

Zen Bow

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FEAR

Zen Bow: Fear

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Person? What Person?

RICHARD VON STURMER

There's nothing but the wind, just wind, and I sleepily notice how the doors shake in their frames and how the glass in the windows loudly resists. I don't sleep.... A few vestiges of consciousness persist. I feel the weight of slumber but not of unconsciousness. I don't exist....

You wake up before dawn in a strange bed. For a few seconds you don't know where you are or even who you are. This momentary loss of orientation could be frightening, or else it could be intriguing—Where am I? Who am I? Then your eyes begin to adjust to the darkness; you see the shadowy form of a television set, a wardrobe, the first faint glow of light through a crack in the curtains ... and your awareness of place and self returns.

The perfect man, for the pagans, was the perfection of the man that exists; for Christians, the perfection of the man that does not exist; and for Buddhists, the perfection of no man existing.

Although he had little contact with Buddhism, having died in 1935, Fernando Pessoa, the greatest Portuguese poet to the twentieth century, was not far off the mark. The Buddha taught that no-self (*anatta*), along with suffering (*dukkha*) and impermanence (*anicca*) form the three fundamental characteristics of existence. Upon reflection, we can accept the reality of suffering and impermanence in our lives, but the teaching of no-self—that we have no permanent, fixed ego identity—is much harder to digest and may even cause us alarm.

Today I was struck by an absurd but valid sensation. I realized, in an inner flash, that I'm no one. Absolutely no one ... I'm the suburbs of a non-existent town, the long-winded commentary on a book never written. I'm no one, no one at all. I don't know how to feel, how to think, how to want.

I'm the character of an unwritten novel, wafting in the air, dispersed without ever having been, among the dreams of someone who didn't know how to complete me.

This passage, along with the others above, comes from Pessoa's major prose work, *The Book of Disquiet*. The title says it all. In brief, fragmentary chapters the book maps the life and thoughts of Bernardo Soares, an assistant book-keeper in Lisbon, who is an alternate version of Pessoa himself. Years before existentialism became fashionable in Europe through the writings of Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, Pessoa explored what was perceived as the fundamental absurdity of the human condition along with the anxiety one feels at being, in A.E. Housman's words, 'alone and afraid in a world I never made.' The great value of Pessoa's writings, particularly in *The Book of Disquiet*, is that he articulates this existential angst in such a precise and imaginative way.

I'm a shelf of empty jars ... I'm like a playing card belonging to an old and unrecognisable suit—the sole survivor of a lost deck. I have no meaning. ... I'm a bridge between two mysteries, with no idea of how I got built.

The small, ego self senses the tenuous nature of its existence, of its hold on life, and yet it has no broader perspective that could relieve the disquiet. Narrowly confined and uncomfortable, it can do no more than obsess about itself and its predicament.

In the West the concept of emptiness has been equated with an inner hollowness. Many people feel that there is a gaping void at the centre of their lives, a void that can never be filled, no matter how many material possessions are tipped into it. This way of thinking appears at odds with the Buddhist teachings, where the



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experience of emptiness, particularly the emptiness of the self, leads to liberation. In his book *Going to Pieces without Falling Apart*, Mark Epstein explores how our sense of personal emptiness or insufficiency can be transformed through meditation:

In meditation, I had stumbled on a new way to be with myself. I did not have to run away from my emptiness, or cure it, or eradicate it. I had only to see what was actually there. In fact, far from being 'empty,' I found that emptiness was a rather 'full' feeling. I discovered that emptiness was the canvas, or background, of my being. I did not understand it, but I was much less afraid. My condition had no name, but I could reach down into it.

This is the positive, Buddhist relationship to emptiness; it is not some imagined void, a terrifying abyss we are in danger of toppling into, but rather the direct body/mind experience of our true condition, of who we really are. Sri Nisargadatta expressed it perfectly when he wrote, 'Love tells me I am everything. Wisdom tells me I am nothing. Between the two, my life flows.'

When we lack the wisdom that we are nothing, that there is no intrinsic self, we can feel trapped by our ego-centred fears and desires, separated from life as if there were a thin sheet of glass placed between us and the rest of the world. This was certainly the case for Pessoa, who viewed his surroundings with a clinical detachment. Towards the end of *The Book of Disquiet*, however, there is a passage that suggests a different mode of being, one that is more expansive and transcendent.

I lift up my head to the blue sky that doesn't know me, I let my face feel the unconsciously cool breeze, I close my eyelids after having looked, and I forget my face after having felt. This doesn't make me feel better, but it makes me different. Seeing myself frees me from myself. I almost smile, not because I understand myself but because, having become another, I've stopped being able to understand myself. High in the sky, like a visible nothingness, floats a tiny white cloud left behind by the universe.

For a fleeting moment the writer is able to 'forget the self' and is confirmed 'by the ten thousand things,' in this case by a tiny white cloud. Although it may take us many years of practice,

in the end we will realize that there is absolutely nothing to fear in letting go of our transitory ego self and of experiencing the emptiness that is our true nature. Roshi Kapleau often remarked, 'You can't fall out of the universe.' And we will remain in the universe's embrace, whatever happens to us. Not only is there nothing to fear, but there is no one to be afraid. As Mark Epstein observes:

Emptiness is vast and astonishing, the Buddhist approach insists; it does not have to be toxic. When we grasp the emptiness of our false selves, we are touching a little bit of truth. If we can relax into that truth, we can discover ourselves in a new way.

'Pessoa' means 'person' in Portuguese, a suitable generic name for a writer who transferred

authorship of his poetry and prose to a multitude of alter egos. He called these literary personas 'heteronyms,' and gave each one a particular history, psychology and aesthetics. It is obvious that Pessoa took a perverse pleasure in creating these multiple personalities, but while doing so he also remained a dapper European gentleman who liked nothing better than to sit outside a Lisbon café with a cup of coffee and a cigar. Life would come and go around him. And after the smoke had drifted away and the waiter had cleared the table, who remained?

Richard von Sturmer works for the Ministry of Education in New Zealand and helps run the Auckland Zen Centre with his wife, Sensei Amala Wrightson.

Why Are We So Anxious?

JOHN PULLEYN

Editor's note: The following essay is adapted from a Dharma Talk given at the Rochester Zen Center on February 6, 2011.

If recent media reports are any guide, Americans are undergoing an epidemic of anxiety unmatched in our nation's history. Writing for slate.com, Taylor Clark relays the results of surveys conducted by researchers at UCLA that show all-time levels of stress and anxiety for incoming college freshmen. Psychologist Robert Leahy is quoted in the same article, declaring that 'The average high school student today has the same level of anxiety as the average psychiatric patient in the early 1950s.' Spending on anti-anxiety drugs more than doubled in the seven year period from 1997 to 2004, and even accounting for inflation in drug prices, there's a clear increase in the use of these drugs.

It may be that some of what we're measuring is a cultural tendency to admit more readily to negative feelings and to take medication to avoid

those feelings. But few would disagree that we live in anxious times, and despite our relative prosperity, we seem more anxious by all measures than those in the developing world whose life circumstances are far more uncertain. Few people in this country are dying of starvation or of treatable disease, but we feel more fear than those in other countries who are at risk. I'm not much of a world traveler, but in my one trip to Mexico about ten years ago, I was struck by how much happier and how much freer people on the buses of Oaxaca seemed than their fellows in the United States. Though our bus was so crowded that people were hanging out the open door, there was none of the hunkered-down gloom of a New York subway. In fact, most people appeared to be animated and happy.

