Zen Bow

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COMING OUT AS A BUDDHIST

Zen Bow: Coming Out As a Buddhist

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Name? Address? DOB? Religion?

BRENDA REEB

In 1992 I cut my finger while chopping cauliflower for dinner. I needed stiches, so I took the bus from my apartment to the emergency room at a nearby hospital. Back in the days before Urgent Care centers, the ER was the place to go if you pondered the need for stitches after 8 p.m. It was a cold dark night in winter. Bright lights and a sense of trauma greeted me at the door.

I sat in the Intake chair, taking it all in. The attendant quizzed me for information.

Insurance card? Check.

Name? 'Brenda Reeb.'

Spell it please. 'R–e–e–b.'

Address? '15 Hunnewell.'

Spell it please. 'H–u–n–n–e–w–e–l–l.'

Date of birth? 'March 30, 1964.'

Religion? 'What?' I said.

'What is your religion?' he repeats. He looks up expectantly. I had broken the rhythm of our exchange.

At first surprised, I quickly realized the relevancy of the question. I was in a hospital named St. Elizabeth and I had been raised Catholic. If I died here, from some awful infection from my cauliflower cut, what about my soul? Last Rights, in other words. The religion question put my soul on the line.

A couple decades of Catholic indoctrination kicked in. Without Last Rites I would burn in Hell. Was I prepared to face Hell? Not to say 'Catholic' felt like renouncing my family. I was sitting zazen fairly regularly, but I hadn't called

it Buddhism yet. I had not even called myself 'formerly Catholic.' I knew I was hooked on zazen, but I had not set out to discard Catholicism.

Frankly, no one had asked until now.

Could I turn down this offer of salvation, my opportunity for Last Rites? Could I say, 'No thanks, I've found something else'? Make that, 'No thanks, *Jesus*. I've found something else. Sorry about the cross thing.' Catholic children are not taught about Something Else. Burn in Hell or angel's wings are your choices. And guilt is your posture.

A couple of years of steady zazen kicked in. I paused another split second. 'Buddhist,' I said, 'I'll say Buddhist.' And with that I cast my soul's lot. It felt pretty good.

He looks back at the form. Studies it. Looks at me again. 'We don't have that. I'll check "Other."'

Brenda Reeb lives in Rochester and has been an RZC member since 1987.

Not Proud To Be Buddhist

BRYAN HOFFMAN

I was proud to be Catholic.

Stacking logs with Dad. We breathe steam into cold December air.

'You could be a priest, you know.' I have trouble lifting a log.

Dad grabs it before it falls to the ground—I was afraid it might hit my foot.

'I don't want to be a priest, Dad.'

'No?' He hands me another log from the wheelbarrow.

I place it on the pile.

'No … I want to be the Pope.' I don't smile—this is too serious.

Dad doesn't smile either, but looks at me, 'Of course you can.'

Then, as he hands me a large log, 'You should be Pope.'

As we take off our boots in the basement, Mom folds laundry at a table.

Dad tousles my hair and says to Mom, 'Bryan's going to be Pope.'

'You would be a good Pope,' Mom says as she folds a pair of my pants fresh from the dryer.

At church each morning I wonder if the priest sees me.

Does Monsignor know I've been here every morning since the school year began? Does he realize that I'm the only one in the entire school who goes to mass every day? As I receive Holy Communion, I imagine God inhabiting my body, cleansing it of impurities. I think about 'unclean' people, and I'm grateful I'm not one of them.

Later, as we leave church, a stooped, elderly woman says to my mother, 'He's like an angel.'

When I think about the Jewish kids and the Presbyterian kids—all non-Catholic kids—I reflect with sadness that they'll go to hell when they die. I worry about them, but I'm mostly proud of my own solid faith—faith that has earned me a seat on the Heaven Express.

The pride I felt as a child was rooted in a desire to be a good person, though I now see myself as having been misguided and arrogant. As a Catholic, I believed everyone needed that brand of religion—that it was the cure for all ailments.

Tom Kowal

Yet, over time, this arrogance gave way to a genuine desire to help others. Catholicism gave way to self-helpism. I really, *really* wanted to help people. So much so that I would evangelize about all sorts of things: 'If you have heartburn, you should really be taking ginger root daily; it helps with motion sickness too.' 'You can cure anxiety by practicing qigong! Have you tried acupuncture? That works too!' 'Why are you dating that person, he's clearly no good for you. Find someone who makes you happier.' 'Does that contain partially hydrogenated oil? That stuff will *kill* you!'

