In the late 1970’s, Gary Snyder, Nelson Foster and the Ring of Bone Zendo Sangha in Northern California began developing a form of sesshin that takes place in the context of an extended backpacking wilderness expedition. It follows a set schedule and has its own forms similar to, yet different from, our conventional sesshin. The first sesshin of this kind in Hawai‘i took place in 1986 when Nelson was still living in Honolulu and Aitken Roshi still was the primary teacher at PZC. At that time it was called Volcanoes and Vents Sesshin — a tongue-in-cheek variation on the Mountains and Rivers name used in California. Later, Nelson suggested that the Hawai‘i version be called “Hele Mālie”, an Hawaiian phrase meaning to come or go slowly, calmly, and serenely. (Hawaiian Dictionary, Pukui and Elbert, 1986)
Our Hele Mālie this year took place in and along the coastline of Volcanoes National Park on Hawai‘i Island. Although we traversed lava fields, slept by the ocean and swam in clear, anchialine pools, our purpose was nothing other than to realize the Way.

Excerpts from Nelson's essay on M&R sesshin

I've been asked to describe the tradition of Mountains and Rivers Sesshin that the sangha at Ring of Bone Zendo has developed through nearly 40 years of experimentation and practice. To those accustomed to strict, Japanese-style sesshin, the notion that back-packing can serve as a form of intensive Zen practice may seem just one more example of New-Age spirituality run amuck, so I'd like to begin by placing this practice in the context of greater Buddhist tradition before going on to explain the formal means we've devised to encourage, under wilderness conditions, the complete falling away of body and mind that's the hallmark of any true sesshin and, indeed, of all Zen practice.

If we were to trace Mountains and Rivers Sesshin to its earliest sources, we'd have to go back to the most ancient human activities of all—hunting and gathering, moving from place to place in accord with the seasons and availability of food. Most peoples long ago gave up such practices, but spending a week on foot in a genuinely wild place still evokes primordial experience.

Long before Shakyamuni’s time, itinerant seekers were an established feature of the social landscape in India, and they remain so today, ranging from saddhus committed to a life without fixed habitation to ordinary householders for whom one pilgrimage to the Ghanges or to another holy site may fulfill a life-long aspiration.

The early sangha wrote walking into its code, together with mendicancy and forest-dwelling, and it exported the doctrine of meditating in all four of the elemental postures—walking, standing, sitting, and lying—not only in the sutras and shastras that went north to China but also in the practice of the monks who traveled the Silk Road to translate those texts and teach the Dharma. However faithfully the Indian precedent was transmitted, of course, Buddhist pilgrimage tradition took new form in China, modified particularly through the influence of Taoist and Confucian thought and practices. Whereas in India rivers are the holiest geographical features and thus the usual destination for pilgrims, since prehistoric times the Chinese have considered mountains the most numinous of places, associated with deities, immortals, and sages and with the acquisition of virtue, wisdom, and miraculous powers. So it's to the peaks that Chinese seekers have customarily turned their staffs, including our own ancestors in Chan.

... From a relatively early date, Chan texts put a premium on ...travel to the four quarters, as a means for monks first to find a true master and later to deepen their realization and sharpen their ability to present the Dharma by encountering masters or seasoned practitioners from other lineages and other parts of the country. They called it xingjiao 行腳 (lit., going on foot), and a well-defined dress, gear kit, etiquette, and support structure developed around it. Instances of xingjiao abound in Chan literature, including the great teaching records and koan texts, and its forms are preserved in the ritual pilgrimage and almsrounds of Japanese Zen.

China being a vast land, its mountain ranges separated by wide, dusty plains and great rivers, xingjiao wasn’t something to undertake lightly. Not only did it require these people-of-place to live in the rough and venture far from their home precincts but it also entailed covering very large distances and sometimes staying on the trail for very long periods of time. Zhaozhou is renowned for doing 20 years of xingjiao, but such extended kinhin wasn’t as exceptional as it may seem. Zhaozhou’s contemporary Yanguan reportedly spent 30 years touring the Chan mountains, and the later master Fenyang, author of the "Song of Xingjiao," is said to have vis-
ited 71 teachers. Many other monks—Koreans and Japanese, in addition to Chinese—spent decades pounding the path.

