

Zen Bow

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TRAINING & PRACTICE

Zen Bow: Training & Practice

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Tom Kowal

The Freedom of No-Choice

ROSHI BODHIN KJOLHEDE

In Zen the emphasis falls on the correctness or falsity of the training, not on the excellence or mediocrity of the teaching or the depth or shallowness of the principle.

—Zen Master Dogen

Every once in a while the Center receives a letter from a young man unknown to us who writes, 'I want to become a Zen monk.' Usually he'll name *The Three Pillars of Zen* or other books that have inspired him, but without mentioning anything about sitting. Chances are, he's not yet moved beyond reading. But he wants to. We've learned to translate his aspiration to 'become a monk' as 'wanting a full immersion in practice.'

But first, what does the word 'monk' really mean? It depends on who is using it. Two key components of Chinese (and Korean) monasticism have always been the vows of lifelong celibacy and of homelessness (many English translations of Chinese Buddhist texts refer to monks as 'home leavers'). These requirements vanished in Japan in the nineteenth century, and traditional Buddhist monasticism has not yet got much of a foothold in the West. Yet it has become commonplace for American Zen centers large enough to offer residential training to use the word 'monastery' in their names and to refer to their resident trainees as 'monks,' sometimes even when those 'monks'

have houses, jobs, spouses, or young children to support. It's hard not to see this semantic inflation as a marketing device meant to convey an image of greater authenticity to the training. In deference to true monks, as well as to avoid blurring the distinction between them and those who have not made their sweeping commitments, at the Rochester Zen Center we refrain from referring to our resident trainees (or even our ordained priests) as 'monks.'

Let us also distinguish between the words 'training' and 'practice.' We can say that everyone who does zazen (or at least does it regularly) is practicing Zen. But Zen *training* takes place only in a structured setting under the supervision of a teacher and his or her assistants.

What, then, draws people to residential training? After all, Zen practice at its purest is not limited to any particular circumstances or conditions. It is to be done no matter where we are or what we're doing. But some of us want all the help we can get in this formidable task of purifying the self. And nowhere do you find the close support and conditions so conducive to sustained practice as at a Zen center.

It's unlikely that anyone applying for residential training would do so out of a cost-benefit calculation. The tangible remuneration for staff is so modest that it would offer no incentive for coming to train at the Center, and the intangible benefits can only be discovered through actual immersion in the training. To apply for residential training, then, is like wading into unknown waters at night—you don't know what you're getting into until you're in it. It takes a bit of daring, or trust. As such, applicants for training self-select for these qualities. They do sense that it's a somewhat rigorous way of life, at least in comparison to conventional standards, so their movement toward it signifies that for the time being, at least, they rank worldly comforts beneath spiritual aspirations.

Any new Zen Center resident will face some problems in adjusting to the training regimen,

and that's most likely to happen in the first week. Suddenly you're sitting zazen more than ever before, assigned to a room with at least one roommate, assigned to a job (usually manual) you might never have seen yourself doing, and embedded in a daily schedule not of your making.

You knew (if only vaguely) of these strictures before coming, but it's another thing to be living under them. But there may be no element of Zen training more basic than having fewer personal choices.

We chant it at the Center several times a week:

The Great Way is not difficult for those who do not pick and choose.

When preferences are cast aside the Way stands clear and undisguised.

These words are from *Affirming Faith in Mind*, one of the very first—and most important—Zen documents, written by Zen master Sengcan ('Seng Tsan' in our chant book), Zen's Third Chinese Ancestor. In opening the text with these two stanzas, Sengcan implicitly acknowledges how deeply wired we are as a species to have personal preferences, while insisting that such preferences rank among the most serious impediments to realizing the Way.

Sengcan's admonition reflects a fundamental cause of human suffering: our captivity to our desires and aversions. It is only natural to have preferences of all kinds, starting with foods, colors, clothing styles, music, and matters of design. The problem comes when these preferences assume too much prominence in the mind—that is, when out of habit we expect life to grant us what we like and rid us of what we don't like. That's when innocuous preferences grow into selfish grasping—the cause of suffering.

The principle of 'no preferences' is often misunderstood to mean that we have to 'get rid' of our likes and dislikes. How could we do that, when they are so basic to our nature? We can't. It isn't so much our likes and dislikes themselves

'Just bow and serve.'

—Zen Master Dogen

but our *attachment* to them that binds us to suffering.

Imagine the airline passenger offered a choice of beverages—‘Coke, Diet Coke, Sprite, ginger ale, orange juice, cranberry juice, tomato juice, coffee, tea ...’. Most passengers would have little trouble choosing from this menu, even though, let’s say, pineapple juice might have been what they *really* wanted. What would signal the presence of attachment is, first, a pang of disappointment. Stronger attachment might play out in the passenger replying: ‘Oh. Do you have pineapple juice?’ (‘No, ma’am, just the ones I said.’) And then, balking, and further resistance, with a whining, ‘You don’t? Really?’ (Today, however, this fictitious passenger could later reclaim some satisfaction by finding an online rating site on which to dock the airline for not offering him his first choice of beverages.)

Attachment to individual personal tastes is hardly the worst of our problems. Potentially more troublesome by far are the challenges posed by the four painful conditions listed by the Buddha:

- Having to do what you don’t want to do.
- Not being able to do what you want to do.
- Not being with people you want to be with.
- Having to be with people you don’t want to be with.

The difficulties people may have in their first weeks of residential training usually arise from these four basic forms of frustration, or *dukkha*.

When I moved from Michigan to Rochester to enter training at the Center in 1971 (having announced to my co-workers that I was ‘going to Rochester to become a Zen monk’), I brought a lot more baggage than I realized at the time. It included the idea that you never work outdoors in the rain. But lo—while stationed at the Center’s country land in Honeoye one week, our supervisor (who is our current Head of Zendo) sent my fellow trainees and me out to clear brush in the pouring rain. First I was incredulous, then indignant—‘Come on,’ I silently griped, ‘anyone knows you don’t work in the rain!’ What hap-

pened, though, was that the rain washed away some of that aversion—and with it a little bit of self-concern.

So long as we can arrange our lives to accommodate our likes and dislikes, we are apt to hold tight to them, allowing them to harden. And never before in human history, surely, have so many had the freedom to avoid their aversions and indulge their desires as do middle-class Americans today. Sengcan would have seen this prosperity as a spiritual infection. Again, from his *Affirming Faith in Mind*:

To founder in dislike and like
Is nothing but the mind’s disease.

Those of us who feel ‘sick’ enough and are presently free of commitments to family or career might check ourselves into a hospital—a Zen center—to receive full-time treatment. Treatment begins right off the bat. Used to getting up at 6:30 am? Wake-up at the Center is at 5:15 most days. Rather work outdoors than indoors? Well, you’re needed in the kitchen. Annoyed by your roommate? Learn to get along. Last night to catch that movie you’ve been eager to see? You’ll have to be in the zendo instead.

It’s not that any trainee’s particular preferences need to be deliberately thwarted. The very structure of the training program does much to highlight our likes and dislikes, even as the daily schedule of *zazen* exposes their gratuitous and ultimately treacherous nature. Our cherished desires and aversions, we learn, come back to bite us. In ancient China, Zen master Yunmen (*Jap.*, Ummon), who ran his own large ‘hospital,’ declared: ‘Medicine and sickness correspond to each other. The whole earth is medicine. What is your self?’

Zen training leaves us with far fewer personal choices in daily life than people ‘on the outside’ have, but if we can surrender to that simplicity, it will yield an ease of mind denied to those still hooked on their preferences. This is the paradox of freedom that is revealed in Zen training (especially *sesshin*): the more of our personal freedom we are willing to relinquish, the more *true*

freedom we can realize. Because true freedom is not freedom *to*, but freedom *from*—freedom from the baying of our desires and the squawking of our aversions. Then we can use every training rule and restriction to help us overcome the dictates of our likes and dislikes. As medicine, it can be bitter, but it does heal. The Great Way becomes a bit less difficult.

‘What is your self?’ Yunmen challenges. If I were untethered from my preferences, my opinions, notions, beliefs, and principles, what would I be? Without these mental constructs that gird the illusory structure of self, what’s left? Thirteenth-century Ch’an master Hongzhi (‘Tiantong Zongjue’ in our Ancestral Line) had just enough left of himself to describe this True Self that is no-self:

Empty and desireless, cold and thin, simple and genuine, this is how to strike down and fold up the remaining habits of many lives. When the stains from old habits are exhausted, the original light appears, blazing through your skull, not admitting any other matters. Vast and spacious, like sky and water merging during autumn, like snow and moon having the same color, this field is without boundary, beyond direction, magnificently one entity without edge or seam.

The basic elements of residential Zen training today in Western countries, as well as in Japan and Korea, derive from China, where the Zen monastic community as we know it originated. What unifies East and West in training is the mission: to ‘house’ the work of meditation—both sitting and active meditation—in an environment set up to allow Zen practice to flourish. Sengcan, again, lays it out in *Affirming Faith in Mind*: ‘Mind is mind because of things.’ The ‘things’ in monastic-style practice vary in their particulars, but reflect three plain themes: simplicity, order, and authority.

Simplicity starts with uncluttered surroundings (helpful for home practice as well!), but pervades every aspect of training. Even the newest trainee is relieved of many of the per-

sonal responsibilities of a householder. With no meals to prepare, no rent or mortgage to pay or household to repair or maintain, no furnishings or appliances or even books to buy, trainees are also relieved of a crateful of self-concerns: thoughts of *my* bills, *my* meals, *my* furnishings, *my* shopping. And those at our center who are later accepted to the staff program also receive health care coverage and a monthly stipend for clothing, occasional travel, and

other incidental expenses. With so few financial responsibilities, trainees, like monks, can devote themselves more fully to *zazen* and to extending their practice into serving the wider Sangha.

To those who sometimes speak admiringly of the ‘discipline’ it takes to live in residential training for many years, I reply, ‘If you mean *self-discipline*, there’s actually none required. On staff you have no choice but to follow the training schedule and rules.’ This way of life that appears so hard to many people is, when you’re ready for it, the easiest way to live in accordance with practice.

Order, like simplicity, would seem to be a universal feature of monastic and other religious training communities. The original Buddhist Sangha in India was laced up with rules and regulations, later codified as the Vinaya, and as the Dharma took root in China, the Chan (Zen) monasteries formulated their own regulations. These were adopted from the Confucian principles of family order that still govern Zen training in China, Korean, and Japan: a socio-political order based on prescribed reciprocal relationships in a hierarchical structure.