I started to sound like a walking self-help infomercial.

The problem? I was somewhat hypocritical. *I* suffered from heartburn, and gingerroot only *sometimes* helped. *I* was anxious and felt only modest relief through qigong and acupuncture. The main problem? How can anyone truly know what another person needs? I was offering one-size-fits-all solutions because I thought I knew better than others. I now realize this created an apparent wall between me and the folks in my life. I wasn't really listening to people.

When I began practicing Zen Buddhism, the tide of the old Catholic pride came rushing in. I wondered what the teacher thought as I sat after formal rounds during sesshin. I hoped the monitors saw me as I sat still as a rock. I had Zen pride. After attending sesshin, I would return to the 'real world' and quietly judge people. Instead of thinking they were all lost souls who would burn in eternal hellfire, I saw non-Buddhists as victims of their own desires. I pitied them for allowing themselves to become enmeshed in the world of things. I began urging close friends and family members to meditate. The problem? Same as before. I couldn't see past my own inflated ego. Instead of noticing

my own flaws, I looked for flaws in others. I now see that I avoided the icky task of examining my own shortcomings.

Sit long enough, and the ego gradually wears away. This is the greatest gift of Zen practice. There is really no room for ego when sitting still, absorbed in the practice. And when the ego drops away, our notions of what others need drop away. (In any event, what we *think* others need is often *not* what they actually need.) Don't be fooled: this is not a blissful state—not initially, anyway. In my experience, the moments when I've been able to drop my ego most fully are the same moments when the smelliest, most fearsome demons surface. Even then, though, sitting … sitting … sitting … wears away at them as well. Sitting is like drops of water repeatedly hitting the same spot on the same stone every day. Eventually, that daily drip, drip, drip wears away the stone.

And so, I'm not proud to be Buddhist. No, just grateful I'm still alive and can sit cross–legged so I can work out the kinks in my character.

Dad and I drink tea on his porch. We chat about mom, places my wife and I have recently traveled. Then he tells me he's impressed by the changes he's seen in me over the years since I first started meditating. He and I chat for hours about Zen, Catholicism, and science. Zen fits well with his own view of life and the universe. He's clearly proud of me.

'Have you thought about becoming a teacher or leader—what are they called in Zen?'

If he only knew how many sesshins I sat white-knuckled as I confronted inner demons. Demon-slaying is a hard business. There's nothing glamorous about it. There's no more room for pride in Zen practice than there is in cleaning a grimy toilet.

'Well, there are priests who make a vocational commitment, but they're not anything like Catholic priests who give sermons, say mass. But I'm not ready to be a Zen priest—not sure I'll ever be ready for that level of commitment. Then there are Zen teachers. As far as being a Zen teacher, that's just not something to strive for.'

He thinks I'm being humble.

'Well, you're my spiritual guide. You're my teacher.'

Old feelings of wanting to please him, to impress him, resurface.

No, Dad, I'm just your son.

Bryan Hoffman has been a member of the RZC since 1999. He lives with his wife in southern New Jersey, where he works in the public-school system. His parents have recently begun meditating with him.

Got Lucky

DAVE PASCALE

As someone who has been sitting daily for a little over six months I have struggled with how to discuss my practice with friends, family, and coworkers. When friends and family visit our house we stuff my cushions in the closet and put my small Buddha statue in a drawer. My wife thinks it is best to hide the Zen cushions and statue to avoid awkward conversations. I used to think this as well, but now I'm not so sure.

Lets face it: life is hard at times. It has its ups and downs. Everybody struggles sooner or later. I think any mature adult, Buddhist or not, will admit this to some degree. If friends and family come over and see my cushions and ask about them, why not look them in the eye and say, 'I had problems sleeping at night and needed a better way to deal with stress, so I started meditating'? Who wouldn't understand that life can be hard and everyone tries to cope one way or another? Why deny someone the opportunity to practice zazen?

Several months ago I had lunch with two coworkers. They started talking about how stressful work had been recently and how it is difficult to sleep at night when your mind is racing with thought after thought. I wanted to tell them about zazen, but the words never came out. I was afraid they would judge me and I wasn't sure how to start the conversation. I'm ashamed of myself for not having mentioned that I sit daily. How pathetic to be so concerned with how others would judge me that I deny someone the opportunity to learn about zazen.

