



Passing It On:
Lay Practitioners Share Dharma Wisdom
2014

A publication of
Insight Meditation Center
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In Gratitude

- to Gil Fronsdal for his steady and inspiring leadership
- to Jim Bronson for creating this space where lay practitioners can share dharma wisdom
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- to lay practitioners everywhere applying the teachings of 2500 years in their lives and to all of our contributors who communicate artfully about their practice.

- *Passing It On*, 2010 – Edited by Jim Bronson
- *Passing It On*, 2011 – Edited by Dave Barnett
- *Passing It On*, 2012 – Edited by Judy Long
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Gratitude

Passing It On 2014

<i>Bauhaus Quilt</i> , Sushma Patel-Bould	Cover
<i>After Wildfire</i> , Charles Atkinson	Page 1
<i>What I Must Do</i> , Bianca Powell	Page 2
<i>Puget Sound</i> , Arthur Cohen	Page 3
<i>Cutting through Illusion</i> , Lorraine Capparel	Page 4
<i>Scrubbing the Kitchen Floor</i> , Bill Kostura	Page 5
<i>from Spare Verses</i> , Robert Bohanan	Page 7
<i>Nyack: Hudson River at In Dawn</i> , Jim Ramsay	Page 8
<i>Love on the Edge of Life</i> , Rebecca Dixon	Page 9
<i>Sandstone Fog</i> , Richard Sievers	Page 14
<i>Haiku</i> , Mary Helen Fein, Chales Atkinson, Vinit Allen, Nancy Flowers, Jean Adler, Rick Maddock,	Page 15
<i>Dharma Jewel</i> , Lorraine Capperell	Page 16
<i>The Buddha and the Muse</i> , Ashvin Iyengar	Page 17
<i>Passing Bell for Kobun Chino, Sensei</i> , Charles Atkinson	Page 18
<i>Point Reyes Storm</i> , Arthur Cohen	Page 19
<i>The Buddha and the Internet</i> , Robert D. Rossel	Page 21
<i>Fat Boy Tries to Jump over Bar</i> , Jim Bronson	Page 23
<i>Impressions: It's Like This</i> , Richard Sievers	Page 24
<i>The Making of Sea Coast</i> , Jim Bronson	Page 26
<i>Mountain on the Hudson</i> , Jim Ramsay	Page 27

<i>Shadowy Presence</i> , Judy Taylor	Page 38
<i>Milestones in the Moonlight</i> , Jim Bronson	Page 29
<i>One Seed</i> , Carla Brooke	Page 30
<i>Untitled</i> , Gerard Sarnat	Page 30
<i>Spring Vine</i> , Kim Allen	Page 31
<i>The Leaf</i> , Lori Wong	Page 31
<i>Five Congruities between Buddhist Meditation Practice and Art</i> , Jim Ramsay	Page 32
<i>Sangha Meditation, Documented</i> , Fran Cesarone	Page 34
<i>Aspiration</i> , Lorraine Capparell	Page 36
<i>The Spigot People</i> , Sydney Reuben	Page 37
<i>Untitled</i> , Jim Ramsay	Page 39
<i>Nyack: Passing Rainstorm</i> , Jim Ramsay	Page 40
<i>The Hudson River in Winter</i> , Jim Ramsay	Page 41
<i>Surrender</i> , Fran Cesarone	Page 42
<i>'Til the Bittersweet End</i> , Judy Taylor	Page 44
<i>Ruby Beach</i> , By Arthur Cohen	Page 46
<i>Ten Thousand Candles</i> , Charles Atkinson	Page 47
Contributors	Page 48
About <i>Passing It On</i>	Page 53
Index	Page 55



Passing It On

Lay Practitioners Share Dharma Wisdom

Passing It On: Background

The growth of Western Buddhist practice has come largely through the initiative of teachers who often carry credentials based on having been a monastic and received "dharma transmission" from venerable sages. In recent years, many sanghas have developed an additional leadership resource based on long-term experienced lay practitioners whose practices have matured and strengthened through everyday kinds of experiences, for example having families, making a living, managing organizations, pursuing professional careers, in a variety of ways developing their gifts and talents and sharing them with their communities. These practitioners may be invited to take the dharma seat from time to time, not because of their credentials, but because of the wisdom they have to pass on.

The Insight Meditation Center in Redwood City, CA (IMC), has many such mature Lay Practitioners. Some participate and volunteer regularly at the center while others, though attending irregularly, are closely connected to our practice. Some of the lay practitioners have started small sitting groups of their own. Others have actively provided services to the IMC community, including talks, classes, chaplaincy services, conducting weddings, memorials, serving on the board, attending interfaith meetings, offering mindfulness teachings for local businesses, school, and jails, and other settings.

To bring together the practice insights and dharma teachings of seasoned lay practitioners, we launched this project in 2009 and are continuing it in 2013 to publish art and writings about the many facets of Dharma practice in the many dimensions of lay life.

"As he was sitting there, Venerable Ananda said to the Blessed One, 'This is half of the holy life, lord: admirable friendship, admirable companionship, admirable camaraderie.'

'Don't say that, Ananda. Don't say that. Admirable friendship, admirable companionship, admirable camaraderie is actually the whole of the holy life.'"

Insight Meditation Center's Mission

The Insight Meditation Center is dedicated to the study and practice of Buddhist ideals - mindfulness, ethics, compassion, loving-kindness, and liberation. At the heart of all IMC activities is the practice of Insight Meditation, sometimes called mindfulness or Vipassana meditation. Based on a 2500-year-old Buddhist teaching, this practice helps us to see more deeply and clearly into our lives. With insight, we develop ways of living more peacefully, compassionately, and wisely.

Daily practice forms the foundation of Insight Meditation practice: daily meditation practice, and the practice of mindfulness and compassion as we go about our daily lives. Buddhist tradition also emphasizes the value of intensive meditation retreats. IMC's mission is to stay firmly rooted in the practices of meditation and retreats. From this foundation in meditation and mindfulness, we actively seek to find ways to support practitioners in integrating and applying the spiritual life in all areas of life.

Insight Meditation Center's Vision

Our vision for the Insight Meditation Center is to be a community-based meditation center where the practices and teachings of Insight Meditation are made available to those living urban lifestyles. IMC has six intertwining functions:

1. To provide a simple and quiet environment where the contemplative life can be developed and protected amidst the complexities of city living.
2. To offer teachings and practice opportunities that complement Insight Meditation in supporting a balanced spiritual life from a Buddhist perspective.
3. To be a place where people can come together to cultivate and express their practice in and through their family, social, and community lives.
4. To bring in a variety of visiting Buddhist teachers who offer a wide range of Buddhist practices and viewpoints to our IMC community and the interested public.
5. To establish an urban retreat center offering a variety of residential retreat programs.
6. To offer all activities, including residential retreats, free of charge.

After Wildfire
New Camaldoli Hermitage, Big Sur

By Charles Atkinson

The floor of hell could look like this: chalky
orange clay, exploded rock, black stumps.
Shredded pine roots from a 'dozer's firebreak.
Thousands of silent acres charred, inert.

Not a leaf on the hillside—till you kneel
in dirt: bindweed tendril, bracken nubs,
poison oak's buds bronze in the ash. Why are
the noxious always most eager, first to return?

Beside the chapel, wren so quick to change
direction on a twig, faster than the eye:
now east—bald ridge—now west—the sheer Pacific—
intent on aphids from a potted rose.

Rain slides down an iron chain from eave
to ground, a rusty rippled sleeve. Each link
a wavering lens that frames the bell tower—
tiny silver towers stacked to the gutter.

Matins for the Mystery—blaze, vine,
bug, bird. They eddy out the chapel,
tufts of milkweed floss shaken loose
by wind, seeds above bare ground.

What I Must Do

By Bianca Powell

This is how it is. Sometimes there are options and sometimes there aren't. With this sickness, I cannot deny it, escape from it, or medicate it. It's too complex and subtle for any of those strategies to work. So, there is no other choice. What I must do is meet it.

Illness this consuming is a demanding guest. Relentless! It requires utter presence, tolerates no distraction, and responds only to deepest truth. In these matters it is merciless.

To be with this dis-ease I must become bigger than it is, must expand to enormous dimensions, give it room to roam. And I must listen to it attentively, hear – and absolutely heed – what it has to say, or it will destroy me.

So, I must slow for this meeting. Relax my body. Quiet my mind. Come to a complete stop. I must enter the silence of my soul where pain comes to me without disguise and I can meet it without defense. That is the only way to truly be with it; the only way I can look at it. Then, I behold its awe-full face unflinchingly, dare reach out to tenderly touch and take it into my heart. Then we become one and I am truly whole. When I am whole, the pain is still present, but there is no suffering, no fear or anger, no self pity or aversion. When I am whole, there is only reverence and all abiding Love.

I'm still learning.



Puget Sound

By Arthur Cohen



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Cutting through Illusion

Ⓟ Capparell

Cutting through Illusion

By Lorraine Capparell

Scrubbing the Kitchen Floor

By Bill Kostura

Perhaps something like this has happened to you at some point in your life.