The Zen monastery in Japan has been called the last bastion of the country’s medieval culture. Beneath the teacher, or abbot, power and privilege are organized largely in accordance with seniority. A monk who enters a temple even one day before another monk will always be his ‘senior’ and outrank him, making the establishment and tracking of seniority all-important. The only general meeting I recall from my

‘A day of no work,
a day of no eating.’

—Zen Master Baizhang Huaihai

six months' training in Japan lasted about twenty minutes, and half of that time was spent with the roshi first working out the seating (for just eight of us) on the basis of seniority—a tricky process when Western residents are involved who have trained longer than some Japanese, but not in Japan. Establishing the bath order was similarly trying, for the same reason.

To be sure, seniority can be abused, as we know from the military, from fraternities and sororities, from school bullying, and from the original hierarchy: family. In Japan, stories of hazing in the monasteries abound. The roshi mentioned above, who had survived his share of such bullying but then determined to eliminate it in his own temple, once scoffed, 'What they call "training" really means trying to make life for the younger monks as miserable as possible.'

The Asian reverence for rank as a factor in interpersonal relations has not found very receptive soil in the West. The United States, with its love of self-expressive individualism, its strong egalitarian principles, its enshrinement of individual rights, and its disregard for history and age in general, could be the world's least Confucian country. And since an American Zen center is hardly a military unit, relying merely on seniority to legitimize one's authority is not enough. But hierarchy more broadly plays a vital role in religious communities the world over, and reflects a form of order that can stand on its own as a third key component of Zen training: chain of *authority*. The other two components of training can be arranged, to an extent, even outside the training milieu. On a solitary retreat one can create an environment of uncluttered simplicity, with few decisions to make and order galore in a strict daily schedule with self-imposed rules. But it lacks accountability. There is no teacher to face, no 'senior' monitoring you, no one at all to whom you have to answer. Accountability, sustained through a chain of authority, is the key element available only at a training center.

One of the most important responsibilities invested in the more seasoned residents in the chain of authority at a Zen monastery or cen-

A monk who came before Master Xuetang after having stopped at the monastery of Master Poshan reported that although he hadn't met him, he knew Poshan to be a good leader. When Xuetang asked how he knew, the monk said:

'When you go into the monastery there, the paths are clear, the halls are in good repair, there are always incense and lamps burning in the shrines, morning and night the bell and drum are sounded precisely and clearly, the morning and noon gruel and rice are clean and wholesome, and the monks are polite when they see people as they go about their activities. This is how I know Poshan is a good leader.'

ter is to offer corrections to others in training. We all come to residential training for support, which includes the close guidance of more experienced practitioners. We count on them in their daily presence to notice our patterns of behavior and speech that cause pain (to ourselves as well as to others), and then to engage with us to overcome them. They adjust postures (sitting, standing, and walking); demonstrate how to work no-mindedly; correct us when we show up late for things, disturb others, waste water or food or *time*, leave lights on, speak mindlessly, or in any of myriad other little ways reveal a mind divided—a mind not fully present. Their job is to show us 'how to strike down and fold up the remaining habits of many lives.'

In addition to these traditional, nuts-and-bolts matters of Zen training, practice leaders also serve those under them (as well as others) by helping them learn to look after their fellow



Amaury Cruz

residents—as training for extending that care to the wider Sangha and beyond. Zen training really means training in awareness and responsiveness—functions of the eyes and hands of the bodhisattva of compassion. It takes most of us years to notice the more subtle signs of people’s distress—forms of anxiety and depression, most commonly—and even longer to know how to respond skillfully. Good parents learn these skills, and so can ‘big brothers and sisters’ on staff. If we don’t develop this kind of helpfulness, residential training can too easily become just a sanctuary for neat freaks and the self-absorbed.

The virtue of hierarchical authority is, of course, its clarity. Supervisors and zendo leaders (monitors) can simply issue their orders and expect obedient responses. Though hierarchical authority in ancient China served generally to enforce social and political stability (as well as the subjugation of women and the underclass), Asian Buddhists found that it could also be used in spiritual training to help undermine the self and its preferences. The monk or trainee receiv-

ing the order is denied the chance to complain, argue, or negotiate, and left with no room to maneuver. With ego-resistance futile, he is all but forced to surrender to the Great Way that is beyond self and other, beyond right and wrong.

As a governing basis of spiritual training, hierarchical authority is only as legitimate as the good will of those in command. If the supervisor or monitor is dedicated to the liberation of those under him, his order will be like an offering. Then the trainee receiving it can use it as the opportunity that it is. But even if a supervisor or monitor wields his authority in a way that is not in the best interests of those under him, the trainee on the receiving end, if well-integrated and determined, can still use it to develop himself; ultimately, the value of the exchange depends on the mind of the subordinate. A monk who can bear up under such treatment does forge a certain strength, a survivor’s toughness that can serve him well in adversity forever after. Such fortitude is an enviable asset to develop—a great foundation. But the promise of spiritual training goes further, to what Zen mas-

ter Dogen was referring to when he described the purpose of practice as ‘the development of a tender heart.’

After hundreds or thousands of little instances in training in which the trainee has no choice but to acquiesce to the circumstances imposed on him, he will have incorporated an absolutely priceless ability: to become one with what cannot be changed. What training could be more valuable when facing death, or when confronted by grave illness, divorce, or other crises? These and other times of loss are the

ultimate tests of our practice. Zen master Wu-men (Mumon) declared, ‘If you want to know pure gold, see it in the midst of fire.’

Roshi Kapleau’s own training came through for him when his back was to the wall. By almost every measure, he adapted gracefully to his relentless decline over years of Parkinson’s disease, and his death was so serene that those who were at his side reported that they couldn’t quite tell when he drew his last breath. But we don’t have to wait for dire circumstances to confirm the benefits of Zen training. They flow to us in coping with the ordinary stresses of life as well: a job rejection, a car accident, the breakup of a relationship, a traffic jam, getting stranded in an airport. These are all potential affronts to the ego and its demands on life. Once we’ve learned through the tests of hard training to accept the limits of our control, we find deep reserves of endurance, patience, and peace of mind.

Privileges allocated on the basis of seniority are relatively easy for Americans to accept because they meet our expectation of fairness, another of our country’s predominant ideals. Everyone in training has an equal chance at getting a single room, for example, if she sticks around long enough. But once some people are given *authority* over others, it introduces a whole new world of potential strife. It’s also true that nearly everyone working with others in the wider

world has a supervisor or someone to supervise, but when people in vertical relationships also live with one another, there’s no escape valve.

A supervisor or zendo leader may manage those under him heavy-handedly, but even skillful correction can push people’s buttons. Hierarchical relationships are almost sure to expose, over time, whatever authority issues we have, and the standard reaction is anger in one degree or another. Whichever end of the stick we find ourselves on, when our will is frustrated we’re likely to experience anything

from irritation to rage. Parents, in setting limits with their children though, have to face these reactions both in themselves and their children. For adults without children, residential training may reveal such issues as never before. Good, then—let them be seen, so that they may be seen *through*.

Vertical relations may reveal our anger and other defilements especially clearly, but the lateral relations in training also offer plenty of insight into our mental attachments. The issues are the same as in any workplace (and indeed among siblings generally), revolving around rivalry and views of fairness. But at a residential training center everyone not only works together, but also eats together, sits together, and sleeps under the same roof. In this hothouse of potential friction, residents have to learn how to get along. You can’t share the company of others around the clock (and for some, year after year) without having your sharp corners and rough edges softened; either you leave or you get more civilized. In Japan they say that residential training leaves monks like river stones polished smooth over time through rubbing against one another in the turbulence of the waters.

Ultimately, it is daily *zazen* that purifies and renews the life of Zen training. Although Roshi Kapleau and I both came to believe that what probably keeps most people on staff is the op-

‘Although each individual inherently possesses the Way, the gaining of it depends on all the monks practicing together.’

—Zen Master Dogen

portunity to attend sesshin frequently, the day-to-day sitting may be even more transformative in the long run. It is the paramount agent of change, the fresh running water that is continually washing away the mental-emotional sediments that tend to form in each of us as a result of our interactions with others. After an exchange with someone has left us feeling irked, sitting with legs crossed reveals a new perspective on the matter and in no time we can be ready to let it go. It's the same with other bedeviling emotions—fear, resentment, anxiety, remorse—and if an hour or two of zazen doesn't bring release, the next sesshin is all but sure to. Sooner or later, zazen will tend to dissolve whatever gums up our psyche. Our differences with others recede, and we come to the ground described by Sengcan when he said, 'In this "not two" all is the same / with nothing separate or outside.'

One of the most valuable resources available to staff is the dedicated zendo situated in their own house—a sanctuary, of sorts, that is charged with decades of spiritual exertions. Even to non-resident members it is available day and night, but there is nothing like having it in one's own house, just a flight of stairs away. Even more,

residents can count on as many as fifty others in the same room at any given time, boosting the Samadhi-power beyond what any individual sitter can access alone.

A Zen teacher once told me that he never wanted to have residential training at his center, presumably because of the demands it places on the teacher's time in managing it. But I believe that we who have large enough facilities ought to provide the opportunity for people to immerse themselves in this training that has sustained the Dharma for the past 1,500 years. Having spent my whole adult life doing this work full-time (and not for even a day wanting to do anything else), I've known the riches that flow from the simplicity of the conditions, the fortifying nature of the schedule and rules, and the 'wisdom, example, and never-failing support' of senior staff and others in training. Until more Western followers of the Way are called to lifelong vows of celibacy and homelessness, residential training fills the need, for some, to work on themselves by serving Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha full-time and to serve Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha by working on themselves.

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.