So what are the reasons for so much angst? Most recent media reports put the blame on our current political and economic uncertainties, and these certainly contribute. A decades-long belief in the continuation of the American

Dream and in the basic decency and competence of our institutions has been shaken. We're seeing the first generation that doesn't expect to do as well as their parents, and they're leaving college saddled with debt and entering an economy short on jobs. I remember no such worries when I graduated from college in 1968. I didn't feel I had to think twice about coming to Rochester to practice Zen. When I first spoke by phone with Roshi Kapleau, he told me there were plenty of jobs in Rochester, and in fact I never had any difficulty getting by.

Nevertheless, this country has seen tough times before. Regardless of how grimly the picture is painted, we're not in a great depression. Why then, are so many people so afraid?

Mr. Clark's *Slate* article is entitled 'It's Not the Job Market: The Three Real Reasons Why Americans Are More Anxious Than Ever Before,' and his three reasons go beyond economic worries. He writes that these three culprits were implicated by scores of neuroscientists and psychologists he interviewed while researching the subject. While they don't get all the way to the root of our fears, his big three are a good place to start if we want to look for a way to live lives that aren't diminished by fear and uncertainty.

So let's start with them. First on the list is our 'increasing loss of community.' As families move farther apart, as screen time replaces face time, as texting replaces talking, we lose our nuanced connection with others. Once Kurt Vonnegut, the author, gave a lecture in Rochester, and I remember his observation that the nuclear family had replaced the extended family and that it was too small. 'One day,' he said, 'your wife will turn to you and say "You're not enough people."' Clark quotes Michael Davis, a researcher at Emory University with a similar point: 'If you've lost the extended family and lost the sense of community, you're going to have fewer people you can depend on, and therefore you'll be more anxious. Other cultures have much more social support and are better off psychologically because of it.'

This basic human need doesn't evaporate when we take up spiritual practice. The Buddha said to Ananda, 'Having excellent friends and keeping good company is not half the sacred Way; it is the Way itself.' Buddhism has been practiced historically in groups, and for us, too, cultivating friendship with others who are swimming upstream along with us against the cultural current gives us support we need. Making this connection with others requires tolerance and an open heart, and, for many of us, a conscious effort. If our habitual attitude toward others is one of critical judgment and competition, we close ourselves off. We can't help others, and others can't help us.

Culprit number two is information overload. We live in an avalanche of data, much of it designed to catch our attention by alarming us. We could make the case that articles on an 'epidemic' of anxiety are doing exactly that. But beyond the alarmist nature of media reports is their typical triviality. More and more of the information we consume is superficial (and if you're surfing the net, you are by definition on the surface). Because our attention is constantly hijacked by the next shiny object, we lose our capacity to take our time, to delve deeply into anything. It seems a common complaint that people find it more difficult to read a long book or even a long magazine article. It's normal now to watch a news report on one subject while snippets of information about other subjects crawl across the bottom of the screen.

What peace is there in trivia? In the words of David Levy, professor at the Information School at the University of Washington, 'We need the equivalent of old-growth forests and marshlands in our mental lives.' This is a call to practice. Leaving the thin excitement of shallow stimulation, we can turn inward to our awareness before thought.

Taylor Clark's third factor feels to me like the most significant and points out how serious Zen practice can help us deal with fear. He says,

Put simply, Americans have developed habits for dealing with anxiety and stress that



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actually make them far worse. We vilify our aversive emotions and fight them, rather than letting them run their own course. We avoid situations that make us nervous. We try to bury uncomfortable feelings like anxiety and stress with alcohol or entertainment or shopping sprees.

For some reason, our society seems to think that ‘I haven’t got time for the pain’ is a reasonable approach to difficult feelings. This is like saying, ‘I haven’t got time for reality.’ Sometimes the weather is miserable. If you can’t appreciate a rainy day in Rochester, you’re collaborating in your misery. Sometimes the sun is out, the sky is blue, and the smell of linden trees is in the air. If you’re caught up in grasping and rejecting, how can you fully enjoy a beautiful day?

In Zen practice, it’s all grist for the mill. Rather than ‘half looking,’ holding pain or anxiety at a distance, we make the effort to open to things as they are. No one I’ve ever met can say with Zen Master Rinzai, ‘There is nothing I dislike,’ but anyone who practices sincerely can increase their capacity to embrace life as it is. When the going gets tough, and we find ourselves looking to escape, we’ve found our point of practice.

There’s a great quote from a teisho by Robert Aitken-roshi about doing sesshin that gets at this point. He says,

There are two ways to get through a sesshin. One is to concentrate on survival and the second is to focus on each moment as it comes up. Either way will get you through sesshin. But only the second way will give you an ef-

fective sesshin. If you focus on survival then you will be disappointed after your sesshin, because you will know that you have wasted your time just thinking about getting through it. Forget about getting through it, just focus on that one, on that two, on that three, that's all—nothing else.

When our primary focus is escaping from our own fear, we shrink our lives and diminish ourselves. And that very diminishment and disconnection makes us prey to anxiety.

Some people don't see fear or anxiety as a problem for themselves, because they assiduously avoid situations that might trigger those feelings. We can limit our lives without knowing we're doing it. Kapleau-roshi used to say, 'The reasons people give for what they do are never the real reasons.' Often that real reason is the fear of feeling fear. We need to reflect on what we value, on how we want to live, and then we need action that comes out of those values and not out of mere avoidance of pain.

To sum up Taylor Clark's article, we can reasonably lay a lot of the upsurge of anxiety in America on these three factors. We find ourselves isolated without enough companionship with others; we're drowning in a flood of trivia and superficial stimulation; and we're intolerant of, and therefore controlled by, our negative feelings. Beyond these three, there's another more basic and existential source of anxiety. That is our reluctance to squarely face the facts of life. The Buddha's formulation of these facts is known as the three characteristics of existence. They are *Annica* or impermanence, *Dukkha* or suffering, and *Anatta* or no-self. Put simply, we can say:

1. There's nothing that lasts, we're going to die, and everything we build up will eventually fall apart.

2. We will never find a reliable escape from pain and suffering.

3. Our whole sense of self is a house of cards. We're vainly trying to protect a mirage.

As we frantically try to patch together a permanent self that won't have to suffer, it's no wonder we're anxious. It's not just hard, it's impossible. It's incompatible with reality.

Anxiety and fear are wake-up calls, calling us back to this moment, to what *is* real. Calling us to open up, to feel what we feel. The unskillful approach is to try to fix the feeling, to control the pain. That's like lying in bed, dreading getting up and trying to make ourselves feel like doing it. Instead we can be willing to do what we don't *feel* willing to do. Get out of bed! The feelings will change on their own; it's not our job to manipulate them.

