

Zen Bow

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TEACHING & PRACTICE

Zen Bow: Teaching & Practice

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Amaury Cruz

Teaching and the Precepts

SUSAN RAKOW

The classroom is a crucible for practice. Each day a teacher steps into her school, she is surrounded by 20 to 30 children and a host of faculty members and administrators, each with their own needs, personalities, and karma. Over the past forty years, I've taught almost every grade level from kindergarten to graduate school, in a variety of public and private settings and with a wide range of colleagues. But the experience of teaching itself has been much the same, regardless of age or environment. This same four decades is the length of time I've been practicing zazen, and I doubt I could have survived my years in the classroom without it. What is the link between teaching practice and Zen practice? Probably the most cogent way to reflect on this question is by describing how I attempt to live and work according to the Ten Cardinal Precepts with my students and colleagues.

1. *I resolve not to kill, but to cherish all life.*

This seems like it would be the easiest precept to follow, though many kids, parents, and colleagues frequently bring out the desire to strangle (at least briefly)! Obviously, becoming violent in the classroom isn't the real issue. The spirit of this precept is demonstrated by cherishing the unique personalities, talents, and abilities of all our students. Some kids make this really hard, seeming to go out of their way to get under our skin. I'm reminded of the ninth graders who, in the first year of my teaching, spread a poor quality sepia-toned pornographic magazine on my desk and made me cry. A novice teacher, in front of the whole class, I angrily and loudly accused the boys I believed had done it, which of course they denied and in return, accused me of having no proof. Which was true. I handled this

situation insensitively and turned it into a public power battle when a deep breath, a sense of humor, and less ego might have allowed me to just put it in the trash and move on with the lesson.

Another time, a group of the worst kids in the school was being punished by being kept back at school on the last day in June when the rest of the student body, principal, and faculty went to an amusement park. I agreed to stay behind at school and supervise them with two colleagues. When my colleagues didn't show up, I was left to manage twelve unruly seventh- and eighth-grade students by myself. It was a total disaster. They refused to cooperate with any of the activities I had planned, threw food at each other during lunch, and swore at each other and at me. I ended up insulting them and completely losing control of the situation. Finally, I called an administrator from another building, who contacted parents and sent the students home. In both cases, I didn't know the students well and hadn't developed relationships with them. This might have allowed me to look beyond their behavior and attitudes to the potential that was waiting to be nurtured and hiding beneath the adolescent bravado.

In both cases, my commitment to this precept was challenged and I was unable to draw on deeper awareness and respond with greater insight. The precept says cherish ALL life—not just people who are easy, people we know well, or people we love.



2. *I resolve not to take what is not given, but to respect the things of others.*

A school is a community with a great deal that is shared: time, materials, students, ideas, and feelings. But this precept is harder for me in less physically obvious ways. Caitlin, one of my students, once accused us (her teachers) of stealing her youth by filling up all her free time with homework that was repetitive and unnecessary. In her case, she was right about the homework. It was disrespectful to her. Another student (whom I now recognize as having Asperger's

Syndrome) couldn't write reading response journals that drew on his feelings or personal opinions. I struggled with this, since having students make an emotional connection to literature was one of MY priorities. After a while, I realized he was unable to 'give' this to me, and we negotiated a writing alternative that was more respectful. I had to face disappointment and examine my attachments to certain ways of doing things, regardless of whether or not they were appropriate for a particular individual.

When two teachers share a classroom, there are often conflicts about materials, bulletin board space, and even things like how the desks are set up or where the Kleenex box is kept. But again, 'taking' and 'giving' are more complex. As the seventh grade team leader, I often tried to elicit feedback and input from other teachers in order to make decisions, plans, and policies. My cultural background and family history is full of open expressions of feelings and vigorous discussion and debate. I learned that not everyone is comfortable with that approach. Although I'm often confused and frustrated by mixed messages (as in 'I won't participate in the discussion, but I'll complain about the decision'), I continue to work on accepting my colleagues' different approaches to teamwork and varying personal communication styles and accepting what's offered.



3. *I resolve not to misuse sexuality, but to be caring and responsible.*

The direct meaning of this for teachers and students is obvious. But there's one particular experience that comes to mind that shows the subtlety of how the precepts can guide choices. I was the advisor for a middle school 'Hip Hop Advisory' group of twenty-five seventh and eighth graders, mostly African-American. They taught me how to freestyle and shared their music with me. I helped them learn how to research the history of Hip Hop and took them to the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame's special exhibit and presentations. During one class period, the

kids decided they were going to demonstrate dance moves and teach me how to do them. I LOVE to dance and was eager to learn. We started out with basic rhythms and steps, and I was doing fine. Then we moved on to the next level, which involved more sexually provocative moves. I had a choice. I knew I could do them, but if I did, I'd be behaving in ways that were inappropriate for a teacher with her students. If I didn't, they'd see that I was a middle-aged white lady who just couldn't 'get it.' It seemed like a lose-lose situation. I chose to sit it out ... and went home and practiced in the living room instead! Ultimately, proving to them that I was 'hip' wasn't nearly as important as not showing the sexy side of their teacher. But I'd be lying if I didn't say it was hard not to just jump right in and dance with them! I'm not sure I could have made the same choice or had the same insights when I was in my early 20s as a beginning teacher ... and a beginning Zen student.



