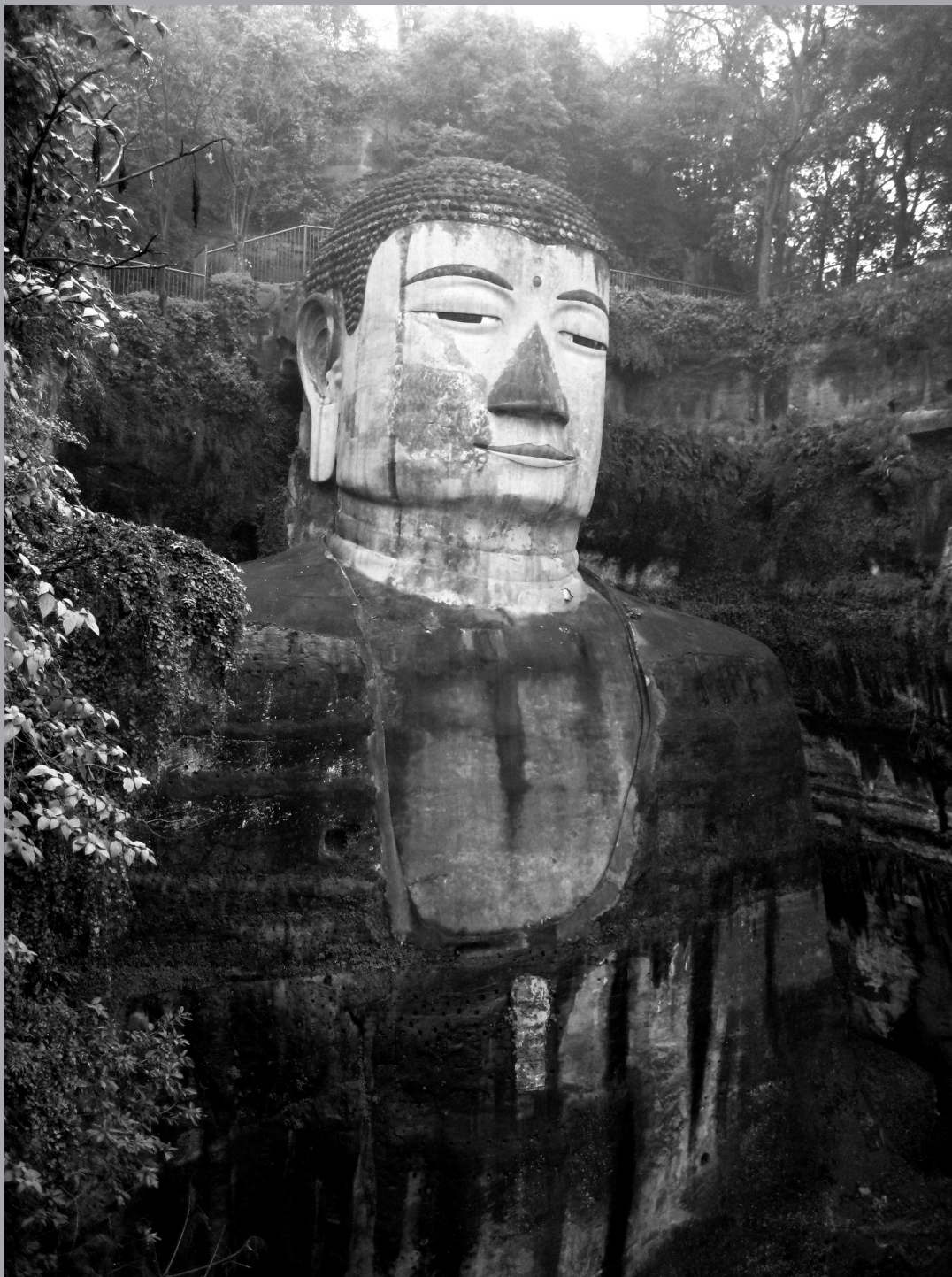


# *Zen Bow*

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ATTENTION

# *Zen Bow: Attention*

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# Focuser, Noticer, Juggler, Spy

ROSHI BODHIN KJOLHEDE

*Editor's Note: The following is an edited transcription of a teisho given by Roshi last summer.*

This is June 14th, 2009, and today's teisho will be on awareness and attention. This topic seized my own attention this morning when I heard that a few hours ago there was a small fire at Chapin Mill. There was not a great deal of damage done; the firefighters estimate between \$1,000 and \$10,000 in repairs, but Wayman tells me that we have the materials—the lumber and shingles—to be able to do it for far less than \$10,000.

One of the distressing things about the fire was that it started with a pile of oily rags, and for those of you who are newer to the Center, that's how the building we are sitting in now caught fire, in 1968. The building was completely gutted, leaving only the shell standing. What we're sitting in now, the zendo, had been the living room of the Morse Lumber family. As it turned out, the fire proved to have a silver lining to it: since we had to rebuild the whole interior, we re-designed it for our own purposes, as a Zen center, and no longer had to accommodate ourselves to the architecture of a family home.

So, oily rags ...

Neuroscientists and others who have studied meditation identify different types of attention. At the Mind and Life Summer Research Institute in 2008, I heard the various presenters classify awareness in different terms. To keep things simple this morning, we'll consider just four basic kinds: focused attention, 'noticing,' metacognitive awareness, and executive functions.

Focused attention, sometimes called 'orienting,' refers to holding our attention on one object at a time. This is the aspect of awareness known in some Buddhist schools as samatha—one-pointed absorption in the object of meditation. In doing breath or koan practice during

zazen, we want to keep our focus on that alone. Of course, our attention keeps drifting away from the practice; that's what the mind tends to do. The ox is just following its instincts, always straying, enticed by the sight of succulent grasses off the path. And our job, each time we notice that it's gone off, is simply to pull it back. Over time we get better at it, if we sit every day, and are increasingly able to access a state of 'flow' in daily life. Ultimately we can reach samadhi, or no-mindedness—the pre-condition for awakening.

