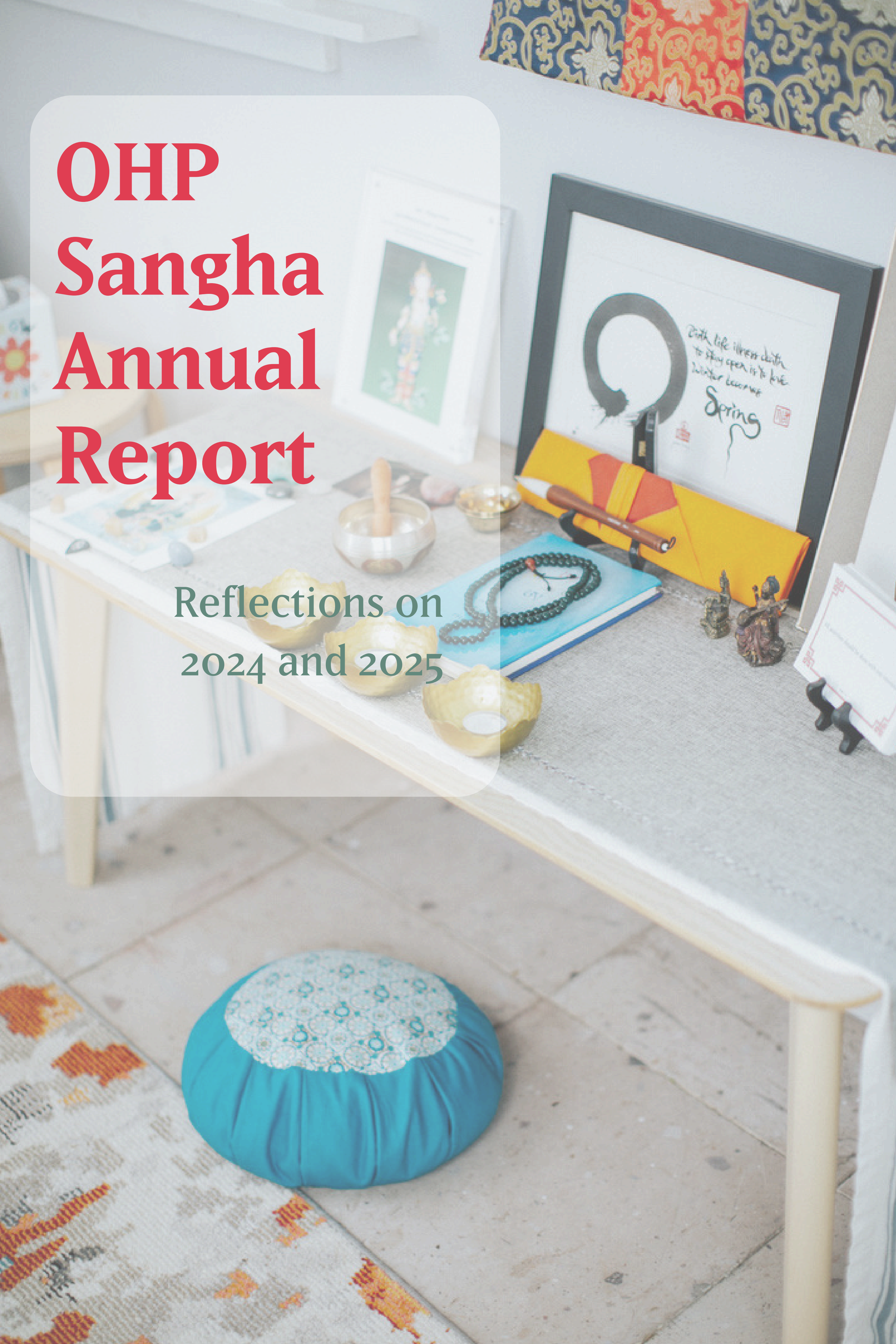


# OHP Sangha Annual Report

Reflections on  
2024 and 2025



*Thank you so  
much for  
being a part  
of the OHP  
sangha.*



What we are building together is unprecedented: a “virtual” community practicing real dharma, each in a very individual way, informed by a female teacher who is also a householder. As far as I can see, these conditions are singular. There is no particular roadmap. Our journey together seems to reveal itself once we turn a corner, but not before.