4. *I resolve not to lie, but to speak the truth.*

How do you tell a student that his behavior is inappropriate and immature? How do you tell a parent that her child is failing your class? How do you tell a colleague that the majority of your students think his class is boring and irrelevant? This precept isn't just about speaking the truth, but how to do it in ways that also keep the *other* precepts. And it includes deciding when silence is the better option. In some ways, this is easier with children than with colleagues. I am almost always straightforward and honest with my students. Once a middle school boy asked aloud in English class, apropos of nothing in particular, that he couldn't understand why a guy didn't just put on a condom when he left for a date so 'he'd be ready.' I calmly answered that a condom had to be put on an erect penis. 'It does?!' he exclaimed. 'Yes.' Ahhhh, the power of the truth. So, in general, I am quite open and direct. But when I taught in a predominately Jewish middle school, where 80% of the population had Bar and Bat Mitzvahs and were learning to embrace

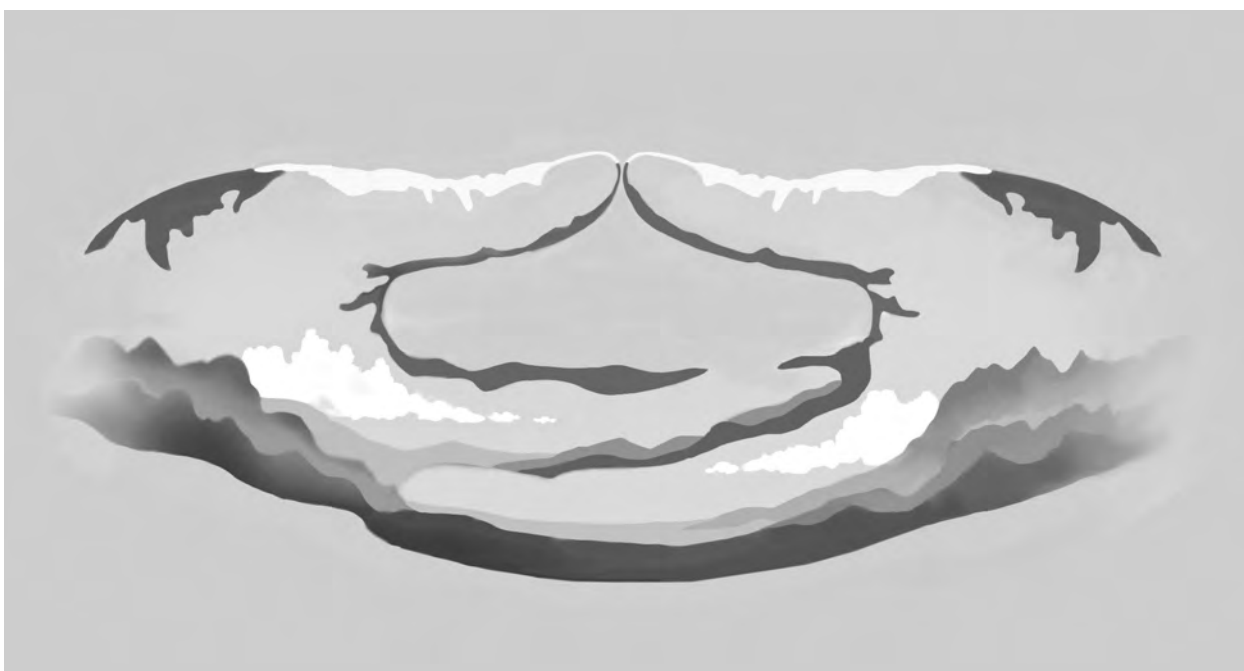
their birth religion and their role in their faith community, I chose not to answer their questions about why I was no longer a practicing Jew.

Many schools have grade level teams that inform decision-making for the school. When I was on the seventh grade team, we were discussing the eighth grade team's resolution to the problem of students who were late to class. They wanted ALL teachers to unite and deduct points from their grades. I voiced my opposition to this idea because I firmly believe that grades are supposed to communicate achievement, not obedience. I voted against it and lost. I told the team that, honestly, I could not participate in this practice because I thought it was wrong, no matter what the team voted. The saddest part of this story, though, was that after the meeting, several colleagues told me they had voted for it just to go along with the group but had no intention of following the policy anyway. They wondered why I hadn't just done the same. Schools themselves often seem designed to 'kill' individual spirits and stifle anyone who walks to a different drummer. Speaking the truth as I experience or understand it doesn't always help make me part of the group.



5. *I resolve not to cause others to abuse alcohol or drugs, nor to do so myself, but to keep the mind clear.*

Again, since most of my teaching has been with younger children, this precept has been more of a challenge with adult colleagues. At TGIF gatherings or meals with colleagues at conferences, not drinking or even drinking modestly can lead to teasing or being left out. Trying to follow this precept has also led to dissonance with the precept on lying. When students asked about my drug and alcohol experiences during my 'hippie' days, I chose to avoid the truth because with vulnerable early adolescents, it could have the effect of causing them to interpret my behavior as giving approval or permission for their drug or alcohol use. To me, lying in this



Rob Inglis

case ('I didn't, but I knew many people in the 60s who did') upheld the spirit of both precepts, though not the letter.