It seems Zen has grown in popularity over the years in our country. However, it is not as if there are commercials on TV extolling the benefits of meditation (does *Oprah* count?), advertisements on the radio, or billboards along the highway with sayings such as 'Life Sucking Lately? Go Stare at a Wall and Count to 10. Keep Counting.' Or 'Dude, Stop Grasping. Nothing is Permanent.'

I wouldn't have known about zazen unless a Sangha member, who was a college professor of mine, had told me about it. I went to an RZC workshop and initially tried zazen while I was in college, but I thought it was too hard and gave up on it. Fast forward seven years later, facing insomnia and a mid-life crisis, I come crawling back to the mat. Words cannot describe the gratitude I feel to have known about zazen—to have had this option for me in a time of need. Thanks to someone I had somewhere to crawl to. I got lucky.

Growing up, my younger brother had medical problems as an infant and needed to sleep connected to a monitor that would sound an alarm if he stopped breathing. My father couldn't handle the stress and started drinking heavily to cope with the situation. I used to judge my father for his struggles with alcoholism. Now I realize that he couldn't handle the suffering and didn't know what to do, so he picked up a bottle and drank. Who can blame him? Life doesn't come with an instruction manual. Nobody told him to try crossing his legs and counting to ten. Zazen wasn't an option for him. He was not so lucky.

I used to think I shouldn't talk about zazen because I'm not qualified. This logic doesn't withstand scrutiny. If you're walking across the street and see someone get hit by a car, do you say, 'Sorry, I'd like to help you, but I'm not a doctor.' Of course not. You try to stop the bleeding as best you can and call for help. I think the same can be said for spiritual aid. If I find someone who is hurting and looking for help, I do the best I can to offer that help. I'm ashamed of myself if I don't. Not everyone is lucky enough to have zazen as an option when life gets hard.

Tom Kowal

When offering spiritual aid, I keep it simple. I think of offering up zazen like recommending the best movie I've ever seen to someone who might be looking for a good movie. It is easy enough to see the people who are really hurting and might be open to zazen. I say something like, 'I recently went through a rough time and found zazen to be very helpful.' If the person is interested, I tell them I'd be willing to go with them to the Clearwater Zen Center on 'Beginner's Night' and sit for a couple of short rounds. (I live in Tampa, Florida or else I'd offer to go to a workshop at the RZC with them.)

Roshi Bodhin Kjolhede once said in a teisho that in Zen we only talk about our own experience. My experience is limited, but for those interested I can give some basic advice on how to get into a good posture and count breaths: If you lose count, simply start over again. Don't be hard on yourself; it isn't productive. Sit daily. I would also recommend *The Three Pillars of Zen* if they wanted more information—with the admonishment that the important thing is doing the meditation, not the reading. This is all advice I was given by the Sangha. I try to follow it and share my experience with others. There is no reason for me to talk about anything else because I don't have experience with anything else. There is no need to try to sell what little I understand of the Dharma because the Dharma is readily available. It hides in plain sight.

The first time I talked about my practice in an effort to help someone in need was difficult. Somehow the words came out of my mouth and they were appreciated. Each person I've talked to about zazen has been grateful that I mentioned it. Most give it a try at least once. I'm not sure why I would find that surprising.

People suffer. They know something is missing, but can't put their finger on it. They try to mask their suffering through drugs, acquiring money and material things, sex, work, sports, being the perfect parent, et cetera. Making money was my mask of choice, and I wore it well. I worked awfully hard at wearing it day and night for years. Grasping. Endless grasping. Never satisfied. My mask stopped working. So I started sitting. Why should I be surprised to find other people searching?

If the people I offer aid to take zazen and run with it, great! If not, that is okay, too. Who am I to judge? I gave up on zazen initially, threw my cushions in the trash and focused on acquiring material things. After exhausting myself grasping for money, someone told me not to give up on zazen. Give it another try. Zazen works. I got lucky again. Maybe the people I offer aid to will go on to find another meditation practice. Maybe zazen will be there for them years down the road when they need it. Maybe they will give up only to start again. Maybe they will look back and say, 'I got lucky, too.' Maybe they will weep for those who are not so lucky.

David Pascale is an accountant who lives in Tampa, Florida with his wife. He became a member of the Zen Center in 2012.

A Zen Buddhist Among Pagans, Christians, and Jews (Oh My!)