You are standing at the kitchen counter preparing a complex meal. Many ingredients are to be used, many steps are involved, the guests will arrive sooner than you would really like for them to, and it is all a bit stressful. Thinking ahead to the guests' arrival, your attention wanders for a critical moment, and you drop a big, moist glob of food on the floor. It splatters, and you know you can't ignore it; you have to pay attention to this event and clean the mess up now. If you wait until later, you'll track slimy bits of food around the kitchen and the problem will just become worse; the guests will notice.

So, you get down on your hands and knees and clean up the glob and the splatters. While you're down there you see a remarkable array of smaller bits of food that had fallen to the floor over past months, or years. Bread crumbs, rice, kernels of corn, lentils, ends of zucchinis, bits of onion skin, and other items that have become unrecognizable. There are dozens of these bits of food, most of them against corners, but some right in the middle of the floor. They've been there all along, occasionally getting stepped on and ground in. When they fell, you had not noticed, or if you had, you thought they weren't important, and could be ignored. Now that you are looking closely, however, you can see them in the aggregate, and they look pretty disgusting.

You decide that preparing the meal can wait a minute or two longer. Cleaning up the bits of food seems more important. You sweep up the bigger pieces, and then you drop to your knees to run your hand along the floor, especially next to the corners, and you notice smaller bits of debris you hadn't seen before. These are so small that you usually can't tell what kinds of food they once were, but there are hundreds of them. Perhaps because there are so many, these now bother you more than the larger bits of food did. So you clean these up, too. This takes longer, because they are so small and there are so many of them. It takes a lot of attention and repeated sweeps of the whisk broom or hand to get them.

You are looking at the floor more closely now. With the grosser and finer bits of food gone, you can now see spots that you hadn't noticed before. They must be bits of moist food that had been ground into the floor over the months or years and that then dried. You wonder how long they have been there – a long time, certainly. It's funny, in a way: until now they have been invisible to you, but now that you are low to the floor, paying close attention, you can see them easily. Revulsion washes over you. You get out the green scrubbie and clean these spots up. You really care about this task, now. You put some elbow grease into the job, and scrub with real effort.

This takes longer than you thought it would. After you clean up the larger spots, you start to see slightly smaller ones. After you clean these, you begin to see smaller and fainter ones still. You realize that you have been incapable of seeing small spots on the floor while larger ones are still there.

You are cleaning up the smallest spots now. To your surprise, every once in a while you come across another large spot, or a bit of solid food. You were certain you had gotten rid of all of the grosser items some time ago, but somehow you had missed a few. It is a little disconcerting. You lose faith in your powers of observation and become discouraged, although you shouldn't. The floor is actually getting cleaner.

Now you have cleaned up the big glob (the original crisis event), the bigger and smaller bits of food, the larger and darker spots, and the smaller and fainter spots. You are still kneeling on the floor, and you are getting a very close look at it. The places where you had scrubbed with strong effort have become pretty clean, and so now you can see that the surrounding floor areas, where there had not been any noticeable spots, are nevertheless somewhat grimy. There are no spots here, just a thin, generalized grime. You realize grime pervades the entire floor. Maybe it's nothing compared to the original glob of food, or the older bits of food, but now all you want to do is to clean up the grime. Things that once had higher priority, for instance making your dinner, have receded to the back of your mind. Scrubbing your environment is more important.

You scrub and scrub. Wherever you have scrubbed for a second time, the adjacent areas that you have scrubbed only once now look soiled by comparison. Interesting; you now understand the cleaning process better. So you scrub those adjacent areas again. It seems hopeless that you can ever thoroughly clean the entire floor, for there are multiple layers of grime, and it is impossible to perceive the primeval layers until you have cleaned those closer to the surface. A bit of food that you had somehow missed still crops up occasionally. For a moment you feel discouraged, but that passes. This is becoming satisfying; you are on a mission.

This is not a perfect metaphor for Buddhist practice. If this was really about scrubbing your kitchen floor, you would soon choose an arbitrary stopping point so you could go back to cooking for your guests. In Buddhist practice, though, a crisis does sometimes nudge us to look closely at our inner environment, and to see our inner grime with some clarity. And the more we clean, the more we want to clean. Our subtler defilements seem as important to address as the grosser ones.

You may, or may not, ever finish, but perhaps that is not so important. The cleaner your heart and mind become, the happier you will be. Why stop? And your guests, when they arrive, will be happier in your company. They will love your clean floor so much, they'll be happy to help you cook.

from Spare Verses

By Robert Bohanan

Patio Dharma 6/16/2013

Mourning Doves calling.
Their song rising and falling,
Melting away into the unheard.

Sipping my tea at sunrise.
Tea made with last night's leaves,
Just because they yet had life.

When does a sound truly disappear?
When does tea cease to be tea?
When did I begin and when do I end?

Resting in the place of no coming and of no going, The sweet place where
answers are unanswered questions, The place where beginnings and
endings dissolve and become presents.

Zen Moment in a Green Chair 7/28/2013

The day ahead.
The day behind.
The day in between.

I sit in all three.
Crowding mind,
No room for heart.

My dog staring at me,
Brown pupils, infinite pools,
Unconditional love.

Curling on my lap,
She rings the silent bell,
Inviting me to presence.

In the pause, the present,
I see all and I see no thing.
And again I smile.

Somewhere on the West Side 7/21/2013

Time. Just a moment.
A little blip, really it was.
Ticks and tocks in my day.

A moment experienced,
Gathered up by neurons,
Stored in invisible wiring.

Called forth later from subterranean synapses, Ease or dis-ease, depend on
the story told, Equally in moments of solitude or loneliness.

Awareness and clarity read the storylines, Weaving past in to the present,
my present, As I choose my clothes and ready for the day.



Nyack: Hudson River at Dawn

By Jim Ramsay

Love on the Edge of Life

By Rebecca Dixon

Meditation was just another thing I was willing to try in 1992, after a year of watching my life fall apart. I had lost my home and relationship due to my own bad judgment, then my law career due to illness. My old ways weren't helping me cope, so when a friend invited me to attend a Zen center, I figured, why not?

To my surprise, sitting zazen eased my neuromuscular pain simply by helping me relax. I'd studied Buddhism in graduate school, but in an era when scholars didn't recognize the importance of the practice. They taught the concepts with barely a mention of meditation. It was like studying the body without noticing the blood flowing through it. Now that I put the whole path together, I immediately became a dedicated practitioner. Within two years of sitting daily, I was taking courses, attending day-longs, and volunteering at the Zen Hospice Project (ZHP).

Stephen Levine and Ram Dass were responsible for my wanting to work with the dying. They wrote about how much it benefited your practice. I thought it would be like *Tuesdays with Morrie*, catching pithy comments of those made wise by proximity to the "other world." Not at all. It was, instead, an almost painfully intense lesson in opening the heart: learning to love when clinging is so clearly not going to work out well.

Part of the excellent education ZHP gave me was a volunteer support meeting on the Four Divine Abodes. By that time, I already had bonded with a patient named Allen, and I needed to know about metta, a loving kindness that expects nothing in return. When that gently powerful state of the heart meets suffering, it responds with compassion, and when it encounters happiness, it feels sympathetic joy. Keeping us steady like the keel of a boat is equanimity, holding the mind open wider than the immediate experience without taking attention away from it, so we can keep it in perspective.

In hospice work I anticipated lots of situations evoking compassion. What I didn't expect was the joy. At the end of our forty-hour training we were given a tour of Laguna Honda Hospital (LHH) where many of us would serve as volunteers in the hospice ward. During those years I kept a journal, which I've been very slowly turning into a memoir. Here's what I wrote that night when I got home:

The women's ward smells awful. The food odors are almost nauseating and they're overlaid with the smells of urine, feces and disinfectant in a mélange that cues my nervous system to flee. What a relief to end this tour in C2, the hospice ward. It is softened, friendly, much warmer than the other wards. People smile, chat with each other, laugh. An Asian woman is being moved

in her wheelchair by the volunteer on duty – just being paid attention to. She is beyond speech, almost blind, but she waves her crippled hands at us, beckoning. One by one we reach out and she takes our hands, beaming. We stand around her in a circle of love, more joyous than any group at a party. Writing this, I am moved to tears. Then, I only felt joy to be part of that moment of happiness for her. Now, I know I'm in the right place.

Also during that initial training I met Allen, a resident at ZHP's four-bed Guest House in downtown San Francisco, and I liked him immediately. We were both from the Midwest, though, and reserved. For over a month I worried whether Allen wanted to be my friend, then I finally just offered to take him Christmas shopping. When he returned from his visit in Ohio, he said his family was warm but still wouldn't talk about his life or impending death from AIDS. As a lesbian I could easily connect with this pain, and during that afternoon we acknowledged that we were friends. But in January Allen went down with meningitis and was often unconscious. I realized I was already grieving the loss of our friendship. The volunteer coordinator, a wonderful woman named Harriett, assured me Allen still felt our connection. She assigned me to give him a manicure in preparation for his parents' final visit. I'd never cut anyone else's nails and was nervous about hurting Allen or drawing blood. Finally, though, here's how it went:

I was able, on that day, to see past my desire for Allen's affection to the essential nature we shared. Focused on the simple but absorbing task of cleaning and cutting his nails, I began to speak my love for him with less self-consciousness. As I did so, my affection came to feel gentler to me. In fact, for the first time in my life, I felt my heart open freely without even caring if my gift of love was being received. Although it wasn't my shift, I went to visit Allen two days later while his parents were there. When I arrived, they were sitting in his room, silent and stiff. Nodding respectfully to them, I went directly to Allen's bed and kissed his forehead. He murmured and smiled, but didn't open his eyes. Then, as I turned slowly from the bed, I spoke to his mother. "He's a wonderful man."