Amaury Cruz

Clinging

JEANETTE PRINCE-CHERRY

According to *The Golden Age of Zen* by John Wu, Lin-chi I-hsuan was in his twenties and already a fully ordained monk when he started practicing Ch'an. He joined the community in southern China where Huang-po Hsi-yun was abbot and Mu-chou Tao-ming was head monk. Lin-chi had been a member of the community for three years, yet had never gone to dokusan. He simply didn't know what to say. Mu-Chou suggested that he ask the master to explain to him the essential principles of Buddhism. Following his elder Dharma brother's suggestion, Lin-chi put the question to the abbot. He had barely got the words out of his mouth when Huang-po struck him with his staff. Lin-chi reported to Mu-chou what had happened adding

that he did not understand his error. Mu-chou encouraged Lin-chi to ask the question again. Lin-chi did as instructed, but as soon as he finished speaking, he was beaten again by the master. For the third time Mu-chou pressed Lin-chi to attend dokusan to ask his question, but for the third time Lin-chi was beaten. Finally Lin-chi went to Mu-chou saying, 'I appreciate your instigating and urging me to ask about the Buddhadharma. Repeatedly the abbot has deigned to bestow his beatings upon me. I only regret that due to some obstructive karma of my own making I have not been able to comprehend the profound doctrine. There's nothing left for me to do but to leave.' Mu-chou urged Lin-chi to remember his manners and bid fare-

well to the abbot before departing. In the meantime, Mu-chou went to Huang-po asking that he be tactful with Lin-chi when he arrived.

Later, when Lin-chi went to the master to say good-bye, Huang-po suggested he go to a specific temple nearby because there the master would explain everything to him. Lin-chi again did as he was told. The abbot at the nearby temple asked the newcomer what instruction he'd received from Huang-po. Lin-chi replied, 'Three times I inquired about the essentials of the Buddhadharma, and three times I was beaten. I don't know whether or not I had committed any fault.' The master said, 'The fact is that Huang-po treated you with the compassionate heart of an old woman, bent upon releasing you once and for all from bondage and distress.

bond·age

n.

1. servitude or subjugation.
2. the state of being greatly constrained by circumstances or obligations.

And yet you have come here to ask me whether you are not at fault!' At his words, Lin-chi was thoroughly enlightened.

My early days of residential training at the Rochester Zen Center somewhat mirror Lin-chi's first encounters with Huang-po. Late in 2011, I aspired to devote myself more fully to Zen practice and my commitment to the Dharma by spending extra time at RZC. Instead of traveling from my home in Louisville, Kentucky a few times a year just to attend sesshin, I planned to split my time between Kentucky and New York until—whenever. A few months later, despite the displeasure of some closest to me, I started spending one to two weeks each month engaged in full-time Zen training.

I'd never done residential training before. As an out-of-towner (my family moved from the Rochester area fifteen years ago), I was no longer familiar with the daily schedule and procedures at Arnold Park. I was deeply humbled by

my lack of experience with such an important aspect of Zen training. In my ignorance, I made mistakes. Lots of them. And I was being corrected—constantly.

The first few errors and subsequent corrections were easy to shrug off. No one is perfect. Slip-ups were to be expected. But after a few more blunders and a few more fixes, living and working in the close quarters of the Rochester Zen Center started rubbing me the wrong way.

I noticed that other residents and staff made mistakes, too (sometimes big ones). They seemed capable of letting go and moving on gracefully without being bruised. I, on the hand, was starting to take the criticism personally.

The final blow came when I was tasked with setting the dining room table for a formal lunch. After receiving instructions on how to do it, I started working. When finished, the job was corrected. I was told to angle the salad tongs this way, not that way. I was directed to place the serving spoons this way, not that way. Admittedly, these suggestions improved the overall flow and harmony of the table-setting. No problem. But when I was told to move the forks what seemed to be only millimeters away from where I'd put them—a change so minute as to hardly be detectable—I was nearly brought to tears. I was definitely taking the criticism personally.

crit·i·cism

n.

1. to censure or find fault with.
2. the act or occupation of analyzing or evaluating a literary or artistic work.

The truth is that I was already pretty beaten up when I started residential training. I was still regaining my equilibrium from having experienced a significant personal loss. Months of well-meaning but unsolicited advice, from folks I deeply respected, eventually eroded my remaining confidence. Consequently I arrived in Rochester feeling vulnerable and insecure. One

modern-day Zen teacher remarked that a tiny smudge of shit on the nose makes everything smell like shit. And I smelled shit everywhere!

I openly confessed my anxieties to a Dharma sister who'd also done residential training at the RZC. This friend listened attentively and empathized with my plight. She admitted having feelings of inadequacy in her early weeks of training, too. But after indulging the pity-party a little longer, she finally said to me, 'In Zen training, you can expect to be corrected when you make mistakes. You can expect feedback.'

Feedback? Feedback! Almost instantly the dark clouds of self-doubt and confusion lifted from my mind. Joy returned to my heart.

feed·back

n.

1. that part of the output fed back into the input.
2. knowledge of the results of any behavior, considered as influencing or modifying further performance.

When I was a child the dictionary was one of my favorite books. I could look up a word like 'criticism' and find that it means 'to censure or find fault with.' If there was a term in the definition that was unclear to me, like the word 'disapproval,' I'd research that, too. In rambling through the dictionary I learned the very useful skill of weaving words into concepts in order to better understand and communicate in the world.

With my expanded vocabulary, though, I heaped layer after layer of concepts onto reality—getting farther and farther removed from the naked truth. Somewhere along the way, the pile of concepts grew to be more valuable than the real thing.

There is an Indian story about six blind men and an elephant. The six men wanted to know what an elephant was so each touched a different part of the same animal. Based only on what they were able to perceive with their senses, they

compared interpretations. Each man observed something different; thus, each man's concept of the elephant was different. They nearly came to blows over conflicting opinions about the nature of an elephant. Yet none of them comprehended the whole elephant. The truth is even if the men's senses were completely and perfectly intact, they never could have understood the whole elephant. Never.

con·cept

n.

1. a general notion or idea.
2. a plan or intention; a conception.

Like the blind men, if my ability to perceive the world through the five ordinary senses and the intellect (where concepts are formed) were different, my world would be different. When perception is colored by afflictive emotions, then the world is colored by afflictive emotions.

Behavior I interpreted as criticism in those early days in-residence at the Rochester Zen Center might, indeed, have been criticism or it could have been feedback or it could have been something else entirely. Or it could have been nothing at all—only a projection of my agitated heart and mind. The fact is that I messed up and I was corrected. Could there be a more direct presentation of the truth? Could there be a more perfect embodiment of 'this'?

My friend's comments reminded me that the mind can make heaven and hell, purity and defilement, pleasure and pain. I can magically transform criticism into feedback—a useful expedient for temporarily relieving anxiety. But exchanging one empty concept for another empty concept isn't a permanent solution. Realizing that I can never see the whole picture in any situation, however, frees me from clinging to what I think I know and the words used to describe it.

Here's a final bit of advice from Ch'an master Lin-chi: 'The true follower of Tao does not grasp at the Buddha, nor at bodhisattvas, nor at

the arhats, nor at the exceeding glories in the three realms. In his transcendental independence and untrammled freedom, he adheres to nothing. Even if the universe should collapse, his faith would not falter. Should all the Buddhas from the ten heavens appear before him, he would not feel the slightest elation. Nor would he experience the slightest fear, should all the demons come out from the three hells. How can he be so calm? Because he sees the fundamental voidness of all things ... The three realms are only a manifestation of the mind, and the ten thousand things arise from consciousness. What then is the use of grasping at a dream, an illusion, a flower in the air? Only the one person who is right now before your very eyes listening to my discourse is authentically real. He can

enter into fire without being burned and plunge into water without being drowned. The three hells would be turned into a pleasure garden for him ... What makes such a state possible? The law of non-discrimination! If you should love the saintly but hate the worldly, you will never cease to be engulfed in the sea of birth and death. Afflictions and trials exist because you are mindful of them. But if you are not mindful of them, how can they disturb you? Spare yourself the vain labor of discriminating and grasping at appearances and in a single instant you will realize Tao with spontaneous ease.'

Jeanette Prince-Cherry has been a member of the Rochester Zen Center since 1996. She lives in Louisville, Kentucky.

Unexpected Lessons

TOM KOWAL

I was drawn to the training program from the first day that I stepped foot in the Rochester Zen Center and learned about the residential staff. I was just finishing up my undergraduate education and looking for a well-paying job to help dig me out of my freshly accumulated pile of student loans. However, my nascent Zen practice was showing me that it was also possible to dig myself out of the deep pile of dukkha that had accumulated, which seemed much more important than the financial setback at the time. For better or worse, when I got drawn to something I usually dove in headfirst and consumed myself with it without giving it too much thought. (This tendency has led me into a number of adverse situations as well as fantastic ones, but it always seemed to provide a useful lesson.)

Beginning in the fall of 1999, I started coming to the Center regularly and within a couple of weeks I inquired about joining staff. The construction of the retreat center was just about to

begin at Chapin Mill, and I really wanted to be a part of it. However, in the meantime I was offered a job with a large company in Connecticut with a very good salary and benefits. I can remember vividly the phone call in which my would-be supervisor offered me the position and I told him 'No, thank you.' It was a somewhat surreal experience, as if I were observing the conversation from the outside.

It was a significant crossroads in my life, and I had decided to take the uncertain path, not the well-travelled one that most of my friends and family expected. It was very difficult for me to ignore the strong pull to devote myself to the practice of zazen. Of course, my friends and family thought I was crazy, and they may have been somewhat correct. After all, from their perspective, I sold my car, turned down a good job, and was going to 'live at some cult, or commune, or something weird, whatever it is ... ?' I recall meeting with my best friend from high



Tom Kowal

school while I was on staff. He was visiting from Colorado and came to pick me up to hang out for the day. Before he left, I gave him a quick tour of the Center, and when it was time for him to leave he tried his best to get me to come back to Colorado with him, insisting that I just go grab my bags, jump in his truck, and get out.

I wasn't completely sure what I was getting myself into, but I was imagining it would be akin to one long sesshin, and being that I had one 4-day and one 7-day under my belt, in retrospect I had no clue. The first lesson I learned on staff is probably similar to that of most people who start training and find themselves living in a large group setting—dealing with all of the small annoyances of others' habits and quirks, like leaving a mess in the staff kitchen or eating all but one spoonful of something in the fridge to avoid cleaning the container. Of course, in the grand scheme of things these are small issues, but in the residential environment everything seemed to be magnified. Perhaps the ego's way of avoiding the pain of self-reflection is to turn the other trainees into the most wretched criminals to walk the earth. Clearly, leaving

breadcrumbs on the table is right up there with murder and larceny!

Probably the most valuable experience for me was working on the construction of Chapin Mill Retreat Center. I had only a small amount of building experience, but working with Wayman (then Lou) Kubicka and several other skilled trainees that came and went during that period really boosted my confidence to take on more complex tasks. And doing that work in the Zen training environment seemed to be a perfect match. When my mind was wandering I would know quickly because that's when mistakes happen: fingers get hit with hammers, or crow bars get left on the top of a ladder and fall on your head when you move the ladder ... leading to a hospital visit for five stitches. Or something like that.