... Over the years, through trial and error, inspiration and accident, Mountains and Rivers Sesshin has gradually evolved a schedule and set of forms similar to but different from that of conventional sesshin. A typical day begins at 4:30 am, ends at 9 pm, and includes four hours of zazen—two hours each in early morning and at night, with the opportunity for dōkusan—and approximately six hours of silent backpacking. We eat our meals together, taking lunch informally on the trail but maintaining almost the same rituals for breakfast and supper as during sesshin in the zendo. Each day, before setting out, we meet for a briefing on the day’s hike, to resolve problems that have arisen (organizational, medical, interpersonal), and to have a presentation and exchange on an appropriate text, often a selection from Dōgen Zenji. His illuminating, endlessly challenging "Mountains and Rivers Sutra" is a favorite for this occasion, but we’ve studied many other texts as well.

... At a seated sesshin, participants have the experience of practicing solitarily, without direct human interaction for most of the day, and sitting, at the same time, in intimate community. We strike a similar balance at Mountains and Rivers Sesshin by keeping silent throughout the hiking and leaving enough space between individual hikers so that each of us is walking basically alone. When the trail is clear and other conditions permit, as they usually do, we actually walk out of sight of one another for most of the hiking day. At times when this seems potentially unsafe, the trail leader calls us to close up the line and hike within sight of one another.

Each day, at the trail meeting (if not sooner), a trail leader and "sweep" are selected. Throughout the day’s walk, the trail leader and the sweep bracket the rest of the group, providing a sort of moving enclo-

sure in which the other participants are free to give themselves wholly to practice, wandering along utterly without concern.

... At Mountains and Rivers Sesshin, our purpose is nothing other than to realize the Way. All else is subordinate to that. We go to marvelous places, see beautiful things, get lots of exercise, and have a good time with friends, but that's all incidental to our purpose.

Sara Bauer reflects on Hele Mālie and her path to PZC Temple Keeper

If you had told me a year ago that I would be living in Hawai‘i, I would not have believed you. I had never once thought about moving here before January. In fact, it wasn’t even on my list of destinations to visit. I hadn’t spent my lifetime dreaming and scheming about getting here, fantasizing about what it would be like. I grew up in the middle of the continent. When I taught English in Japan I was
buried in the mountains. The one time I did live by 
the ocean was in NYC, but you’d hardly conceptualize 
that while working in a penthouse on 7th Avenue and 78th Street. What’s more, I’ve always considered myself a “winter person,” praying for fresh powder, loving the swift glide of my cross-country skis, the colder the better. And now here I was, about to set out on a 5-day backpacking retreat on an island in the middle of the ocean. I didn’t know what I was doing but I was sure as hell living. Add sesshin to this exotic environment and clearly I was in a particularly unique situation. I had never been on a backpacking sesshin, so I didn’t know what to expect. On the way to the trailhead, someone mentioned that the ‘Ōhi’a trees were dying en masse. I had never even heard of an ‘Ōhi’a but suddenly I wanted to know: “Which ones?” I chirped and they were pointed out.

Backpacking is one thing I do know well. Each time I put on a heavy backpack carrying everything I need, I’m totally free. It’s like I get to remove the weight of the world in order to carry my pack. The familiarity of my boots, the straps against my shoulders and the sweat on my back are sensations my body gladly invites. What I was to discover is that sesshin and backpacking go together like peanut butter and jelly, or grapefruit and cinnamon. Step after step offered a new opportunity to study extensively, as Michael and Dōgen encouraged us to do. A new world emerged at each ridge and turn. This was sesshin, but it felt as natural as the rising and setting of the moon.