She rose from her chair and reached toward me for a hug. After that I hugged Allen's father, too. He seemed surprised, but grateful. Then I told them, "It's been a great experience working here, but the best part has been getting to know Allen."

"Look," his mother said, "you're making him smile." And it was true – a wide smile lifted Allen's lips below eyes that were still shut. For about an hour I sat with his parents and we told stories about good times we'd had with Allen, how kind he was, and how we loved him. The depth of my affection seemed to make it easier for them to express their own deepest love for their son.

When his father said, "I've always been proud of him," I looked over at my friend as if to share with him the wonder of that remark. The corners of Allen's lips were again lifted upward, and because of

that smile, I felt sure he was at last hearing the acceptance he'd never really felt from his parents.

By the end of my year at the Guest House (in 1995, still lacking an elevator) I was having trouble climbing its stairs, so I transferred to LHH, which was then configured in an open thirty-eight-bed ward. The women's room was the farthest down the long hall, then the men's, and closest to the entrance door was the community area, lovingly decorated by years of volunteers. The staff was ambivalent toward us because the hospital hired fewer of them on the theory that we volunteers lightened their work load. But the nurses and CNAs did appreciate us when we were able to make the residents more comfortable. That was a value we all shared unequivocally.

On my first day there Anita, a CNA, showed me a thin metal cabinet in the hall containing what everyone called, "warm blankies." Over a dozen heated cotton weave blankets sat ready to spread warmth over aching bodies. I grabbed one into my arms, felt its soothing warmth against my body, and smiled ecstatically. "Wow, that'll make 'em happy!" I blurted, and I could see that Anita's grin mirrored my own appreciation for this ready source of happiness for people who might otherwise be suffering so much.

This was sympathetic joy to the second power. I felt delight in the pleasure I knew these blankets could bring others, and Anita savored my delight. By this point in my hospice career, I was beginning to see how opening the heart to the truth of the moment enhanced life globally. It enabled me to stay fully present with suffering and thus offer as much comfort as possible. It also allowed me to appreciate deeply the moments of joy that are shot through all experience, sometimes like fine gold threads that we must look carefully to see.

After I'd been at LHH for several months, a new patient named Pat arrived. I read in our log that Pat had dementia. All I could see when I approached her bedside was a tiny, wizened woman who met me with a non-committal stare. Moving slowly, I placed a hand on the guardrail of her bed, reaching out but respecting her private space. I stared off into space in the same direction Pat was looking. Then:

As if indifferent to my presence, she reached toward the guardrail on her bed nearest me and weakly wrapped a thin hand around it. I gradually touched and then massaged her hand. Again as if by coincidence, her other hand came up and covered mine, making a hand sandwich. All of a sudden Pat broke out into one of the most loving and beatific smiles I've ever seen, revealing an almost toothless mouth calmly savoring bliss. If joy had a face, it would be hers with that smile.

For the four weeks after that, I was too ill to go in to the hospice. When I returned to ward C2, I carried a light-weight cane, mostly for balance. I needed comfort myself, so I headed right toward Pat. She took my hand and pulled it to her mouth and kissed it, then flashed me the first of many joyous smiles.

Her hand kept reaching for the volunteer ID tag pinned to my shirt. At first I felt the need to explain it to her. Even after I realized she didn't care *what* it was, but was just focused on *it*, I kept wanting somehow to normalize her reaching for a part of my clothing. Then I noticed a soft kind of pleasure, like having a kid play with my hair, a totally innocent intimacy, an absorption in a moment of contact. I consciously decided to relax and enjoy Pat's connecting with me this way. After a while, she also found the sunglasses in my pocket.

Now that was fun. I took them out and handed them to her and with very little hesitation she put them on. They made her look like a very old motorcycle mama. People walking by kept turning to smile and Pat sat up in her bed and looked around proudly. That visit with Pat and those blissful smiles of hers was the best medicine I could have had.

By the time I'd been with ZHP for two years, my heart had been transformed. I had sat with many people in their final hours, including several who'd become good friends of mine. I'd seen hardy young men and women transformed by illness to suffering decrepitude. My heart was steadied by kindness and love, no longer grasping for my affection to be returned or even to keep these people in my life. Whatever I encountered during my weekly five-hour shift, I accepted mindfully, keeping my heart open to both suffering and delight. Then I met Rachel.

I met her at a singles party. Actually, we met just before it, outside in the dark, looking for the address. We shared a joke before we even saw each other and were clearly both interested by the time we stepped inside. My friends were teasing me within the hour. As the evening grew late, Rachel mentioned a pain in her kidneys. Then she confided it was probably a recurrence of the ovarian cancer she'd been dealing with for two years. I understood just what that meant.

I was cautious. There was so much potential for hurt feelings and deep sadness if I didn't proceed mindfully. Still I enjoyed Rachel's company tremendously. I let loving kindness be my guide even though now I was in a much different role than hospice volunteer. After two or three months it was obvious we were in love. Then she began radiation. Our relationship matured backwards: extreme intimacy as I nursed her for two months, then some distance as she recovered, and finally a union of equals. For the next nine months we had a lot of fun gardening, traveling, and socializing. Although my health held up quite well, she was often hardier than I.

The following autumn a strange pain began creeping down Rachel's leg and became intractable. October was a horror show: a pain pump was implanted in her abdomen, resulting in a leak of cerebral spinal fluid and a killer headache. Then a drug freakishly caused a sudden and complete withdrawal from morphine. Her weight dropped frighteningly. It took until mid-January for Rachel to get back on her feet. By that time we were well into an El Nino that dumped historic amounts of rain in one dark and wind-whipped storm after another. Yet even in that darkest of winters, on most days suffering and delight were all mixed together, like threads in a tapestry.

This is from my journal:

On Monday the sun came out again in full glory. Rachel said she wanted to do a little retail therapy in Emeryville. She needed new shoes.

The weather was an exhilarating reprieve from what we've had for months: the constant sound of rain beating against walls that never really kept out the gloom, the cold or the damp. On this day, high puffy clouds shone brilliantly against a pale blue sky. The wind tousled our hair the moment we stepped from the car. Rachel came toward me and caught my arm, drawing me into a kiss, whispering, "I love you, hon'."

We went our separate ways, then I turned to watch her stride toward the shoe store. No sign of pain showed in her gait, just the bounce of someone savoring the joy of life on a lovely day. As I watched, I treasured the vision.

I am so grateful that I knew by then that sympathetic joy needs to be recognized and savored. It's easy to overlook such precious moments of happiness. Clearly identifying them and allowing the joy to seep deep into the mind encourages our future capacity to be present with the joy of others – and our own. The following week was again a mixture of delight and depression for Rachel, and one day she met me at the door to report that her psychiatrist had called to increase her wellbutrin.

"And," she grinned, "our rings are ready."

We had decided to exchange wedding bands in mid-February in a small ceremony at home. We drove right out to Lafayette and parked in front of the jewelry store's picture window. We felt a bit conspicuous as the people inside watched us approach. That was in an era when their attention could as likely have been scornful as friendly. This is how I recorded the scene:

The salesman who'd taken our order went to get a ring box from the back room. A pale, thin man followed him out. Several employees watched as Rachel and I, laughing with

excitement, opened the box and tried the rings on. We fussed about the sizing, then decided the rings were completely perfect. I asked the skinny guy if he was the jeweler who'd fashioned them.

"Oh, no," he protested, "I'm just an assistant. I came out to watch." Then he seemed shy. "It's nice to see you so happy."

That one man's ability to see and value and share our joy in that precious moment lifted so many clouds from our hearts. He gave us what the law, the weather, and Rachel's health denied us that winter, just by sharing the celebration of our love. Rachel died at the end of June. I've kept my heart open since then to the ten thousand joys and ten thousand sorrows of my own life and others'. No matter how severe the sadness or how deliriously we're glad, it's seldom all one or the other but mingled together most of the time. It's up to us to appreciate all the parts. And on balance, overall, what endures is the joy.



Sandstone Fog

By Richard Sievers

Haiku

Note: These poems were inspired during a Dedicated Practitioners Program IV retreat at Yucca Valley, May 2012.

Lizard basks on hot rock.
Blinks. Then sees me come.
Flash of tail. Empty rock.

Mary Helen Fein

Your snoring's music.
It's the silence between gasps
that's so unnerving.

Charles Atkinson

Cascading water
Wisdom from so many mouths
Fills my thirsty soul.

Vinit Allen

All zafus taken
In the meditation hall.
But no one is there.

Nancy Flowers

Awareness
 Flowing free
Disappears down a rabbit hole.

Jean Adler

Every part withered
 Except your smiling teeth,
 Laughing on your last day.

Rick Maddock

The Buddha and the Muse

by Ashvin Iyengar

Forgive me, Buddha, for I have sinned. This is what happened. I was sitting, meditating arduously hour after hour, and the muse kept appearing in her sinuous form beckoning me like a siren – “See that thought there? Take it and follow me and I will lead you to a poem.”