6. I resolve not to speak of the faults of others, but to be understanding and sympathetic.

7. I resolve not to praise myself and disparage others, but to overcome my own shortcomings

These two precepts seem connected and are most easily discussed together. While expected to be 'in charge,' most teachers rarely experience a linear exercise of authority. So when things don't go as planned or expected, the 'blame game' is a school favorite among both teachers and students. And yet, part of teaching is pointing out students' errors and faults so that they can grow and change. This feedback needs to be offered in ways that uphold the first and last Precepts, accepting that each one of us is whole, complete and perfect, and simultaneously, in need of improvement. Most people are doing the best they can with what they have at any given moment. A teacher's job is to know when and how to be understanding ... and when to apply the 'encouragement stick' to help

move the student forward. Healthy self-esteem is based on achievement; students need to be given specific feedback about how to improve. False praise designed solely to be sympathetic enables children to offer less than what they're capable of accomplishing.

While it is obvious that as a teacher, I have to give feedback to my students, both positive and negative, what is less apparent is that teachers also constantly evaluate their own performance and that of their colleagues. It is far too easy for me to believe that I am not just a good teacher, but a better one than others, without examining and working on my weaknesses and without blaming others for creating barriers to improvement and growth. In my current job I work with pre-service and beginning teachers. Often I have to curb the impulse to just tell them how I would handle a situation or teach a particular lesson based on the assumption that MY way would be the best way for anyone. Instead I continue to work on guiding the person in developing their own plan and their own solution and then helping them determine if it was successful or effective.



8. *I resolve not to withhold spiritual or material aid, but to give them freely where needed.*

Whether we categorize it as ‘spiritual’ or ‘material,’ the greatest aid teachers offer students is time. Time to listen. Time for calls home to connect with parents. Time to re-explain, to re-teach, to re-grade, to re-write. Most teachers spend \$500 to \$1,000 of their own money for their students and classrooms, but this is a pittance compared to their emotional investment and their commitment of time. It always seems to be just at the end of the day when a concerned parent calls, just as the teacher is about to walk out of the building. Or just as I’m packing up after a four hour graduate class that ends at 9:00 p.m, a student will linger and say, ‘Dr. Rakow, can I just talk to you for a moment?’ This is a teachable moment ... for both of us.



9. *I resolve not to indulge in anger, but to practice forbearance.*

How many times a day do I turn to the blackboard to write something, take a deep breath, and center myself in my practice so that I don’t yell and scream, berate and insult some child who has pushed me over the edge? How many times in seemingly senseless ego-aggrandizing faculty or staff meetings do I breathe and ground myself in my *hara* to avoid voicing a furious rant that would accomplish nothing? How many times over my career have I wanted to kick kids out of class or tell parents what an incredibly horrible job they’re doing with raising their child or lecture some administrator or board member on the idiocy of some policy or practice? This precept is intimately connected to so many of the others as anger pushes us to praise ourselves

over others, withhold help, and speak of others’ faults.

The ‘anger’ test presents itself for me daily. I’m learning how to use my ‘anger barometer’ to probe more deeply into, ‘What am I afraid of here? What am I attached to here?’ Often it reveals an assortment of self-delusions: ‘I’m the teacher! I’m in charge! I’m smarter than you! I’m older and more experienced than you. If you’d just do what I tell you, everything would be fine!’ etc. The practice of forbearance is at the heart of good teaching and this patience comes from faith in each individual’s True Nature.



10. *I resolve not to revile the Three Treasures, but to cherish and uphold them.*

Being a teacher is a tremendous responsibility and a powerful opportunity for practice. The fruits of our words, actions, and attitudes are reflected back by the students, moment by moment. Zen practice helps us prepare so that in each moment, we are more likely to choose compassionate, respectful, and affirming words and actions.

Every day, the three treasures—Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha—are in my classroom. Can I see them blossoming around me? Can I meet the challenge of upholding these Precepts? Can I manifest them to nurture and liberate others? This living *koan* is at the heart of teaching.

After more than 30 years teaching middle and high school students, Susan Rakow has spent the last 10 years as a teacher educator. She has been a member of the Zen Center since the early 70s, serves as the group leader for the Cleveland, Ohio, Zazen Group, and is a member of the Three Jewels Order.



Donna Kowal

Zen in the Art of Teaching

BRAD CRADDOCK

A bell rings. Suddenly there is movement—a frantic dash for the door, followed by jostling and orderly chaos as bodies stream into a river of people. Within minutes the noisy deluge has receded and all is quiet once more. Somewhere, amidst the storm of activity, there is a teacher waiting for his students to appear.

To the Zen practitioner the anecdote described above might as well describe *dokusan*. But it might equally apply to any hallowed hall of teaching. The similarities between teaching and learning, Zen practice and the simple process of existence are many. For me, a public school teacher for the past thirteen years, Zen practice has infused itself into my educational philosophy. More so, Zen has been my prover-

bial north star from which I navigate the daily tempests familiar to the teaching profession.

I work for the City School District at the School of the Arts in Rochester, NY. Many people mistake the school as private. Some insist that our academic success is bound by a lack of minority or poor urban students. This is not the case. Over 70% of its students are minorities, with roughly half its student body eligible for free or reduced lunches (an earmark for socioeconomic status often linked to the overall academic and productive success of a student). It is also no longer a magnet school, having grown large with academic and artistic success for the past thirty years. The attending students are required to pass an arts audition to be placed in

the school. Once matriculated, students are required to choose any of eight art majors: creative writing, visual arts, drama, theater technology, dance, instrumental music, strings, or voice.

What is special about the School of the Arts is the arts program. Without the arts major focus, the school really is made from the same material as any public school. It bows under the same pressures that govern all public institutions. It must deal with poverty, sluggish reform, and administrative red tape as much as any school. Our students are not unlike those who attend the other city schools. The success of many of our students is simple. Most have an interest in learning an art.