On the last day we made our longest hike from the beach back up to the ridge from where we came. Atop the ridge I stepped into an expanse of burnished volcanic rock, dirt and dust in hues of chocolate and blood, and low grasses in sage. Moving slowly along I looked up and discovered one particular ‘Ōhi’a reaching steadily across the trail. It stood like a gateway: its trunk was gnarled yet persistent, with waxy green leaves and magenta pom-poms bursting forth. I had seen many on the trail that day, but I now finally knew the ‘Ōhi’a.

As I sat in the circle at the end of the trail, I looked around at the smiling faces. Despite being worlds away from everything I had come to depend on, I knew that I had truly come home. I am deeply honored to serve as your temple keeper and I am deeply appreciative of the assistance, support, and generosity I have received from the sangha thus far. Please don’t hesitate to reach out regarding any concerns, ideas, questions, or help you may need. Aloha! —Sara

Dōgen Zenji’s Shōbōgenzō Henzan

For our Dharma talks this past Hele Mālie Sesshin Michael took up the Henzan 偏参 chapter of Dōgen’s Shōbōgenzō. In Chan and Zen writings Henzan (Ch: biancan) refers to the practice of traveling widely to study with various masters to sharpen one’s Dharma eye and to develop and refine one’s expression of the Dharma. "Hen" means "everywhere" and "the whole." Zan” (also "san”) in Sino-Japanese means "to counsel," "to consult together," "to take part in," "to consider." It is the same character as the san of Dokusan. Henzan has been variously translated as: "Extensive Study," "All-Inclusive Study," "Thorough Exploration," and "On Seeking One’s Master Far and Wide."

Early in Henzan, Dōgen quotes the following exchange:

_The great master Xuansha Shibei was once addressed by Xuefeng, who said, “Ascetic Bei, why don’t you go off on extensive study (Henzan)?”_ The master said, "Bodhidharma didn’t come to the Eastern Land; the Second Ancestor didn’t go to the Western Heavens.” Xuefeng deeply approved this.

Dōgen Zenji commented:

_The meaning of the extensive study spoken of by Xuefeng naturally does not recommend his leaving the peak, does not recommend his going north and_
Sara K. Bauer, 2016. “Henzan,” cut paper, 5” x 7”
coming south: it helps him in the extensive study of "Bodhidharma didn’t come to the Eastern Land; the Second Ancestor didn’t go to the Western Heavens" spoken of by Xuansha.

Michael’s Comments: One could say the theme of this passage is coming and going, or more to the point, no coming or going. In our conventional way of thinking and understanding, we suppose we are now “here” and we move (walk, ride, fly …) to another location—“there.”

The assumption seems to include some notion of ourselves as a constant that leaves one place and goes to a different place. Dōgen tells us we should study this coming and going carefully. In other words, we should study extensively this coming and going, this walking, this Hele Mālie.

When you attend to this matter of coming and going carefully, what do you find? Do you actually come and go—now in Honolulu, now in Hilo, now at Hilina Pali, now at Ka’aha? What then is it that comes and goes? Don’t just believe your thoughts—actually look and see! What is this business of here and there? Do these words actually refer to anything? We could just as well say that there is here (where else could it be) and here is there (if you speak of “here” you’ve just made it into a separate “there”).

We usually think of the trail as going from here to there, but does the trail really go anywhere? The trail, if there is any trail, is the whole trail. If it’s not the whole trail, it isn’t a trail at all. When you consider the trail as the whole trail, does it really go anywhere? Every part, every step of the trail touches the whole trail—there is no gap. And what of your own life? . . . Don’t just keep stumbling along trying to get somewhere. Study this matter to the limit. Penetrate into it and let it penetrate you and open you up with each step. This is Henzan. This is extensive study.

Dōgen Zenji said:
The “Bodhidharma didn’t come to the Eastern Land” spoken of by Xuansha is not some confused words about coming or not coming; it is the principle that “the great earth lacks an inch of land.” “Dharma” here is the “point of the vital artery.”