I refused countless times saying, “I am just supposed to note my thoughts, not indulge them by putting them on paper.” And she said, “Sometimes, you can note them better if you put them down on paper.”

“Hmmm,” I said suspiciously. “Sounds a bit like Mara saying, ‘The better to note them with.’”

“Me? Mara?” she said looking wounded. “I am an angel,” she said, promptly sprouting a halo.

I could not say, “Get thee behind me, angel” with any degree of conviction, so I succumbed. I picked up my pen and wrote. Very mindfully, I assure you!! While lifting the pen, I was aware I was lifting the pen. While putting down the pen, I was aware I was putting down the pen. While starting a line, I was aware I was starting a line. While ending a line, I was aware I was ending a line. While writing a short line, I was aware I was writing a short line. While writing a long line, I was aware I was writing a long line. While following the meter, I was aware I was following the meter. While not following the meter, I was aware I was not following the meter. You get the gist. I guess you would have called this the poetrypatthana sutta eh?

And after putting down the pen, I noted the arising of satisfaction. And I noted the passing away of the satisfaction. But not having learnt the transitory nature of all phenomena, I sighed, “Now, if only the goddess of love was so forthcoming with her favors.”

“In that case, I might have to leave you,” the muse said, looking concerned.

“Wait!!” I said. “Can I not have you both?”

“Very few men,” she said, “have made love to two goddesses and lived to write about it. Are you equal to that?” she asked, looking at me doubtfully.

“But I would never forsake you!!” I exclaimed.

“In that case.” she said, pleased with my devotion, ‘I might even help you.’

Don't know how you did it, Buddha, but I am putty in the hands of goddesses.

Anyway, here is one of the poems the muse helped me write. You will be glad to note that it is not altogether unrelated to Vipassana.

Witnessing the Drama

I am getting off the stage
I tried so many things
to make the play a little more
bearable.

For once, I kept saying,
let's make fate
the comedian
and not the villain.

For once, I kept saying,
let us laugh where we should cry
and cry where we should laugh.

For once, I kept saying,
let us be the audience
and the audience, the actors.

For once, I kept saying,
let us throw out the props
and just improvise.

For once, I kept saying,
let us read the lines
as if
this was only a play.

I am getting off the stage
and you may continue with your play.
I am getting off the stage
and you may bemoan the loss of an actor
or if you notice, be happy
that I am still here
watching the drama.

Passing Bell for Kobun Chino, Sensei

— *We're separate from nothing.*

By Charles Atkinson

In that moment of knowing—beside the lake,
your daughter gone under—surely, no thought
but to follow, and the body's faith that it can.
And then? Did you swim down to twilight,

paw toward weeds beyond your reach, exhale,
believing another stroke would find her?
Did you touch, knowing neither could rise,
draw her close as you settled down deeper?

Prophet who didn't believe; you *knew*.
The planet yields so few—and so casually
takes you away. A vacancy I didn't feel until
you weren't here to fill it. A final parent lost.

*

Tell me what breathed you breathes us all.
Tell me we can live, eyes open, and know
this touch is the last. Let me be a membrane
to caress what comes, and let it pass through.

Wind chime. Scrub jay. Sun through fog.
Not ideas, not words; the things themselves.
We say hello a thousand times and
never fully mean it. Or goodbye.

The gulf between absence and presence
is tiny, profound. I spent decades
inching over it, clinging to your hand.
So what if they waver—the first steps alone.



Point Reyes Storm

By Arthur Cohen

The Buddha and the Internet

By Robert D. Rossel

I keep asking myself, what would the Buddha have done if he had access to the Internet? Long ago, we are told, he said, "Don't take my word for it. Try my teachings out. Test them and see how they work in the real world." That was probably the single most amazing thing he did. We've been engaged in a universal, time/space traversing experiment on the Web and elsewhere about our mutual lives together ever since.

Isn't it amazing? Think about it. There are all these different forms of Buddhism springing up all over the world: Zen, Tibetan, Vipassana, and other "schools" containing multiple "branches," "Greater" and "Lesser" vehicles, etc. Though we differ from each other in significant ways as we practice, come from many different countries, and speak many different languages, we all more or less agree on certain principles and practices, test them out, talk about them with each other, and thus try to make the world a better place to live in for ourselves and for others. As a result, we are hopefully transforming our individual lives, our families, jobs, health, and society at large. Also we hope we are finding/creating more wisdom about what it means to be here on this planet, deeply plumbing the mystery of life. That is Buddhism, more or less, in a "nutshell." And he started all this without having access to written language, electricity, a phone, computer, and the Internet!

Of course, we fight about principles and practices. We wonder about the ways it could be better, how we could do it better. We wonder about whether you can actually be a "real" Buddhist and a householder. Whether we can make it without having an esteemed teacher. Whether we can practice and have a job in the "real" world, if we can make it without doing multiple month-long retreats or living in a cave somewhere on a mountain or in a forest. It has changed a lot since his times. And here we are, now, trying to converse on the "Net" about his teachings, how they have touched our lives, work, practice, etc.

I recently was reading about Indra's Net in Francis H. Cook's interesting book *Hua-Yen Buddhism: The Jewel Net of Indra*. It is a very dense and important book that explores this ancient metaphor/myth as a vehicle for examining the concepts of emptiness, dependent origination, and the interpenetrating "field" of life as seen in the ancient Mahayana Buddhist school and in the third century scriptures of the Avatamsaka Sutra. (cf., Cook, 1977).

You may recall the story goes thus:

Far away in the heavenly abode of the great god Indra, there is a wonderful net which has been hung by some cunning artificer in such a manner that it stretches out infinitely in all directions. In accordance with the extravagant tastes of deities, the artificer has hung a single glittering jewel in each "eye" of the net, and since the

net itself is infinite in dimension, the jewels are infinite in number. There hang the jewels, glittering like stars in the first magnitude, a wonderful sight to behold. If we now arbitrarily select one of these jewels for inspection and look closely at it, we will discover that its polished surface there are reflected all the other jewels in the net, infinite in number. Not only that, but each of the jewels reflected in this one jewel is also reflecting all the other jewels, so that there is an infinite reflecting process occurring.

Now there are many inferences possible that can be drawn from this ancient story about the holographic nature of the universe, the interconnectedness of all things, non-locality, emptiness, our innate wisdom and inherent Buddha nature, and the mirror-like nature of mind. Many modern scholars have wondered about it and written about it: (cf. Hofstadter, in *Godel, Escher, Bach*, 1999; Kabat-Zinn, Watson, Batchelor, and Claxton, in *Indra's Net at Work: The Mainstreaming of Dharma Practice in Society*, 2000).

With regard to the Internet, we may look at us as linked in a web that knits us as primary units in a vibrant and growing virtual community, and the community, among other things, is connected by our interest in practice of Buddhism in our lives and in our work. To what extent is the cosmos, the human brain, and a network of interlinked human beings recognizing more and more their interdependence, in some respects an increasingly vital "hologram" that embodies some essential qualities of Buddha-nature and inter-being. Might our task be to help each other "polish our jewel" so to speak, through practice, mirroring a reality under construction in every act of practice where we try to become more truly ourselves?

I had a dream last night with lots of images of webs and vehicles of connection. It got me thinking about my attempts to communicate on the Internet and connect with more and more folks from all kinds of countries, backgrounds, and interest in Buddhism.

Here are some of my associations: Dreams, at least in Freud's and Jung's world, were "gates to the unconscious." Now despite (perhaps because of) what was going on in their world at that time, they became masters at "plumbing the depths," so to speak, and we are all the richer for their efforts.

One of the things that is great about the Internet is that it gives us a way of moving *VERY FAR* and *VERY FAST* at least in comparison to Freud and Jung in their time. But sometimes I wonder if it is capable of going very *DEEP*. It moves so fast and is capable of moving so far in an instant: I wonder in the process if it loses some depth. It is kind of like a rock that, if thrown at just the right speed and angle, skips vigorously across the surface of the water and can go pretty far and pretty fast, but if it stops skipping, it settles in deep. (Yes, I know that analogies carry us only so far. But I think they are sometimes helpful in stretching our thinking.) Part of the problem with the Internet, multi-tasking, and the blinding speed of modern life is that it gets us spinning and skipping across the surface of things so much that we miss the

depths. The very pace of life is not conducive to mindfulness. We get attached to the glitter of the surface of things, we forget to breathe, we get spinning, and we get dizzy. I have seen how it affects our conversations here. Isn't it interesting? We are having a conversation about mindfulness practice, something we all love and are curious about, and, speaking for me, get caught up in the concerns of the ego. I often forget to slow down, breathe, center, and connect to the tender humanness of what we are doing.

William Stafford's moving poem "A Ritual to Read to Each Other" gives us a view of how we can create a *practice* that let us see *both* the surface and depth of our lives. Here is the poem:

A Ritual To Read To Each Other

If you don't know the kind of person I am
and I don't know the kind of person you are
a pattern that others made may prevail in the world
and following the wrong god home we may miss our star.

For there is many a small betrayal in the mind,
a shrug that lets the fragile sequence break
sending with shouts the horrible errors of childhood
storming out to play through the broken dyke.