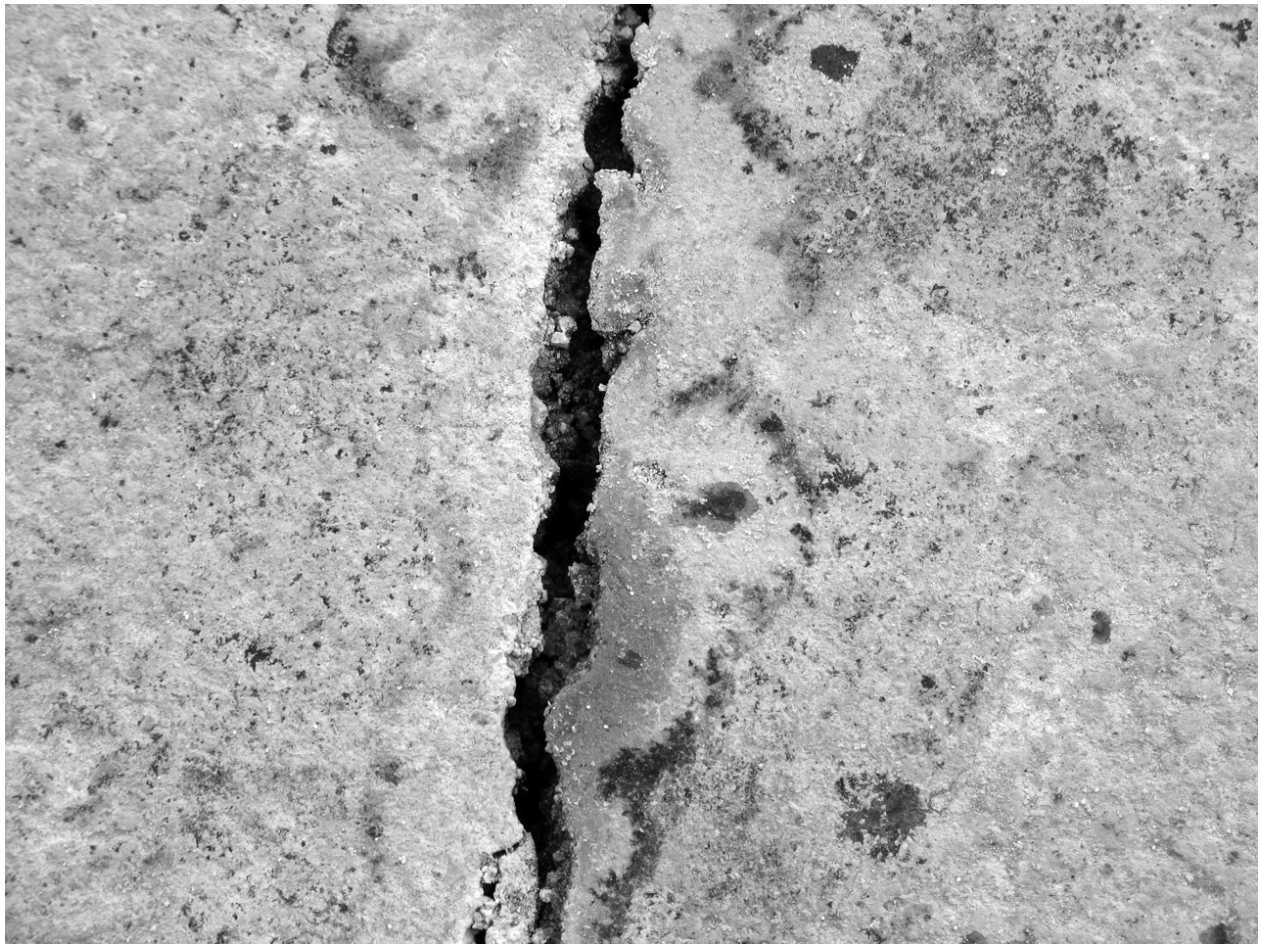
When we're no longer running from our feelings of anxiety, when we are not so afraid of being afraid, we can begin to rely on this moment, the only thing that isn't a pipe dream. This very moment is the essence of *zazen*; it is the nobility of a Buddha. When we open to it, we are, in the words of Zen Master Dogen, 'like a tiger entering the mountain.'

John Pulleyn is a long-time Center member and current Head of Zendo.

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David Merulla

Not What I Expected

PAUL GILFORD

For the last ten years, every December has been the month for my annual medical physical. The typical routine involves a physical check up, including prostate exam, EKG, and blood work with a PSA screening. When the results came back this year, I was informed that my PSA test result had jumped to 4.6 from its historic 2.3. The doctor suggested that I see a urologist to be on the safe side.

The consult with the urologist was interesting; it encompassed a great deal of information about the unreliability and value of the PSA test and led to a prostate biopsy, falling under the umbrella of ‘better safe than sorry.’

When the biopsy results came back a few days later, prostate cancer was discovered in several of

the biopsy samples. The doctor recommended both a CT and bone scan to rule out a more serious problem before engaging in the treatment of prostate cancer.

Following the CT and bone scans, I was expecting good news. Instead, the doctor called with news to the contrary and proposed a next-day meeting with the recommendation that my wife be in attendance as well.

For Cheryl and me, the meeting day begins with all the initial sequencing of business as usual. Our morning routines are largely the same; we see our teenager off to school; Houston traffic is typical Houston traffic. We sit down with the doctor and he is sorry to be the bearer of bad news. He’s never seen anything like this in his

35 years of medical practice. He resonates shock and disbelief as he walks us through the series of test and lab results including the digital pictures of the bone scan with innumerable hot spots indicating advanced metastatic bone cancer. He reports being so disbelieving that he personally shared the bone scans with three different diagnostic experts for confirmation. He takes a breath and sighs. He is available to answer our questions.

We sit there. Stunned quiet. Questions arise. How can I feel fine, have no symptoms, and be this sick? How long do people typically live with this amount of cancer? Answer: The normal curve indicates two years. Cheryl cries. More questions. We leave for home. I hold Cheryl's hand. We say very little. There is love.

I go to work. Things are different and slowed down. It is not business as usual. I savor the meetings and to-do's and the people. The details and impressions are clear, sharp, and discriminated. There is a sense of precision. I go home. Tosca, our springer, is hungry. She rivets her attention on the food cabinet. As Cheryl says, Tosca smells like a dog. I smell Tosca. She is her dog self fully. When Kaleb comes home from school I hug him. The usual ratio of four teenager interactions to one hug is out the window. The new ratio is one to one. I love my son.

The nights are surprising. I have this strong experience that everything I know, and depend on, and take for granted, and look forward to is really a sand castle. I won't grow older with Cheryl, and we won't live together on Maui in the house she designs. I won't know Kaleb's wife and children. I will miss out on Britt's and Coleman's unfolding. My graceful work retirement

five to ten years from now is now, graceful or otherwise. My body is crumbling, in the blink of an eye. The sand castle dissolves; it's nothing but sand. It's nothing at all. There is expansion, space, not knowing. Held in this expanse, arising cloud-like, is fear. It is barely bearable. It comes and goes. Deep sadness wafts in and through. There is stillness and peace. My usual sitting is tripled, quadrupled. This moment is mind. It is all there is.

A bone biopsy is scheduled for the following week to confirm conclusively the bone cancer diagnosis. I redo my will and prepare the baton pass to Cheryl of the information and responsibilities I handle for our household. I talk to my friends. This group includes sangha member Grant Swanson. Grant, a doctor, educates me about cancer and is present. I am grateful.

More days and nights. Nothing but practice. Sweetness and connection to all things. Periods of deep and settled ease. Rounds of exquisiteness. At times it's too much to hold. A friend says that perhaps this is like Pip's experience in *Moby Dick* when Pip sees 'God's foot on the treadle of the loom.'

And then the unimaginable happens: good news. The results of the bone biopsy rule out bone cancer and point to another largely non-symptomatic medical condition. There is relief. The sand has the scent of a sand castle. I never expected to feel gratitude for the opportunity to receive radiation treatments. This moment is mind.