In general, the “land” is not east or west; east and west have nothing to do with the “land.” “The Second Ancestor didn’t go to the Western Heavens” [means that,] in extensively studying the Western Heavens, “he didn’t go to the Western Heavens.” If the Second Ancestor went to the Western Heavens, one arm would fall off. Now, why did the Second Ancestor not go to the Western Heavens? Because he jumped into the eye of Blue Eyes, he “didn’t go to the Western Heavens.” If he had not jumped into the eye of Blue Eyes, he would definitely have gone to the Western Heavens. He made plucking out Bodhidharma’s eye his extensive study.

Michael’s Comments: “The great earth lacks an inch of land” is a saying appearing in a number of Zen texts and usually attributed to the Song Period master Changling Shouzhou. What is the content of one inch or one mile? If you mark the boundary points, is there any difference between what is inside the marks and what is outside? And how about the one doing the marking—any difference there? As the master Linji said, “You can’t drive a nail into empty space.” That fact is the vital artery of the Zen Way and the vital artery of all beings.

Dōgen says the second ancestor didn’t go to the Western Heavens, but rather jumped into the eye of Blue Eyes. Blue Eyes refers to Bodhidharma. Dōgen continues: “If he had not jumped into the eye of Blue Eyes, he would definitely have gone to the Western Heavens.” If he hadn’t made that leap he’d still be coming and going, being up and being down, being born and dying, forever. “Jumping into the eye of Blue Eyes” and “plucking out Bodhidharma’s eye” is plunging into your own unknowing, into your own walking, into Mu. Each step opens the unbounded infinite nature that you are. “The great earth lacks an inch of land.” Take that step into extensive study. Jump in!
Let the Ahu Find You

—Kendra Martyn

Dōgen Zenji said:

“The sweet melon is sweet through to its stem”,
“the bitter gourd is bitter to its root”, the sweet sweetness is sweet through to the stem. This is how it has been studied.

Michael’s Comments: This too is a saying occurring with some frequency in Zen texts. In Case 87 of the Blue Cliff Record Yunmen says to his assembly:

Medicine and sickness regulate one another. The whole great earth is medicine. What is yourself?

Master Yuanwu commented on Yunmen’s question saying:

Sweet melon is sweet to the stem. Where did he get this news?

I can’t help but laugh every time I hear this: "Where did he get this news?" Ha! It’s quite a mystery isn’t it? When you bite into a juicy sweet cold melon, what else is there? "To study the self is to forget the self." This is how it has been studied.

No additions or subtractions could make it any clearer: "the sweet melon is sweet through to its stem"; "the bitter gourd is bitter to its root" The taste of your morning tea is extensive study; the weight of your backpack is extensive study.

The Volcanoes National Park trails we walked during Hele Mālie are marked by rock pilings called ahu. Staying on the trail requires scanning the foreground in search of the ahu. Sometimes the next ahu wasn’t readily visible and on several occasions I found myself wondering, with apprehension and usually exhaustion, if I had gotten off the trail. Then I would search around anxiously, eyes darting one way and then another, seeking to locate the next ahu, and if I didn’t see it right away, I would look for the person behind me to see if he or she saw the way. It might have been the second day during our morning “check in” meeting when Michael said, “if you don’t see the ahu right away, just wait and let the ahu find you.” Like so many of the Zen teachings Michael has shared, this one took root in my mind.

In June, after Hele Mālie, I repeatedly found myself unsure of the direction to take. My path included another five-day backpacking trip in Yosemite where more than once I lost the trail, but my body grew stronger and my confidence in forging swift streams walking on precarious logs or rocks improved each day. This trip also involved making plans and traveling with my husband and his elderly parents to attend their granddaughter’s UC Davis
graduation ceremony and associated social events, assisting in creating their medical power of attorney documents and helping them define their end of life wishes—sensitive issues and activities requiring patience and compassion.