I’d like to share some thoughts about our sangha in 2024 and where we are going in 2025. My intention in doing so is the wish to share with you some insights into the guiding principles and dreams that underlie our curricula. This feels especially important since we are in 609 (the current number of sangha members) different places.

It is one of the great privileges of my entire life to build this remarkable community with you.

But first, a few thoughts about 2024.



# 2024



It was a very strange year, most particularly due to the persistent divisiveness and misinformation that culminated in our presidential election. There are people who are devastated and terrified. There are others who are not. We cannot understand each other...at least right now. Who is right? What is true?

My best answers are: No one and Hard to say.

It seems to me that we are all trapped in well-funded and unremitting explosions of propaganda. We find ourselves together in what Vajrayana Buddhists call the jealous god realm.



As you may know, Buddhist cosmology posits six realms of existence:

1. **The god realm** where everything goes perfectly without any obstacles and whatever you wish for you immediately have. You can fly and are perfectly psychic. That may sound great but there is a downside: a long, long lifespan culminating in an extended and painful death with very little hope of enlightenment. There is not enough suffering to compel one to practice and study the dharma so one is still bound to the cycles of samsara. There is no opportunity to learn how to care for others because everyone is just dandy. True wisdom and compassion are simply not needed.

2. **The jealous god realm, inhabited by beings who are obsessed with power, wealth, and influence**, all of which they already have in endless supply. Still, they do not believe that they have enough and so wage war to get what the other jealous gods have. The warfare never ends because there is never a moment deemed “enough.”

3. **The human realm, which is where we reside**. This is the lucky realm, y’all. Although there is certainly extraordinary pain and loss, we also have what is necessary to study the dharma: a roof over our heads, food to eat, and some sense of basic peace. We are not fighting every single day for survival, although some days (weeks, months, years) it may feel that way. Still, we have the right ratio of suffering to joy. Too much or too little of one and we feel no compulsion to practice. So, this is the good one.

4. **The hungry ghost realm**, inhabited by beings with teeny-tiny mouths, narrow necks, and enormous bellies which can never, ever be filled because the means of entry are just not up to the job. There is perpetual hunger and dissatisfaction.

5. **The animal realm**, a place of fear where survival is the primary concern. There is no vision or capacity to understand the what, where, why, how of reality.

6. **The hell realm**, where there is only pure suffering.

Though we may not be jealous gods ourselves (except on occasion), we are currently living in a jealous god realm, ruled by beings and entities that can never, ever, EVER be satisfied until they have conquered everything. Own everything. And once they do, new enemies will be created to ransack. It is a world of intense battle in which everything and everyone (including you and me) is viewed as a possible enemy. No effort is spared in the name of domination and aggression.

Jealous gods are extremely dangerous when they wage battle in the human or other realms, but most dangerous, it seems, when they wage war on each other. This is what is happening now. We are all collateral damage. We can't fight the jealous gods with human realm weapons (laws, common sense, academia, public protests, and so on). We cannot go head-to-head because we are not jealous gods.

It can be tempting to try to choose from among the jealous gods and align ourselves with one or the other. The jealous gods who insist that their religion or science is the only one. The jealous gods who call themselves Republicans. The jealous gods who call themselves Democrats. The jealous gods who want us to be vaccinated. The jealous gods who warn us against vaccination. Those who pose as rebels or saviors.

They are all lying. They do not care about you or me. They care only for power and control. And they really, really want you to choose a side. They will spend endless money and time on this endeavor and they promise you a bitter end should you choose incorrectly.

My friends. Let us not fall for this. Let us not choose from among the jealous gods. Let us, instead, choose ourselves and each other. (Cue a jealous god who will tell you how naive and stupid this is.) The red flag that we've fallen into the delusion of the jealous gods' offered choices should be when we feel that we know something that others do not; that our side is the right one, or that we are simply victims without recourse; and, of course, in any circumstance where murder and mayhem seem justifiable. Please do not enter this realm.



