a poem. On its way to the editor, the wind picked it up and swirled it into the vastness. It met with the hair-blown sword and was sliced into two paper-thin layers. Casually reading through the *dharma rag*, one might conclude that there are two poems, but I assure you there is only one. There is a point to all these boisterous words (pardon me for them-I've been reading Hakuin lately and still have a bit of his taste in my mouth), so I'll set them aside and work my way toward it.

A while ago someone mentioned to me that he had visited a Zen monastery out east, and that every weekend around 80 people came to practice. While I found this impressive and was glad to hear of such a number of people encountering the dharma regularly, I found myself drawn more to the question of what happens during the other days of the week. I was told that about 10 people live and practice at the monastery full time. So what about everyone else? My hope is that they carry much of the practice into their everyday lives; my concern is that they are "weekend monks" who really get into it for a couple of days but live life-as-usual for the rest; and I am certain it is a mixture of these extremes, with a wide variety of practices across the spectrum.

There is a highly transient quality to our society, people always moving from one thing to the next, anything from fashion to diets to spirituality. And our lives are often divided, changing our personas to fit the situations we find ourselves in – the at-home persona, at-work persona, hanging-out-with-friends persona, etc. The above situation lends itself to the creation of the Monday-through-Friday persona and the weekend-monk persona, which in my mind can be a tremendous hindrance to fully embodying one's practice. I have much respect for monastic practice and am highly drawn to it myself, but over the past few years it became strikingly clear that the work we who are affiliated with PZI and Open Source are doing is essential and exactly what a society such as ours requires.

When I think of the traditional way of Zen, what comes to mind is sages dancing in the secluded mountains upon realizing their wisdom then finding a way to bring it to the world, or sometimes letting the world find its way to them. Our practice closes the gap somewhat, in that it is a way of finding wisdom in the world and bringing it to the world while being in the midst of the world. It is a way of integrating all facets of our lives into one solid, seamless practice. Still, it doesn't keep us from dividing our lives into many segments or keeping a variety of personas at hand. However, I do believe that with this particular form of practice, the barriers between the segments and personas dissolve more readily during the integration process. This brings me back to the thing that brought about this barrage of words.

The double-edged, two-faced poem is an expression of integration, of how the vastness and the mundane are constantly and endlessly interwoven, in each and every moment of our lives. Or, as Hakuin more succinctly puts it (in one of my favorite phrases), an expression of the formless form coming into form. Nevertheless, the point is that it is all here, right in front of us. Our actions and words are not metaphors for

something grander; they are not "it's-sort-of-like-this" statements and activities. They are all at once, every single step of the way, exactly and completely "it". I know we've all encountered words such as these before, but I figure we can never get enough and wanted to throw some more out there. In that spirit, I'll close with this: whatever path we are on, whatever situation we find ourselves in, let us embrace the interweaving, be interwoven, and fully realize our precious awakening.

Andrew

Looking for Love in all the Wrong Places

By Connie O'Murray © 2004

Looking towards the stars

The Seeker

Scans the heavens

For answers

To ancient questions

On happiness....

Not satisfied

He looks towards knowledge

So the Seeker

Asks the scholars

Thoughtful questions

About truth....

Still unsatisfied

And seeking all that is

The Seeker

Implores the sages

To answer questions

On inner peace....

While Happiness

And Truth

And Peace

And Love

Hide

And

Seek

The Seeker

In his heart.

New Zealand Beaches are Grey

(sunset, Greymouth, South Island, NZ, Feb 5, 2005) by Hal G.

This beach is

so empty

of footprints, cigarettes and cans, and polyethylene,
yet so full of grey and green and black pebbles who
come alive with each welling of frail fleeting foam.

On this beach

are cluttered waves of dried and tortured driftwood
shiny blue and white shells of old lives.

It is here

newness and emptiness are rediscovered
by tired eyes and swirled about
in currents of imagination re-awakened.

It is in

these waves where we become children,
comforted by the heartbeat of predictability,
and become adults, humbled in the undertow
of pure strength and unpredictability.

It is here,

sands drink repeatedly of the salty blue-green
not unlike the red in these veins.

At this beach,

we think we glimpse immortality,
or whatever we call it that clutters these eyes, but
at this beach we can only watch as
footprints are washed away, rocks ground to sand.

REVIEW

Spiritual Cinema Circle

Elizabeth and I recently joined a movie club called Spiritual Cinema Circle. It's been around for a year, but we only heard about it a few months ago. The object is to provide "heartful, soulful movies" that you would probably not get to see otherwise in a convenient DVD format. For a reasonable fee, you receive in the mail each month a new DVD with four films, typically two short films and two longer films. They represent a wide range of nationalities and cultural perspectives (we've seen films from Canada, Germany, Iceland, India and Australia, as well as the US). They are highly imaginative and professionally produced, though without a lot of special effects. The "spirituality" is subtle and not at all doctrinaire. One of the short films that we especially liked consisted almost exclusively of two people having a dinner conversation and finding an unexpected connection through the heart. Sometimes a documentary is included. For instance, the first DVD that we received contained a documentary on Tibetan yogis, and the most recent included a film about Ram Das entitled "Fierce Grace," depicting his life before and after his stroke. If you are interested, you can go to their website www.SpiritualCinemaCircle.com for more information.

Robert

Sangha Events & Weekly Calendar

<http://www.smszen.org/calendar.htm>

Events

Always check the events section of the website for the most current update of our planned happenings. Not only check for the time and location but also consider leaning in and helping out and even making event suggestions, planning and reviewing for this newsletter. These are your events too and the sangha needs all your support, engagement and feedback you can offer.