And as elephants parade holding each elephant's tail,
but if one wanders the circus won't find the park,
I call it cruel and maybe the root of all cruelty
to know what occurs but not recognize the fact.

And so I appeal to a voice, to something shadowy,
a remote important region in all who talk:
though we could fool each other, we should consider—
lest the parade of our mutual life get lost in the dark.

For it is important that awake people be awake,
or a breaking line may discourage them back to sleep;
the signals we give—yes or no, or maybe—
should be clear: the darkness around us is deep.

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Fat Boy Tries to Jump over Bar

By Jim Bronson

"Dull as a mud fence,"
My critics would say
"He'll bore you to death
While he stands in the way.

His inner light looks dim
Nothing fires his round belly
A will-o'-the-wisp,
A bowl full of jelly.

He'll knock down the bar
When he finally jumps
Make the sawdust scatter
And land with a thump."

But, past the high bar
Effort undiminished
This fat boy has attempted
Though crashed at the finish.

"Nice try," says the coach
"Next time you could make it.
Keep coming on back
Let's see if you can take it."

My high jumping hopes
Ground on to an end
I thought I would break
But found I could bend.

In the autumn of my life,
Now, I get up each day
Set the coffee to perk
And remember my May,

When jumping at bars
A coach gave me heart
An inner commitment
The courage to start.

Now, with old friends
I remember my past
And honor that boy
Who will jump to the last.

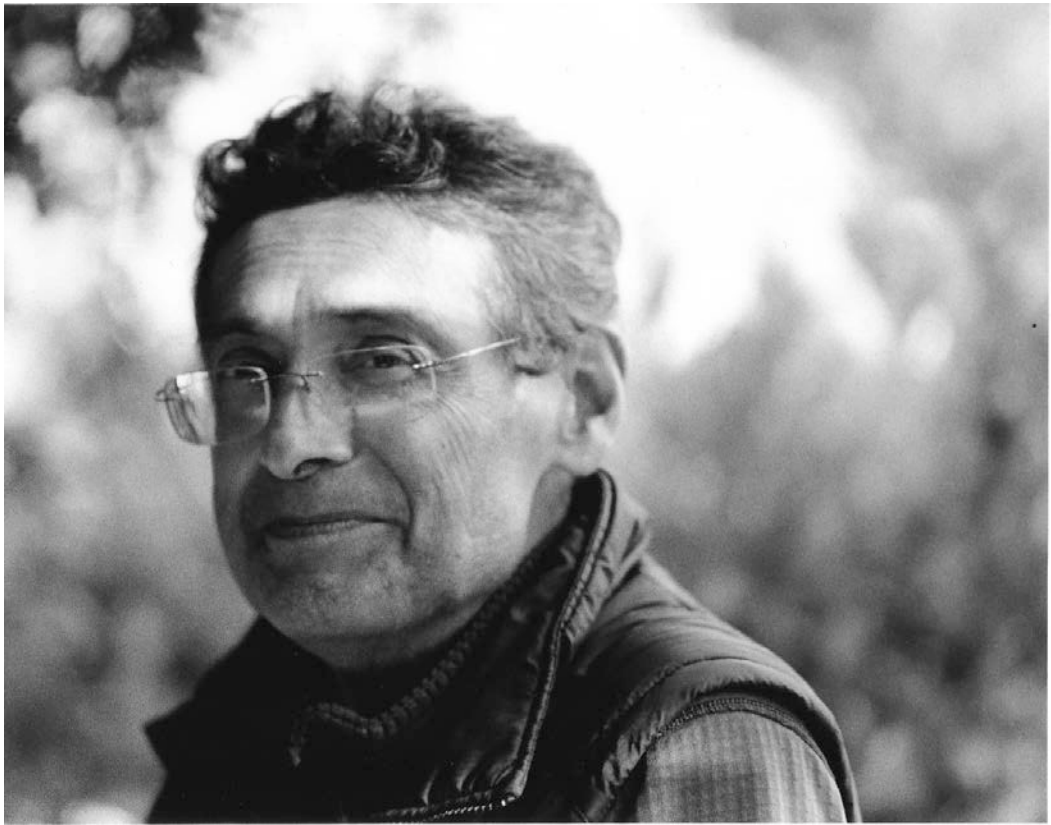
Impressions: It's Like This

By Richard Sievers

Photography is a very new exploration for me. A friend from the sangha encouraged me into the field by loaning me some equipment and sharing some pointers. I set up a darkroom in my laundry and have enjoyed the journey so far.

These three photos of Victor Medina, a dear sangha friend who passed away on July 4, 2013, were taken at a small Kalayana Mitta group about two months before his death. Victor was incredibly generous in all ways; his allowing me to take these photo's was just a small example – capturing mind moments and impressions of this beautiful human being.





The Making of Sea Coast

By Jim Bronson

There was a world a lifetime ago
When a girl-woman with gentle curves
And a face to fall in love with
Traveled with her Mr. to Inverness.

One afternoon in a wide meadow
On the Isle of Skye above the sea
She suddenly realized his longing
And said, "You love me too much."

"Too much?," he said. "How can it be?
I cannot love you less than I feel."
She could not say why but she knew
She must loosen from his rapture.

Their lives progressed to daily living,
The man in a vortex of body light
The woman reaching from a shadow
Slowly forgetting why they must part.

Like the ocean that comes and goes
Finding its way among rock and sand
Day after day the lovers grew old
Making shore of what had been land.

Facing page: *Mountain on the Hudson* by Jim Ramsay



Shadowy Presence

By Judy Taylor

I admire cats for their ability to be fully present. They often seem completely absorbed in whatever they're doing, whether it's napping, observing creepy crawlies in the dirt, or chomping down their food. Not only do they seem utterly present in the moment, but they also appear to be quite content within it. Their peaceful demeanor makes me doubt their minds are elsewhere. They're not thinking up a better mouse catching strategy or worrying about how they destroyed the sofa.

When I first brought Tawy home from the animal shelter, I almost named her Shadow for her charcoal grey fur and tendency to loiter closely behind me. She hovers near me because she either wants to be fed or she craves my companionship. While I enjoy her company, her shadowing habit can be annoyingly dangerous. It's too easy for me to accidentally step on her paws or tail. And when I do so, I feel horrible. I apologize by rubbing the hurt spot and speaking to her in loving tones.

Yet, quite quickly after such incidents, Tawy will be back behind me like the shadow I can't shake. I gather that since she is so much in the present moment, she's not dwelling on the past (the accident) nor is she thinking about the future (that the same behavior might put her in jeopardy of being squashed again). Tawy is only focused on the now.

Tawy always seems to have complete trust in my ability to keep her safe. While I find her faith in me quite charming, I know I must live up to her confidence. This means I need to be more mindful of her whereabouts as I move around the house.

Now instead of seeing Tawy's shadowing behavior as an inconvenience, I view it as an aid to mindfulness. I'm thankful that her actions are forcing me to develop the very quality of awareness I so admire in her!

Milestones in the Moonlight

by Jim Bronson

Driving to a nighttime run, I'm 64 years.
How much life is left to me now?
Dad died at 64, alone, depressed,
His soft-nosed bullet through his ears.

A too sharp end to a blunted life.
Now, at 64, I'm all grown up, fit
And wonder about the path I will take,
Will I stop early, this night also lost?

Late at the start, bodies tightly packed.
No chance to stretch, a gunshot. Go.
I know the milestones. At first go slow.
No rush, pressed tight front to back.

Second mile, a few runners walking
My pace settles to a familiar groove.
Three strides a breath, forced at first,
Then breath takes over, no one talking.

Third mile, bunched runners feel the strain.
We stride and breathe, stride and breathe.
The light of the moon reflects on tide pools.
A shining hollow emptiness before the pain.

A mile to go now. Leave the water's edge.
Back on roads, past buildings, well wishers.
I feel a surge arise to beat somebody,
Pass those feet, get through the wedge.

A wind takes over, stirring and violent
The pace quickens. Liquid air gulped.
Mine. Theirs. Mine. We converge
Inhaling at an urgent white volume.

Just motion, just breath, pulling nearer,
Touching taught arms, one being finally.
Bright fog in arc lights. Across the line,
I hear my name spoken from somewhere.

Limitlessness now, my eyes start to see,
Someone tears the ID strip from my bib.
My effort is placed. Spindled. Secure.
I exhale brief cheers at finishers after me.

Runners pass by, aglow, flashing a "V".
Oh dad, poor dad, if you could see us now,
Complete, uninjured, the longing released
A sure heart still for the miles left to me.

One Seed

By Carla Brooke

One seed planted with faith
and look what has grown
from nothing at all
love takes root
deserts rise into painted canyons
waterfalls appear and disappear

Until one droplet finds
its home again
The ocean laughs its encore.
Waves reflecting sky
where birds fly in one heartbeat

Blossoms all from one seed
planted long ago
flowers bloom that were sown long ago:
and look what has grown.

Life takes root from nothing at all,
almost nothing at all.

untitled

By Gerard Sarnat

dream out of time.

come to an end
who can recall
what was coveted

Spring Vine

By Kim Allen

Spring vine
Chainlinked fence
Foothold
Scaffold
Launch pad

The Leaf

By Lori Wong

A leaf doesn't let go
or cling to the tree -
it doesn't hang on.
But when it's time,
it just does
what is
natural.