There are also the many unexpected lessons that happen as a result of living at a place that attracts people from around the world for training, sesshin, or visits with Roshi Philip Kapleau, for whom I served as a personal aide for many months. Before joining staff, the idea of helping an old man with every personal detail at any

given hour of the day would have seemed like torture, but it is probably one of the greatest gifts that I have ever received. There is a level of selflessness that a person needs in order to do that kind of work—and to be able to do it for the person responsible for the founding of the Zen Center was humbling.

There was a constant stream of past students who would visit Roshi Kapleau regularly or sporadically, bringing him gifts, sharing stories, or just poking their head in to say, ‘Hi.’ Through the many times that I questioned if I should continue as a staff member and whether Zen

practice really ‘works,’ witnessing so many genuinely grateful people stopping in to visit Roshi confirmed to me that indeed it does work.

Looking back, I am so grateful to have had the chance to be on staff, and I hope to find my way back there at some point. In the mean time, I try to remind myself that the greatest lesson might be the one that is repeated so often in Zen teachings: not living in the moment brings so much unnecessary pain and suffering.

Tom Kowal lives in Rochester and currently serves as Chair of the Center’s Board of Trustees.

Imagination & Practice

RICHARD VON STURMER

Logic will get you from A to Z; imagination will get you everywhere.

—Albert Einstein

I.

In 1975 Brian Eno released *Another Green World*, a landmark record of the 1970s. In my late teens I was intrigued by the guitars listed on the album: Snake Guitar, Wimborne Guitar, Desert Guitars, Castanet Guitars, Club Guitar. Only later did I learn that these were not specially created instruments; Eno gave the guitars these names to indicate how they were treated electronically or how they should be played. On one track, ‘St. Elmo’s Fire,’ Robert Fripp plays a transcendent solo on a ‘Wimshurst Guitar.’

In her book, *Another Green World*, Geeta Dayal writes: ‘A Wimshurst machine is an electrostatic generator that was invented in the 1880s, an ancestor of the better-known Van de Graff generator. The Wimshurst discharged large high-voltage sparks that jumped wildly between

its metal plates. Eno issued a challenge to Fripp to play a guitar solo that sounded like the darting sparks of an electrostatic generator, and the end result was incandescent.’

Robert Fripp is a master of the electric guitar and a consummate musician. His contribution to the album would always have been professional and incisive, but because his imagination was fully engaged by Eno’s challenge, he went beyond what he knew and produced something truly exceptional.

In Zen practice, koans present us with a similar challenge: they catch our imagination with their paradoxical nature and then force us to make an intuitive leap in order to see directly into the truth that they embody. Koans enable us to go beyond the known, and to connect directly with the great teachers of our lineage. And we have to bring everything we have to this demanding process, including our imagination. In this way, to use a Zen image, we can entwine our eyebrows with Zhaozhou or Yunmen.

When I first began working on Mu, I would often employ imaginative strategies to become more engaged with the koan. For instance, in an early sesshin, when I was experiencing a lot of pain in the legs, I would imagine myself as a samurai at the beginning of each round, mentally putting on each piece of armour and then bearing down on Mu with nostrils flared. Later on, in another sesshin, prompted by an encouragement talk, I held Mu in my mind like you would hold a baby in your arms. Round after round I would silently whisper Mu ... Mu ... Eventually the point would come in sesshin when I'd stop such approaches and simply concentrate on Mu without any image. By then I would have become more concentrated, and those strategies were no longer needed; in fact, to continue with them would have been mechanical and counter-productive. But they did help me to become more intimate with Mu.

Imagination makes things possible, just as a lack of imagination can turn our world, and our practice, into something dull and pedestrian. Its transformative power is illustrated in the following soccer story by the Uruguayan writer, Eduardo Galeano:

Two British teams were battling out the championship match. The final whistle was not far off and they were still tied, when one player collided with another and fell, out cold. A stretcher carried him off and the entire medical team went to work, but the man did not come to. Minutes passed, centuries passed, and the coach was swallowing the clock, hands and all. He had already used up his substitutions. His boys, ten against eleven, were defending as best they could, which was not much. The coach could see defeat coming, when suddenly the team doctor ran up and cried ecstatically, 'We did it! He's coming around!' And in a low voice added: 'He doesn't know who he is.' The coach went over to the player, who was babbling incoherently as he tried to get to his feet, and in his ear informed him: 'You are Pelé.' They won the match five nil.

The Brazilian Pelé is considered to be the greatest soccer player in the history of the game.

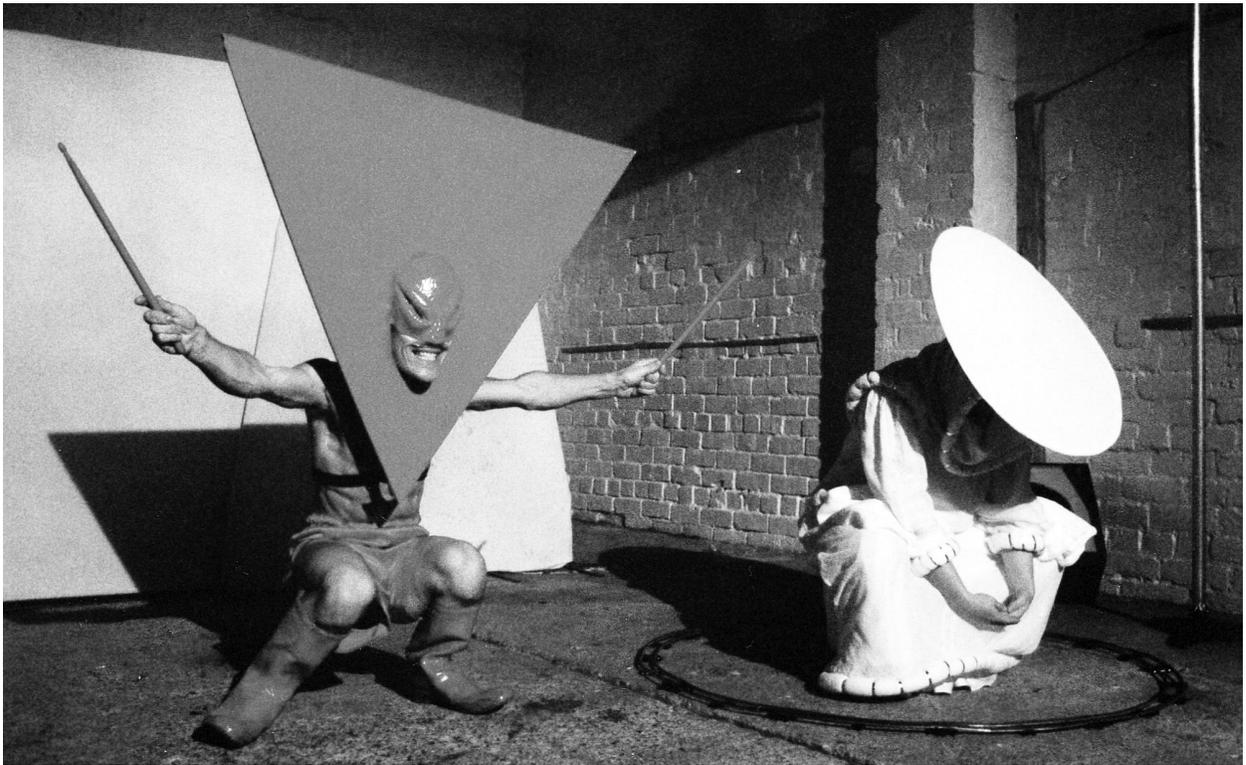
Mumonkan Case 41

Bodhidharma sat in zazen facing the wall. Huike, having cut off his arm, stood in the snow. He said, 'Your disciple's mind has no peace as yet. I beg you, my teacher, to please give it peace.' Bodhidharma replied, 'Bring your mind here and I will set in at rest.' Huike said, 'I have searched for this mind, and have not found it.' Bodhidharma said, 'Then I have put it to rest.'

In my early twenties, before I began to practice Zen, I had read about the second ancestor, Huike, standing in the snow outside Bodhidharma's cave, completely ignored by the great master, in the end being compelled to cut off his arm in a demonstration of his sincerity. This story really entered my imagination.

Several years later, in 1981, my wife, Amala, and I travelled to Italy to study mime and movement at the Scuola Nuova Scena in Bologna. We had a strong desire to immerse ourselves in these disciplines and to work with a good teacher. But it was hard at first; we had difficulty finding accommodation in Bologna, the school was in financial crisis and couldn't afford to employ the best teachers, and no one spoke English. It was a time of turmoil, of our lives being turned upside down, and we felt isolated and anxious.

On the first day of the school, by way of an introduction, each student was asked to give a brief solo performance. What came to mind immediately for me was this koan. So, in front of the class, I became Bodhidharma sitting in his cave, facing the wall. I became Huike standing waist-deep in the snow. Then, dramatically, I mimed cutting off my arm and presenting it to Bodhidharma. Finally, in my less-than-perfect Italian, I recited their dialogue. I didn't know what the rest of the class thought of my performance (apart from ourselves and a young woman from Austria all the other students were Italian), but I did know that it packed a certain dramatic punch. The koan had come alive, vividly before an audience. It had also helped to



Richard von Sturmer and Amala Wrightson

clarify my own situation: demonstrate your sincerity, accept these difficulties, become one with your dilemma.

3.

Forming the Auckland Zen Centre back in January 2004 was, in some respects, an act of imagination. Amala-sensei and I imagined starting a centre where others could come to learn meditation and engage in Zen training. We imagined a Sangha made up of like-minded people who would support each other in their practice. But this imagining was also based on experience; we had both undergone extensive training at the Rochester Zen Center, Amala had been sanctioned as a teacher, and we knew what was possible. And so the Auckland Zen Centre was founded, a Sangha gradually formed, and we've continued for nine years, adapting to changing conditions and learning as we go. Many others have contributed and continue to contribute to this endeavour. Such a work-in-progress is in

tune with the second aspect of the Noble Eightfold Path: Right Thought, or Intention or Aspiration.