By and by, almost in spite of ourselves, we're better able to hold the mind steadily on one thing at a time. This is a big accomplishment, although it's not as though we reach a point where we never again have our mind wandering. But we do find that we are able more and more to notice when the mind is wandering and then return to the breath.

The second aspect of attention, the 'noticing part,' is a function of what some in the business call 'open monitoring,' the receptive mode of awareness. In breath and koan practice, this is the indirect effect of focusing, whereas shikantaza ('just sitting') is awareness pure and simple, beyond cause and effect. Our mind may wander every which way, and we can be unaware of it for big chunks of time—five, ten, twenty minutes. At such times absorption is not the problem; we're plenty absorbed—but in our thoughts. The mind is promiscuous in the attachments it forms. It may even latch onto thoughts that make us miserable—say, a cutting remark by someone, or a financial concern. We can be stuck in a train of thought or a fantasy for the longest time without noticing it.

Step One of living in the present, then, is noticing when the mind has wandered. But now here's the tricky thing: we can't notice until we notice. That is, there's nothing we can really do





Tom Kowal

about our wandering attention until we notice it's wandered. Noticing is not something we can will, because willing is a conscious act, and when our mind is off somewhere, we're not conscious of it. Fortunately, though, noticing is also something we do get better at over time.

The 12th-century Korean Zen master Chinul, one of the seminal ancestors of our tradition, offered advice that is valuable for any stage of practice: 'Do not fear the arising of thoughts, only be concerned that your awareness of them not be tardy.' Again, for beginners who may not know this, we're always going to have thoughts arising in the mind. That's one of the functions of a living brain. The key thing is to notice them without getting involved in them. That little space right there between the noticing that there are thoughts, before getting involved in the content of the thoughts, is where we have our best shot at bringing ourselves back to the practice—that is, back to the present.

The more sitting we do, per day or per week, the more quickly we're likely to notice when the mind has wandered. We catch ourselves sooner, and can then redirect our attention back to where we want it, as we would a flashlight. Picture being in a dark room and turning on a flashlight, and then flicking the beam in any direction—to the ceiling, to the floor, to this wall, that wall, the lamp, the chair, even oneself. Managing this beam of attention is very important because we're pretty much out to sea until we can learn to focus. To move our attention with intention determines our experience of life, because it determines where our mind is—and that determines our character. The Spanish writer and philosopher José Ortega y Gasset might as well have been speaking on behalf of all seasoned meditators when he said, 'Tell me to what you pay attention, and I'll tell you who you are.'

So, we're doing zazen, we have a stray thought come into the mind, and once we notice, there's

a choice. Do we stay with the thought, and then board the train of thoughts that follow? That's one option—and a very popular one! The other is to go back to the breath or koan. And in that moment-to-moment choosing of how we direct our attention, is everything. This is Zen mind-training, which determines not merely the quality of our sitting but how consciously and effectively we function in our everyday lives. Once we learn while sitting that we don't have to engage with the thoughts as they flit through our mind, when we learn in the zendo to keep swinging that flashlight beam back to the breath or koan, then that choice of reality over thought-dust comes to operate in our daily life.

When someone says or does something hurtful to us, say, at work or at home, we have a choice: do we continue to dwell on the offense, for the next few hours, or days, or even longer, or do we bring our attention back to what is at hand, what is before us? We face the same choice, of course, with thoughts of the future—when we catch ourselves fretting about what might happen, or imagining our wishes fulfilled, we can either go on weaving those scenarios or drop them. That determines, to a great deal, the quality of our life.

The question is 'Who's in the driver's seat here?' Are we going to be driven by our thoughts, our memories and plans? Do we want to spend our lives dwelling in the past and in the future and in our fantasies. That would be to misuse our beam of directed awareness. To harmonize with what is real—the present—we want to direct our attention to the practice—the koan, if that's what we're working on, or, if our practice while sitting is a non-koan practice like the breath or shikantaza, then we just bring our mind to what we're doing—This!

Now, there are people with long Zen practice, or even some people without any Zen practice, who can bring a great deal of single-minded focus to what they're doing, and can reach self-forgetfulness to such a degree that they aren't aware of either themselves or what is going on around them. In a highly simplified environment like sesshin, or during sitting anywhere, losing

oneself—one's self—is the whole point. A Zen master in ancient China even said, 'One who is working on Mu does not see the sky when he raises his head, nor the ground when he lowers his head.' If we can enter into this pure absorption, we can break through our ordinary consciousness and experience the eternal. But for our functioning in the world, with other people, we have to balance focused absorption with noticing our place in time and space.

Every day we find ourselves in situations that call for us to integrate awareness of our surroundings with absorption. Any cook learns that even with no thoughts in the mind, getting overly absorbed in chopping or washing while a pot is over a flame on the stove can be costly. Sitting itself can be dysfunctional; I once missed a flight while doing zazen in an airport chapel. Even in sesshin, people who take walks during break periods have to remain oriented to the clock if they wander beyond earshot of the warning bells.

The Japanese have a saying, 'Watch your back,' which for them means, be aware of who is behind you (or around you) and how you might be blocking their view, or otherwise affecting their experience. This calls for panoramic awareness, noticing how our movements, or non-movements, are impacting other people. Let's say it's just before a sitting, like this morning, and as you approach the zendo you see someone you want to speak with. You automatically start talking to him and in your focus you forget everything else. And because you're really into it, you may be talking a bit loudly, without the broader awareness of people sitting in the zendo, who are likely to be disturbed by your loud talking. Likewise, people who are talking while standing near a doorway need to notice when someone else needs to come through and get out of the way.

At our daily meals here at the Center our staff has learned to pay more attention to what's happening around them. It used to be that people at these formal meals, which are held in silence, would get overly focused on serving themselves—'Salad—okay, I'll take that. Next, casse-

role—okay. Now salt—check,’ and so forth. The mind isn’t wandering, it’s right in the moment, but self-absorbed. It needs to be integrated with an awareness of what the people next to you, and across from you, need. This balance of focused attention and ambient awareness isn’t easy, but a mature Zen practice requires it.