It is elementary human psychology really. We all know that without interest, a *raison d'être*, a person can only achieve so much. Intrinsic or external motivation spurs us to act. Whether sitting zazen, learning a new craft, gardening, or preparing a meal, our mind has to be engaged in the action for a purpose perceived as important to the acting individual. Action and actor must meld into one thing. The more I teach and contemplate my profession, the more I come to understand this tenuous rule of creation. It is particularly true of excelling at any art or activity. Mind and body must, like a horse and rider, act as one. This is as true for teaching as much as it is true for Zen practice.

What we see as art is really the blending of mind and material, so deftly intertwined that the artist is invisible. In meditative practice the breath or *koan* is fundamentally the practitioner. As chanted in *Affirming Faith in Mind*, 'all is One.' When we separate objects, we begin to delude and misunderstand. So, too, this idea infuses the art of teaching.

I do think of myself as an artist when I stand before a classroom. Education can be created as much as any other thing. Teacher and student, parent and administrator, the culture and community contribute in each present moment to the educational environment.

I am mindful when teaching to do no harm. While this is difficult when asked to judge, evaluate, and criticize student behavior or prog-

ress, Zen training helps. Every day I enter the classroom is a new day—and honestly some days I am more in the moment than others. What Buddhism has taught me though is that our suffering is temporal. Conditions change—sometimes for the better, sometimes for worse. When students succeed at a task or win contests or acknowledgement, I am happy for them. When they struggle or rail against the structure and rules set down by the institution or chafe against the discipline needed to study and excel in academics or the arts, I know that this is a temporary situation. I try not to get mixed up in over-sympathizing—a product of many bleeding hearts when working with inner-city students—but am mindful of the difficulties each child faces. I take the middle path, and that has made all the difference.

As Albert Einstein puts it, 'It is the supreme art of the teacher to awaken joy in creative expression and knowledge.' This is the challenge and duty of any good teacher. Some days it is easier than others, no doubt. Like all important things in our lives, the essential ones are most elusive. Buddhism has reminded me to take one day and each struggle at a time. As a teacher and a practitioner of Zen, I try to be present. For me, this is the key to being an effective teacher. I am a role model, a guide, a coach as well as a lifetime learner who wishes to share with children his artistic and academic passions about life. Overall, I encourage my students to learn from what I have to offer them. A good teacher or *sensei* inspires learning so that students can find their own way. I am present to give a prod in the right direction.

It is, however, the student's responsibility to find his or her own meaning or motivation in regards to learning. Without it, the process of education splinters and breaks. Imagine sitting down to practice and refusing to breathe!

Lately, the teaching profession has come under severe criticism. We often misunderstand the role of a teacher. We want the teacher to provide all the answers. A teacher is the magician who waves his or her magic wand and creates standardized results. This is a lazy and

destructive philosophy. The truth about education is that without the cooperation of a student, the process is doomed to fail. Students must be present and invested as much as the teacher. American scholar and scientist, Martin H. Fischer once quipped, ‘the pupil can only educate himself. Teachers are the custodians of apparatus upon which he himself must turn and twist to acquire the excellencies that distinguish the better from the poorer of God’s vessels.’ Objectivist philosophy views a student as an empty vessel that the teacher fills with knowledge, and has been with us since Rousseau and the founding of our American education system. It is hard to ignore this philosophy, especially in a product-focused society.

Our culture wants to be assured that all a teacher need do is cram information into the empty vessel or student. It is a factory model of production. The student is seen as an object that begins its life as an unshaped lump that through the educational conveyor belt ends its post-graduate life as an instrument of use by society. If the work arrives in the college showroom with flaws, it is the fault of the workers or programmers (i.e., the teachers). Enough errors and judgments are laid on the shoulders of management. All this finger pointing and blame only cause more separation and suffering.

Even in Zen practice this way of thinking can be deluding. Separating oneself from one’s practice or blaming our shortcomings on others is not productive. We are remiss to think that the *roshi* or *sensei* ladles wisdom from the stream of enlightenment. Even in such a seemingly passive activity as *zazen*, the practitioner, not the instructor, is the acting agent. Fundamentally then, the student, whether in high school or Buddhist practice, must strive for Right Mind to put forth the right kind of effort.

The role of the teacher remains important though. As a guide who has a deeper understanding of his subject, I am required by my vocation to assist my students to come to, what is best described as, an enlightenment. Like any Zen teacher, I can lead and point in the right direction, but my finger is not the moon. I am able to assist, but I cannot be held completely responsible for the success of my pupils. Failure and frustration is as much a part of any discipline as are successes. I acknowledge that my students have been arbitrarily set before me insofar as not all have the same level of interest and dedication—but the process of learning remains a shared one.

I hope to learn as my students learn. Teacher and student can become one mind. When the process of education works, it is art. Like the dancer and the dance, to the observer we are indistinguishable. I think this is one of the greatest aspects and joys of being a teacher. Without the practice of Zen, I may not have been aware of this process to such an extent. I certainly would not have put it in these words. But I am confident that without my practice, my practice would only be part of the essential whole. In the meantime, I will wait in my classroom. There will be the inevitable signaling bell, and as the Buddhist proverb goes, ‘when the student is ready, the teacher will appear.’

Brad Craddock currently teaches English and Creative Writing at the School of the Arts in Rochester. He has been a member of the Zen Center since 2003. He is the author of the comic novel Alice’s Misadventures Underground and continues to write, read, and practice zazen.