Right Intention is the bridge between Right View (the first aspect) and Right Action (the third aspect). We orient ourselves towards the Dharma, then we decide how best to embody the Dharma, how to make the Dharma part of our lives. This is right intention. It requires not only our resolve to change but also our faith and our imagination that such change is possible. 'The Buddhas and Bodhisattvas in the past were like us, and we will in the future become Buddhas and Bodhisattvas.' In this way imagination is the awareness of what is possible.

In early Buddhism, when mentioned at all, imagination generally had a negative connotation. It was associated with proliferation (*papañca*), how the mind can colour or distort reality based on our underlying tendencies of greed, anger and delusion. However, instead of proliferating, we can learn to cultivate mindful awareness, or *sati*.

With *sati*, the awareness of mind, we are able to direct our imagination in a positive direction. One practice from early Buddhism is *buddhānussati*, calling to mind the qualities of the Buddha, imagining or identifying with the Buddha in order to deepen our connection with the Dharma. Another important practice is *sati* in conjunction with *metta*, loving-kindness; the awareness that all beings are just like us. As you widen the scope of your *metta* practice, all beings are imagined as being happy and fulfilled, free from suffering. This, of course, is liberating for your own heart.

4.

There are imaginative teachings in all the Buddhists traditions (and the koan itself could be argued as being the most imaginative device ever employed in spiritual practice). One contemporary example is that of the well-known Thai abbot, Ajahn Jumnien. In the words of John Tarrant:

Perhaps ten years ago, he had a canvas harness made for himself—something like a fisherman's vest. Whenever anyone gave him anything—a watch, money, a bottle of water, a radio, a cup, healing medicines, an amulet or two—he would fix it on the harness. He bristled with objects; it was the kind of thing that would have made him a career in the art

world. He accumulates things and from time to time passed them on, but first he wore them. He said the whole apparatus weighed about sixty pounds. He took it off to sleep, but otherwise he walked around in it, carrying the burden of everything he received.

Ajahn Jumnien's practice was partly a reflection on the Thai tradition of collecting amulets. It can also be seen as a commentary on how we receive objects and then become attached to them, in the end being weighed down by their proliferation. In the words of Zen Master Mumon, he was giving us, in a sort of on-going performance, 'the full presentation of the whole.'

Ajahn Jumnien eventually took off his contraption for good. It had served its purpose, and provided his followers (and us) with a great example of imagination in the service of the Dharma. That's probably the key; when we imagine that we can get something from our practice, or that the teacher can somehow remove our problems and afflictions, we run smack-bang into all sorts of difficulties. This is imagination in the service of the small self. But if we harness imagination so that it can serve the Dharma, then our practice takes on arms and legs and wings.

Richard von Sturmer's new collection of poetry, Book of Equanimity Verses, will be published by Puriri Press in November this year.

West to East: North to South (Part 2)

ANONYMOUS

Editor's Note: Part one of this essay appeared in the 'Illness & Practice' issue under the title 'North to South, West to East (Part 1).' See Zen Bow Vol. 35, No. 2 & 3, 2012, pages 18-20.

The mind of the great sage of India is intimately conveyed from West to East.

Though humans may be sharp or dull the way has no northern or southern ancestors ...

—*The Harmony of Relative and Absolute*

In part one, the author found himself haunted by a desperate dream to 'find love' immediately before heading to a seven-day sesshin at Chapin Mill. The sesshin ended without any clarity about this dream or obvious insights into practice ... until the evening afterward when he was visited by a strong healing force that moved throughout his body. Now the author must re-enter the world. How can a profound experience shape your practice, both on and off the cushion? Luckily for the author, Bodhidharma keeps showing up to offer guidance in the most unlikely of places.

Returning Home

Once again the flights ran on schedule this time from East to West. My father-in-law picked me up at the airport on Sunday and with him were my two daughters. The two girls ran to greet me and filled my arms ... too immense a feeling to begin to describe. We were hungry and drove for a meal at our favorite Chinese restaurant called 'Imperial Gardens' just outside the city limits of Madison. Father-in-law treated us that night and insisted on paying the bill. On the way back from the bathroom, I caught the eye of the manager who always seemed to have

an uncanny knack for hospitality and service. Her large cuffed sleeves danced back and forth as she flowed around the restaurant with a calm, focused smile. I asked her to tell me where she found this unusually crisp picture of, you guessed it, Bodhidharma hanging on the wall and staring back with his wide-open eyes, stubbly beard, dangling earrings, and staff. She walked with me to the entrance of the men's bathroom to take a look at it and said the owner got it from a dealer who brought back unique finds from China. She promised to look into its origin and with a gleam in her eyes said, 'I put it next to the bathroom so that more people will see it.'

Sunday night I sat on the cushion for a while and the Chinese food didn't seem to agitate my stomach. What a relief! Normally this kind of rich food takes my stomach for a ride after sesshin. And the stomach usually is just the beginning of the downward slide. Unfortunately, my days following sesshin can often be a tough blow. Back to the familiar routines, mountains of emails, demands of clients and family. It usually feels like a helium-filled balloon with a tiny leak: light and buoyant at first leading to a dragging plummet back to the ground over the course of a few days. On this particular occasion though, the balloon stayed full, as if it had a burner to keep it floating aloft in the sky. Now the big test: Monday morning on the job would see just how much buoyancy this balloon had left.

I've had the privilege of being a group facilitator and organizational consultant for the better part of two decades. From environment to higher education, transportation to city planning, business strategy to non-profit board development, these conversations have been a deep well of practice and professional growth.

It is work that requires significant concentration and flexibility on your feet much like walking a tight rope. You can never take any situation for granted when it comes to facilitating a group because of its inherent complexity. What I noticed on the transition back to work, even after all of these years, completely redefined my relationship to the group and its members.

Stakeholders planning a state-wide water conference crowded a small meeting table. My role was to help consult on and facilitate their conversation in order to draft an agenda for a three day immersive event coming up in November. They began with opening words from the convening leader who outlined the meeting purpose and appealed to them for their full, complete engagement so that they might accomplish their task. As the leader spoke, I scanned the room full of participants and caught one person's staring face. She wasn't tuned-out, rather more tuned-in just to the words being spoken by her colleague. It became increasingly clear that she could only listen to the leader's words rather than see the person AND hear the words at the same time. In one respect, she, the listener, was blind and combing around in the dark for a place to hang on to. Completely stunned by this realization after spending thousands of hours witnessing groups, I decided to keep watching others to test this strange hypothesis. Amazingly, it held true. So I tried to facilitate with this mindset for the remainder of the meeting to see what would happen. In order to really bring it to life, I imagined that the room was pitch black and no light could be seen at all. The words rang across the darkness. My role was to assist full and complete understanding of these traversing words through utter and persistent focus. Wow, did it work! Rather than rely on cues of body language, or power and position, or dress or any other outward form of expression, people started to hear the words spoken from within. We listened underneath the words for what was actually being communicated. We traveled from words to assumptions, then to

stories and values, on to tone and energy, and finally to hearing people's authentic expression of their truth. It reminded me of a quote from David Whyte's book *Crossing the Unknown Sea*: 'In the surface conversation of our colleague, we listen for the undercurrent; the persistent tug and ebb that tell us she is actually going in the opposite direction.' I continued to 'facilitate in the dark' as if we were all blind and searching beyond what we could initially hear to what was being spoken. What a remarkable experience. In that short, less than 90-minute meeting, we outlined our basic intent and approach for a state-wide conference on the future of water management in the State of Wisconsin. By all accounts, people felt engaged and truly heard, no matter their point of view, status or background. The entire group, with its varying viewpoints and interests, reached agreement on an outline that would attract a central cast to tackle some of the most complex and crucial environmental challenges we are likely to face in the next century. Not a bad meeting! And not least of all, I left profoundly aware that I, too, was searching, groping, blind in the dark.

Dancing with Ghosts

One lesson from the planning meeting stood out: to find my way in the dark, I needed to ask questions. If something didn't seem quite right, asking questions of others helped to fill in gaps and rough spots that naturally show up throughout the course of daily life. With the newly minted humility of being mostly blind, asking questions about people's perspectives became a lot easier to do. One friend put it beautifully: It's like we each have a flashlight of awareness we shine within the dark cave of life. You can't possibly see it all with your limited lumens. So you must ask others what they can see to fill in more of the picture. This process became continuous and was propelled by the fundamental question I had been asking assiduously over these many years, 'What is mu?'. It was a good thing too



Amaury Cruz

because I was about to enter into completely uncharted territory.

Por la madrugada Tuesday, October 9, I sat upright in bed, awakened by strong winds blowing outside. The winds howled ever so slightly as they blew across our neighborhood, rattling flags, loose siding and roof tiles. There was a massive pull calling me into the meditation room just next door to our bedroom. I entered and bowed reverently ... and found myself unable to move from the stance of the bow. I stood many moments with hands palm to palm but when I started to try and move to the meditation cushion instead my right leg and arm moved ever so slowly upward and out in circular motion settling into a slight squat. Some force, some action or will was taking hold of me and requesting permission to help lead the way. I surrendered to the request in complete astonishment. Deeply absorbed in mu, it unfolded into a quiet, wonderful dance. Back and forth, right to

left, left to right, up and down. I started to hum and sing a song under my breath at first. And then it got louder and louder until I used exhales and puffs of breath to punctuate a rhythm that matched the dance. Absorbed even further, the dance morphed into new forms which came in all sorts of flavors. It felt as if I were being led from classical dance to modern, ancient tribal steps to rave dancing in a night club. Except, I've never been to a 'rave' and for that matter very few night clubs. By this point, I began to use my hands to clap out beats and rhythms while my mouth offset the slapping, clapping sound in a syncopated, musical riff. My whole body was immersed in these dances that strung together, one into another. At times, I became all too aware that I was making a lot of noise, but the wind helped muffle the scene so that it didn't wake my wife and youngest daughter sleeping in adjacent rooms. So wonderful and rich was this dancing and singing that it over-

came me and introduced characters that caught me completely by surprise. At one point I was 'beat boxing' and then scat singing, two things I can't recall ever doing before! Inhaling deeply, I felt such awe and mystery that I felt a sob enter my chest. Instead of sobbing, however, I asked, 'What is mu?' and the sob moved from my chest deep into my belly, where it took on a low, full roar of ... a laugh. I laughed out loud in pure and complete joy. Somehow inexplicably, I sensed that this laugh arose from Bodhidharma himself and I fell into a full forward squat toward the floor in a puddle of amazement. He was with me that night, no doubt about it. After the dancing, singing and laughter, I used the walls of the pitch dark room as a guide and the yoga mat on the floor as a runway to find my way to the cushion for meditation. That day, I realized later, we celebrated Bodhidharma Day and it also fell on the one-year anniversary of my mother-in-law's passing.