To master any balancing act demands practice, and for this one it starts during sitting. That’s when we learn to focus the attention while at the same time openly monitoring—noticing—our posture. To be sure, an awareness of the finer points of posture isn’t essential in the beginning; the more important thing is to let those stampeding thoughts settle through absorption in the breath or koan. But those who are in this for the long run will want to avoid developing bad posture habits—especially since a relaxed, upright posture enhances our concentration. The two are mutually reinforcing, actually.

Our third type of attention this morning, metacognitive awareness, is close in meaning to ‘noticing,’ or open monitoring, but how close depends on which academic discipline is defining it. Both of these go beyond focused attention. Metacognition literally means ‘cognition about cognition,’ or ‘knowing about knowing.’ Broadly speaking, metacognitive awareness means stepping back and seeing the process, beyond the content of thoughts. When it functions as pure presence of mind, without reference to the past or future, it’s simply noticing what’s going on right now, as when we notice, for example, that we’re getting angry. Most people, when they’re really angry, are intensely focused, but only on that ‘other’—the object of their anger. They’re not fully aware they’re getting angry, because they are so riveted on what that person said or did, and also maybe on what they’re going to say or do to that person. It’s quite astonishing how angry we can get without fully being aware of it. If we can just catch the anger as it’s beginning to rise, that very noticing will do much to neutralize it.

There are physical signs we can learn to identify to help us spot our anger. Some of the most common are the palms getting wet, the heart

rate increasing, and the throat constricting, affecting our speech. They vary among different people. To be able at that moment to step back and notice these signs—that’s where we can avoid being whipped about by our anger.

When metacognitive awareness is informed by what we’ve learned, it is more than simple noticing. For example, if upon noticing the arising of anger we recall our tendency to react that way in similar circumstances, we access self-knowledge that is valuable in helping us detach from the anger. We not only see through the contents of the angry thoughts to the process at work, but also recognize the process from before.

Here’s another situation in which metacognitive awareness can save us: falling in love with the wrong person. Extramarital affairs usually seem to begin mindlessly, fueled by adrenaline that quashes sound judgment. The parties involved can get so swept up in each other, in flurries of secret meetings and emails and texting, that they don’t notice they’re heading toward a cliff. They miss the big picture.

All of this is to say that the sense of perspective we acquire through sitting is not limited to the rarefied atmosphere of the zendo. As we watch the mind and how it works while sitting, we are learning how to continue that monitoring of the mind outside the zendo. So, as with anger, to notice, ‘Whoa—I’m edging into an illicit affair,’ can lead us back to our senses: ‘Is that something I want to do? What will be the consequences of that?’ Whether it’s anger or craving, when we succumb to a blind passion we lose our bearings. We become blind.

It would be hard to overestimate the importance of cultivating metacognitive awareness as a resource in understanding and managing interpersonal relationships. And here, again, we can distinguish between simple in-the-moment noticing, as bare attention, and a learning-based form of metacognition. Consider the art of listening: A listener’s first priority is to stay focused on the speaker’s words. Beyond that comes noticing what is beyond the words—his affect, tone of voice, eyes, posture, and other non-verbal information, and especially his si-

lences. Finally comes awareness of everything else about the speaker based on learning derived from our life experience.

For example, we're listening to someone griping about a co-worker over a quarrel they just had with each other. The speaker's words may be presented as a factual account, but we're noticing that she's putting the blame entirely on the other person, as squabbling children do. From this we can conclude—based on our knowledge about the nature of disputes (and the Buddhist doctrine of dependent co-arising)—that her reporting is not to be entirely trusted. In reality these three forms of awareness may occur at once, but some naïve listeners may merely take the words at face value, without noticing the non-verbal clues, and even those who do see beyond the words may not use their capacity for metacognitive awareness to wonder about the untold story behind it.

There's no end to the power of metacognitive awareness in understanding what's behind the appearance of things, in public life as well as private. This is not just a matter of seeing the world with greater insight, but of using that insight to manage our reactions to it. Say we're hearing a furious member of the Tea Party ranting about taxes and 'Big Government.' The most ignorant listener will simply react to the words (focused attention, but nothing more). Others will take note of the speaker's agitation as well, but without looking deeper. Those with metacognitive awareness will go further and draw inferences based on their acquired experience, recognizing, for example, that anger arises from fear, which in this case probably reflects a sense of powerlessness in the one who's tantruming. Reflecting like this about the process at work, without getting snagged in the content of the words, we cultivate equanimity. Our perspective evolves from 'mean people suck' to 'mean people are suffering.'

With metacognitive awareness we can find the same detachment when confronted by anyone potentially disturbing—bloggers jeering at the scientific evidence for climate change; Muslim extremists on a rant; anyone consumed by

'us' against 'them.' This doesn't mean closing our eyes to hatred and yielding to it, but learning to see through it and not compound it through knee-jerk reactivity.

Another area in which metacognitive awareness, informed by life experience, can lead us beyond just noticing something to understanding it: In anyone, a characterological extreme generally suggests the presence of its opposite—arrogance points to insecurity, meekness to pride, cynicism to idealism (or to hostility—Roshi Kapleau used to say 'Watch out for the quiet ones'). Those obsessed with 'strength' tend to be running from perceived weakness, those harping about 'love' or 'compassion' betray deficits in these same qualities. The same identity of opposites can be suspected of the excessively polite, the compulsively joking, and those who are most shrill in denouncing the sexual behavior of others. Indeed, we in spiritual practice, especially, need to be on guard against attachment to moral purity in general—with its implied shadow. The 17th-century French philosopher Pascal recognized this, warning, 'Men never do evil so fully and so happily as when they do it for conscience's sake.'

Our ability to discern hidden motivations and subtexts and other phenomena behind the world of appearances—'when seeing three corners to know the fourth,' as it is said in Zen—develops with age. The mere accumulation of life experience teaches us how the world works. What we lose in naïvety we gain in worldly knowledge—wisdom with a small 'w.' As useful as this is in intuiting the character of others, even more important is shining our light of awareness onto ourselves, for it is from here that change unfolds. When Socrates declared, 'Know thyself' he knew that to understand our own nature is to understand the nature of things.