Paul Gilford has been a member of the Zen Center since 1975. Paul and his family live in Houston.

Trudging the Road

JOËLLE C.

In January 2008 I broke my ankle, right femur, and pelvis in a car accident. My left femur had gone through the left knee, shattering the kneecap, severing the ligaments, and leaving me pretty beat-up. Drinking caused the accident, and I didn't stop drinking even after the accident. At the time, I had been meditating sporadically for six years, since the early tenth grade, but I never sat regularly.

In 2009 I was introduced to zazen at the Rochester Zen Center, and I started sitting regularly. With the help of many kind people there, and my boyfriend at the time, I learned 'how' to meditate, initially sitting atop of a pile of cushions to alleviate the excruciating pain I experienced in my legs and ankles. I sat like this for about two weeks until I realized that this Zen practice was not going to work for me. One of those kind friends from the Center suggested I try using a chair, which I reluctantly sat in, embarrassed, ashamed, and above all, fearful.

Meditation saved my life. I needed to continue to sit if I was to fulfill my goals, both short-term and long-term. So I started to sit in a chair next to (what seemed to my mind) the elderly folks at the Center. I swallowed my pride, ignored my critical thoughts, and it became apparent to me how afraid I was of judgment, life, and truth. This was the beginning of a journey that continues through present day and for what I believe will be eternity.

Delusion is the root of my fear. Selfishness and dishonesty follow close behind. When I was ten years old, I fell in love with alcohol and drugs. Anything to get out of 'self' was my release. I floated in substances for eleven years. The car accident that nearly killed me couldn't keep me from drinking again. Through inner turmoil, hate, chaos, fear, I fell into bed on the 22nd of April, 2008 begging to be dead again. Why live, when everything I did resulted in

chaos, when everything I felt was based in fear, when everything I believed was delusion? My waking moment came on April 23 of 2008. That is the day I entered sobriety, head down, hands clenched, and breath short. I was also scared that my past would destroy me, that I could not possibly live in the present, and future unknowns could only be more horror and pain.

Early sobriety was a test for sanity. I was emotionally raw and very much vulnerable. When I was using, all of my thoughts and actions were based out of fear—this was all I knew. As a result, I was promiscuous. I also stole and tortured myself with the shame that followed my manic behaviors. I realized that if I did what I did, then I was going to get all the results of those actions. I found that there was no longer an excuse for what I was doing, and that I had better get into a program that would help me. I found, too, that if I asked for help in any way, I always received it in one form or another. I surrendered my old behavior and looked for new ways to help me cope. A program of love and energy beyond human means gave me freedom. My love for myself and compassion for others came out of participating in a twelve-step program. Meditation is encouraged in this program, which made me realize I could connect my zazen practice with recovery.

People come to Zen practice for various reasons. I've found that I was drawn to it out of my fear and hopelessness and the need to connect with a 'power' or 'energy' greater than myself. I needed a spiritual outlet in order to change my old way of life. I needed a practice that would help me strengthen my resistance to serious and fatal desires. I have come to believe in the Four Noble Truths and have gained trust in the Eightfold Path. I especially can understand the eternal struggle with suffering and the connection I have with all sentient beings. Zen has taught me

that things are ‘not-two.’ I may have taken these words out of context, but small phrases like this one give me hope that I can have a connection with others, that I am no different from other living beings, that I can be one with my suffering and intense pain, and that this oneness can bring a beautiful willingness to recover.

I should and could be dead. Zen practice has brought me to a place I never thought I would inhabit, becoming the person I never thought I would become and adopting new, healing behaviors. I embrace my breath today and wish that every moment I could be aware and awak-

ened to acceptance of answers. These are the answers to the questions my mind conjures. I can feel today. I can realize the things I never knew and the things I need to know, and still search for what is real. Speaking vaguely, I know that I can’t really put into words the understanding—and unknowing—that comes with practice. All I know is sitting. Sitting is what I must do; my life depends on it.

Joëlle C. lives in Rochester, NY where she works at a co-op and attends college. She loves music and currently plays drums and flute in a few local bands.

Why It Is So Hard to Be With Just This, Right Here, Right Now

ANONYMOUS

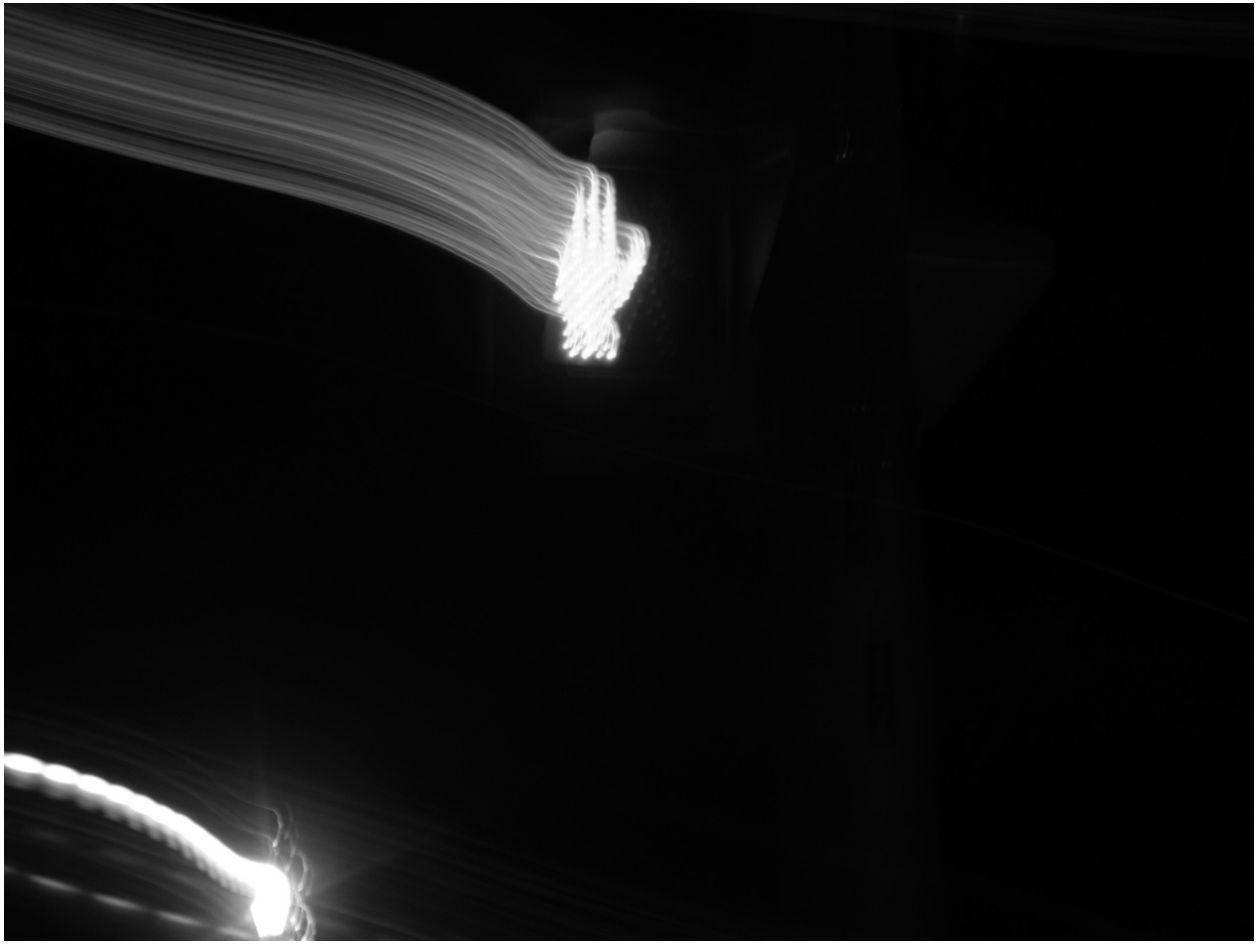
Editor’s note: This essay includes a version of a letter addressed to the author’s daughter that previously appeared in the Hidden Valley Zen Center’s journal ‘Oak Tree In the Garden’ (March/April 2010).