Change: due to summer activities at Shove Chapel, the Saturday morning sit time is changing to 6:00 to 8:00am.

In the Fullness of Time

an Introduction to Zen Meditation

with Sarah Bender, SMS meditation instructor

Saturday, July 16, 9:30 AM to 3:30 PM at the Woman's Club of Colorado College 20 W. Mesa Rd.

This day will offer a chance to stop awhile, an introduction to seated and walking meditation, time for discussion, a shared silent lunch, a talk about the practice of shared inquiry, time to relax or take a walk.

All are welcome. Cost is \$25 For more information, please contact Sarah Bender at sbender@corb.com or 594-0724

Non-Violent Communication: Workshop

with Julie Archer

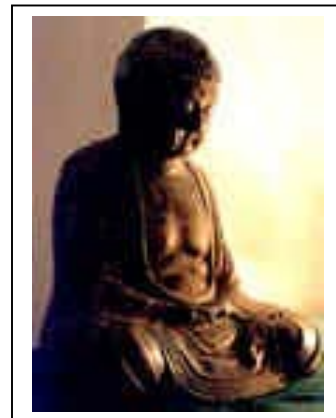
We are doing a workshop with Julia Archer on Marshall Rosenberg's system/practice of Nonviolent communication. This will take place at The Woman's Club, 10 to 6 Saturday and 10 to 5 Sunday, the 9th and 10th of July. It looks like we presently have 7 or 8 spaces open, and I want to encourage everyone to take advantage of this opportunity. If the fee is an obstacle please talk to Robert about some scholarship help.

We've put a limit of 20 participants on this due to space considerations, and that's first come, first served. The fee of \$150 is due July 1st, mailed to Robert King, P. O. Box 571, Green Mountain Falls, CO 80819. His phone is 719-684-0130. Those of you you've requested scholarship help or who will need some, please talk to Robert before the first about arrangements. Please get your payments in, or make arrangements ASAP to confirm your place.

Julia suggests that it would be helpful to skim Rosenberg's book *Nonviolent Communication, A Language of life*. This is available through Amazon, and the Sangha has 5 copies for sale or loan.

Weekly Sitting Schedule

- ❖ **Monday** evenings starting at 6:10 p.m. at Shove Chapel: 1010 North Nevada on the campus of Colorado College.
 - ✓ *First Monday* of the month: 30-minute sutra Service, brief walking meditation, two 25-minute periods of sitting
 - ✓ *Second Monday*: two 25-minute sitting periods, including walking meditation, followed by a social gathering
 - ✓ *Third Monday*: two 25-minute sitting periods, including walking meditation, followed by a talk or reading
 - ✓ *Fourth Monday*: One 25-minute sitting period and community member shares personal Zen Practice experience: "Way Seeking Mind." If you'd like/willing to take a turn, please call Sarah Bender
- ❖ **Wednesday Mornings** from 6:00 a.m. to 7:00 a.m. at Shove Chapel.
- ❖ **Saturday Mornings** from 6:00 a.m. to 8:00 a.m. (note change). also at Shove Chapel. After the sitting many of us usually walk to a nearby coffee shop for breakfast.
- ❖ **Sunday** we often have steering committee meetings or discussion groups or workshops.



July, 2005

Sun	Mon	Tues	Wed	Thurs	Fri	Sat
					1	2 6:00-8:00 am Zazen
3	4 6:15 pm Community Night	5	6 6:00-7:00 am Zazen	7	8	9 6:00-8:00 am Zazen NV Workshop
10 NV Workshop	11 6:15 pm Talk Night	12	13 6:00-7:00 am Zazen	14	15	16 6:00-8:00 am Zazen 9:30-3:30 Intro to Zen
17 Steering Committee Mtg	18 6:15 pm Zazen Zen Practice	19	20 6:00-7:00 am Zazen	21	22	23 6:00-8:00 am Zazen
24/31	25 6:15 pm Zazen	26	27	28	29	30

August, 2005

Sun	Mon	Tues	Wed	Thurs	Fri	Sat
	1 6:15 pm Sutra Service	2	3 6:00-7:00 am Zazen	4	5	6 6:00-8:00 am Zazen
7	8 6:15 pm Community Night	9	10 6:00-7:00 am Zazen	11	12	13 6:00-8:00 am Zazen
14	15 6:15 pm Talk Night	16	17 6:00-7:00 am Zazen	18	19	20 6:00-8:00 am Zazen,
21	22 6:15 pm Zazen Zen Practice	23	24 6:00-7:00 am Zazen	25	26	27 6:00-8:00 am Zazen;
28	29 6:15 pm Zazen Zen Practice	30	31 6:00-7:00 am Zazen			

Dana for Springs Mountain Sangha

Springs Mountain Sangha engages in three weekly sittings, study groups, retreats, residencies for our holding teachers, the *dharma rag*, website, and other communication media. Contributions from members and friends are the Sangha's sole financial resource. Let's share the dharma assets!

Name: _____

Address: _____

City: _____ State: _____ Zip: _____

Phone: (h) _____ (other) _____

Email: _____ (required for e-distribution)

Contribution Amount Enclosed: \$ _____

Checks should be made out to Robert King, Treasurer.

Springs Mountain Sangha is a member of the Open Source Project, in both the Soto & Rinzai traditions.

To learn more, visit our website, <http://www.smszen.org/> or contact us at Dharmarag@smszen.org or Redsteed@ispwest.com (editor). Please check if you prefer to receive the newsletter by email, saving resources & expenses.

The dharma rag

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