How do we refrain from entering? Through mindfulness-awareness. Through clear-seeing. Turning within and feeling into the extraordinary heartbreak that arises from acknowledging the human condition. Through choosing wakefulness again and again by becoming as consistent as possible in our meditation practice.

Our practice, then, is what helps us remain connected to each other rather than any school of thought. Because it rouses genuine wisdom, compassion, and courage, it is a path of warriorship, one that has never been more necessary. It is also a path no jealous god would ever embark upon and when we are tempted to pick up their weapons (propaganda, warfare, rage, cornering influence), we can be dissuaded. They cannot.

Our practice is a way to discover an endless reserve of what was mentioned above: wisdom, compassion, and courage, aka the three qualities of the awakened mind. Whether you have been meditating for a week or a year (or more), I'm sure you can see that these qualities arise spontaneously from our exceedingly simple (though not easy) practice of sitting there "doing nothing."



Many of you know what I'm going to say next: *don't take my word for this. Or anything. Think about it yourself and see what you discover.* The teachings only come to life when you bring them into your unique inner world. (I have great hope that as we move away from patriarchal, hierarchical ways of sharing wisdom, "don't take my word for this" will become a more widespread teaching strategy.)

During more conventional times, I would say that simply having a steady (or steady-ish) meditation practice is enough. It will rouse the more common results of meditation: stress-reduction, becoming more patient, less easily triggered, nicer, and so on. These are great things. But these are not conventional times and more is needed—more magic, more auspicious coincidence, more depth, more mystery, and less conventionality: the esoteric fruits of practice.

To enter this realm, your entire life needs to become part of your practice. It is not just about sitting on the cushion for 5 or 10 or 45 minutes and then going into your life. Please do sit for 5 or 10 or 45 minutes; it will enrich your life. But also begin to dismantle any barriers between what you do on the cushion and what you do everywhere else. We are seeking to discover all the ways in which our homes, relationships, jobs, and art are practice; everything from the way we keep house to the relationships we choose to invest in (or not) is included.

I know that so many of you want to make the world a better place and are deeply worried about the future. While it remains important to speak out, support just causes, and take care of each other, it can feel as though such efforts do not create lasting change. It is difficult to detect any echoes from our best efforts.



My suggestion is this: to make the world a more sane, kind, and vibrant place, focus on making *your* world as sane, kind, and vibrant as possible. I'm not talking about being nice or anything like that. I'm talking about creating a world of richness. Such a world definitely echoes beyond its confines.

So how do we do this? As you may have heard me say on any number of occasions, to keep your practice sacred (meaning: powerful), make offerings, request blessings, and dedicate the merit. ([Here](#) is an explanation of these steps.) To treat your practice as a ritual, rather than something on your to-do list, elevates it in an indescribable way. Rituals are how we feel into the world we long to create. Rituals connect us to what we *know* is right there, waiting for us to enter. Ritual is the way to declare our inherent wealth.



In addition to these semi-all-over-the-place reflections on 2024 (blame hip replacement surgery), this was also a year when my own thinking became more clear about what we are actually doing here. When the OHP started, it was a place where you could learn to meditate and establish a regular practice. Over the years, it has become much more than this. Many of you have taken refuge. Developed great insight into your life. Witnessed the power of the practice as you meet moments of life and death. Found yourself changing and becoming stronger without quite knowing how. How to describe what is underneath all this?



Here is my best shot:

***We engage in daily ritual.*** In this way, we begin (and end) our day with a declaration of wealth and invocation of the protector principle.

***We live as mystics (hiding in plain sight).*** Rather than expressing our spirituality in a monastery or a cave, we express it as householders in the way we relate to the ordinary/extraordinary aspects of daily life: home, food, clothing, and so on.

***The personal is not the obstacle, it is the way.*** Rather than trying to rid ourselves of “ego” (whatever that is) or small self, we embrace that self as guide.