From here the path required flying to Indiana to navigate the ins and outs of health insurance and Medicare coverage and overseeing care plans and physical therapy in a rehab center for my own elderly father, who had not been home since breaking his leg in early April. What I encountered there included intimate, and at times fragile, interpersonal exchanges between me and my siblings and their spouses, my father, step mother, nieces and nephews and my husband. These exchanges uncovered and revealed deep-seated anger, wants, needs, and fears of the individuals making up a family. Often I did not know how to respond, and I wanted to extract myself to eliminate what felt like the cause of others’ unhappiness. Yet, I didn’t know what was right or wrong, or even whether such a determination could ever be made. Could this possibly be my path? Where was Zen now?

But finally, the words, “Let the ahu find you” resurfaced in my consciousness and I began to relax. I could not solve all the problems, nor did I even understand them, and certainly I was not alone in the cause.

The ahu found me, right where I was. I was not lost or off the trail . . .

He sat in his wheelchair waiting for me to push him down the long carpeted hallway to the front porch of Mulberry Health.

“I think you should roll yourself to the front door, Dad.”

“NO! I’m too slow!”

“But we’ve got all day, Dad. What else do we have to do? Besides, it will build your arm strength and you’ll get more adept at maneuvering the wheelchair.” I smiled.

Ever so slowly, Dad began to roll the wheelchair towards the front door.

Lisa and Matt Say Goodbye

How can we leave a place?

In a way, I feel like we will never really leave Pālolo, but carry a piece of the rich fabric of practice and community with us wherever we go. I’m so grateful for the opportunity to participate in this living tradition with encouragement of so many flavors—birdcalls in the morning and the storm cloud colors that wake up the sky; you sitting next to me, perfectly still; patience, attention with my questions; nothing ignored. At Pālolo, I feel like I have lived closer to community than I have in any of my wandering—I know the rich sangha available to take up my most challenging question. I’m not alone when things come up.

I cannot say enough about what I learned and take away from my time on the Board of Directors—thank you for trusting me to serve. This opportunity to sit with the varied experiences and good intentions of our group showed me first-hand how things get done, and a way of doing them with the benefit
of taking many perspectives into account. I see now that a variety of ideas, opinions and perspectives add strength and agility to whatever is being discussed—I hope to find other opportunities to collaborate so productively and considerately.

—Lisa

My five years practicing with the Diamond Sangha, almost three of which were living at the zen center, seems at once long and very short—as many things do. I feel so fortunate to have done Hele Mālie every year I was there. How can I say goodbye? When I say to you that I can’t find the words, I don’t mean that I think there are words out there somewhere to say this goodbye just right. Rather, that there simply aren’t the words to express this good bye.

A hug, a smile, moist eyes with a long sigh. That’ll do.

You’re all truly a family to me, and practicing with each of you has changed my life completely.

I will miss you all, but I don’t think you’ve seen the last of me!

—Matt

I hiked my first Hele Mālie last year, at Haleakalā, and Michael said to let the landscape reveal itself to me; don’t go chasing after it. And it wasn’t until our last day of Hele Mālie this year, hiking out of Volcano National Park on the Big Island, that I understood what he meant. We in the front walked with space between us—enough that at times I couldn’t see anyone ahead of or behind me. I attended to my crunching footsteps, walking Mu, and noticed unexplainable lava formations as they appeared before me, stopping until the others came into view—looking up at the sky, just breathing. Somewhere in the walking, the ‘Ōhi’a breathed in the wind, gently rustling, and when I looked up, with soft eyes this time, at the tall trees swaying in front of the far-off ocean, the world looked softer too. I could see it with more than just my eyes. And it occurred to me that trying to capture the landscape with my eyes or mind is not so different from trying to capture a person in a picture—it will only ever give me the smallest hint of what is really there. Crunch, crunch, crunch.