Tom Kowal

Rorschach Test

REBECCA GILBERT

‘Are you a flutist practicing Zen, or a Zen student practicing the flute?’

Roshi posed this question to me within the first year of my coming to practice. At that early time in my development, I thought to myself, ‘What a clever juxtaposition of perspectives.’ To my beginner’s mind, it seemed that the answer depended on what I happen to be doing at any given moment. So, the answer was that I am both, but not at the same time.

In the moment that he presented the idea to me, Roshi wasn’t looking for an answer, and I didn’t offer one. However, it has been a question that keeps coming back to my mind over the years and serves as a kind of touchstone in

my thoughts. Each time the question enters my mind, I have a deeper, richer understanding of what Roshi was pointing to. Since those early days, I feel much less difference between practicing Zen and practicing the flute. Teaching the flute has been the arena where I can see this evolution of understanding most clearly.

I began teaching at a very young age. When I was only 7 or 8, one of my favorite games was to play schoolteacher. I loved to get up in front of an imaginary classroom, present a lesson, supervise my students’ progress, and correct their mistakes. Looking back it is hard to remember what was motivating me, but I think I liked being the expert. These instincts seemed to be

rooted in a desire for mastery and achievement and, as I got older, that desire manifested to the point that I couldn't bear the thought of earning anything less than an 'A' in my classes. I wanted to do my best, be my best, and have the grades to prove it. I loved learning and was very happy to have demanding teachers who seemed scary in their expectations. I was thrilled to be taught by these smarter, wiser, and more experienced experts who invested in my meager efforts so that I could realize my potential. It was heady stuff, and I liked the feeling of discovering myself through the exercises and assignments.

I began teaching the flute very early also. When I was in high school I had a handful of beginner students from the neighborhood that took lessons with me during the summer vacation break. I had only been playing the flute for a few years, but I knew more than my students, which made me the 'expert' and more importantly, I had a desire to help. I wanted to help these young budding musicians master their skills so that they could experience their creative energies playing the flute. But even though I was the 'expert,' I was eager to learn how to teach them and was grateful for the opportunity of learning the art of teaching. I made lesson plans, gave them practice assignments, and listened patiently as they played for me, making corrections as needed and always giving them a goal to reach for. Then I just watched and waited to see what they did, hoping that they would improve and progress. I had teachers from my own experience who inspired me and who I tried to imitate. But mostly I was experimenting—testing my teaching skills and looking for results in my students.

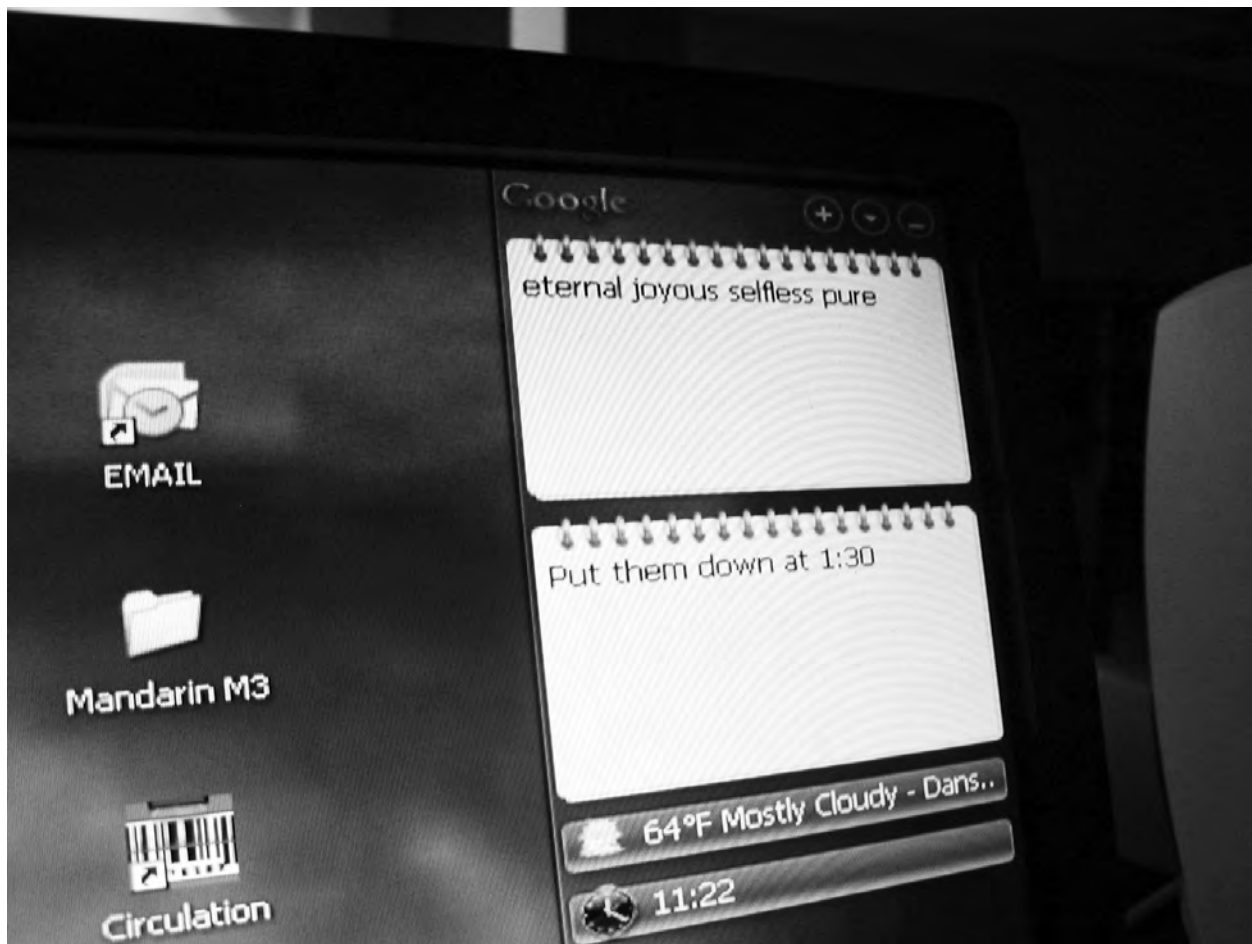
Becoming a Zen student was illuminating to every aspect of my life, and teaching was no exception. At first it was hard to 'submit' myself. I had a strong desire to enter the *dokusan* room and show Roshi what I had accomplished. In my first sesshin, I barely went to *dokusan*. I felt that I knew very well what the instructions were, and what else was there to know? Just to do it. Breathe, count, return to the practice. Eventually, Roshi had the monitor call me in