***We dream on behalf of others.*** We dream for those who cannot or will not. Our investigation into the personal serves everyone in our world. Dreaming on behalf of others is especially important for those in distress or working with less capacity for consciousness. Beings such as animals or the mentally ill or trees especially need our dreams for them. No being or entity is excluded from our capacities.

***We are willing to taste grief and heartbreak*** at their depths and recognize that the more we feel, the more we heal (ourselves and others). We are willing to hold it all to the best of our ability.

***We clean up after ourselves as an expression of sacredness*** (physically, emotionally, spiritually). As you may know, I often talk about how valuable it is to clean your house. Or your room. Or your car. Or your office. Your mind. Wherever you spend the most time. I’m not saying this because clean is better (although it is) but because it creates an environment in which your rituals can thrive. It also signals the kind of world you want to live in. It creates a sense of protection from chaos and disorder.

As time goes by and our conversation deepens, I see more and more clearly that this is what we are really up to in the OHP sangha. These explorations are about stepping fully into our practice for its mystical, witchy, shamanic, magical powers. If you want! No one has to do these things! But you could try and see what happens.

I mention all of this because it is the foundation for what is planned for our sangha in 2025.

# 2025

## THE PATH

We will continue our sangha newsletter with contributions from me, Crystal Gandrud, and Kevin Townley.

Our theme for 2025 is:

### **Commencing the Great Work: Your Life is the Path**

It's time for the magician in each of us to arise. "The Great Work" is a term associated with Hermeticism and alchemy, bodies of knowledge that define distinct phases of transformation. In 2025, we will consider the stages of alchemy from a dharmic perspective. The connection between meditation, the dharma, and alchemy is startling, utterly practical, and, hopefully, transformative.

Traditional alchemy comprises seven stages: calcination, dissolution, separation, conjunction, fermentation, sublimation, and radiation.

Each phase has a "base matter," symptoms, a strategy, and a profound result. For example, the great book, "On Becoming an Alchemist" by Catherine MacCoun, describes calcination (the first phase) in this way:

The base matter is called false roots

The symptoms are anxiety, loss (and fear of loss), external upheavals

The strategy is to "avoid blaming self or others...and refrain from attempts to explain misfortune"

The result is confidence.

Yes please! I'll have what she's having.

As there are 12 months and 7 alchemical stages, we are dividing the months in the following way, offering Buddhist teachings that relate to each stage:



February: Calcination  
March and April: Dissolution  
May and June: Separation  
July and August: Conjunction  
September: Fermentation  
October and November: Sublimation  
December: Radiation

Rather than a Path newsletter each month, you will receive seven editions throughout the year. To further the dialog, we invite questions concerning the alchemy of meditation and will create additional newsletters with our answers, sent to all. In this way, we hope to hear from more of you about the material in a direct way.

## **BOOK CLUBS**

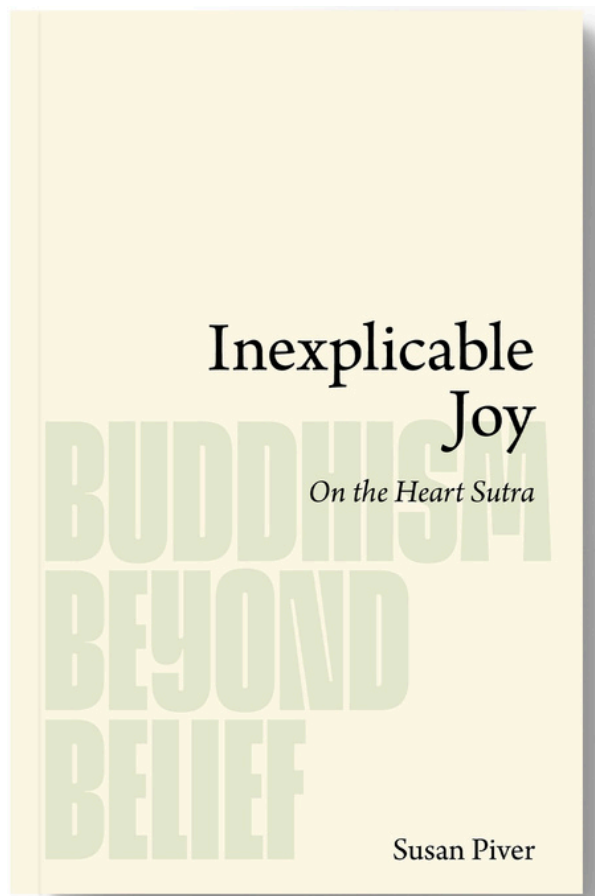
Beginning in February, we will offer a chance to participate in a book club at a time that works for you. Each book club will meet weekly for 3 months. At the end, your group may decide to continue with another book or not. For this first round, we offer two titles with study guides: *On Becoming an Alchemist* (for those who want to dive even more deeply into this astonishing topic) and *The Heart of Unconditional Love* by my own teacher, Tulku Thondup Rinpoche. Going forward, we will have new study guides, or your group may decide on a new title based on mutual agreement. Please look for an email in January with all the details.