Five Congruities between Buddhist Meditation Practice and Art

By Jim Ramsay

1. **It is important to pay attention.** Both meditational practice and drawing or painting seem to be most fulfilling, seem to release you into a creative place, when you are in a state of relaxed alertness, aware of everything, but at the same time focused (on the breath/ on the subject to be painted). Distractions arise, you are aware of and open to them, and you become like a screen – they pass right through you and your focus returns. It is the great irony of meditation and painting that, with both, we set out to do the simplest thing – to see – and we make it hard. Central to both meditation and art is the process of letting go of preconceptions and simply seeing.
2. **Meditation and art are practical, not mystical.** Each is a practice with traditions that have been handed down for thousands of years – specific things to do that help you open yourself up to the experience. Each has teachers, masters, examples to learn from. Yet ultimately we have to find our own way, our own path. We have to find out what is true for *us*. If this were not so, all mediators would have the same experience. All paintings would look the same.
3. **Things change. Nothing is forever.** This truth underlies Buddhist practice. It inspired my poem, “The Climb,” which IMC was kind enough to publish in the 2012 edition of *Passing It On*. The poem is about aging and my mom, Juanita Ramey Ramsay. She was well aware of change and of her own aging, especially as it related to her memory loss. You know what she did? She laughed at it. A few years before she died, my brother Gene said to her, “Mom, my son John visited you last week, and he said you two had a great time. Do you remember that?” Mom replied, “Well, Honey, that rings a bell. ... I’m just not sure *which* bell.”
4. **In the face of increased suffering, your heart can open further to encompass it.** I learned this from my experience with *tonglen* practice. I was introduced to *tonglen* when my partner Anita Kline and I did a one-week work-meditation practice at Gampo Abbey on Cape Breton Island, Nova Scotia. *Tonglen* practice was, initially, excruciating. Deliberately opening up to the pain in yourself? In your neighborhood? In the world? Breathing the pain in, breathing out peace? I just didn’t get it. Where did all the *bad* go that you were sucking in? Did it stay inside you? When did you change your filter? How could anyone *do* that? My initial experiences were heart-wrenching. I had to open

myself up in baby steps, or I became a puddle of hitched-breath weeping. But gradually I came to understand the infinite expandability of the heart. I find the same is true of my art. You have to open yourself up to the hardest things, the riskiest things. To do your best work you have to risk pain. It's as simple as that. It's like Rumi says in "The Guest House":

This being human is a guest house.
Every morning a new arrival.
A joy, a depression, a meanness,
some momentary awareness comes
as an unexpected visitor.
Welcome and entertain them all!
Even if they're a crowd of sorrows,
who violently sweep your house
empty of its furniture,
still, treat each guest honorably.
He may be clearing you out
for some new delight.

Rumi! Talk about art! I love great art and it also drives me crazy. I suffer, because I know I can't achieve that kind of stuff. And then the still small voice of a meditation teacher – Pema, or Jack or Thanissaro, or Eugene, or whoever says, "Forget it. Start from where you are," and you keep painting, writing, creating what *you* have to offer.

5. **It is helpful to take a step back from clinging – from praise and blame, attraction and aversion, grasping and shunning.** This is what meditation is all about, and also what achieving truth through art is all about. If you want and need to *get to some state* in meditation, you'll never get there. The process is not fighting through the impediments, it's letting go of them and watching them dissolve. In art, if you have your eye on the gold ring – "Wow, maybe I can SELL this," or "This poem/painting/song is going to be so incredibly soulful and filled with truth, for sure when she hears it she's going to want to go to bed with me," – if you allow your artistic involvement to be directed by your will toward an end result, it will diminish your art. It will make it mundane.

So, that's the list. The through-line seems to be the wonderful Buddhist contradiction I've learned to be true: You can only hope to get what you want by letting go of it.

Or, to put it another way: in meditation, and in art, the *process* is what's important, not the *product*. If the process is a cream-filled Italian pastry, and product is a firearm, leave the gun, take the cannoli.

Sangha Meditation, Documented

By Fran Cesarone

I sit in my chair relaxed, yet dignified.
My eyes gently close.
My palms rest upon my thighs.
I inhale deeply, filling my lungs to capacity.
Slowly I exhale, pushing out all residual air.
Again, I take a deep breath.
I release the air from my lungs.
One last time I feel my lungs expand with oxygen.
Once again I set the air free.
My attention now focuses on my third eye, just above the
bridge of my nose.
The rhythm of my breath relaxes me.
In, out - in, out - in, out.
My focus remains on my third eye.
In, out - in, out - in, out.
I am settling deeper into my seat, firmly planted in this posture.
Feeling at ease with this meditation.

Safeway has peppers on sale. I'll stop on the way home. I can cook them tomorrow. Maybe I'll make....

Out – in, out – in, out.
Third eye...in, out – in, out.

I hope Lonnie fixed my computer. I don't know why Firefox keeps crashing. It's been far too long since I've done a backup. Oh God, I can't afford to lose everything I've done in the last few months...my resume, cover letters, compositions, client work...

The person beside me snuffles.
In, out – in, out – in, out.
Someone opens the door to the room.

These late arrivals are interrupting my meditation. I was really in the zone too.

In, out – in, out – in, out.

My attention goes back to my third eye. In, out – SLOWER – In, out.

I'm not going to have Honda replace my battery. It will be much cheaper if I take the car to Sears. Plus Sears will take care of it while I wait. Diehards come with a 5-year warranty too. Hmm. I wonder if the warranty is good if I take the car to a different Sears. It must be. It's not like you can plan to have the battery fail near the Sears where you made the purchase.

Someone clears her throat.

How did I drift so far away? I must return to my meditation.

In, out – in, out – in, out. Focus.

In, out – in, out – in, out. Third eye.

In, out – in, out – in, out.

I wonder if Bill is here tonight. He's really cute. Don't remember seeing a wedding ring on his finger. I wonder if he has a girlfriend. My luck he's probably gay.

In, out – in, out – in, out.

Bung. Bung. Bung. Namaste.



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Aspiration

Ⓢ Capparell

Aspiration

By Lorraine Capparell

The Spigot People

By Sydney Reuben

Once upon a time in a faraway land, lived a group of people who had spigots attached to their hearts. Whenever their spigots were open, love flowed through their bodies and out to others, as well through their smiles and their touch. As long as everyone kept their spigots open, they were filled with love all of the time.

But because the Spigot People (also called “Spigoteers”) didn’t understand the mechanics of how their spigots worked and didn’t know whose love-flow was filling whom, they would sometimes make themselves miserable. If someone were having a stressful day, for instance, and inadvertently shut off their spigot, that person might accuse another Spigoteer, “You haven’t been giving me enough love lately. You must have closed your spigot.”

Bewildered, the second Spigoteer would respond, “No, I didn’t close mine, it’s been open all day. It’s *your* spigot that’s closed.”

“Well, you made mine close when you aimed your love-flow at other people.”

“But I never turned off my love for *you*; it can flow in more than one direction.”

“No, it can’t, else I would be happy.”

And sometimes when the Spigot People were feeling really good, they would think, “I want to keep this love right here. I don’t want to lose it.” So they would close their spigots to stop the flow; but the love they wanted to hold onto would seep out of their fingers and hair and dribble down onto the ground, and eventually they would feel no love at all. Then they would complain, “How come nobody loves me? I must be too ugly, or too old, or too unlucky.”

The Spigot People were very lucky, however, that a plumber happened to be passing through Spigotville and noticed that the Spigoteers had no idea that they controlled the degree to which they were filled with love. So he took an ordinary garden hose, connected it to a water spigot, and showed the townspeople that as long as the spigot was open, the hose remained inflated with water and when the spigot was closed, the hose collapsed. Next, he took a second hose and aimed its spray at the first one. He aimed it at the middle and he aimed it at the nozzle;

but wherever he aimed it, the hose on the ground remained flat because the flow from the other hose could not fill it up.

“You’re so lucky, Spigot People, because just like this hose and the water, all you have to do is keep your *own* spigot open in order to be filled with love. Now, others’ love certainly feels good when its spray touches you, but it’s the love from your own spigot that fills and expands you.”

Excited whispers rustled through the group, and one puzzled-looking Spigoteer stepped forward. “But if other Spigoteers can’t turn on my love-flow,” he said, “they can’t turn it off, either.”

“Right,” beamed the plumber.

“Well, then what turns it off?”

The whispering stopped as silent Spigoteers stared at the plumber scratching his head. “As near as I can figure out,” he finally said, “your love-flow stops when you try to mind someone else’s spigot instead of your own.”



Untitled

By Jim Ramsay



Nyack: Passing Rainstorm

By Jim Ramsay



The Hudson River in Winter

By Jim Ramsay

Surrender

By Fran Cesarone

God, Allah, Jah
One day will call me home
My bags are packed
They weren't always packed
I wasn't always ready
Time has passed
Loved ones have passed
Dreams have passed
The call may come in a minute
Or maybe in 30 years
I am ready
I will be traveling light
I always travel light
Low maintenance me
No need to check baggage
No passport, visa, or photo ID
No e-ticket printout
Security scan unnecessary
My call will come at the perfect time
But how shall I fill the chasm as I wait?
Do I wear a Mona Lisa smile in anticipation?
Do I assume the stoic composure of the arborvitae
Or like the weeping willow dance to the rhythm of the gentle breeze
In this Meantime, do I strive to influence
Or do I simply accept?