Why is it so hard for me to be right here and right now? It is fear. It is fear of pain (suffering). It is fear of not surviving the experience of pain. I have believed for many years that the only healthy thing to do with pain is to look it in the face and spend whatever time necessary to just simply be with it, the pain and the fear of the pain. What follows is a story of how I tried to be with the anguish of specific events only to find that underneath them flows an endless river of pain.

I wanted to be a mother more than anything in the world. My infertility seemed to be the greatest tragedy of my life. I was willing to be a mother in any way that I could, so we had five foster children; all but one were teenagers. After they all grew up, got married and had children of their own, and two moved away to other parts

of the country, we adopted two young children. The first adoption was a five-and-a-half-year-old boy who had been born three months premature and suffered vision, coordination, and attention problems directly related to the premature birth. Throughout his childhood and young adult life he had the attitude of, ‘Oh, no, this is too soon. I am not ready yet.’ Everything was so hard for him that he preferred a fantasy life to anything in reality. This led eventually to a lifetime of struggle for sobriety.

That little boy was such a hard child to place in adoption that the adoption agency promised us an infant girl in the next year if we could make the adoption work with him. A year later we welcomed into our hearts a precious six-month-old baby girl. She was a full term baby but the birth mother had rubella in the third or fourth month of pregnancy and the baby had to be watched for neurological problems. The baby had perceptual impairments and was inordinately aggressive; however, we will never know if rubella was the cause or not. Nevertheless, she



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was my only baby and I completely adored her. I hoped that her kindness and loving heart would modify her aggressiveness.

When she was in seventh grade my daughter developed a morbid attachment to another seventh grader who would become a drug addict and a career criminal. By the time my daughter reached her mid-twenties, she seemed to be over the intense attraction to the criminal. She was married and raising young children. When my husband was entering the advanced stages of Alzheimer's disease, my daughter, her husband, children, and animals moved in so that they could help with my husband's care, and I could help with the children. This only lasted for two years. My daughter chose to follow the criminal who had been recently released from jail, leaving behind her husband, her animals, and her two seriously mentally ill children, ages seven and eleven. My son-in-law went to live with

his mother and I, alone, was responsible for the children, their animals, and a sick husband.

A few years later, my daughter wanted to escape from the criminal. I gave her a one-way ticket to a mid-western state to live with her girlfriend from high school. She seemed to do very well there and become somewhat stabilized. In the mean time my grandson was growing big enough and strong enough that I could no longer restrain him when he went into one of his violent episodes. After a five-month psychiatric hospitalization, it was decided that he would do better if he were living with his mother in the mid-west. During the year he was with his mother, his sister graduated high school and left for college.

Without the distraction of raising grandchildren, grief due to my husband's advancing illness and the loss of my relationship with him really hit me! This worsened 16

months later when he developed a bad wound on the heel of his foot. I was three days into trying to handle the horror of the skin, every single layer of it, falling off his foot when the phone call came! ... My daughter, my beloved little girl, had been hauled off to jail, maybe for years. The criminal had followed my daughter out to the Mid-west, tried to be a working family man for awhile, but slid back into his old habits and told my daughter that the only way he would stay with her was if she let him build a meth lab in her house, the same house where my grandson ate, slept, bathed, and did homework. Of course they were caught, and my mentally ill grandson was heading for a foster care system many hundreds of miles away from any family who could visit him. My level of horror spun out beyond anything I could ever have imagined, a pain worse than anything I had experienced in my adult life. I did not know how to process all this horror. *This!* How could I be with this? This was so impossibly awful! In my attempts to be with this I felt withdrawn and paralyzed.

Facing this pain led to an experience that I shared in a letter to my daughter while she was in jail. My husband's sister, Taffy, had just died and her twin, Sonnie, asked me to come to the family Christmas party, and to bring my husband if there was any way for my husband to travel. So, with the help of a caregiver we went to the party. Below is an excerpt of the letter I wrote to my daughter about the experience.

I had an interesting experience at Sonnie's, one that made me fully realize that there is a silver lining around the dark clouds of pain. First, no one said anything about your situation. I did tell them you sent warm wishes. For the most part they were all dealing with the pain of having the first Christmas without Taffy. The music that was playing was beautiful and I got into the music, the music got into me. I merged with the music and at that moment I completely knew that my suffering was no different and no worse than theirs. All the suffering, theirs and mine and yours and the suffering throughout the world merged and then all the merged suffering merged with the

music. It all grew into perfect harmony, a single harmonious unit that is the condition of all sentient beings. If I allow myself to give up the idea of me as a separate, isolated individual, having particularly acute pain, then all the world's suffering, mine included, blends together in perfect harmony that evolves into love for all beings, myself included. A door opens out into the joy of being, of belonging, of communion, of love, of beauty.

I am changed by this experience. It doesn't mean that I will not feel the acute pain of separation again. However, if I allow myself to experience it with full acceptance of it and embrace it in all its awfulness with the humility of knowing my pain is no different and no worse than that of all the rest of the world, the open door to harmony, love, being, belonging and beauty will present itself again and again.

Shortly after this experience occurred, my lifelong friend since childhood was diagnosed with stage-four cancer. She had tumors in her pelvis, hip, and lung plus two tumors in her brain. There was no treatment possible, and pain medications made her anxious. She had been such a sweet and dear friend for so many years that it broke my heart to watch her suffer such a painful death. I experienced the grief very directly. I cried alone and with her family. I did not do anything to try to find relief from the grief. Eventually, this situation too began merging with all of the world's grief, blending into a perfect harmony of being, of belonging, of communion, of love, of beauty.

Now I believed that I was free of the intensified pain that results from avoiding suffering. However, to my dismay, I discovered that there is still pain, lots and lots of pain, all the time. Until now, I did not realize that I was going to great lengths using most of my energy and most of my attention to avoid experiencing any pain. Much of this pain consists of a constant undercurrent of feelings of inadequacy, of shame and humiliation, of doing things wrong, of being stupid, of being unworthy, of being unlovable, of being a failure. I don't know if I always

have these feelings or if I have the fear of having these feelings. These bad feelings are welling up out of the primal river of pain. This primal river of pain is the certain knowledge of my own personal death. So, if I have this life, then I need to feel this life means something. I need to make it a very good life, the best life, not a humiliation. But wait! ...What did I just say? ... Is it true? Am I really going to die? ... Don't let me think about dying, please ... Let me do anything else, think anything else, believe anything else, pretend anything else. Distract myself in any way possible from this terrible knowledge. Deceive myself in any way possible about this terrible knowledge.

I made the decision to work really hard to stop avoiding these sufferings. It is hard work because the natural tendency is to avoid pain, any and every pain that arises. Maybe I should stand on top of a mountain and shout to the whole world, 'I am a humiliation to the human race. And you know what? I am going to actually die someday! So get over it.'