## **BUDDHISM BEYOND BELIEF: THE PROGRAM**

On January 30, I'm launching an 11-week course of study on foundational Buddhist teachings based on the three yanas (or vehicles) of Buddhist wisdom. We will talk about the four noble truths, the six paramitas, the Heart Sutra, as well as teachings from Vajrayana Buddhism on ordinary magic and the power of environment as a source of wisdom. All the details are [here](#). It would be so lovely to see you there. Two full scholarships are offered.

## **BUDDHISM BEYOND BELIEF: THE BOOK SERIES**

On January 29, our in-house publishing arm, Lionheart Press, is launching a series of small books called *Buddhism Beyond Belief*. Each book will introduce foundational Buddhist wisdom in down-to-earth language. The first, authored by me, is *Inexplicable Joy: On the Heart Sutra*. I am very excited to share this with you.



## **DAILY MEDITATIONS**

We will continue with 9a ET sits with the teachers you have come to know and love. Weekends will continue to be guided by graduates of our Meditation Teacher Training.

I would like to teach more in the coming year and Bridget has graciously agreed to alternate Tuesdays with me, beginning on January 14th.

Wednesday sits with Maho will begin at 8:30a for those who wish to explore adding chanting to their daily practice. The regularly scheduled practice begins at 9a, as always. If you want to learn more about the chants, please visit [this](#) page.

## **SUNDAY MEDITATION IMMERSION and CREATIVE CONGREGATION**

Will continue on the 2nd Sunday and 3rd Saturday of each month, respectively.



## **FRIDAY SANGHA GATHERINGS**

Will continue at 3p ET. One of my wishes for 2025 is to have a second gathering at some point for those who can never make the 3p ET time. Stay tuned and thanks for being patient!

## **IN-PERSON RETREATS**

I'm teaching a weekend program, Your Life is the Path, at Kriplau in Western Massachusetts, April 11-13.

There will be a week-long deep meditation retreat at Drala Mountain Center in Colorado, August 25-Sept 1. It is not up on their site yet, but should be soon. If I could urge you to come to any program, it would be this one. It is constructed to be a very traditional meditation retreat and will include lots of sitting, Buddhist chants, a discussion about shrines and shrine objects, and a thorough review of shrine-room etiquette, as well as how to establish a daily ritual at home.

I'm planning a small meditation and writing retreat in my home in Austin in November. Please stay tuned for details.

## **REDISCOVERING CONFIDENCE IN CHALLENGING TIMES with Michael Carroll and Susan**

In this 3-class series, we will explore confidence from the three yana perspective. Classes will be held on March 11, 18, and 25 from 6:30p - 8:00p ET. Free for sangha members. All classes will be recorded.

## **REFUGE VOW CEREMONY**

On June 22, I'm honored to offer a refuge vow ceremony for anyone who would like to formally commit to the Buddhist path. There will be an opportunity to talk this over one-to-one beginning in May.

# *Personal Note*

2024 has been a difficult year. Several things happened that compelled me to unexpectedly slow down. I have not been on top of my game for much of the year and have felt a bit lost. Not in a bad way, particularly, but not in a way I am familiar with at the same time.