for *dokusan*—I was defensive. I knew what to do. What could he have to tell me? Of course, there was a lot to say and talk about, but much more than that came years later, when I just relaxed and submitted myself to the process of unfolding the machinations of my discriminating mind. I came to look forward to just entering the *dokusan* room and hearing the bell ... it was so simple and such an exquisite demonstration of the importance of showing up and paying attention. The moments when all we do is sit together, practicing the effort of pure attention are the ones that are at the core of my understanding of the Dharma. And that bare, rapt attention is what transformed my own teaching.

Now I still set goals and watch for results, but I am no longer the 'expert.' These days I feel more like a guide, helping my students see what is right beneath the surface of their awareness and pointing them in the direction to make their own discoveries. Each one is their own expert, and I encourage them to sustain their efforts to show up and pay attention and discover for themselves the vast wondrousness of their natural intuitive wisdom. More than specific skills, Zen practice showed me how fundamental concentration is to realizing the fullest potential in anything. It doesn't matter whether I am playing the flute, chopping vegetables, talking with my husband, playing with my son ... every moment is an opportunity to go deeper, if we can concentrate and submit to the moment.

Music is a language that transcends differences within the human experience and connects us on an emotional level beyond words and other mental concepts. Zen emphasizes experiential understanding of our pure Buddha-nature through direct realization. It is so clear to me now which of the two is more fundamental—a flutist practicing Zen or a Zen student practicing the flute—but then again, is there a hierarchy? I don't think so. It is just a matter of which you notice when.

Rebecca Gilbert is Principal Flutist with the Rochester Philharmonic Orchestra and has been a member of the Zen Center since 1999.



Cris Reidel

Remind Me, *Please*

CRIS REIDEL

Middle School students, grades six, seven, and eight, eleven- twelve- and thirteen-year-old kids, are conundrums—to themselves as well as to their teachers. This piece is not high philosophy, but a tale from middle school trenches.

Last year, I was assigned a study hall. In my school, these are called Learning Labs; even the students laugh at how big a misnomer that is. While there was no choice in the matter, I ‘accepted’ my assignment. Resentment accompanied my ‘acceptance,’ as the necessary scheduling changes meant curtailing several of the program offerings in my already short-staffed library.

The study hall class was not a large group, merely thirteen students. I outlined my expecta-

tions just like teaching texts say is the best way to get desired behavior. Then the characteristics of the members of the class erupted. There were two students who did really study during study hall. The rest were interested in, alternately: gossiping, playing computer games, and complaining—and also, it seemed to me, going out of their way to engage in any/all activity known to irritate Mrs. Riedel.

The list of specifics of their choices (while I’m sure it will entertain me years from now) isn’t necessary here, or even to the point. The point is that their lack of respect of my ‘position of authority’ and their refusal to do as requested infuriated me. Disciplinary actions were taken,

behavior plans were put into place. Winter break gave us all time apart ... which didn't heal anything or change attitudes or behaviors. Day after day the class would begin quietly. By the end of 50 minutes, I was fuming.

In my school building, I use the elevator to get around the building. Beautifully, the trip from one floor to the next is just enough time for one verse of the Kanzeon. This I did, until a second moment to chant Kanzeon occurred to me. Early in the morning, the hall before me is often empty. I can continue a silent chant to begin my day, I began to remind myself:

Students are part of 'all sentient beings.'

Each one is a gift.

Each day is an opportunity to practice what I chant on the zafu.

But my resentment, at being saddled with a study hall and with these particular young people, festered.

The Kanzeon, a Jataka tale, and my computer desktop hardware provided a pathway to some peace.

At the circulation desk, my home base at work, there is the omnipresent computer. On newer computers, there is a little widget to place sticky notes on the desktop on top of whatever wallpaper you have chosen. On my wallpaper, I put 'eternal joyous selfless pure' in as large a type as the widget allows. Those comforting (challenging, too) words were now in front of me all day long.

The 'cure' surely wasn't immediate. The more I repeated those four words, though (even as the class was in session), the milder my feelings became. I seethed much less. But the class disre-

spect—for me, for their school work, for basic polite manners—galled me so, and continued to rankle.