LEE LONDON

I am a PaCaJuBu. By this I mean that I have a diverse spiritual heritage: Pagan, Catholic, Jewish, and Buddhist. It is the religious equivalent of crossbreeding a GoldenCockerDoodle with a Shih Tzu.

As a youngster, I was a wild and unbaptized Pagan. I spent splendid breathtaking days and magical moon– and star–lit nights exploring the fields, creeks, lanes, trails, rivers, ponds, and forests of rural St. Charles, Illinois. The area at that time was a lovely green Eden of mostly dairy farm families forty miles west of Chicago. My marvelous natural surroundings provided me with an abundance of rich and deeply spiritual experiences. I saw the face of The Divine in the brilliant Aurora Borealis that unfurled and danced above me one late–summer night. Looking back now, I understand that it was my own True Nature that I saw in all that surrounded me!

My Jewish dad held a militant and often-voiced acrimony towards 'Organized Religion.' Over the years, petty squabbling at his synagogue discouraged him and eventually eroded his involvement with the congregation. He served in the U.S. Army during WWII as an MP, a Military Policeman. Accounts of the Nazi Death Camps came to him from the news media and from his Army buddies who had returned from Europe in 1945 at the end of the war. These horrors rightly terrified him and profoundly shook his faith. Nevertheless, my dad held a deeply personal spirituality. He often warned me never to allow the lifeless dogma of priests or rabbis to trump my own personal experience of the Divine. He habitually entertained me with his renditions of Yiddish folk tales and sayings. In his own way, he introduced me to the richness, humor, and wisdom of the Jewish tradition.

My mom, a devout Catholic, was certain that her two sons would ride a rocket sled to Hell without religious preparation. So, Mom delivered her two pre-teen boys to the nuns at St. Patrick's Catholic Church for religious tutoring.

Danne Eriksson

There my brother Mike and I received Catholic instruction, baptism, and confirmation. In the years that followed as a practicing Catholic, I came to understand the power of personal faith, which transcends liturgy and doctrine.

For the last 35 years, through my association with the Rochester Zen Center and my Zen practice, I have been striving to simply sit quietly and to follow my breath. I've become a brown-robed sponge steeped in the language and practices of Zen Buddhism. When I speak with another Buddhist, I have the benefit of a shared terminology and similar meditation experiences. But there is no section in Google Translate to help me translate my understanding of Zen Buddhism clearly for my Judeo–Christian friends.

I recall a question and answer session at an RZC introductory workshop given by Roshi Philip Kapleau. A somewhat agitated middle-aged female participant asked Roshi Kapleau, 'Where is Jesus Christ in all of this?' Roshi Kapleau replied, 'If you want to know Jesus Christ, do zazen!'

Using my Zen training together with my diverse 'religious' background, I have attempted to apply Roshi Kapleau's prescription to my understanding of some of the more popular points of Judeo-Christian theology. This winning combination has made it possible for me to translate the experiential reality of my Zen Buddhist practice into the language of my Judeo-Christian friends.

On one occasion, a very pleasant acquaintance found it necessary to expound to me the virtues of accepting Jesus and Christianity in general. I responded by saying that I was a Buddhist and that I thought that the teachings of Jesus and Buddha were very similar. A stern expression crossed his face. He said, 'Oh no, Buddha was wrong!' Realizing my error, I looked at my watch and said, 'My goodness, I have to

run!' I made an unceremonious retreat. Upon reflection, I realized that it was a mistake for me to use the terms 'Buddha,' 'Buddhist,' or 'Buddhism' with someone who may interpret these words as meaning 'heretics who worship multi-armed satanic demons.' It would have been more useful to keep the conversation strictly within the limits of the familiar concepts with which this person was comfortable.

In a different encounter, one of my fellow employees once asked me if I had accepted Jesus Christ as my 'Personal Savior.' Because I associate the terms 'True' and 'Buddha Nature' with the Greek interpretation of 'Christ' as 'The Anointed One,' I replied to my colleague, 'Of course!' We went on to have quite a lovely conversation about all the blessings that acceptance of Christ has brought to our lives.

I had a similar experience with a woman who was waiting for her prescription at a local pharmacy. I noticed she was sitting dejectedly, and so I smiled at her and asked how she was feeling. She said that the only thing that was preventing her from being really depressed was the promise that Jesus would return. I replied that I understand Christ (again, 'True' or 'Buddha Nature') to be living and present in each of us. She smiled and replied, 'Thank you for brightening my day!'