On December 29, 2023, my root teacher, Tulku Thondup Rinpoche, died. He had lived a long, fruitful, extraordinary life...though you would never know about him unless someone instructed you to look. (Luckily for me, someone did more than 30 years ago.) I could go on and on about my shocking good fortune and what it was like to be in the orbit of such a person. Spoiler alert: it was totally ordinary. There were neither bells nor whistles. Lightning did not strike. No one told me what to do or “called me on my shit” to demonstrate spiritual mastery. I mention these things because they are what most of us expect will happen upon meeting a true teacher. For perspective, I can say that I didn’t even realize he was my teacher for about 15 years. Only when I looked back did I see that he had been guiding my path in truly imperceptible ways. Well, well.

When he was dying, I asked Sam, my meditation teacher, what I should do as he passed. “Just mix your mind with his,” he said. And so I tried to do so. The morning he died, I went for a dawn swim at Barton Springs in Austin, Texas, a three acre spring-fed pool. Because it was pitch black and 30 degrees out, I was almost the only one there. The water was warmer than the air so the pool was bathed in mist. Every once in a while, I felt like someone was swimming near me. The next time that happens, I thought, I’m going to say *dude, this is a very big pool, do you have to swim so close?* But when I looked, there was no one there. I then had this feeling that Rinpoche was swimming next to me and we were like two fish swimming together.



A few weeks ago was the anniversary of his death. I dusted off my little shrine with his picture and re-situated his photo next to the tea candle I burn every morning. I lit the candle and sat on my couch to read. After a while, I smelled smoke. When I looked up, I saw that this little picture of Tulku Thondup had pitched forward into the flame. By the time I had noticed, it was half burned up. I was scared. What did this mean? Was he saying goodbye to me? Leaving me? Mad at me for something? (I could think of lots of possibilities.) My husband Duncan said, “he just wants you to know he’s still here” and I decided to go with that explanation. Upon further reflection, I thought—correctly or not, who knows—that he may have been trying to communicate something like, “now it’s your turn.” Not to be a Tulku or a Rinpoche or anything remotely like that, but to live in my own understanding, use my own voice, step out from any shadows. I don’t know. That’s a very tall order.



In July of 2024, my dear, deeply loved cat, Sly, died. May, June, and July were about helping him, holding him, thinking he was about to die, then, no, not yet. Should we let him go? How do you ever make this most awful decision? In the months after he died, all I can remember doing was sobbing. It was a grief like no other. I am still in a state of semi-shock from missing him and struggling with accepting that he is gone. My heart literally aches in my chest. The night after he passed, I dreamed he was holding me.

July is usually the month when I have my annual physical. This year, it seemed a good idea to intercede proactively in some aspects of my aging process. I had tiny cataracts in both eyes and decided to have cataract surgery before they got bigger. The first was in August. The second in September. Since sedation and recovery are involved, I was...sedated and had to recover.