Two Candles at the Center

The past year had been a very difficult one for my wife. Her mother had died of complications related to a stroke and heart attack one year ago to the day, October 9, 2011. I had been on my way back from sesshin when a call rang in between connecting flights: come home as soon as you can, we will wait for you to stop life support equipment so we can all say goodbye together. Luckily, I returned to see her one last time, although her brain waves had flat-lined hours ago. By some blessing, the appointed chaplain happened to be a Buddhist priest with Christian upbringing and it allowed the assembled family to comfortably recite passages from the Zen Center chant book as well as the Bible. Our youngest child elected to stay with her until her last gasp, witnessing her death first hand with final words of 'I love you, Grandma.' We had a lovely ceremony to remember her, complete with a purple lotus flower candle unfolding on top of the church altar. Her memory loomed

large, and try as she might, my wife continued to be plagued with sadness a year after the sudden loss of her mother.

After spending much of the night in meditation, I woke up that next morning in time for Tuesday's sitting at the Madison Zen Center (MZC). Fortified by the events of the past few days, a great amount of energy and focus coursed through my body-mind. The many brilliant marvels over the past few days felt familiar to me from my youth, when strong connections and magic were daily occurrences. I experienced a tight intimacy with my surroundings ... the kind you feel when you first fall in love or while open-eyed journeying across distant lands. When the sitting concluded, I announced it was Bodhidharma Day and wished people safe journey from West to East or whatever direction they would travel that day. Cleaning up around the Center, generally putting things in order, I found two beautiful little lotus candles in a box mysteriously out of place on a shelf in the basement. They were the same type of candles purchased as a gift for my wife after her mother died and that ended up gracing her remembrance ceremony and our home mantle's altar. Not about to overlook this exceptional sign, I took the twin candles upstairs to adorn our MZC altar in honor of Bodhidharma Day. Just cresting the stairs, I caught sight of a member whose mother had died the week before. Trusting the power of this moment, I called out to her before she donned her shoes from the rack, wished her my condolences and invited her to light these candles at the center altar to remember her mom. She agreed and we both walked to the zendo to install the candles. Bowing as we entered, I asked which direction faced East ... she said 'behind you.' With a look somewhere between confusion and interest, she said, 'What is going on with you?' I said without hesitation, 'I don't know.' We then approached the altar, placed candles from North to South, and bowed in unison to exit the zendo.

Decisions, Decisions

ALLEN BROADMAN

I wear the chain I forged in life ... I made it link by link, and yard by yard; I girded it on of my own free will, and of my own free will I wore it.

—Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol*

I will never forget my first sesshin, experienced almost 15 years ago. Just one short weekend, and held in a Boy Scout-style camp building in rural New Jersey, it barely lasted two full days. But in those two days I found myself up against obstacles I hadn't even known existed: being perplexed and stymied by the teacher's comments in dokusan, dealing with awful knee pain, getting homesick, wondering why I had decided to go on a retreat, and obsessively counting the hours until it would be over. In other words, it was just like every other sesshin since then.

Well, not really *just* like every other sesshin. It's true that those same obstacles often still arise in one way or another for me at many retreats, but over the years there has been an important change—a change in how I respond to them. Sesshin provides a training environment that can help us see more clearly into our own reactions to conditions, and that in turn gives us the opportunity to learn how different reactions can create very different effects. That seems such an obvious and simple thing, yet what a lesson it is, to discover that how we choose to respond to conditions directly affects the quality of our lives. Usually when we think of events causing our 'future' to unfold, we forget that our own response to things *is* one of the events causing the future to unfold! That's important to see and to remember, and something that sesshin training helps bring into focus.

There have been times that I've hated sesshin training—I freely admit that without shame. Hated the physical pain, the emotional pain,

the confusion and doubts, the exhaustion, and the aloneness. The aloneness has always struck me—how it's possible to feel alone even in the midst of so many people. Sesshin can be very, very hard. All of this Zen training and practice we do can be very hard. Roshi has said it many times: the practice is simple, but not easy. In sesshin, both the simplicity and the difficulty are greatly magnified. There are times that the difficulty feels unbearable. But I have also come to appreciate, over the years, the great simplicity.

What an unburdening it is to have so many of our usual decisions taken out of our hands and managed for us. The food we eat is chosen for us, our time to wake up, to sit, to eat, to shower, to exercise—it's all scheduled. We are released from so many of the hundreds of choices we normally make every day—work decisions, decisions about emailing this person or calling that person, or whether to check Facebook. What to make for dinner, when to do the laundry, what time to take the kids to soccer practice, whether to get the car checked because of that weird noise it's been making, whether to read this book or that magazine, or to watch TV, or what to do this weekend. It's absolutely endless, this stream of decisions we take on in even the most simple of ordinary days. The fatigue of it all can be immense, and it seeps into us slowly as the decisions keep mounting, and we don't even notice it happening. That's because it happens one small piece at a time, just like the links in the chain which burdened Jacob Marley's ghost in the Charles Dickens classic *A Christmas Carol*. And before we know it, the weight of it all becomes a terrible struggle.

But at sesshin, we don't *need* to make so many decisions. We know what to do because the practice and the rhythm tell us. Now we sit, now



Donna Kowal

we chant, now we eat, work, rest, and now we sit again. We can settle into just sitting, just chanting, just eating. But this settling down is only an opportunity, not a guarantee. Even though relieved of so many choices, the ‘monkey’ mind is always there, prepared to construct a new set of choices to replace the old ones. Should I wake up before the bell or sleep in? Should I wear my extra-heavy sweater tonight or just a shirt? Use the zafu this round, or the seiza bench? Soup or cottage cheese for lunch, or both? How many crackers? Will I go to the bathroom this kinhin or can I make it to the next one? Go to dokusan or skip it? Stay up late or get some rest? And on and on and on.

But the beauty of sesshin training is that if we can stay with our practice, if we can just keep coming back to our practice over and over, then our mind *can* settle down and we can stop mull-

ing over all these choices about soups and sweaters. We can just decide and move on. And if we can do that, then we can find a quiet foundation at sesshin, and the noisy-ness of our activity and thinking finally turns down. So many of the triggers that normally produce more choices and more thoughts, just aren’t there during sesshin training. We don’t *have* to make so many choices at sesshin, or to spend much time considering the few choices we do need to make. At sesshin, decisions are either optional, or can be done instantly.

That is what I love about sesshin—that when the mind finally starts to settle, there won’t be an email about a project at work, or a text message from your friend, or a phone call that a child needs a ride home, or any of a thousand different kinds of events that so often send us spiraling into decision making. I’m certain that some

people can be so mindfully absorbed that their everyday choices are not distractions, and become the very essence of practice, but how many of us are fortunate enough to be so fully engaged all the time? I think for most of us, practice and mindfulness in everyday life is a struggle.

By relieving us of so many ordinary choices, and providing so much potential quietude, sesshin training gives us the chance to see how the mind actually functions. Absent so many triggers and decisions, with the noise finally dying down, there it is to plainly see—our mind at work, doing its crazy thing. With less noise, we can see how the mind works when it's working well, and how it works when it's working poorly. Most importantly, we can start to see the difference between the two.

I've found over the years, that after all the hating and loving of sesshin is done with, what remains is the need for the unique training that sesshin provides. This retreat from our usual affairs has become necessary for me—necessary for healthier living, in the same way that water is necessary or clean air. Necessary for cultivating a quieter mind. And so I keep coming back for more: hating it, loving it, and needing it—and I hope to keep joining my fellow practitioners in doing so for a long time to come.

Allen Broadman has been a member of the Zen Center for over 10 years and is grateful for that first sesshin long ago, led by an RZC teacher who traveled to the wilds of southern New Jersey for the weekend.

Lessons from Awkward, Unstructured Time

DENÉ GRANGER

I was first introduced to the Zen Center as an out-of-town member living in Syracuse. After doing yoga for a year, I decided that I wanted to get more serious and I began doing meditation with a small group of people at my yoga school. A couple years later, not having any clue, I ended up at a two-day sesshin at Chapin Mill. I was hooked. I began making a trip to the Center once a month, and I quickly discovered a great appreciation for the longer stints of sitting and for sitting with a larger group of people. Traveling from Syracuse, I felt like I couldn't justify the three-hour round trip for one sitting, so I began making weekend trips and training a day or two at a time.

At first, I found that it was a great way to get familiar with the place and to get to know a group of people who are serious about practice. Then I found how helpful a tight daily struc-

ture can be. I had been a graduate student for five years, reaching complete burn out; I needed more structure in my life. Despite the benefits of all that structure, one of my biggest lessons came with the awkward unstructured time, when I had no idea what to do with myself. In the Center's dorm, without any of my school work, I didn't have nearly the wide array of things to distract myself, to make myself busy, and pour my energy into: no dirty dishes or floors to sweep, no weeds to pull or internet and email, or papers to write.

After the work day came to a close at 3:30 pm, exhausted, I would lie down until I got too antsy, then wander into an empty staff kitchen for a cup of tea, not because I felt thirsty for tea, but because I felt like I needed something to do. I'd head back to the dorms and pull out the one book I brought, and then I realized I would only



Tom Kowal

be reading to keep myself busy. I would think to myself, 'Maybe I just have the wrong book,' head to the library, flip through some more books, still entirely dissatisfied. After doing this a few times, I started to catch on to how I waste so much energy doing things just to fill up time, and how uncomfortable it can be to have nothing to distract me. I could imagine how I was stuck in a hamster wheel. While my academic work carried personal and social importance, it was mostly very expensive material for a sometimes thrilling, sometimes gut-wrenching hamster wheel.

Then, this past winter, I spent my winter break from school at the Zen Center. With the December sesshin behind me, it was easier for me to catch glimpses of what it means to be more present. Even though that unstructured time was still awkward, it was a lot less uncomfortable. Now, I was not polishing wood because that was my job for the day, it was not to keep busy, and it certainly wasn't to keep distracted.

Dené Granger has been a member since December 2011, and a resident in training since May 2013.