In English translations of ancient Zen texts we often find the work of Zen referred to as 'introspection' (literally, 'looking inward') or 'contemplation.' It starts with the focusing, which quiets our mental static enough for us to notice what's going on in the mind; paradoxically, the more thoroughly we become absorbed in no-



mind, the more clearly we see the stuff of the mind. And what we discover includes repetitive themes, some of them personal and others general. Virtually all of us will come face-to-face with a deeply ingrained tendency to pass silent judgments on ourselves and others. This is one of the most common—and painful—revelations in sesshin. Most of us will also come to see how preoccupied we are with ideas of progress in our practice, and we will suffer recurrent bouts of frustration and discouragement that sometimes alternate with self-congratulation. We also learn to recognize our individual thought-habits—our tendency, for instance, to dwell in the past more than the future, or vice-versa. We come to know our internal landscape, our typical emotional weather systems, and our particular strains of greed, anger, and delusion. We expose patterns in how we react to whom in what circumstances at what times. This ongoing collecting of data about our vulnerabilities yields an ever-growing harvest of self-knowledge. To the extent that we're aware of these karmic propensities as they operate, such awareness will provide the psychological perspective—the space—for us to respond to our circumstances consciously rather than reactively. When the legendary Zen master Zhaozhou (a.k.a. Joshu, of Mu fame) was asked, 'What is the first principle of the one wearing Buddhist robes?' he replied, 'Not to deceive himself.' In this regard, Zhaozhou, as a monk, was without one of the all-time most reliable sources of self-exposure: marriage. But then, he doesn't seem to have needed it.

Because such metacognitive awareness is learning-based, it has no place in pure zazen. While sitting our job is simply to notice when the mind has wandered and then re-focus on the breath or koan (or, in shikantaza, just drop the thought) without going on to interpret what we've noticed. But while out and about, navigating the straits of self-and-other, us-and-them, awareness of our own cognitive and emotional processes as they unfold becomes en-lightening, freeing us somewhat from the weight of our karmic baggage.

## SHARPENING ATTENTION

*Sitting in the dokusan line  
facing that hammer and bell  
—like a good snort of horseradish.*

—DWAIN WILDER

One last application of metacognitive awareness: When we hear about oily rags left in a pile, it's easy to think, 'What a stupid mistake! How could anyone be so negligent?' But when we hear this inner critical voice of ours, we can mentally step back and reflect, 'Well, I myself am not always Mr. Awareness.' It wouldn't take long for any of us to recall incidents (just take driving) in which we paid a price for a moment of inattention.

Whether the task is handling oily rags or a chain saw, or working with electrical wiring or with glue, when we're relatively new to it we tend to be protected by 'beginner's mind'—the keen attention and openness of mind that is natural in a learning situation. At the other end of the scale are the pro's who through years of experience—the school of hard knocks—have incorporated the safety habits necessary for the job. It's those in the middle of the experience continuum who may be most at risk. They've repeated the task enough to have lost beginner's mind, but not enough to have assimilated the dangers the hard way. Things that have become



routine invite carelessness, and there is a growing awareness in medicine and other fields that checklists go a long way toward preventing the mistakes that experts are prone to make.

Finally, there's multi-tasking, one of the 'executive functions' of attention. This 'juggling' of attention, when it's not carelessly done, is harmless enough, and just part of human activity in contemporary life—talking on the phone while stirring the soup, watching the news while running on the treadmill, driving while listening to the radio. It's also become practically an unavoidable part of working with others. But even in the simplest, safest circumstances it does split the mind, and recent research confirms that each of the multiple tasks done simultaneously is performed less effectively than when done by itself.

What do we find so compelling about doing two or more things at once? Besides the obvious saving of a little time, it would seem to reflect a form of greed, a wish to pack activity into the space in our lives. But to what end? It's a handy way of dodging whatever in the mind might otherwise trouble us. Multi-tasking works to squeeze idle thoughts out of the mind, thoughts that might otherwise leave us anxious, bored, or lonely. Someone once noted, 'No one is lonely while eating spaghetti—it takes too much attention.' So, too, does talking on the phone while surfing the web while watching TV while snacking. Keeping ourselves consumed in busyness provides a temporary escape from the self-consciousness that gnaws at the mind. But it takes its toll, as Thoreau warned:

I believe that the mind can be permanently profaned by the habit of attending to trivial things, so that all our thoughts become tinged with triviality. ...We should treat our minds, that is, ourselves, as innocent ingenuous children, whose guardians we are, and be careful what subjects we thrust on

their attention. Read not the Times. Read the Eternities. Conventionalities are at length as bad as impurities... Yes, every thought that passes through the mind helps to wear and tear it and to deepen the ruts.

The pitfalls of multi-tasking are largely the same as those of being overly focused in general, but with the stakes raised. Being lost in reverie while sitting under a tree costs us the full experience of our surroundings, but not an injury (or worse, a manslaughter charge, which we risk when multi-tasking behind the wheel). But ever more injuries are now occurring to pedestrians lost in their iPods or cell phones who run afoul of sidewalk cracks, sign poles, toys left on the floor, and parked cars.

An article in *The New York Times* in January of this year reported on a study devised by a psychology professor in Washington that dramatized the problem of 'inattention blindness,' in which despite looking at an object, we fail to register it or process what it is. One of his students dressed himself as a clown and rode through campus on a unicycle, but was unseen by 75% of those talking on their cell phones. The same blindness was not observed in pairs of pedestrians conversing with each other side-by-side. Why the difference? 'A cell phone taxes not just auditory resources in the brain, but visual functions, since the listener is prompted to create visual imagery that overrides or obscures the processing of real images,' the article concluded.

Lest any of us despair at our failures of attention and awareness, it is well to remember that these human endowments, no matter how seemingly elusive, are not beyond us. In fact, awareness is our very nature. The word 'Buddha' means enlightened awareness, and we are all equally endowed with this Buddha-nature. It just takes daily practice—and lots of perseverance—to actualize it.