I've found that common ideas offer opportunities for communication and mutual understanding between Buddhists and Judeo-Christians. Consider, for example, how the Christian image of Jesus on the cross relates closely to the Buddhist view of suffering as inherent in the human condition. The Deadly Sins of Judeo–Christian doctrine correspond to the Buddhist Ten Cardinal Precepts and Three Poisons, i.e., Greed, Anger, and Delusion. The Judeo-Christian concept of sin can be understood in the Buddhist context as any action that separates us from our True Nature.

So, gentle reader, may you benefit by these examples of how my religious crossbreeding has allowed me to connect more easily as a Buddhist to the wider world of diverse spirituality. Svaha!

Lee London is a native of Chicago, IL and a member of the Rochester Zen Center. He was very successfully transplanted to Rochester, NY in 1976. There he continues to thrive.

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, 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.

Danne Eriksson

The Kimono Opens (or Taking the Wraps Off)

COLLEEN O'BRIEN

I am a commercial banker (not to be confused with a commercial baker, which is how it's sometimes understood in moments of inarticulate speech). With all the controversy surrounding the industry in recent years, and my employer in particular, that sounds like a 'Truth or Dare' statement appropriate for the confessional. Even so, I do like many aspects of my job—the analytics, client interaction, negotiations, thrill of the deal, and high performance bar.

The finance industry is not known for attracting individuals with a left-of-center political view or high tolerance for alternative lifestyles and philosophies. Last fall I aroused suspicion among some of my colleagues when, in advance of a sesshin, I announced that I would be away for a few days with no cell phone or access to email. Curiosity was high for a couple of reasons: first, no one I work with really unplugs on vacation. Second, I was in the middle of a pretty complicated deal and taking a few days off would be considered totally irresponsible. Nevertheless, I was determined to go to sesshin and figured my job would be waiting for me.

I explained to one of my teammates that I was going to attend a 'retreat.' Given the angst in my voice combined with my stress level at the time, he probably thought I was checking in at Betty Ford for a few days and better not to ask questions. I was much more transparent with a second colleague with whom I am more familiar, and he expressed some curiosity about the Zen Center so I took the bait. We walked through the web site—'You sit like that for how many hours?' … 'Those people look pretty normal' … 'Boy, they all look pretty happy' … 'Do you wear a brown robe too?' … 'Why are they walking in a parade?' … you get the gist. By the way,

regarding the first colleague, when I returned to the office and my voice was regulated and demeanor calm, that aroused even more suspicion so I 'came clean.' No big deal.

The *coup de grace* was during a holiday dinner with a client and some of my senior managers. At one point during dinner someone said, 'So, Colleen O'Brien, you must be Catholic'—only one of a million entertaining and astute ethnic observations I have heard in my lifetime. But my punch line was even better—'Actually, I was raised a Catholic long ago, but now I practice Zen Buddhism.' Silence. Absolute, dead silence.

Fast forward, I now have a small Buddha on my desk next to a calendar with Buddhist quotes for that bit of inspiration that I need at some point in the day.

And it's no big deal.

Colleen O'Brien has been an RZC member since 2007. She lives in Rochester with two Yorkshire terriers, is blessed to have 19–year–old twin sons for whom she feels boundless love, and is grateful to be here.

Inadvertent Coming Out

PETE BEATTIE

Recently, an individual had come to my home in response to an advertisement I placed in an online classified ads website for some items for sale, including musical instruments and related gadgets. I had anticipated that this fellow would gaze in awe at the guitars and gadgets that I wished to sell, but as soon as he came in the door his attention was grabbed by the Buddha figures and pictures that were prominently displayed in the room and were, admittedly, hard to miss. Instead of a conversation about the topic that ostensibly provided the purpose for our meeting, the gentleman expressed an interest in the items on display and their meaning and place in my life. He mentioned that he was reading and very much enjoying a book about Buddhism. He reiterated a number of times that the book made clear that Buddhism was not actually an 'ism.' I took this to mean that he understood Buddhism to be a practice rather than a philosophy. He proceeded to ask me about the bench and mat in my living room and how often I got 'all Zenned out.'

As I have done many times over the course of the last four decades, I immediately launched into a sales pitch for Roshi Philip Kapleau's *The Three Pillars of Zen.* I mentioned the emphasis and instruction that the book offered on 'how to do it,' and I swear that his ears actually perked up upon hearing the words 'how to do it.'