Residential Training: An Interview with Cecily Fuhr

Editor's Note: We invited a current member of the RZC residential staff to share her experiences with residential training. Cecily Fuhr currently serves as Zendo Assistant, and she also occasionally serves in the roles of Head Cook and Receptionist. This is her second stint on staff. She first joined staff in the late 1990s and stayed for three years. She returned nearly a decade later in 2010.

ZB: Tell us about the circumstances that led to your arrivals and departure from staff.

Cecily: When I joined staff the first time, I had no life experience other than large, structured institutional life. I joined staff directly from graduate school, and I had entered graduate school immediately after college. I had no substantive experience outside of structured academia. I left staff because it felt like a weird, self-enclosed environment and I wanted to do something more plugged-in with the rest of life. I moved to Seattle to attend law school. Upon passing the bar, I practiced law in Seattle for a few years and returned to Rochester for sesshins. I realized I wanted to attend more sesshin and wanted closer proximity to the people at the Center, so I moved back to Rochester. At first I worked at a legal publishing house in Rochester and then rejoined staff after two years.

From that experience of leaving and returning I realized a couple of things. Residential training, for any period of time, has inherent value. It is possible to drop away and return. Come when you can and as often as you can. Come for a weekend, a summer, a year. Swap out a sesshin for a week of residential training. Residential training is a valuable training experience—right up there with sesshin.

ZB: How has your staff experience influenced your lay life?

My residential training was excellent training for functioning in the regular world. I don't think I could have gotten through law school without it. Law school consists of engaging with large, weighty textbooks that are initially incomprehensible. I had to return to these books again and again, repeatedly, until they eventually began to make sense. This is not unlike my experience on the mat! On the flip side, I also developed a capacity to receive criticism, which I was not aware that I had developed. In the law firm where I worked, the managing partner assigned work to me that was not well defined. When I showed her my completed work, she indicated I had wrongly interpreted it and needed to redo it. I took the feedback in stride and immediately began to redo the work. During our conversation she sat back in her chair and commented that I was able to redirect myself better than anyone she had ever seen.

When you are on staff and Roshin or someone is correcting you nearly every day, you don't feel like you receive it particularly well, when in fact it is like developing muscles little by little. When you snap back you realize you have changed, that you have muscle memory. After being on staff, I realized, 'Oh, I do take responsibility for myself.'

This second time around in residential training, I feel more sincere in myself as a Buddhist. I happen to read a lot. I read a lot before I came to the Center. Does that make me a bad Buddhist? Who knows? I know that my reading does not negatively (or positively) impact my practice, so I'll keep my reading habit until it does. If and when it does, I'll stop. I'm not stopping it on the

theoretical grounds that good Buddhists don't read much. Staff training quickly gives you insight on what habits cause pain for yourself or others. If you are not receiving that feedback, either directly from a senior staff person or through an internal anxiety or preoccupation or annoyance, then there is no need to get rid of it.

ZB: What aspects of residential training have surprised you?

What surprises me about residential training is that it makes me a better person without my self-consciously trying to be a better person. What is a hell realm? Hell realm is a lack of engagement with my practice and friction with people around me. In the residential program I spend all facets of life with the other residents. You eat, sleep, work, and sit zazen together. There is no escape from each other. With the many hours of zazen, you begin to see your friction coming. It starts as a vague annoyance with someone or a situation. Then more thoughts come, focusing the specifics of the annoyance into a bona fide friction with concrete details. The friction develops. To stop the friction, you don't have to be bodhisattvic. You just have to stop engaging in the thoughts. Just stop the thoughts and the hell realm ceases. And with the cessation of those thoughts, you stop breaking the Seventh Precept, 'I resolve not to praise myself and disparage others, but to be understanding and sympathetic.' You've stopped the thoughts for the self-saving reason of leaving the hell realm. Not that you feel warm fuzzies for the person or situation, but you do cease doing harm. The training makes you a better person by default. You get instant feedback within the residential training loop.

Another thing that has surprised me about training is how much work I am given to do that is outside my comfort zone. Serving on the

building committee and doing fundraising for Chapin Mill were new kinds of work for me. I knew I was smart, but it had never occurred to me to apply my intellect to something that was practical or concrete and not academic. It occurred to me, as I was assigned practical, worldly tasks, that I can be useful. Without the training there would be enormous chunks of myself that I would not see to develop.

ZB: What have you learned or unlearned from training?

My current experience of staff consists of focusing on sitting and the quality of relationships with people. I don't think that staff training fundamentally changes personality or character defects or what is hard-wired in a person. Rather it pumps up the parts of me that are a little withered. Everyone goes towards wholeness. I am a self-indulgent person, and my staff training has taught me that I am a self-indulgent person who can get stuff done under pressure and that self-indulgences no longer harm myself or others.

Training has taught me to appreciate parts of myself that I didn't particularly value or like. In this type of training you are stuck—stuck with these people, stuck within this building, stuck with facing the wall. It's not hard to extrapolate that to stuck with parts of me I don't like or value and learning to make friends with that because there is nowhere else to go.

I find the people aspect of training to be the most rewarding and engaging. I am an extrovert, and I am developing a liking for introverts and visual people. I love the people in training with me, even when I find them annoying or weird. We are all facing in the same direction. That shared direction, and our relentless proximity, teach me to appreciate really different kinds of people.

Not Putting Down the Yoke and the Burden

ELI RUBIN

It was day two of renovating the horse stall floor. The day before, the boss of the Maine farm where I was working and living for the season had consulted with his father, the previous boss, and his own son, the next boss, about the situation. The 1,700-pound Suffolk Punch draft horse who lives in that box stall is a highly valuable team member of the farm crew. Specifically, her pulling power is of great value, and for that she needs to maintain good feet and legs, and good feet and legs need a solid, even floor to stand on. The decision meant additional work in an already packed week.

Seeding, watering, transplanting, weeding, cultivating, harvesting: it was the middle of summer, when all the tasks need regular attention and there is never enough time. Fortunately, with a crew of seven, the to-do list wasn't growing too out of control. One of the other apprentices and I decided to wake up early to start the horse stall, so that we might not have to work through the heat of the day. The dark, sloppy soup that immersed our almost waterproof boots was comprised of urine—mostly—and manure. This soup of sludge was an accumulation of 25 years worth of 'crumbs' that fall between the floor boards during the daily mucking out of the barn. No wonder the floor was rotten. Construction around the barn had prevented any drainage, so here sat our acid soup, fermenting in the dark, maturing for this, its final day of unveiling. The sun was barely up, and we were thankful that the cool morning air kept the rankness on the floor and away from our noses.

Shoveling wet manure is difficult. It's heavy, it splashes at every opportunity, and—in our case—it was also filled with fist-sized rocks, tightly wedged together. This early attempt at sub-floor drainage was now our curse. While

working in the box stall on the second day, I was becoming frustrated at how little material each shovel-full would remove from the floor, at how little each wheelbarrow load would hold, and at how much was left to be done. The pleasant banter with my fellow worker, which had accompanied most of our work the previous day, fell silent soon after work began that day. The sheer amount of work ahead kept me going, while a mild frustration brewed in my head. 'If only I could fit more in each shovel-full, I would be doing better,' I thought. This theory lasted only briefly, as my body quickly fought the idea with rips of pain through my back and gasps for air to my lungs. Only able to lift a quarter-shovel-full at a time now, I did what I could while my body recovered. Amazingly, while moving less manure, I became less and less frustrated at the speed of my progress. I started to see, to really see each shovel-full for what it was. Five handfuls. In one motion, without even bending onto my knees, I was doing the work of scooping up the mud five times with my hands. And with that little change of perspective, I was now flying through my work.

Each shovel-full became a process for which I was endlessly grateful. The tool that once wasn't enough, was now an object of sincere affection. Seeing each shovel-full at five handfuls, I continued working with a presence and awareness I had not previously experienced. Every scoop had the fullest of my attention and every ounce of my gratitude.

The lesson continued on through the day. During evening chores I came to appreciate buckets for hauling feed and water to animals. What was a heavy burden yesterday, a strain on the arms, today became a miracle. As I poured out the cracked oats to the chickens I tried to imagine how many handfuls I had just carried

to the coop and poured out ... 75? 100? Pouring water into their troughs, I struggled to imagine what life would have been like before the tools that I had taken for granted, like buckets and shovels, were commonplace. Somewhere, at some time, I imagined animals being fed a fistful at a time, and water carried to thirsty mouths by the hands alone.

Daily zazen practice has been hard for me this season, for the work hours are long, and exhaustion sets in after work is complete. Sometimes my lack of regular practice bothers me, as

if I were in a rush to fill a wheelbarrow with zazen. I try to remember, though, to see life by the handful and to experience each handful as it happens. In the words attributed to an ancient Zen master, 'The merit of doing zazen even for one moment is immeasurable.'

Eli Rubin is currently living in Vermont working at another horse-powered farm. For several years, he has been a farmer's apprentice. One day he hopes to have land and to be just a farmer.

The Place of Practice

KATHRYN ARGETSINGER

Since January 2004, I have been in residential Zen training—off and on. From the time that I first began to practice, part of what attracted me so strongly to the Rochester Zen Center was the sense of support, both material and spiritual, that I felt from the presence of the residents at Arnold Park. I had always felt a deep attraction to monastic-style training—Christian as well as Buddhist. But as a married person, a teacher, and a mother, I felt I had chosen a different path, and I wasn't at all certain that such training could ever be for me. But that winter of 2004, about three years after I first began to sit, I decided to use just one week of my semester break to try it out.

I will never forget the experience of walking through the front door of Arnold Park on the first day of my training period, setting my suitcases down on the floor of the link, and then, just listening ... completely embraced by the silence. My only thought was, 'I'm home. I've finally come home.'

The week was not without its challenges. Sharing a room with two others was hard. Living in the dorm was cold. Getting up so early after not sleeping well felt wretched. But that

sense of silence, that sense of home, was always there as a deep undercurrent of support. It wasn't just the silence in the zendo. It was the sense of routine and of calm. We did only one thing at a time. After sitting, we ate breakfast—just ate breakfast. We didn't read the paper or make to-do lists at the same time. After breakfast we worked. When the tea-bell rang, we dropped our work and drank tea for 15 minutes. A wonderful part of the training was learning to throw oneself wholeheartedly into whatever task was assigned, but then to let it go completely when the work period was over.

This important attitude was one thing I carried away with me from my first week of residential training. I also carried with me the desire to do more—and in the nearly ten years since then, that desire has scarcely waned. Nor, on the other hand, has the desire to live at home with my husband and family. Thus I have not been the typical trainee, but have always been sorting my way through the various pulls of training, family, and, for many years, employment as well.