# The Big Gorilla

ANDY STERN

Cognitive neuroscientists have speculated that we use only 3% of our brain's potential, which suggests there are vast resources of the brain that have yet to be accessed. By comparison, if we could harness only 3% of the power in a car engine, our maximum speed would be just 3 MPH! While the idea that the human brain has far more potential than we realize may not be surprising to students of the mind, including Zen practitioners, it is nevertheless a mindboggling concept—at least to the 3% of our brain that we typically use! Pondering this idea of vast untapped brainpower, Arthur Koestler's book *The Sleepwalkers* shows how the insights of great thinkers like Galileo, Johannes Kepler, and Isaac Newton were a product of their ability to tap into the unconscious reserves of the mind through a process of sustained, focused concentration—that is, fierce, unrelenting, even obsessive attention. Sound familiar?

Sustained attention creates a cognitive state that can be likened to the phenomenon of supersaturation. For example, only a certain amount of sugar can be dissolved in water to create a saturated solution; however, if the solution is heated up, more sugar will dissolve. When the solution is returned to a cooled state, all of the sugar will remain in the solution. This supersaturated solution is very unstable and can easily crystallize. By analogy, sustained attention through zazen changes the very nature of the mind, creating an unstable supersaturated cognitive state from which extraordinary realizations, already known to the unconscious mind, can crystallize and become realized with the conscious mind.

There is more than one way to engage in focused attention. In his memoir about dying of AIDS, Harold Brodkey describes two fundamental types of attention: patterned and unpatterned. Reflecting on the differences between the two, he writes,

At one time I was interested in bird-watching, and I noticed that when I saw a bird for the first time I couldn't really see it, because I had no formal arrangement, no sense of pattern, for it. I couldn't remember it clearly, either. But once I identified the bird, the drawings in bird books and my own sense of order arranged the image and made it clearer to me, and I never forgot it. From then on I could see the bird in two ways—as the fresh, unpatterned vision and the patterned one. Well, seeing death nearby is very like the first way of seeing (p. 109).

For me, the patterned way of seeing, or attention directed by knowledge, is a lifelong habit that is comfortable, easy, fruitful, and even fun. I've recently spent some time with birders, and observed that there is often a rush, a competitive drive, to identify a bird—and be the first to recognize the species. I suspect that, like me, birders are uncomfortable in the unpatterned, unpredictable world of not knowing. Unpatterned attention leads us away from the familiar into less certain terrain—like 'seeing death.' I find sustaining unpatterned attention to be both difficult and scary. But it may be that sustained unpatterned attention is the gateway to that untapped 97% of brain's potential.

In cognitive neuroscience parlance, unpatterned thinking is a right-brain function, whereas patterned thinking is left-brain. In Zen, unpatterned seeing is referred to as 'beginner's mind' and patterned vision as 'arrived mind.' This balance of patterned and unpatterned attention informs much of our engagement with life. As a neurologist, on almost a daily basis I meet with patients whose condition cannot be labeled with a clear diagnosis. And, once a firm diagnosis is made, it is all too easy to luxuriate in the warm bath of that knowledge, paying far more attention to the bird book than the bird itself, and therefore give less attention to the patient.



Anaury Cruz

Since I began my medical practice, I have always opened the door to the waiting room myself and invited each patient to come back to my office. I often obtain valuable information in the waiting room from seeing how a patient sits, stands up from the chair, and walks, alone or accompanied by a family member or caretaker. Sometimes I can know the neurologic diagnosis by what I observe in the waiting room. For example, many patients with Parkinson's disease are diagnosable at first sight with a fair degree of certainty. But, when I know in advance that my next patient has Parkinson's the energy of my attention decreases because I already know that I can answer any questions that may come up, and that I can look and feel competent as a doctor. However, if a patient comes into my exam room and states that, yes, they suffer from Parkinson's disease but they are coming to me now because of headaches—a symptom that is

not associated with Parkinson's—I feel like the birder who realizes he has incorrectly identified an unknown bird. I immediately get an uneasy feeling as I gird myself in unpatterned attention mode and make a fresh start in coming up with a diagnosis.

Jon Kabat-Zinn provided an astounding illustration of the different outcomes of patterned versus unpatterned attention when he spoke at the Rochester Zen Center's 40th anniversary symposium. Before playing a short video, he explained to the audience that he was going to show a clip of two teams of graduate students playing basketball, one team wearing white shirts and the other in black, and that each team will be passing the basketball back and forth to team members. He challenged the audience to count how many times the white team passed the ball. At the end of the video he asked us, 'How many?' 'Fourteen!' we chorused. He con-

gratulated us on our good work, but then asked if anyone had seen something a little strange. Three people out of about 300 audience members raised their hands and giggled. He then replayed the same video but this time instructed us to just watch it, to engage in unpatterned seeing. For the first few moments the video seemed exactly the same, but then a person dressed in a gorilla suit entered from stage left, walked downstage front-center, nearly obscuring the action behind him, turned to face the camera, and beat his chest for several seconds, turned, and exited stage right a few moments before the clip ended.

Now, I fancy myself an observant fellow but I must confess that I missed the gorilla. Had he first instructed the audience to just watch, undoubtedly 300 out of 300 would have seen the gorilla and giggled. To notice the gorilla we do not need special visual acuity, intelligence, or knowledge. All that we need is a change in the quality of our attention. As a child, when I wasn't able to solve a problem I was sometimes admonished to 'think harder.' But to see the gorilla, we need to think less hard!

While fierce, unremitting, even obsessive attention can certainly facilitate profound discovery, it is also true that attention, especially when too narrowly focused, can block the process by interfering with our ability to simply notice. Studies in neuroscience show that, in general, when we activate one brain function we suppress another. Consider, for example, that many people are aware of involuntary jerking movements of their limbs as they are falling asleep. This phenomenon is the result of a relaxation of inhibition of spinal cord nerve cells from higher, brain-localized systems, which release the cells of the spinal cord to fire spontaneously. (When we are fully awake and alert, the brain activity suppresses spinal neurons and our legs don't jerk.) Some people awaken on occasion with transient double vision that corrects itself as the brain arouses and directs the eyes to point in the same direction. To focus our attention not only inhibits other cognitive modes but requires it. Koestler writes, 'Some of the greatest discov-

eries ... consist mainly in the clearing away of psychological roadblocks which obstruct the approach to reality; which is why, *post factum*, they appear so obvious' (p. 338-9).