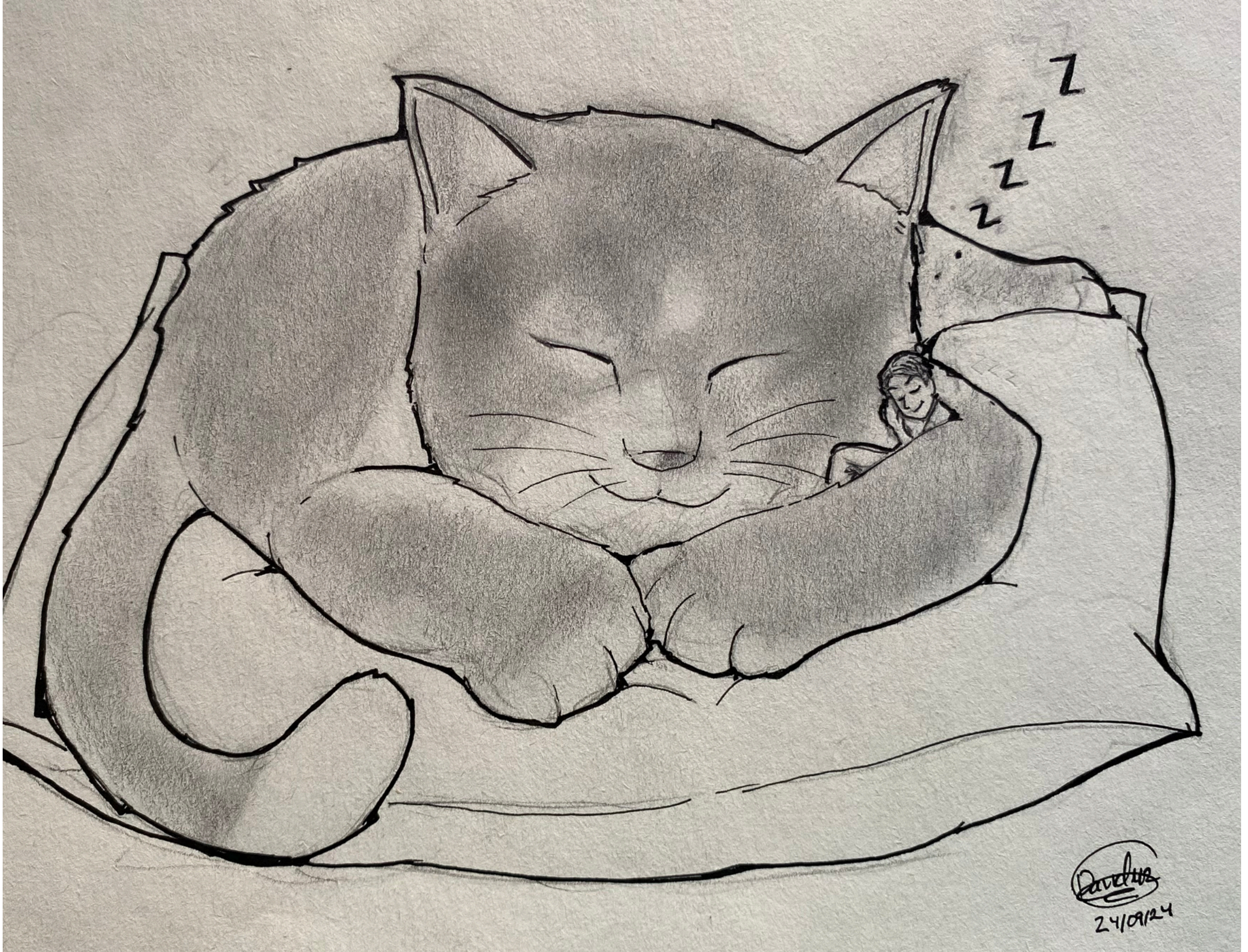
Finally, it turned out that the hip pain I'd been feeling for the last year was arthritis. Arthritis can be deemed mild, moderate, or severe. My diagnosis was between moderate and severe, the best time to have surgery according to the orthopedist. If you wait until it's severe, recovery may be more difficult and additional stress is put on the other joints. So I scheduled the surgery for Dec 18 thinking, let's make bionic whatever I can before I get to really, really old age. So as I write this, I'm about 3 weeks into recovery.

All of this has slowed me down in ways I was not quite prepared for. I hope that 2025 will be a smoother ride. There is so much I want to do, explore, write, discuss with you.

Thank you for listening/reading. Thank you for your bravery and your open hearts, If you have questions, reflections, concerns, please don't hesitate to email me.

Love always, Susan





*illustration by David Miñarro*





With many, many thanks to those who made our sangha work in 2024, including teachers Bridget Bailey, Crystal Gandrud, Maho Kawachi, Kristy Krivitsky, Kevin Townley, Lilyán de la Vega, Marisa Viola, Ernesto Yáñez, and all the graduates of our Meditation Teacher Training program who show up on weekends to lead sessions.

Leanna Kristine, Geneviève Okuma, and Carra Simpson provide the invisible ninja glue that holds it all together.