I have lived at Arnold Park for periods ranging from one to three weeks. I have lived at Chapin Mill for periods ranging from a few

weeks to a few months. Whenever I've lived at Chapin Mill, I have, unlike the other trainees, gone home for the weekends, and frequently on Wednesday evenings as well. I have several times been a long-term trainee or on staff at Arnold Park while living at home: bath at 5 am, shovel out the car, drive in for the morning sitting, return home at 4 pm after chanting, get dinner ready, exchange a few words with my husband, drive back for the evening sitting, return home, fall into bed, repeat. Do people realize that Roshi and John Pulleyn have lived this life for years? It is exhausting!

I have also trained at the Auckland Zen Centre for periods ranging from a few weeks to several months. In New Zealand, of course, the challenge is not so much trying to integrate training with home life as it is simply being so far away from home and family. Moreover, since, for many years of my training there, we had no dedicated training facility, I have lived in various, sometimes odd, situations: at a home-stay, at a student hostel, at a Catholic convent, 'camping out' at the zendo (one cold water tap), sleeping on a mattress in Amala-sensei's parents' living room, and more recently, now that we have a Sangha House, either in one of the Sangha House rooms or in the 'sleep-out' that Sensei and Richard have created for trainees from a converted garage. Sesshin takes place at various rented venues: still more places to cook and to sleep. When I come home, I stand in my kitchen and have no idea where a cup or a pot might be. The sensation of waking in the morning and not knowing where I am has, over the years, become routine for me, and I have actually grown to savour it, trying to draw it out as long as I can. Though my husband still teases me about all the stuff I lug around with me on my various comings and goings ('Nothing but your robe and begging bowl,' he says as I head off to sesshin with my three suitcases), there is no doubt that on some level I have had to learn to travel light. The constant coming and going, the jet lag, the disorientation have become important parts of my training—learning to just let go and be present wherever I am.

What especially helps with training in two places is the way it is all tied together by the consistency of the training principles and regimen. In the early years of my training, as I worked my way up to longer stints at Arnold Park and Chapin Mill, I found that new aspects of the training were continually being revealed. There was a lot to learn—from not leaning on the kitchen altar and not commenting on the food, to answering 'Yes!' as soon as anyone called your name, to taking on any assigned task with as much cheerfulness as you could muster, to being ready to own up at the daily work meeting to any mistakes you had made.

Roshi would often use the work meeting to comment on or explain various aspects of the training. Even after several years of my off-and-on training stints, I would often learn something completely unexpected at these times. One morning he talked about posture. It was not just a question of a straight back in the zendo or at meals, but of being mindful at all times that our posture reflected, and affected, our practice and our state of mind. Standing with arms crossed or akimbo was discouraged; Roshi encouraged us, when someone was addressing us, to simply stand with our hands at our sides, in a posture of openness. This is something I am still working on.

It was just over a year after my first training experiences at the Rochester Center that I began traveling to New Zealand to train at the centre in Auckland. Flying back and forth across the globe once or twice each year, I felt a strong connection to the geese who pass through Chapin Mill on their way to and from Canada, or the gannets who breed on the crags overlooking Muriwai Beach before heading off on their journey to Australia. In the first several years of my migrations, the residential training program in Auckland consisted of one teacher (Amala-sensei) and one trainee (me). It is with the deepest gratitude that I recollect the seriousness with which Sensei conducted our embryonic program. I was gradually and systematically trained in the various instruments and zendo duties. I arranged flowers and cleaned incense



Tom Koval

pots. I was assigned housekeeping, cooking, and administrative tasks of all sorts. Sometimes attendance at the morning sittings totaled three participants (Sensei, Richard, and myself)—or two, if Richard couldn't be there. If there were just two of us, I would play the han and Sensei would be timer. All the bells would be struck as usual. After zazen, I would play the drum and we would complete the full chanting service for the day, recite the four vows and do our prostrations. There was never any sense that we should do anything less precisely or less wholeheartedly

because there were just two of us. And, when I was overseas, Sensei and Richard often did the same. Over the years, as attendance at sittings steadily grew, I realized ever more clearly how important this attitude was. We had created a container into which new sitters could be seamlessly welcomed.

As time has gone on, one of the real privileges of participating in the Auckland program has been the opportunity to welcome new trainees, and to be involved in designing training program guidelines from the ground up. This

has been a chance to think about what makes a training program work, what is necessary and what is optional, and what are the most important principles to convey to new trainees—or new members of the Centre who may be participating in the training day on occasion. What type of culture do we wish to create at the Centre, and how can we go about creating it?

In Auckland we have a three-page document of training guidelines, and these have changed and evolved with our evolving circumstances. We have had full-time residential trainees (like those in Rochester), we have had trainees who have lived at the Sangha House but worked outside in the community, we have had occasional short-term trainees, and we often have guests from other Buddhist communities, or people staying at the Sangha House before and after sesshin. And, of course, we have Sensei and Richard, who make their house available to trainees, but who also need it to function as a place where they can enjoy some privacy and make their home.

To accommodate changing circumstances, our three pages of guidelines have been tweaked in various ways. But consistently, each of the three pages takes up one of three elements that I have come to view as the three pillars of training: Maintaining a Quiet Environment, Maintaining an Orderly Environment, and the Daily Schedule. In fact you could sum it all up this way: 1. Silence is default mode; 2. Leave no traces; 3. Sit often. These are the central challenges—and liberating aspects—of residential training.

It is liberating to feel that there is no need to engage in continual small talk with co-workers, that each of us is there simply to focus on our practice and on the task at hand—but it is challenging to keep one's constant flow of thoughts, opinions, judgments, and advice to oneself. It is liberating to live in a clean and orderly environment—but it is challenging to maintain the level of mindfulness and energy necessary to see each task through to the end, including clean-up, and to apply oneself consistently to the various cleaning tasks that need to be done each day or each week. It is liberating to have one's time

planned as neatly as the physical environment, and to have so much time available to sit—but it is challenging to cheerfully do whatever is on the schedule, including sitting, whether or not it is what you feel like doing. But, of course, in making the effort to silence one's judgments, to leave no traces, to flow with the schedule, one's inner as well as outer landscape begins to change.

The fact that I have generally done my training for clearly defined periods of time has no doubt made it easier for me to stay positive about the challenges. If I really can't stand having to take showers instead of baths, or if a fellow trainee is really driving me crazy, I can always think, 'Just two more weeks and I'll be home.' I really do admire the staff members who carry on cheerfully year after year without any such safety valve. On the other hand, the fact that I have regularly flowed in and out of various training situations has put me in an excellent position to see that all those training guidelines are not just rules for living at a Zen Centre, but are actually important hints for living a happy life. After all, you might find that someone at home is driving you crazy, too. Can you still practice then?

Though over the years there have been countless times when I have felt frustrated—not to say desperate—about the conflicting pulls of family, teacher, and training, in the long run my off-and-on, here-and-there approach—created by necessity more than by choice—has proven to be a wonderful way to train. I owe a deep debt of gratitude to both Roshi and Sensei for the flexibility they have shown in working with me, for supporting me in finding my own way. Gradually, as I have moved in and out of training centers, and back and forth between hemispheres, the transitions have become easier and less fraught with anxiety. This is not just because of internal shifts of attitude, but also very much because I have gradually learned to organize my life outside of a Zen center in ways that support rather than undermine the practice. More and more my home has become for me just one more training venue.

At a training center, there is no television or radio, and there is really no need for them

at home either. At a training center, there is a regular schedule of sitting, and you can keep to a sitting schedule at home, too. When the tea bell rings in training, we drop our work, and at home, too, I now have regular tea-breaks and then at least short sitting periods—regular points during the day when I drop whatever I am doing and return to the silence. Maintaining silence as a default, leaving no traces ... whether we are at a Zen Center, at home, or at work, we can try to ask ourselves before speaking, Is it true? Is it necessary? Is it helpful? And wherever we are, we can try to see any task we are involved in through to the end. We can do this with emotional as well as physical tasks, taking full responsibility for our feelings and our communications, and working wholeheartedly with ourselves and others to minimize painful traces that may result from our words or actions.

‘Where is the place of practice?’ is the question famously posed to the great lay practitioner, Vimalakirti. Though in Zen we can understand intellectually that we should be practicing right here and now, whatever our circumstances, that can be not-so-easy to do! Vimalakirti, like other great lay practitioners through the ages, was able to practice right in the midst of the circumstances of the busy life of a householder. He was able, we must believe, to engage the functions of the ego while still seeing clearly through it. He was able to give without any notion of giver, gift, or receiver. As we are often told in Zen, the ultimate renunciation is very simply the renunciation of thoughts, and this does not depend on our physical environment or our circumstances.

Nevertheless it was the Buddha himself who established the Sangha of home-leavers, and it

was in the great monasteries organized according to the principles established by Baizhang that Chan and Zen practice came into their own. In fact our physical circumstances and our daily routines have a profound effect on our minds. If we are not willing to make any changes to our comfortable way of life or to our ingrained daily habits, it will be very difficult to make the internal changes we long for.

Thus I am not simply saying that we need to learn to practice in any circumstances, though there is nothing wrong with that goal. Nor am I simply saying that we need to drop everything and leave home, though there is nothing wrong with that, either, if the time is ripe. Rather my suggestion is that no matter what our circumstances, we can look for ways to adjust our environment and our routine to bring it closer to, or to introduce elements of, a training environment. And short stints of formal training, even if we can only find perhaps one week a year, will help with this. Whatever changes we can make are bound to support our practice, and this will inspire us to look for further outer shifts that we can introduce.

At the age of 57, I have decided to try to make my bed every day. This is something I had never been able to see the point of. I still don’t manage to do it every day—old habits die hard. But when I do step into the bedroom and see the coverlet neatly pulled up, I smile inside and out, take a breath, listen to the silence, and know that I have come home.

Kathryn Argetsinger has been a Zen student in Rochester and Auckland since 2001, and has recently moved with her family to Western Massachusetts.

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Seeing Through Racism

Racism can take many different forms depending on the cultural context and the communities we engage with. How does racism operate through collective consciousness? How does complicity give racist structures permission to flourish? Are practicing mindfulness and abstaining from hatred enough to address the problem of racism? What have your zazen practice and your experience with racism and/or embracing diversity taught you about the Dharma?



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