When the molt occurs it will not matter
Consciousness knows not the face of prejudice
All are admitted
Leave your resume behind
It does not care which institution conferred your degree
Or if you even have one
It does not care whether you are lovely
Or young or smart or bashful or rich
Consciousness absorbs the all of your spirit into its cosmic soup
And as the great tureen ladles out its brew
It ladles out you
As the stars and the rain and the timber wolf and the pufferfish
And all there is and will be

I surrender to you Infinite Spirit
My lifelong search for the one love I have never found
One who finds me beautiful and companionable and worthy of The Promise
I surrender to you All Powerful
My protracted quest for acknowledgement in the construct of a manmade world
I surrender to you Divine Being
The scars upon my heart and the deluge of tears

After the metamorphosis
I will be the arborvitae and the weeping willow and the breeze
The stars and the rain, the timber wolf and the pufferfish
And all there is and will be
The maya of my flesh and bones evaporated
I envelope into and unfold as The One

'Til the Bittersweet End

By Judy Taylor

One frigid December day many years ago, my former roommate met an emaciated grey tabby at the top of Nob Hill in San Francisco. Being a compassionate soul, he couldn't turn his back on her plaintive cries for food and companionship. So he brought her back to our apartment. Wondering what to call our new friend, I decided to name her Snappy. She was a temperamental cat who might purr in your face in one moment and then strike out at you in the next. Yet, Snappy became my devoted friend. She would sleep atop my head at night and regard me lovingly during the day.

Despite liking to hang out near me, Snappy was never the kind of cat who would lie in my lap. So after sixteen years together, I was quite shocked when she spontaneously hopped up onto me one afternoon. I was even more astonished when she positioned herself to face me, purred loudly, and stared at me so ardently that I felt bathed in adoration. I was so captivated by her intense display of affection that I stroked her tiger-striped fur repeatedly to keep her motor humming. We must've spent about ten minutes locked in this warm, energetic embrace until I just couldn't ignore my bladder's urgent calls anymore.

Then about a week later, Snappy had a few episodes of coughing and vomiting. I thought that the new medication was the culprit so I stopped giving it to her. However, the very next day I found her tucked under the stairs and breathing heavily. Alarmed, I immediately toted her off to the vet.

My veterinarian, a gentle and personable man, carefully assessed Snappy. I waited anxiously for his verdict. In a kindly voice, he began, "Her lungs are filling up with fluid. We could subject her to a battery of tests to determine the cause. But even if we discover the problem, there is nothing we can do to save her. Unfortunately, she will have to be put to sleep. Would you still like us to perform the tests?"

An emotional tidal wave was rising up inside and threatening to engulf me. Since I wanted to be fully present with Snappy until her very last breath, I refused to get pulled into the strong current and have it take me away from being completely engaged. So, I chose to focus my mind on the present.

This cleared my mind enough to opt for putting a speedy end to Snappy's suffering rather than holding onto the false hope that the tests might

provide us better options. I believed this was the best course of action, especially since Snappy was exuding an extraordinary aplomb that told me she knew the end was near. She seemed to be patiently awaiting her deliverance.

The veterinarian left to prepare the medication. Replicating her behavior of a week ago, Snappy began to fix my gaze with fierce affection and vigorous purrs. Snappy's actions were so reminiscent of the prior week that I was certain she was trying to tell me something. And what she seemed to be conveying was her immense gratitude. I felt she was thanking me for consistently filling her belly with food and her heart with love. So in return, I laid a supportive hand on her heaving abdomen and used my voice and eyes to radiate love back to her.

The veterinarian softly re-entered the room. Once he administered the fatal serum, it rapidly took hold, erasing from her eyes all traces of the Snappy I knew. Her purring pulse petered out followed by the slow stiffening and cooling of her flesh.

Deeply saddened, I returned home to hug my remaining feline companion and appreciate the willingness of my boyfriend to come be with me in my grief.

In the aftermath of Snappy's death, I realized she left me with a lasting gift. The memory of her passionate displays of gratitude has helped me cope with all subsequent losses. For with each fresh loss I've endured, I am quick to feel gratitude for everything that newly departed being had ever brought to my life. The sweetness of these blessings feels like a taste of honey amidst a bitter brew!



Ruby Beach

By Arthur Cohen

Ten Thousand Candles

By Charles Atkinson

A match flares up,
the room leans in;
crackling wick,
a tapered flame—
small rite for decades,
to enter the day.
Each one burns down,
a pool, a stump—
year after year.
Ten thousand candles,
and only now
to feel it:
We're
the light that follows
light, that leaps
from match to wick,
moment to moment.
To rouse from a sleep
of past and future,
to be this flame,
this fitful one—
call it a way to
exit the dark,
to provision for
a deeper shade.



CONTRIBUTORS

Jean Adler is a retired psychologist living in Vancouver, Canada. She is into yoga, Israeli folk dancing, and bicycling. Following participation in the Dedicated Practitioners Program IV, she has become interested in the Diamond Approach.

Kim Allen lives at Insight Retreat Center as a caretaker and appreciates the wondrous trees in the Santa Cruz area. She also teaches at various Insight centers around the Bay Area and serves as President of the Buddhist Insight Network.

She says of her work: “My practice is informed by deep silence, both in stillness and in motion. The words and images that do appear can seem sparse or separated, but on closer examination, they are linked in subterranean ways and carry their own depth. Sometimes my art feels representative of my mind in meditation.”

Vinit Allen is Executive Director of the non-profit Sustainable World Coalition, providing education on sustainability through books, courses and events. He is a nature lover and creative artist, living in the San Francisco Bay Area.

Charles Atkinson's first collection, *The Only Cure I Know* (San Diego Poets Press), received the American Book Series award for poetry; a chapbook, *The Best of Us on Fire*, won the Wayland Press competition. A third volume, *Because We Are Men*, was awarded the Sow's Ear Poetry Prize. His most recent collection is *Fossil Honey*, from Hummingbird Press. He has also received the Stanford Prize, the *Comstock Review* Prize, the Paumanok Poetry Award (SUNY Farmingdale), the Emily Dickinson Award (Universities West Press) and *The Ledge* Poetry Prize. He lives in Santa Cruz, CA.

Robert Bohanan: Over the course of six years, I have written and posted over one thousand poems. I began the practice a few months into sobriety, when spiritual practice and mindfulness became very real, very concrete for me. Today, I pass it on to others around me, especially those in my recovery community who are lost and confused. The poems, which I lovingly call *Spare Verses*, are written in the morning usually after meditation. Over time, I

noticed they are a way for me to observe rather than judge and to be aware of the connections of my outer ecology and my inner ecology.

Jim Bronson: Jim began working with the inner life and spiritual traditions as a student of Krishnamurti through a meditation course in 1968. After years of reflective meditation and Krishnamurti's pathless approach, Jim's concentration on Vipassana ("Mindfulness") teachings and meditation began in 1990 with Howard Nudleman and continues with being a co-teacher of the Quiet Mountain Insight Meditation Community in Ashland Oregon. Appreciating both prose and poetry and finding it to be an important dharma for his own awakening, Jim likes to memorize pieces and performs them locally with several other literaphiles. Jim finds that coming to the present with a spacious acceptance is a good approach for all of insight meditation, savoring vibrant writing and lightheartedly moving through life's vicissitudes.

Carla Brooke has been part of the IMC community for eleven years. She is the author of the children's book, *Hanai and I*. Her poem "One Seed" has been set to music for children's chorus by composer, John Beeman, Carla's husband. She brings her passion for art, poetry and nature together while teaching mindfulness with children and parents. Creative expression allows Carla to go beneath the words while connecting to a greater fullness of being.

Lorraine Capparell has been recognized for her work as a painter, sculptor, and photographer since 1975. She lives in Palo Alto, CA, where she divides her time between creating visionary sculptural pieces and richly colorful watercolor paintings that communicate her unique focus on life. She has traveled widely in Asia, studying Buddhist and Hindu sculpture, painting, and temple architecture. Her work can be seen on her website, skymuseum.com.

She says of her work: "I find inspiration for my art not only in dreams but also from close friends, Mother Nature, and the imagery of Eastern religions, especially Buddhism. I maintain a regimen that includes tai chi, meditation, and producing a new watercolor painting each day. I make art to pay tribute to the spirit within."

Fran Cesarone is a San Francisco resident who has enjoyed meditating with Bay Area groups for nearly ten years. She finds creative inspiration in nature and sees the potential for humor in most of life's experiences.

She says of her work: "The benefits I receive from meditation include a sense of inner peace and an acceptance for what my life is in the present moment. When I put pen to paper documenting my thoughts, personal history, or developing an idea, I find that I experience the same benefit. As meditation produces clarity and aspires to eliminate "mind clutter," a fertile ground for unlimited creative potential emerges."

Arthur Cohen has been doing black and white photography on film since the 1970s. He recently retired as a high school photography teacher in the Bay Area,

He says of his work: “I have been practicing Buddhist Meditation since the mid 1980’s. I am intrigued by capturing the feeling tone of places and their changing nature on film, which tends to artificially freeze them and make them appear permanent.”