—Lisa

Photo taken by a friend. Volcanoes National Park, Hele Mālie, 2016
Hele Mālie
—Matt Stuckey

A vision of bison comes to mind watching
kinhin-backpackers slowly
plodding through the grass,
pausing every so often to
check back on one another,
sometimes stopping completely,
still and silent.

Packs are large, like buffalo bodies that look
too big for their own feet.
Ascending to ‘Ōhi’a forest,
merging with the land in every step -

Now twisted gray wood
Now sharp lava
A gray cloud filled with light
And each raindrop full of wonder

Feet step then tumble
Pele smiles on crusted lips
a friend says Hello!
—Julia Finn

Hele Mālie
—Michael Kieran

Steadily climbing and descending on the level ground,
Walking along the glistening ripples and sharp fissures of
my own mind.
Ahu dancing the ancient chant,
Crunch, crunch, crunch, crunch,
Bodhidharma didn’t come from the West.

Sara, Kathy, Kendra, Tom,
Crystal, Lisa, Julia, Matt,
Exquisite water bodies cooling and mysterious
in Keauhou wind and mist
A truly diamond sangha.
I love my boots.
We gather for Zazen most Sundays from 9 to 11 am, and most Wednesdays from 7 to 9 pm, followed by tea. Variations on that schedule, and special events, are highlighted below. Please see, or download, our full calendar from our website, diamondsangha.org, call us at 808-735-1347 or find us on Facebook.

September
9/4, Sunday: Zazenkai/Dokusan, 8:30 am to 4 pm (bring a brownbag lunch).
9/9, Friday: Board of Directors Meeting (please call the office for further information).
9/10, Saturday: Orientation to Zen Practice, 9 am to noon. All are welcome and no preregistration is needed.
9/11, Sunday: Fall Sangha Meeting including 2017 Calendar, 11:30 am following regular Zazen/Dokusan from 9 to 11 am.
9/16-9/18, Friday–Sunday: closed for Vipassana Hawai‘i Retreat.
9/23, Saturday: Sangha Circle (discussion), 2 to 4 pm.
9/25, Sunday: Zazen/Samu, 9 am to noon, followed by lunch.

October
10/3-10/7, Monday—Friday: The Diamond Sangha Teachers’ Circle will be meeting as guests of the Honolulu Diamond Sangha. Our Wednesday evening and other special programs will be announced.
10/8, Saturday: Party or Picnic with our guests, to be announced.
10/9, Sunday: Founders’ Day Ceremony, 9 am to noon, tea.
10/15, Saturday: Orientation to Zen Practice, 9 am to noon. All are welcome and no preregistration is needed.
10/16, Sunday: Zazenkai, 8:30 am to 4 pm (bring a brownbag lunch).
10/21, Friday: Board of Directors Meeting (please call the office for further information).
10/21–10/23, Friday through Sunday: closed for Vipassana Hawaii Retreat.
10/30, Sunday: Work Party, 9 am to noon, lunch.

November
11/4 - 11/9, Friday-Wednesday: Maui Zendo sesshin, please contact the Maui Zendo for registration or questions.
11/11, Friday: Board of Directors Meeting, 6:30.
11/13, Sunday: Zendo Leaders’ Meeting and Scheduling Meeting 11:30, following regular Zazen/Dokusan from 9 to 11 am.
11/19, Saturday: Orientation to Zen Practice, 9 am to noon. All are welcome and no preregistration is needed.
11/20, Sunday: Zazen/Samu, 9 am to noon, followed by lunch.
11/27, Sunday: Hiking Zazenkai, 9 am to 4 pm, meet at trail (to be announced), bring a brownbag lunch.
11/25-12/3: Closed for Vipassana Hawaii retreat. Please contact Vipassana Hawaii for registration or questions.

Highlights From the Calendar

Administrator, HDS: Susan Brandon
Temple Keeper, Pālolo Zen Center: Sara Bauer
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All photos are by Kathy Ratcliffe, Volcanoes National Park, 2016, unless otherwise stated.
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