I have a strong sense that I have spent too much of my life in a comfort zone, counting basketballs while missing so many gorillas! In Zen practice we try to direct our attention at The Big Gorilla. Our job is simply to realize what is there, right in front of us already. We don't need to invent or hallucinate gorillas. The challenge is simply to notice the unmissable.

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*Andy Stern has been a member of the RZC for over ten years and serves as vice-president of the Board of Trustees.*

#### *Countless Good Deeds.*

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, who is a tax attorney, 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.



# Swimming with Ikkyu

ROB INGLIS

One day a man of the people said to Zen master Ikkyu (1394–1481): ‘Master, will you please write for me some maxims of the highest wisdom?’ Ikkyu immediately took his brush and wrote the word ‘Attention.’ ‘Is that all?’ asked the man. ‘Will you not add something more?’ Ikkyu then wrote twice running: ‘Attention, Attention.’ ‘Well,’ remarked the man rather irritably, ‘I really don’t see much depth or subtlety in what you have just written.’ Then Ikkyu wrote the same word three times running: ‘Attention, Attention, Attention.’ Half-angered, the man demanded: ‘What does that word “*Attention*” mean anyway?’ And Ikkyu answered gently: ‘Attention means attention.’

Like the man in the above story, recounted by Roshi Kapleau in *The Three Pillars of Zen*, I sometimes wonder what attention really is. Is attention the result of intention? Or is it that which arises when the mind is allowed to quiet down? Is it a conscious focusing on one thing or one single action, like a magnifying lens? Or is it an open, empty field of pure perception?

One of the great crises of our time is the inability to focus. There are millions of people, children and adults alike, who live in a quick-edit, fast-forward universe. It’s not easy to change this pattern. We can’t even sit down and eat a meal without the TV being on, without having a book in our hand or engaging in conversation. How often do we really taste our food? How attentive are we during conversation?

What should we pay attention to? Our thoughts, feelings, bodily sensations? The world around us? If we get caught up in the outer world and the busyness of our lives we forget our true nature. We get scattered and feel pulled in too many directions at once. If we get stuck in the inner world we become enslaved by our thoughts and emotions. Zen reminds us that inner and outer are not separate and also that this empty

field of attention includes both. Obviously, being present with our Zen practice moment-by-moment is important. The more sitting we truly engage in, the quieter our minds will be, and the practice of attention will be more spontaneous.

When the killing demons of impermanence are before you,

To whom can you speak about the final prison (death),

A hundred affairs are impossible to still, the five desires are noisy.

You want to bar the windows of the senses, but the eight winds blow them open.

—Ikkyu

(The eight winds are prosperity, decline, disgrace, honor, praise, censure, suffering, and pleasure.)



For many years there was a photograph on the wall of our cottage showing my mother executing a perfect swan dive off the side of a nearby wharf. She seems suspended in mid-air, at least five feet above the level of the platform. Although the photo expresses great freedom, there is also something of disciplined, focused attention and of absolute presence in her perfect posture. Mom was the swimming and diving champion of the province of New Brunswick, Canada, in the 1940s. She amassed a cupboard full of trophies and was quite proud of them. She passed on a love of all things aquatic to her four children. I learned at an early age that the ocean was my friend and that if I was alert while on or under the water there was nothing to fear. So I learned to pay attention while swimming, snorkeling, or diving. These activities became, perhaps, an early form of zazen, a tip of the tongue taste of being present. Learning to dive taught me a degree of self-discipline and the value of body posture. The ubiquitous jellyfish



Rob Inglis

with their painful stingers kept me watchful and alert by necessity.

Ikkyu had his own aquatic encounter and it certainly brought him to the attention of his future teacher, whose name was Kaso, a Roshi in the Daitokuji lineage. He had a reputation for maintaining an old-fashioned, rigorous kind of Zen training. Ikkyu once traveled to the town of Katada in Japan to train with him but Kaso refused to even see the young monk. Whereupon Ikkyu took up a seat outside the monastery gate to await either an interview or death by starvation, whichever came first. After four or five days, the master came out to attend a service in the nearby village. Seeing Ikkyu steadfastly at the gate, he told his attendants to give him a good dousing with water and chase him away with a stick. But when he returned, Ikkyu was still there, refusing to leave. Only then did Kaso relent and bring him into the monastery. The persistent young monk went on to become one of the most influential Zen masters and best loved poets in Japanese history.



These days, while swimming for exercise in the local fitness club pool, I sometimes attempt to transform it into a kind of aquatic kinhin. During repetitive laps up and down the pool the mind wants to wander at will. Letting go of the many thoughts and coming back to 'just swimming' requires some effort but gets a little easier with practice. Another way of being attentive in the water is to notice what's really happening. For example, what do I *see* when swimming freestyle? First, a disembodied hand and arm appear, arrowing through the water from the right, trailing bubbles, then disappearing toward the bottom of the scene. Then another arm appears from the left, doing the same thing. Although physical sensations tell me I am moving through the water and my legs are kicking, there is actually no torso to be seen in my field of vision. At times it seems as though motion is suspended and the body has magically disappeared.

Last night there was no wind, the waves were huge;  
Rolling in, rolling out, there is a road, for whom  
does it pass?

If the place to which a hundred streams return  
knows contentment,  
A little piece of cloud athwart the sky wipes out  
empty space.