Did I ask for help? Kannon certainly provided a direction. One morning, tooling down the hall, the story of the two young monks came to me as a remarkable parallel. The two are walking along a path and come to a broad stream. A young lady is standing at the bank, unable to cross. Even though their vows prohibit contact with the opposite sex, one monk carries her across. The two continue on their way. Some time later, the other monk bursts out, 'I can't believe you touched a woman!' The first monk replies calmly, 'Yes, but I put her down hours ago.'

That became my second sticky note. 'Put them down at 1:30.' While the misconduct continued, I was more able to let it go and keep it and my reactions to it from infecting other times of the day. Did the kids change their actions in response to less growling from me? Perhaps. Some of them did notice a change, a softening in my voice and attitude. There was certainly a shift in the general atmosphere of the study hall in the library.

While I can't say that I'm proud of my relationship with that group, or that I set a fabulous pacific Buddhist example for them, the chant and the words of real wisdom did spread soothing oil on the troubled waters.

Those four marvelous little words from the Kanzeon? Still on my desktop sticky note, a comfort and challenge.

Cris Reidel is a storyteller and librarian. She has been a member of RZC for 13 years.



Dominic Amatore

Discovery

DAN ESLER

Through Zen, we realize it is the experience that provides understanding—an intellectual grasp is not enough. Accepting this as a teacher is a bit of a predicament, especially as a science teacher. Experience a proton? Feel the effects of a discrepancy in electronegativity? How am I going to do that? How am I going to help my students do that?

We must remember the role of discovery. Discovery allows us some amount of experiential connection to whatever we learn. Thinking back to one's time in high school or university provides proof of this. We can not necessarily remember individual lectures, even great lectures, but we can remember experiments where we found something, presentations where we

voiced some finding. We remember what we contributed to.

Students need to be invested in their own education as Zen practitioners need to be invested in their own self-discovery. This does not easily come from reading a book or talking to our friends, but more so from sitting and digging. As we all have heard before, it is the effort that is most important. Therefore, the more opportunity students have to contribute to the information they are responsible for learning, the better they will be at remembering and using it.

Unfortunately, discoveries in science are often reserved for those with expensive equipment and the support of a lab full of eager graduate students. Nevertheless, teachers can create activi-

ties and environments where students can make first-time discoveries (as far the students know). I believe an important responsibility of a teacher is to give the students just enough information to let them take more steps on their own. This ensures the sense of investment and discovery that carries the benefits of understanding and memory.

In Zen, so many of our insights have been made before—the paths our minds tread are well worn by those before us. However, our own discovery of these paths gives them life. They

grow from being fleeting words in a teisho to breathing pillars of our own belief system. The feeling of discovery provides a sensation closer to the truth: that we do have a connection to everything that is learned.

As a teacher, it is my job to promote the discovery of what students are responsible for learning. The cliché is, ‘We don’t cover material, we uncover it.’

Dan Esler is a Chemistry teacher at a Rochester-area high school

The Great Ocean

PHILIP SWANSON

Music is like the Great Ocean.
The deeper you go, the deeper it gets.

—*Author unknown*

The Dharma is like the Great Ocean.
The deeper you go, the deeper it gets.

—*Roshi Philip Kapleau, Roshi Bodhin Kjolhede, and countless other Zen teachers*

A student came to the master piano teacher: ‘I want to play the Brahms Piano Concerto No. 2.’

Teacher: ‘Good! A noble aspiration. Begin with the C major scale—right hand only. Keep your hand slightly curved—firm yet relaxed. After you reach E, pass your thumb under your third finger. Continue until your fifth finger (just one octave) and then descend, crossing third finger over the thumb between F and E. Do this slowly and attentively.’

Student: ‘No! I don’t want to do that. I want the Brahms!’

Teacher (calmly): ‘If you begin this way and study and practice consistently, guided by a good

teacher, perhaps in a decade or so you can tackle the Brahms.’

If the student is truly serious, they will stay and begin the training. If not, there are plenty of ‘teachers’ willing to give them a quick fix and take their money.

A student came to the Zen Master: ‘I want to understand the truth of birth and death.’

Teacher: ‘Good! A noble aspiration. Begin by sitting in an erect posture—half or full lotus if possible, but a chair is fine. The back is straight, the eyes are down, the hands are in the lap, thumb to thumb. Count one on the inhalation, two on the exhalation. Go up to ten. Repeat this. If you lose count, go back to one.’

Student: ‘No! I don’t want to do that. I want to understand the meaning of life and death!’

Teacher (calmly): ‘If you begin this way and study and practice consistently, guided by a good teacher, perhaps in a decade or so you can find an answer to this question.’

If the student is truly serious, they will stay and begin the training. If not, there are plenty

of ‘teachers’ willing to give them a quick fix and take their money.

The similarities are remarkable. To begin with, we use the same word—Practice! To progress on the path requires an experienced teacher who has traveled that path and a student willing to commit to years of devoted, focused, energetic, consistent practice.

This struck me immediately when I first encountered *The Three Pillars of Zen* and attended a workshop in 1971. ‘This is it!’ I thought as I left the workshop that snowy December day. Everything about the Center and Roshi Kapleau resonated within me. Within a few years, I had left my job as a trombonist with the Miami Philharmonic and was living in Rochester, working as a part-time staff member. I was to stay and train for twelve years, never leaving music (it’s in every pore of me) but putting the ‘career path’ on hold for those years.