I found that as soon as I stop corralling huge amounts of energy and attention to avoid pain, but instead look at it smack in the face, feeling all the rawness of it, there is a sudden explosion of released energy and there is newly available ATTENTION. The attention is focused at the only place it can be; right here, right now. This energy and attention are available to acknowledge and feel the infinity of everything that is, including beauty, love, harmony, peace, and being just this. The present moment consists of all

of it, of everything that is. Why give up all of it in order to avoid a part of it?

An added note of reasoning about this is that twenty-eight years ago, I realized that dealing with the real fear was nowhere near as bad as dealing with the neuroses that manifested out of the tightly woven web of repression and denial that I wrapped around the real fear. Because of this vigilance in acknowledging and feeling the fear as it comes, I have been free of panic attacks and phobias. So the same can be said about pain. The real pain is nowhere near as bad as dealing with the neuroses that grow out of the complicated web of avoidance mechanisms veiled over the real pain.

My instruction to myself is this: If I find myself dwelling uselessly in the future or in the past, then I will ask myself what pain am I avoiding this minute, right here, right now? Go to it, quickly! Feel it completely! Embrace it! Be vigilant! This vigilance is very hard work. This work is practice.

I don't know if my resources will hold up so I can continue to care for my husband at home. I don't know if my daughter will ever grow up to be a functional person and a functional parent. I don't know if my son will be able to maintain sobriety. I don't know what feelings will well up in me. I don't know where anything is going. I don't care. Come what may. Bring it on! I am not afraid. Skies are blue. Birds are singing. Gardens are growing. Snow is falling. Ocean waves are rolling in. Dance celebrates the movement and changes of life.

Last. Or Maybe First.

DWAIN WILDER

Where there is no jam, no butter, no toast
no fine morning glistening like a raw egg in the sky
where there is no everyday clean shirt and socks
project done, job done

Where there is no goodbye, hello,
love you too, come back soon
where coming home, leaving home, staying home
are no longer adventures

Where there is no honing the sensibilities, self help books
gone to Goodwill
no more temper tantrums, no hankering for chocolate
no New Year's Resolutions
no searching for the truth, God or The Eternal Principle

Where all that can be undone and done, repented and said
has been undone and done, repented and said
where you've come to terms, somehow, with your pain
where your life is no longer a drama

Who are you there, what are you,
my fine crafter of ideas, visions and words,
what of all the grasping at making
that hand and habit need?

Let go that too, even that,
moment by moment by moment?
Eternity, you know, is very ordinary—
just like right now.

Going On

ANONYMOUS

A close companion in my life is angst. When I was a small child, as I lay in my bed at night, I would have bouts of fear that in that very moment I was going to die. My heart would be racing, and every physical reaction of my body seemed like a confirmation that I *was* dying. I did not tell anyone.

This fear later dissolved; however, when I was a teenager I experienced another face of fear, which continues to this day. It started in school. When the teachers would ask me to read a text aloud, I would get completely out of breath; my voice trembling, so that I could barely finish reading. Until then I had been a good reader, with a firm, clear voice, but during those years I was so extremely afraid that I would lose my breath while reading that this, of course, was exactly what happened every time. Finally, my perplexed teachers did not call on me any more.

Again, I did not speak about it or tell anyone. I was so ashamed of what was happening. Other fears emerged: being in church with my parents and bearing the silence, eating with others, speaking in public, even just being face-to-face with others became increasingly difficult and torturous. One of the worst parts was the fear of the fear.

All these anxieties related to situations in which I was with others. What I feared would occur often did occur because I created it with my thoughts. Sadly, this often continues even today. Sometimes it does not, and sometimes I can hide my inner state or use some tricks of distraction—gestures, motions, or words—or control the circumstances in some way so that people won't notice my distress or they'll just notice a certain tension. It is a constant balancing act: of struggling with the fear, hiding it as much as possible, while at the same time having to act, having to be in social situations and to

behave appropriately. Often it is not a matter of 'having to be' with others—I *want* to be with others, I *want* to do what I am afraid of.

Sitting with others is particularly difficult. In *zazen* I cannot use my everyday strategies. Especially in *sesshin* I feel extremely bare, exposed. I hardly can stand the silence in the *zendo* or the slow pacing of the monitors or the teacher behind me, knowing they can look at me while I can't look back or move. I feel exposed to 'the others,' but mainly it is that I am exposed to myself, to my fantasies and thoughts. And yet, in a way, *sesshin* is a sheltered space, which is one of the paradoxes of *sesshin* for me.

I know these fears are neurotic and hard to understand, but they have their own inner logic, at least for me. When the feeling of fear is strong (depending on different circumstances), the result is waves of panic, sitting with every cell of my body in highest tension, being physically in highest alarm.

Not all sitting with others is so painful. There are also periods of calmness, concentration, the absent-mindedness of everyday thoughts, dullness, or sleepiness like a heavy blanket. But when the fear arises, it is agony. Terrible agony.

I try to work with these fears in every possible way. Everything that is said during *teishos* or talks on how to work with physical pain also applies to fear. I try to embrace it, I try to accept it, I try to focus on *Mu*, to enter more deeply into *Mu*. What seems impossible to achieve is to *be* the fear. I am all fear, yes, but it is a disliked part of me; there is huge resistance. How can I surrender, fully surrender, and accept?

The side effect of continuing to practice with fear is that you learn how the small mind works, how the ego sows the seeds of fear. I can watch it arise. However, I cannot stop it. And so far, I cannot let it be, because what I am afraid of tortures me so much.

The important thing is not to get depressed or desperate about what is happening, not to judge. There is nothing bad about having these fears, these things I am afraid of. This is one of the crucial points that I am so grateful to hear repeated during dokusan, one of the points that again and again I try to internalize. Zazen has helped me immensely in not clinging to what has happened two minutes ago, a round ago, or a day ago.

Sometimes in sesshin I get an idea of how wonderful freedom in the moment must be—that there *is* a different world to enter. If only I

could fully surrender to this moment, even when completely in pain. Really *be* in *every* moment, in every situation. Not resisting, not rejecting, not trying to avoid, as I do most of the time.

Even after so many years of working with this mental condition, sitting with others continues to be difficult—sometimes less so, sometimes more. Sometimes, when in the middle of pain, I think it is impossible to go on. But, somehow I do. Roshi once shared a quote by T.S. Eliot: ‘For us there is only the trying. The rest is not our business.’ Or, as Roshi also has said: ‘Trust the process.’

No Fear of Flying

AMAURY CRUZ

The fear of death and infernal rebirths due to my evil actions has led me to practice in solitude in the snowcapped mountains. ...

I will die content and free from regrets. This is the fruit of Dharma practice.

—*Fruit of Dharma Practice* by Milarepa

Much can be said about the role that fear plays in the origin of religions and the psychological makeup of humanity. It has been said that fear is at the root of ego and samsara. Fear is also an essential survival mechanism and an instrument of political manipulation by the State. All of these are interesting topics, but I will focus on some of my personal experiences with fear and how I have sometimes overcome this deep-seated emotion.