—Ikkyu



I remember vividly a scene from my childhood when I was perhaps 11 or 12. A great hurricane had swept up the Atlantic Coast, raising huge waves that crashed on the rocks and the beach near our cottage. The following evening wind and waves were still high, and my visiting uncle, an adventurous fellow if there ever was one, suggested we all go down to the beach for a swim. We put on our swimsuits and jackets and trooped down to the beach. The water was dark brown, having been whipped up by the storm, and the six-foot waves were thumping onto the sand with a loud drumming sound. My uncle, a large and strong man, took off his jacket and stood on the beach, watching, attentive, waiting for the right moment. Suddenly he dashed forward just after one huge wave had hit the beach and ran out into the backwash. He dove straight into the bottom of the next wave and swam underwater in the murky darkness for thirty feet or so, emerging into a rolling sea beyond the surf. He rolled over onto his back and proceeded to float there. He was alternately laughing and sending up spouts of water from his mouth, vastly enjoying the moment.

Natural, reckless, correct skill;  
Yesterday's clarity is today's stupidity.  
The universe has dark and light, entrust oneself  
to change.  
One time, shade the eyes and gaze afar at the  
road of heaven.

—Ikkyu



In 1525, as old age was overtaking him, Ikkyu was asked to take on the enormous task of rebuilding Daitokuji, one of the important Rinzai training centers in Japan, which had been completely destroyed in the Onin war. His large circle of friends and acquaintances, which included

nobles, poets, artists and tea masters, responded generously to his appeal for financial aid. Even though he had inherited the abbot's purple robe he preferred the simple life and stayed in his small hermitage during the years of reconstruction. The monastery was rebuilt and stands to this day as a tribute to his dedication to the Buddha Way.

Last year I was scuba diving near the island of Utila, off the coast of Honduras. The reef was known as 'the labyrinth' due to its maze-like shapes and patterns. Our group was resting between dives, waiting for blood nitrogen levels to subside. Since the water was shallow and the reef was close to the surface, I decided to do some snorkeling. While taking in the shapes and colors of the coral, sponges, and sea fans, I caught a movement off to my left. To my great joy it was a large green sea turtle, slowly swimming by about ten feet in front of me. At that moment there was just pure attention. No self here, no turtle there. Only ... sun-dappled shell, patterned head and fins, graceful gliding through the water. Then, as suddenly as it had appeared, it veered off to the left and dove down over the reef wall and into the dark depths.

Attentiveness can be an ever-deepening experience, and it can exist without the small self. When the personality is let go of, however briefly, awareness or presence is what is left. True attention requires a kind of sacrifice, a letting go, of everything we have been or hope to be, of both past and future. If we learn to face each moment, naked of identity and open to whatever comes, then life takes on a clear, translucent quality, like sunlit ocean water, and turtles transform into miracles.

#### Reference

*Ikkyu and the Crazy Cloud Anthology*, translated by Sonja Arntzen, University of Tokyo Press, 1986, reprinted 1988.

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Richard Von Sturmer

## Learning to Pay Attention

JOHN PULLEYN

If anything can reliably fuel the commitment to practice, it's the recognition that we ourselves are responsible for how we occupy the mind, and that our choices determine not only who we are but what we will become. The Buddha said, 'We are what we think. All that we are arises from our thoughts. With our thoughts, we make our world.' Really, this is very good news. Attention is transformative. The thoughts and states of mind we experience now are the results of how we've used our minds in the past. By using the mind skillfully now, we make possible clearer and more responsive states of mind in the future.

So we sign up, telling ourselves, 'I'm going to cultivate attention.' And then the trouble begins. Attention itself is simple and easy. In this moment, we can direct the mind wherever we like.

But as anyone who sits discovers, it's anything but easy to maintain that initial moment of attention. The mind wants to keep doing what it's always done, and for nearly everyone that means escaping from this moment of attention into the future or the past, into worries and daydreams. It happens without our awareness—for a moment we turn our attention to the breath or to our koan, and in the next moment the mind is hijacked. Often attention is lost so quickly, we feel as if we've failed to pay attention at all.

Realizing the mind's a mess is where everyone starts. When you're floating with the stream, you don't realize how powerful and relentless it is. But when you stop mindlessly identifying with your thoughts and feelings, they're suddenly in your face. You become aware to some degree of what's been going on for your whole life, and



it can be disorienting and even discouraging. Nevertheless, it's a call to practice. You're hardly unique. This is the battle that everyone who aspires to a life of awareness has to fight.

So let's say our determination is strong. We've accepted on a deep level that we alone are responsible for our lives, and we've come to understand that genuine effort is going to be required. Now we have to learn how to sustain attention—or in other words, how to practice—and here we come to grips with the paradoxical nature of mind. To put it simply, attention and intending to pay attention are not the same thing. Most people's tendency is to approach the difficulties of practice with the same set of mental tools they've been using for nearly every other challenge in their lives. Unfortunately, the rational, problem-solving mind cannot be successfully used to control the mind. It's great for figuring out how to pack a suitcase or diagnose car trouble but not so great for working with mental formations—with trying to let go, for example, of cravings or anxieties. The classic example is the challenge not to think of an elephant. The effort itself keeps the elephant alive in the mind. And in the same way, by holding in our mind our resolve to remain attentive or by holding a picture of what that attentive state should feel like, we're immediately divided between the object of our attention and our conscious attempt to pay attention.

Undivided attention is simpler and more direct than we imagine. It's not a matter of technique, we can't follow a formula, and ultimately no one can tell us how to become absorbed. Our only lever is attention itself. When we notice we're no longer attending to the breath or to the koan, we drop whatever we've become preoccupied with and redirect the mind. We come back again and again. Our concern is not clearer states of mind we may achieve in the future. It's not monitoring our present state of mind and judging how well we're succeeding. In order to pay complete attention, we have to give up grasping at anything. As soon as we try to create an effect, we've taken our eye off the ball. The effect (the state of absorption) is the result of

having our eye on the ball and nothing else. It comes unbidden.

This is why a koan can be such a powerful tool for reaching a state of absorption. When we're really questioning, we forget ourselves, and we forget our agenda. The practice, whether it's a koan or the breath, is primary. Everything else is secondary.