There is an unstated understanding of just how long a visit to view items for sale in someone's home can be extended, and after a few minutes (perhaps about as long as an elevator ride from the bottom floor to the top floor of a skyscraper) it was clear that the time had come for this meeting and conversation to end. I wasn't confident that the fellow was going to head right out and look for a copy of *Three Pillars*, but I felt good about being able to make the recommendation.

I will describe one other occasion when I inadvertently gave myself away as a Buddhist. I have been known to visit a local sports bar with my mates after running club on Wednesday nights. (The folks that I run with are at times known as a 'drinking' club with a 'running' problem.) I do endeavor to practice the Fifth Cardinal Precept—'I resolve not to cause others to abuse alcohol or drugs, nor to do so myself,

but to keep the mind clear'—without being too preachy or utterly annoying. When my wallet flops open, there for anyone to see at the bar is a picture of Buddha, looking quite serene and possibly 'all Zenned out.'

On one particular Wednesday evening, a teammate spotted the picture and began to quiz me about it. His question was beautifully phrased and quite telling: 'Hey, Pete are you connected with that stuff in some way?' This fellow was quite sincere with his query, and in brief conversation I was able to point him in the direction of a certain book and some local groups that he could connect with. It is perhaps entirely irrelevant to that moment and the story, but it is interesting to note an additional detail that says much about this fellow. Not long after our conversation took place, he rather abruptly stopped showing up for our group's weekly meeting and dropped out of sight for an extended period of time. After several months, various group members began to express wonder and concern. After about a year, I spotted him walking with his family on a local street and he did not look well at all. I pulled my car over to have a chat and he said that he was just recovering from the process of donating a kidney for the betterment and longevity of a neighbor and friend. I was able to convince myself that (or at least wonder if) our brief chat about Buddhism had helped him find something that he was looking for and something that would help sustain him in his recovery.

Reflecting back on the occasions when I had 'come out' as a Buddhist, a question that arises for me has to do with a large and perhaps thorny dilemma. The Eighth Cardinal Precept encourages us not to withhold spiritual aid. Is it enough to simply respond when 'opporknockity tunes,' or should I seek out ways be more assertive in sharing Zen practice with others? We do not wish to proselytize, but at what point do we hold our hands too close to our chest?

As I think more about 'coming out,' my mind wanders back to an undergraduate course that I took at Queens University about 35 years ago. The course explored world religions and elicited discussion of many different traditions. One particular assignment that I quite enjoyed had to do with the task of defining the term 'religion.' Each student was required to write their possible contribution to a *Webster's* dictionary summary, including a written definition of the word, and had the opportunity to read the summary aloud in class. I recall that even more striking than the similarities were the differences in what people thought and said. For some, the definition centered around a search for solace and support in dealing with the ups and downs of life, and, for others, a lengthy trip along a timeline led them to focus on trying to understand the essential questions of life and death and the hereafter. Phrases like 'a means of ultimate transformation' seemed to catch the imagination of many students. It is a catchy phrase that reminds me of Roshi Kapleau's response to TM (which was all the rage when I was young and seeking). He said simply, 'Who transcends what?' Another phrase that stands out for me was uttered by one of the speakers at the RZC fortieth anniversary celebration. It went something like this: 'Thank God that in other cultures and other parts of the world, some very different ways of facing and addressing the questions have evolved and flourished.'

My mother, who is now 93, offered the suggestion that part of the challenge in 'coming out' with whatever your religious affiliation happens to be is to endorse the need and validate the efforts of other traditions to come to grips with matters of universal concern. I conclude with counsel for myself, whenever and however I decide to open up, that I should do so with the intention of trying to support others in their struggles by inviting genuine communication and sharing.

Pete Beattie lives in Kingston, Ontario (Canada) and is a retired social worker. His first exposure to Zen practice was an RZC introductory workshop in 1977 led by Roshi Kapleau.

Tom Kowal

Long and Winding Road

GRETCHEN TARGEE

I first became curious about Buddhism as a child. My mother had a friend who visited Japan and had many artifacts from his journeys there. When she would bring me along, I loved looking at his collection and photographs. I also would look in the encyclopedia at various Asian references in hopes of finding images of Buddhas and other Eastern Deities.

I attended a Catholic girls boarding school for part of my adolescence. It was at that time that I began to read books about Zen, namely Paul Reps' *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones* and *Unwrinkling Plays*. And, as it was the sixties, I also read the seemingly subversive Alan Watts and Richard Alpert a.k.a. Ram Das. Eventually I was expelled because of my continued interest in and reading of these authors. It wasn't until my early twenties, though, that I ventured toward a more serious interest in Buddhism.