Once I was flying a single-engine four-seat airplane over the slope of a volcano in El Salvador. I was there as a reporter to write a story and shoot photos concerning the bloody civil war that took place in that country from 1979 to 1992. I had a local co-pilot in the right front seat and my land guide was sitting in the back. Suddenly, we were buffeted by a strong downward draft, forcing me to compensate by raising the nose and throttling up. I kept it up for

what seemed an eternity, but the airplane was losing altitude and I was afraid we would hit the ground. I was gripped by fear. This type of fear has a very different quality from paranoia or irrational fears in general. This fear sharpens your perceptions and puts your whole body-mind on alert mode. You realize you could die. Would you be ready for it? Why you? Why now?

The situation only got worse. We were almost at a forty-five degree angle when the wind started to shift from side to side and I was losing control. Suddenly, something strange happened and the airplane stalled, going into a tailspin. I had no idea what was going on.

When you are in a stall, your instinct is to try to raise the nose, but that’s a mistake. You need to push the yoke down to get the airplane to start flying again. When your stall becomes a tailspin, you have to both push the yoke down and apply opposite rudder. I did so and we recovered, but we were still caught in a tornado-like micro burst. As we approached the volcano, my terrified guide yelled ‘Mr. Cruz, look down,’ pointing toward the edge of the fast approaching crater. I looked down and saw a bunch of figures with weapons firing in our direction. We could have been shot down, but we eventually escaped the wind and the trigger-happy guerrillas.



But then the situation went from bad to worse, and my fear grew as a sudden scare turned into a period of extended danger. As we would find out later, the shooters had put three bullets through the fuselage, including one in the right wing. The gas tanks were inside the wings. I don't know why the gas didn't catch fire, except that aviation fuel is less likely to ignite than car fuel, and it's possible that the wing was in such a position when it was penetrated that the bullet did not create a spark in the gas. But we noticed in horror that the gas was leaking out. We were far from the military airport in the capital from which we had taken off, and we really needed all the fuel in the tanks to rise over a mountain range and get back to it. I headed in that direction immediately and began to gain altitude. Half way there, at seven thousand feet, we ran out of gas.

It seemed unfair that I could lose my life in such a meaningless fashion as crashing into the treetops in a strange country, far from my family and loved ones, and that I would be responsible for the deaths of my companions as well. Remember that, under Buddhist doctrine, even if you get hit by a car through no fault of your own, you are karmically responsible due to the exercise of your free will in going out in the streets in the first place. What kind of karma had led to

these circumstances? What kind of karma would that kind of end bring? Would I die content and free from regrets? Or would I be condemned to infernal rebirths? I can't say that I had many (fleeting) reflections of this type. Mostly a sense of, 'Who would have thought? ...' The truth is that I was totally focused on the task of getting out of the situation alive, no matter how difficult it seemed. That meant maintaining the plane at the proper attitude to maximize the distance of the glidepath without slowing down so much that we stalled again. I kept thinking of the lesson, 'An airplane can stall at any attitude and any speed.'

My fear, however, turned into laser-like concentration. I became calm and collected and let my training as a pilot take over. I analyzed the situations as they developed and maintained my equanimity. I did not panic or overreact. In so doing, I was able to instill confidence in my passengers, and direct my co-pilot's attention to fixing the problem with the radio, which was a loose cable behind the instrument panel. How did I do that? I think I have always had the ability to maintain equanimity in the face of this type of episodic fear. In fact, I had a sense of mental hyper-clarity and vision. It seemed as if I could see all around me, and I could feel every fiber of the airplane as if it were an extension of

my own body. I saw things as they were arising and did not get caught in worrying about what would happen next, so I was not buffeted by emotions. I did what was manageable one step at a time. I was not practicing formal zazen with a teacher at the time, but I had been sitting on my own and had many years of training in the martial arts, and maybe that helped.

I looked for a place to make an emergency landing, but there was now a heavy cloud cover. Below the clouds there was only jungle. It would have been practically impossible to survive an emergency landing on the jungle canopy. It was also very difficult to descend through clouds without proper instrumentation, which we didn't have. But there was no choice. I punched through the blinding clouds in a powerless glideslope, while flying by the seat of my pants. Somehow, we made it to where we could see the greenery and, luckily, in the distance, the international airport outside the city of San Salvador. My co-pilot, meantime, had been trying to raise the air traffic controllers on the radio. The radio didn't work. Assuming that we could glide past the jungle, we couldn't just get in the way of the commercial aircraft landing and taking off. Could things get any worse? Finally the radio came to life, we were given clearance, and emergency crews went into action. We continued gliding and, miraculously, managed to make it to the numbers on the runway and on the proper heading against the wind. The fire trucks stayed idle and we breathed a sigh of relief.

A few years later, I had to make another emergency landing because of engine failure. It also went flawlessly. I have faced at least three more life-threatening situations while scuba diving. Somehow, I always keep my wits about me. I do not mean to boast about any special abilities or courage. This is only a testimony that fear can be overcome, and a reminder that, in a life-threatening situation, one had better not freeze or panic. As Mark Twain once said, 'Courage is resistance to fear, mastery of fear—not absence of fear. Except a creature be part coward, it is not a compliment to say it is brave.'

Emergency-induced fear, however, is differ-

ent from the perhaps more pernicious types of fear that can be a constant drag on our lives. Phobias, for example, afflict many of us. Phobias are irrational and can be debilitating. A common one seems to be claustrophobia. I once knew a co-worker who preferred to walk up and down a dozen floors rather than get in the elevator. That can be a great way to exercise, but also a great disadvantage. And I can't imagine how someone with agoraphobia could even function. Such a person might not enjoy the beauty of the outdoors and would be severely handicapped.

I have never suffered from any phobias, but I have struggled with somewhat irrational fears during my life. For example, I used to be very afraid of dogs. When I was little, a rabid dog tried to bite me. I was unhurt only because my mother got in the way, but she was bitten and got rabies. I remember how she suffered. From then on, dogs really scared me, and more than my fair share have tried to bite me. I think they sensed my fear, so we had a mutual dislike. A few years ago, however, my wife became obsessed with having a dog. Despite my concerns, I decided to make her a gift of a Maltese. Granted, that's not like a pit bull (although the little lap dog brazenly thinks she is), but the end result is that I have become a dog lover. So I confronted my fear and dislike of dogs and I'm the better for it.

Another somewhat irrational fear I used to have stemmed from the fact that, in elementary school, I was picked on by bullies and sometimes got beaten up. Then, on my first day of school when I arrived in the United States, I was assaulted by some hoodlums during a gym class because I was speaking Spanish. And every day of the three years I went to public school in Miami, I was deathly afraid because four types of competing ethnic gangs, Cuban, Puerto Rican, black and 'Anglo,' competed to dominate the halls and the grounds. Some of the gang members rode motorcycles and mixed it up with Hell's Angels types. I associated the sound of motorcycles with the possibility of personal harm, so I had recurring nightmares about it. That's one reason why I began training in the

martial arts. One day, as a college junior, I was living off-campus in a bad section of town. Not too far away, there was a seedy bar that catered to motorcyclists. I was listening to the Jefferson Airplane song *For What It's Worth* when the roar of a motorcycle gang entering town became a crescendo: 'Paranoia strikes deep /Into your life it will creep/ It starts when you're always afraid . . . /We better stop, hey, what's that sound.' Of course, the song had nothing to do with motorcycle gangs, but with police repression in the 60s, but it seemed to fit the moment perfectly and it inspired me to do something crazy. I got on my bicycle and rode to the bar. I entered it and mixed with a crowd of scary-looking characters. I drank a couple of beers. I struck up a conversation with a girl covered with tatoos. After I left, I lost my fear of motorcycle gangs forever. I later became a motorcyclist myself. I have met many people who belong to motorcycle clubs and look scary. Most are good folks.