If we get out of the way, with faith in the process, we may experience dramatic changes. I still remember the one home run I hit nearly fifty years ago in Little League baseball. Just before I swung the bat, the ball looked as big as a grapefruit. Somehow, everything else had fallen away, and there was just that ball. The danger in such 'successes' is that we try to replicate them. Whatever it was I did, let me do that again. We want a recipe for becoming absorbed, and so our effort becomes inauthentic as we fall back into trying to create an effect. This is why the only way forward is to let go of anything we think we've achieved. If it's not this moment, how can it help?

More commonly, practice is not so dramatic. Like a frog in gradually heated water, we may not notice a shift. But friends and loved ones may. Or we may begin to notice that problems or situations that used to baffle us are no longer so difficult. In any case, our own assessment of how things are going is always suspect. Moreover, it's not really our business and has nothing to do with paying attention.

Complete attention requires forgetting our agenda and giving up grasping. That means not wanting things to be other than they are. Since things *can't* be other than they are, we avoid a lot of fruitless struggle. If we're no longer slaves to imaginary goals, no longer trying desperately to get from here to there, we find the room to be present in this moment. And then it's a privilege and not a burden to pay attention—to give ourselves completely to the dance.

*John Pulleyn has been a member of the Zen Center since 1968, paying attention with varying degrees of success.*

# For the Eleventh Time

ANONYMOUS

*Editor's Note: A sangha member sent the following testimonial to Roshi after the Jukai ceremony held last November. It is printed here with permission from the author.*

Dear Roshi,

I am writing to tell you about an experience I had after Jukai, not because it's *my* experience but because it's something others might find encouraging.

For ten or twelve years I have occasionally been awakened from sleep by a feeling of dread, a foretaste of death. Its physical cause could have been my body's recollection of the 95°F temperature I had coming out of surgery, or I might have been sleeping in a position where I wasn't getting enough oxygen. I read somewhere that low-frequency sounds like traffic or a distant train could induce this feeling. Knowing of these possible explanations did not make the feeling dissipate, however. Over the years my response has evolved from a paralyzing fear to the discovery that I could achieve release by chanting the Kanzeon, to the realization that this was a valuable opportunity to study fear and death. Although I've not replicated Ramana Maharshi's pre-experience of death, I do think I've gotten past some of my fear of dying.

Which brings me to last night or rather to 3:30 this morning when I was awakened by the feeling of dread. I stood my ground, perhaps even muttering, 'Oh, *that* again' and dozed off.

I was awakened again, but this time by a feeling of great peace. I wish I could say more about the peace, but I can only say what it was not—not the relief of waking up from a nightmare, nor the lassitude that sometimes comes with illness, where you feel death would be a pleasant change from the current misery. The closest comparison is the feeling after writing a difficult passage or negotiating a narrow ledge during a hike. I had the sense that I passed a barrier, but not the sense that there would never be any more trouble.

I have no doubt that the energy of Jukai provided the necessary impetus to push me past what I could achieve with my own effort. I feel that for a few minutes this morning I was in contact with the 'merit power' referred to in the introduction to the repentance gatha.

In closing, I want to thank you for having the patience to keep taking us through the same ritual. For ten or twenty times, one hears only what one understands and the rest is just sound, but the eleventh time, one hears a new phrase or rather an old phrase that can now be comprehended. Again, please feel free to share this with anyone who has experienced the 3 AM fear of the sort that can't be addressed by formulating a Plan B, or who has realized that Plan B can't be, 'Well, I'll just die a quick and easy death.' This has been a lengthy way of saying, 'Beyond great fear lies great peace,' and an even lengthier way of discovering it, but sometimes the longer way is easier to understand.



### *Chapin Mill Report*

Since the last edition of *Zen Bow*, a lot has happened on the Chapin Mill front. Thanks to a large anonymous donation, we're about to begin the final phase of construction. This last wing of the retreat center includes the dokusan room, teacher's quarters, and additional single dormitory rooms. As members who've recently been to sesshin know, our current dokusan room is a small bedroom, and the dokusan line is squeezed into the hallway. The additional single rooms will allow us to rent to larger groups we've had to turn down in the past.

Using money donated explicitly for this last phase of construction, we're hiring our contractor, Joe Condidorio, who's been with us from the beginning, to construct a heated and well-insulated shell. Once his work is complete, we will continue as we did with the Zendo Project, using staff and volunteer labor to finish the interior. Joe plans to break ground around May 17th.

We're very grateful for the donations that make this possible and excited to be able to finish what we set out to do when Ralph Chapin donated his land to us in 1996.

### *Symposium*

On May 1, the Center is hosting a symposium, *Turning Toward the Earth: a Conversation with Leading Environmentalists and Buddhists*, at the Dryden Theatre of the George Eastman House in Rochester. Information about the event is posted on the Center's website ([www.rzc.org](http://www.rzc.org)). Just click on the link in the News Box on the home page.

Our four nationally-known speakers are: Michael Soulé, Stephanie Kaza, David Loy, Joanna Macy.

Ticket prices are \$60, \$40 for students and Zen Center members. Besides learning about our speakers and their talks, you can order tickets directly from the website, or call the Center at (585) 473-9180.

### *Universal Access*

Our new wheelchair lift is installed and operational. People can enter the lift from the Link and exit on the zendo level near the Oak Room door. Our two newly reconfigured bathrooms, one of which is wheelchair accessible, are also good to go. Teshin Sweger, our main carpenter on this project, has now turned his attention to the zendo itself. He's enlarged the side doorway and started a reconfiguration of the zazen tans that will accommodate a few more chair-sitters.

Thanks, again, to the donors that made this project possible! Photos of all our changes are posted on the website ([www.rzc.org/node/10](http://www.rzc.org/node/10)).

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### The Great Turning

In response to the enormous ecological and social problems that humankind is facing, many writers use the term 'The Great Turning' to refer to a paradigm shift towards a sustainable way of life. Readers are invited to submit essays and/or images on the theme of 'The Great Turning' as it relates to the Dharma and Zen practice.

Submissions should be sent to the editor via email at [donna@rzc.org](mailto:donna@rzc.org) (or mailed to the Center). Submission deadline: April 1, 2010. Articles and images on other topics are also welcome and may be submitted at any time.

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