Rebecca Dixon has practiced and taught Vipassana in the Bay Area for many years. She teaches regularly at three sanghas in the East Bay and occasionally at IMC and other places, as listed on RebeccaDixon.org.

Writing, practice and teaching are inter-connected for Rebecca. She sees practice not as a part of life but the way to live. In her writing she seeks to express her experience of the truth of things as they are.

Mary Helen Fein has been meditating since 1991. Her primary teacher is John Travis. She completed the Community Dharma Leader training in 2008 and the Dedicated Practitioner Program in 2013. She teaches at various sitting groups in the Sierra foothills and has been active in Mountain Stream Meditation Center for 20 years. She also owns and operates a web design business in Auburn, CA, where she lives with her husband.

Nancy Flowers writes and consults about human rights and has just completed the Dedicated Practitioners Program at Spirit Rock. She lives in Palo Alto, CA.

Ashvin Iyengar: I am an alumnus of IMC, currently living in Richmond, VA. I am still keeping up with the practice. I have been especially trying to apply mindfulness in my relationships and the workplace. I have a defunct blog about mindfulness in the workplace that I am in the process of restarting: <http://www.awakin.org/read/view.php?tid=709>. My poetry blog is at: <http://seeker-and-the-sought.blogspot.com/>.

Bill Kostura works as an architectural historian, and his previous publications have all been in that field. He discovered Buddhism in 2001 and mainly attends IMC.

He says of his work: “I have found that writing a Buddhist essay tightens up my Buddhist thinking and helps me to notice any sloppiness in my philosophy. So, writing helps my Buddhism, but I’m not sure Buddhism has changed my writing style yet. I still hew closely to the same writing principles I had before 2001. They are to identify my theme and stick closely to it; to write with clarity, in a vivid and engaging manner; and to remove excess verbiage. Regarding the content of my essay or article, I remember how the science fiction writer Theodore Surgeon signed a copy of one of his books for me: Beneath his signature he drew a Q with an arrow through it. It meant, he explained, “Always ask the next question.” And so I do: is what I wrote true? meaningful? worth including? If it’s not, I remove or re-write.

Rick Maddock: A native San Franciscan, Rick was introduced to the dharma by Alan Watts, via his local public television series in the early 1960's. After stints as a college student, a toll collector on the Carquinez Bridge, a gardener in Golden Gate Park, and a researcher at UC San Francisco, he decided to pursue right livelihood as a medical scientist. He received his medical and psychiatric training at UC Davis and Stanford, and has been a professor of psychiatry and neuroscience at UC Davis for almost 30 years. His dharma study has settled into a 21st Century perspective on the Theravada teachings over the last 8 years.

Sushma Patel-Bould is a San Francisco Bay Area Artist, Designer and Photographer based in Menlo Park, California. The creative process is an infinite path of discovery. See more of her work at <http://www.sushmaquilts.com/>.

She says of her work: "Creativity is my spiritual practice."

Bianca Powell currently lives in Ashland, Oregon with her beloved husband, a small garden, and expansive sangha. There, held in such grace and beauty, her practice continues to deepen and mature.

Jim Ramsay : I am 72; live in Nyack, NY; am in a bicoastal relationship with my high school sweetheart and now partner, Anita Kline, who lives in San Francisco; and am retired from several different jobs including college professor, political and corporate speechwriter, editor and free-lance writer. When Anita and I reconnected in 2002, after a 42-year hiatus, she introduced me to meditation, the Dharma and her sangha, the SF Insight Meditation Community.

He says of his work: "The piece I've written for *Passing It On* is a distillation of the connections I've discovered between my Buddhist practice and my art. At Anita's urging, I began to paint when I retired in 2004. I'd always wanted to paint, never had the time; now I do and find that when I look at the world through a painter's eye, I'm also looking at the world through the eye of someone with a Buddhist practice."

Robert Rossel, Ph.D., is a life coach and grief counselor living and practicing in Portola Valley, CA. He is a Buddhist and a long-time practitioner of self-relations psychotherapy and Ericksonian hypnotherapy. With an abiding interest in music, art, yoga, nature, and mind-body practices, Rob has sought for many years to find ways to apply meditation and mindfulness in his spiritual practice and his life. Rob is a husband, father, and grandfather. He plays violin and viola. He is one of the original creators and the core editorial team of *Into the Bardo*, an on-line blogazine that is devoted to creating a common ground (sacred space) through the arts as spiritual practice.

Sydney J. Reuben has taught, coached, and presented workshops on various aspects of self-development for over twenty-five years. Her book, *Finding Her Way*, combines short stories, poems, and fairy tales with both humor and pathos to describe a woman's journey to wholeness.

She says of her work: "My writing seems to mirror my spiritual development, reaching more deeply beneath the surface of events as my practice deepens, becoming more metaphorical and rhythmic as I learn to dance with whatever life brings; and the more I see each day as an adventure, the more risks I take with my writing."

Richard Sievers began practicing in the Theravada tradition in 1984 on a ten-day vipassana retreat. He has had the good fortune to study with many knowledgeable and kind teachers, currently with Gil Fronsdaal at Insight Meditation Center. He has been fortunate to attend long retreat practice at IMS, Spirit Rock, and Insight Retreat Center. He is one of the basic meditation instructors at IMC and the online audio dharma course for those interested in learning meditation, and it is his very favorite aspect of practice.

Gerard Sarnat is the author of two critically acclaimed poetry collections, 2010's *HOMELESS CHRONICLES from Abraham to Burning Man* and 2012's *Disputes*. His poetry has been published in over sixty journals and anthologies. Harvard and Stanford educated, Gerry's been a physician who's set up and staffed clinics for the disenfranchised, a CEO of health care organizations, and a Stanford professor. For *The Huffington Post* review of his work and more; visit GerardSarnat.com. "Untitled" may appear in his third collection, *17s*, in which each poem, stanza, or line has seventeen syllables.

Judy Taylor has been practicing various forms of meditation for over twenty years with exclusive focus on vipassana since 2005. She spends her time writing, reading, dabbling in photography and film, and attempting to live as mindfully as possible. The two essays in this volume are from a short book she is writing which shares what she's learned from cats about the dharma and mindfulness.

Lori Wong is the founding leader of Insight Meditation Central Valley (formerly Insight Meditation Modesto) and has been practicing Insight Meditation since 2003 under the guidance of Gil Fronsdaal. She is a former board member of IMC, a current board member of the Sati Center for Buddhist Studies, and was a founding board member of the Buddhist Insight Network. She is a Community Dharma Leader trained through Spirit Rock Meditation Center in Woodacre, CA.

She says of her work: "I find that prose/poetry allows me to integrate in a succinct way what my practice on retreat (or otherwise) has shown me, using evocative language that is connected to the heart, rather than something constructed from the head. This expression through writing from this heart space is a way of noting or having a way of remembering that insight or deep understanding."



About *Passing It On*

Passing It On is an independent, ad-free collection of writings and art by lay practitioners connected with the Insight Meditation Center in Redwood City, California. The collection celebrates the every-day lives of dharma practitioners, but not in a way that ignores its complexity. The personal essays, short stories, poetry, and art explore the challenges we face and the moments when we rise to meet those challenges.

Passing It On publishes the work of emerging and established artists who are striving to be thoughtful and awake. The collection invites readers to consider an array of ideas and then to join the conversation by submitting work for future editions. The collection is offered freely in the 2500 year-old tradition of *dana*, "generosity," and intends to show that helpful teaching can be found in the ordinary lives of lay practitioners.

Passing It On is a publication of the Insight Meditation Center, which is a tax-exempt, 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization. Publication of *Passing It On* is supported primarily by contributor and reader donations through the Insight Meditation Center. Cash donations to IMC are tax-deductible.

Policies for Passing It On Submissions:

- Material will be peer reviewed and lightly edited
- Fiction or non-fiction should be 1,000 to 3,000 words
- Poetry, photographs and art will mostly remain within a page
- The over-all focus is on exploring mindfulness practice (not just Buddhist)
- References to mindfulness and contemplative practice are encouraged.

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Letters To The Editor

If you're thinking about writing a letter or submitting an artistic contribution to *Passing It On*, give in to the temptation. We love getting email. (Of course, we reserve the right to edit.) Send us your letter or contribution online to: imc.passingiton@gmail.com.

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INDEX

Jean Adler	Page 15
Kim Allen	Page 31
Vinit Allen	Page 15
Charles Atkinson	Page 1, 15, 18, 47
Robert Bohanan	Page 7
Jim Bronson	Page 23, 6, 29
Carla Brooke	Page 30
Lorraine Capparell	Page 4, 36
Fran Cesarone	Page 34, 42
Arthur Cohen:	Page 3, 19, 46
Rebecca Dixon	Page 9
Mary Helen Fein	Page 15
Nancy Flowers	Page 15
Ashvin Iyengar.	Page 16
Bill Kostura	Page 5
Rick Maddock	Page 15
Sushma Patel-Bould	Cover
Bianca Powell	Page 2
Jim Ramsay	Page 8, 27, 32, 39-41
Robert Rossel	Page 20
Sydney J. Reuben	Page 37
Richard Sievers:	Page 14, 24
Gerard Sarnat	Page 30
Judy Taylor	Page 28, 44
Lori Wong	Page 31