When I was twenty-five, my husband was struck by lightening and killed in the mountains of New Mexico. His death and the manner of his death made a deep impression. A short while later, I found myself on the floor of a small basement zendo in the home of Jo and Denny Eberle, who were living in Champaign-Urbana at the same time as I was and who were students of the late Kapleau-roshi.

As I began to be more involved with the Rochester Zen Center, my family, who already thought of me as eccentric, became difficult. My parents regarded Zen as selfish, my siblings were being reborn into Christianity, and my maternal grandmother began asking me to use the back door when I came to visit. It all struck me as rather odd, actually. But it did give pause to any 'coming out' to others.

However, I did find myself referencing Zen masters or Zen teachers in conversations with friends, eventually even making correlations between biblical quotes made by my siblings and various Buddhist teachings. Yet I would deny

being a 'Buddhist' by way of saying I wasn't an 'ist' or an 'ian,' or practicing an 'ism' of any kind. And I must admit to feeling this still in a certain kind of way.

I did eventually begin to put 'Buddhist' on paper when the question arose regarding religion, as leaving it blank seemed false. So perhaps that is the first committed 'coming out' for me.

Nowadays I generally avoid religious conversations, most especially with fundamentalists of any religious practice. When asked about my spiritual practice directly I am as forthcoming as the situation requires. If calling myself a Buddhist is appropriate, I do so; if it seems unnecessary, I don't. I find that sometimes referring to my spirituality as 'Buddhist' creates a need to describe Buddhism itself and therefore detracts from a potentially meaningful demonstration of Buddhist practice that may prove to be of greater service in a given situation or conversation.

Those who remain of my family have desisted in their propensity to convert me to Christianity. Being an imaginative person, I have had dreams and visions of Jesus Christ—naturally, because of the ingrained subconscious references to him instilled in my early childhood. I can honestly say that I have a 'personal relationship' with Jesus. Also, my children have grown into hard-working, honest, compassionate women, which speaks to their Buddhist upbringing and their exposure to Sangha over the years. There can be no denying by my family that whatever the spiritual practice, three worthy human beings arose from it.

Gretchen Targee is an artist and works at the Little Theatre. She lives in Rochester, NY with her two cats, George and Bodhi.

Zen or No Zen?

ALLEN BROADMAN

'Coming out' as a Buddhist involves conflicting feelings for me. My faith in Zen practice is unshakable because this practice has changed my life so much for the better over many long years and has helped me to bear some of the seemingly unbearable sufferings that we all encounter. With that kind of positive experience, who would not want to share knowledge of this path and its potential with everyone? Such sharing is also deeply connected with the Bodhisattva vows.

And yet my own involvements with other religions, including the proselytizing, indoctrination, and even marketing that goes on, has left an awful taste with me. Such awful tastes are part of what drew me to Zen in the first place. How can you not love a religion that makes aspiring practitioners wait outside the monastery gates in the freezing cold, or likes a finger or two to be chopped off in order to prove the seriousness of one's spiritual aspirations? This conflict between wanting to share the path with everyone, but not wanting to be a walking infomercial, can be difficult to manage.

The main challenge I confront is in dealing with my young children—two boys, aged 15 and 11. It would only take about ten minutes in a room with them for anyone to realize that these boys need some Zen. Of course, all children need some Zen because, at its heart, what is Zen practice if not a healthier way to navigate our lives? The practice gives us a better chance to withstand, and possibly even thrive within, life's never-ending obstacles. But as with many teenaged and pre-teen children, one must be very, very careful in suggesting ways to live. Every

Tom Kowal

parental suggestion, no matter how innocent and sincere, runs the risk of a backlash in which the child not only rejects the suggestion, but might make an extra effort to move in the opposite direction. That's when a parent just takes a very deep sigh and hopes for the best.

One way to 'come out' as a Buddhist is to do so in a Zen spirit of no-coming out. How does one go about no-coming out as a Buddhist? Without coming out, of course! By being Buddhist fully, with one's entire body-mind, there is nothing really Buddhist to say or to do. We don't need robes, rakusus, altars, incense, bells, clappers, statues, or artwork to live Zen. Neither do we need Chinese, Japanese, Sanskrit or Pali words of any kind, nor chanting or liturgy. All those things are helpful only in certain contexts of practice, such as retreats, or in ceremonies, or in certain kinds of studies. They can support and strengthen our practice at times, but they are not the essence of practice. If such things were essential, then there would be no Zen practice without them. And Zen lives in the marketplace as much as in the monastery.