Of course, most challenging are the persistent fears of death and the unknown. When we strive to 'thoroughly understand this transcendental matter of life and death' we move toward

the heart of Zen. It has been suggested that the fear of death results from the awareness of past, present and future and therefore of our own mortality. Animals presumably do not have the same awareness. The fear of death, therefore, is probably a defining human characteristic. Some would argue that the source of religion can be traced to this awareness. The word 'religion' itself comes from the Latin *re-ligare*, meaning 'to tie' or 'to bind.' From an existential point of view, religion may be considered the bond between the individual and the universal, or between being and nothingness. Hence, religion is a way to overcome the fundamental fear of death. We also experience an undercurrent of fears in our everyday life. If only we practiced everyday with the keen concentration one gets while trying to land an airplane without engine power—the famous 'hair on fire' sense of urgency—so that, like Milarepa, we 'may die content and free from regrets.'

Amaury Cruz is a lawyer, writer and political activist from Miami who has been a Center member since 1994.

My Encounter With the Demon-Bird

PETER GREULICH

A long time ago I read a story of a mysterious bird-like creature who disrupts those engaged in serious *zazen* while sitting alone in the forest or mountains. At the inception of my *Zen* practice I encountered said creature. Here is my story.

This experience occurred circa 1972-1973, probably in early September, after having read Roshi Kapleau's *Three Pillars of Zen*, but before I attended my first *Zen* workshop in Rochester and before I became a member of the Boston *Zen* Group. At that time, before my formal practice began, my sitting was tepid and sporadic. Nonetheless, having been inspired by the enlightenment accounts in *Three Pillars*, I made a serious determination to go into the

woods and sit all night in *zazen*. I decided to sit in the woods at Middleton Pond, a place where I sometimes hiked, located two or three miles from my house. I dutifully packed my knapsack with all the essentials necessary to get me through the night—a flashlight, matches, sandalwood incense, a canteen of water, and one or two snacks. At 5:30 P.M., I shouldered my pack and began my 40-minute trek into the woods.

Without much difficulty I found a good place to make my stand just a few hundred feet from, and elevated above, the large pond. I wanted to be sure to be far enough away from the edge of the pond so that my campfire wouldn't be spotted from the other side where there were some



Tom Kowal

houses. I was in the midst of a pine forest and the ground was blanketed with pine needles. Scores of dead branches protruded from the base of dozens of trees surrounding me. I made a clearing for a small campfire and a sitting area, using a combination of a suitable flat rock that I found by the edge of the pond and heaps of pine needles as my cushion. I gathered enough dead branches from the pines to keep my fire going for a good part of the night. I knew that both the night-time cold and mosquitoes would be an issue, so the fire would be essential to insure a successful effort. I built a campfire as small and concise as possible because I wanted to concentrate on zazen and I didn't want to keep feeding the fire any more than minimally necessary. Smallness was a virtue. My need for the fire was only for keeping warm—and keeping the mosquitoes away.

Finally I completed my preparations and began sitting. As dusk approached, so did the mosquitoes. I lit the kindling and placed my zazen 'cushion' directly in front of the fire to keep my-

self warm. I quickly discovered that the smoke and heat generated by the flames only slightly mitigated the rapidly growing population of blood-thirsty insects. Plan B was called for—incense. The package of sandalwood incense that I had brought was the kind with a wooden stick projecting at the end of each piece. These were perfect for poking into the ground. I lit three or four of them in the campfire flames and planted them around me in an arc. I resumed my sitting and my bodymind gradually settled down. The incense was working in tandem with the fire and the mosquitoes were more or less kept at bay. I was struck by how cold it was and truly began to appreciate the fire's warmth. As the pitch-blackness of the evening gradually enveloped the campsite, my concentration deepened and I was quite pleased with how successfully events seemed to be unfolding. This was great. It was clear to me that my plan was going to work and that this was going to be a very good night indeed.

But wait. Not so fast.

Faintly, far off in the distance, I heard a sound. In my relative concentration I was unable to identify the nature of what I was hearing, but I tuned into it with all my attention. Gradually, the sound grew louder and closer. I was completely puzzled by what I was hearing. 'What is it?' was my sole thought. The sound grew closer and closer as it got louder and louder. 'What is that?' Now the sound was really getting loud. Suddenly I knew what I was hearing. It was a pack of wild dogs loudly barking—and they were making a beeline straight towards my campfire and towards me! I panicked. I didn't know what to do and I couldn't understand how they knew where I was. I quickly realized that they smelled the smoke drifting from my campfire. If I didn't act immediately the dogs would be on top of me and tear me to shreds. I threw on my boots without tying them and looked for a large branch to protect myself with and fend off the dogs. There were hundreds of branches on the dozens of surrounding trees, but no large ones readily accessible. By this point I was really freaking out. My fevered mind decided to squash the fire thus hoping the dogs wouldn't find me. I kicked the fire out scattering the burning embers in the ten directions. The dogs were still coming and almost on top of me! I totally freaked; my mind was racing. I tried to start the fire again, maybe I could grow it to a

bonfire and that would prevent the dogs from attacking? Too late! They were on top of me. I looked up through the branches, and in the cold moonlit sky, I saw a flock of low flying geese honking overhead.

My 'wild dogs' were nothing more than a flock of wild geese. I'd been had. I felt like an idiot. With my concentration broken and campfire destroyed, and with the mosquitoes, oblivious to the cold, swarming me, I packed my bag, took flashlight in hand and by ten-thirty in the evening, a defeated and deflated would-be sitter sheepishly arrived home.

Now some of you may think that this was nothing more than a novice-sitter encountering his first makyo. Maybe so. But to this day I remain convinced that those geese, 'barking' like wild dogs on the attack, were merely a foil for what in reality was the demon-bird. The sharp eye of the demon-bird spotted me, alone and vulnerable, and used all its powers to break my concentration and send me home packing. So if you ever find yourself sitting alone in the woods determined to make an all-night stand and you hear a strange ominous and threatening sound coming your way, you now know what not to do.

Peter Greulich is a long-time Center member currently investigating the source of his demon-bird.

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If you're thinking about financial planning, estate planning, or both, please remember that there are myriad ways you can help the Rochester Zen Center through planned giving. The right kind of plan can help you reduce your taxes significantly while providing for a larger, longer-lasting gift to the Zen Center. Because there is a wide array of bequests, annuities, trusts, and other financial vehicles to consider, you'll want to work with your financial advisor to decide what's best for you. Long-time Zen Center member David Kernan, an attorney who concentrates his practice in tax law, has generously offered to help point you in the right direction at no charge. For more information about planned giving and David's offer, please contact the Center's receptionist.

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Unexpected

Wholehearted commitment, whether to one's practice, defilements, or other exertions, can deliver unexpected outcomes. Unexpected outcomes remind us of impermanence, a core doctrine of Zen Buddhism. Events unfold in ways that leave one saying, 'I didn't see that coming' or 'I didn't think that person (or situation) would ever change.' Yet every hour, every day, we change: someone you were counting on dies, someone really does love you, your second-choice job offer or 'back-up' plan turns out to suit you very well, etc. Encountering the unexpected may change the trajectory of our life, and it may deepen our insight along the Path.

Readers are invited to submit articles or images on the theme of 'Unexpected' to zenbow@rzc.org or mail to the Rochester Zen Center. Deadline: June 30, 2011.

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