My oldest son is a freshman in high school. He recently played his first-ever high school basketball game, and it went very badly from his perspective. He played poorly and made many mistakes after having gone into the game with very high hopes. Right after the game, this 6'4" almost-man was crying as we sat in the car. His 'world' was crumbling. It's easy to put quotes around that word 'world' since we are adults who understand the bigger picture, but it's important to remember that in the moment, at age 15, there are no quotes involved, and he truly was experiencing an entire, crumbling world of suffering. In a moment like that, no koan will help, nor a clever mondo, nor sayings from the Dhammapada. What is called for is the fundamental, simplest Zen of all—what is needed is the Zen of no-Zen.

As my son cried, I listened with all my attention to everything he had to say and to all the expressions of his sadness and anxieties about the future. I listened and then I listened some more. And then even more. When he had finished expressing himself, I delivered to him the

most basic Buddhist wisdom that I have heard and learned over the years—I told him that things change. I told him that his feelings were exactly what they were—just feelings that were okay to be experiencing. But I also reminded him that he would not always feel this despair, because feelings change, too—they come and they go. And finally I told him that change also means that tomorrow's game is never the same as today's game and anyone can practice and put forth effort to make themselves more ready for the challenges that await us in the next game.

If you change the word 'game' in that advice into the word 'moment' then the lesson might be straight out of the Tang Dynasty, although I don't think they played much basketball back then. Sometimes Zen has to slip in through the back door.

I 'came out' fully as a Zen Buddhist with my son in that moment, but with no robe or altar in sight.

Allen Broadman has been a member of the Rochester Zen Center for over ten years. Being a father for two boys is an ongoing koan, which he has no hopes of ever solving.

From Indra's Net

Sangha Entertainment Night 2013

On February 16 the Buddha Hall was filled to the brim for our annual entertainment night, an opportunity for Sangha members to showcase their talents in front of a very forgiving audience. ZCTV News anchors John Burgundy (John Pulleyn) and Chrissy Karma (Chris Pulleyn) served as hosts and kept the laughs coming as they introduced a variety of a comedic skits, musical performances, and video productions. The two hours of evening entertainment included dog tricks by Fisher Reeb (Brenda Reeb's black lab puppy); a cello number featuring Jackie Hager accompanied by Phil Swanson (our one-man 'house band') on keyboard; a Zen fashion show led by Jonathan Hager (Jackie's dad); and, an infomercial for a CD box set of Zen Buddhist interpretations of holiday songs performed by Roshi Kjolhede, Eryl Kubicka, Andy McClain, and members of the Auckland Zen Centre, among others.

John Pulleyn

In the entertainment night skit shown above John Botsford (background) serenades 'Petunia' (foreground), played by Ben Taylor, as Phil Swanson provides musical accompaniment.

Website Media Updates

The Rochester Zen Center's website is more than just a place to check the calendar and sign up for sesshin—it also contains some great media resources available to members and the general public. We've recently added a page with video talks by Roshi: http://www.rzc.org/publications/videos/.The selection includes his complete set of talks on the precepts, originally recorded for *Tricycle* magazine, as well as a brief talk for new people on Zen and its relationship to Buddhism. More videos will be posted as they're edited! And, if you haven't taken a recent look at the photo galleries on the Zen Center's website, have a look at the new additions at http://www.rzc.org/about/gallery/. Recently-added photo collections include snaps from the construction of the Center's new front entrance, as well as photographs of Zen training in 1950's Japan from the collection of Roshi Philip Kapleau, the Center's founder. Finally, don't forget about our online archive of recorded teishos—over five years' worth of talks by Roshi and others, available at http://rzcpodcasts.blogspot.com/.

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Training & Practice

Residential Zen training (of any length) offers a chance to immerse yourself in a disciplined environment free from the normal responsibilities of daily life. Readers are invited to share their experience with training, either here at the Rochester Zen Center or elsewhere. What did you learn, and what did you unlearn? How has your life changed as a result? Submission deadline: April 15, 2013.

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Seeing Through Racism

Submissions of articles and images may be submitted to the editors at zenbow@rzc.org.

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