The study of music is multifaceted, but at the core it is the private study of one’s primary area (instrument, voice, composition) with one’s teacher. In the beginning, it’s quite all right to ‘shop around.’ There needs to be a karmic affinity with a teacher—one senses, ‘This is my teacher.’ Then, as one begins the training, there needs to be a commitment to that teacher for a significant period of time. If one is flitting about, trying different teachers, approaches, techniques, etc. every few months, one will become hopelessly confused. The student makes a commitment and sticks with it. Of course, every teacher has limitations—we all do. Don’t go down ‘the grass is always greener...’ path. This is endless, and in the end futile. If it’s really not working over a long period of time, then o.k. Maybe one looks elsewhere. In any case, commit.

The heart of music training is the private lesson. These take place for an hour, usually once a week. One always goes in with a bit of trepidation, even with the gentlest of teachers. (With the stern, fierce type of teacher, the trepidation increases significantly!) In the lesson, the student presents the results of their work to the teacher. It is impossible to hide anything. One

is naked. Itzhak Perlman, the great violinist, reportedly said, ‘If I miss one day of practice, I know it. If I miss two days, my friends know it. If I miss three days, everyone knows it.’ Suffice it to say, the teacher will instantly know it. They have been down that path and know the works you are presenting inside and out.

Sometimes a student needs encouragement or a gentle nudge. Sometimes they need to be clobbered (not literally!) and thrown out of the studio. A truly skilled teacher knows when and where to do this. There are standard works that every student studies: Bach Preludes and Fugues, Beethoven and Mozart Sonatas, Chopin Preludes and Etudes, etc. It is endless. One moves on when the teacher feels it is time to do so. Works are never really ‘done.’ One can always go deeper. Musicians study and revisit the same works throughout their lives. A Beethoven Sonata is a much different experience at fifty than at sixteen, or when one first played it.

When I received my Master’s degree from Eastman, I felt as if I’d gone from kindergarten to first grade. When I received my Doctorate from New England Conservatory, I felt as if I had progressed from first to second grade. It’s a huge mountain, a deep ocean. One only need hear a few bars of the masters—Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, Brahms. Very humbling.

A wonderful anecdote I recently heard illustrates this. John Harbison is one of the world’s pre-eminent classical composers. He has won the Pulitzer Prize, had an opera commissioned and performed by the Metropolitan Opera, and constantly has his works performed by many of the world’s great orchestras. The following was related by a colleague. He and John were at a performance in Boston of Bach’s St. Matthew Passion—one of the greatest works ever written in the western classical tradition. During a break, John was looking rather glum. ‘What’s wrong, John? It’s a wonderful performance, don’t you think?’ John smiled quietly and sighed. ‘I just keep waiting for one measure that’s not perfect.’ Such humility. He’s seen (heard) the top of the mountain. We endeavor to be fully present, ful-



Tom Kowal

filled in where we are, and yet—always so much further to go. The paradox.

Do these preceding paragraphs sound remarkably familiar? Just plug in *dokusan* for lessons, *koans* for repertoire, *zazen* for practicing one's instrument, Hakuin and Dogen for Beethoven and Mozart and you've got it!

I teach music at Salem State University, part of the University of Massachusetts system. When I first address my *Music Theory* classes at the beginning of each semester, I say something like, 'You have chosen to be in this classroom to devote your life at this time to the study of music. This is a profound decision. I take it quite seriously and will do my utmost to provide each of you with the best training I can offer. I expect you to do likewise and to work hard. Each of you is endowed with a certain musical ability. Some are more advanced at this time than others. It makes no difference—we all have the

potential to realize this innate ability. It's our responsibility as musicians to develop it to the greatest extent possible. So ... let's get to work.'

There is great danger in this teaching business. Students come in idealistic, eager, naïve. They often idolize the teacher, projecting all sorts of stuff onto them. Beware! Don't believe your press clippings. There are plenty of big holes to fall into—I've fallen in plenty myself. Sadly, I have witnessed flagrant abuses of this responsibility. Students end up leaving musical (or spiritual) practices because of them. It breaks one's heart. What's the best way to avoid this? *Zazen*. Sustained committed *zazen*. Every day. To sit regularly and especially attend *sesshin* or do some type of extended sitting whenever possible. We will all tumble from time to time but the practice will help us to not fall as far and will help us get up more quickly. As Roshi Kapleau used to say, 'Seven times down, eight times up,

such is life. The important thing is to get up.' In the words of Hakuin, 'Upholding the precepts, repentance and giving / The countless good deeds and the way of right living / All come from zazen.' Notice he says All. Not most. All.

Roshi also used to say something like, 'The primary job of the teacher is to free the student from their influence.' Professor Robert Cogan, a great composer and theorist who was my composition teacher at New England Conservatory, did not try to make me a clone of himself. Rather, he helped me develop my own musical voice. I am so grateful for his wisdom and patience—a gentle yet demanding teacher. This is what I endeavor to impart to my own students.

Ultimately there is nowhere to go—we are already there. There is nothing to gain—we have all we need. There is no teacher and no student. If we can live from True Self—No Self, empty and transparent, we will be able to most effectively help our students, or for that matter, anyone else we encounter. When all notions of student and teacher disappear, only Mozart is present. Only the flower is present. Ah!

Philip Swanson is a free-lance musician living in Gloucester, MA. He is an associate professor at Salem State University, where he teaches trombone, piano, music theory, and composition. He joined the Center in 1972.

TEN YEARS AFTER

*Ten years after my last sesshin
Having ignored the goading of my zafu
in the corner of my bedroom
To come and sit
I am on Flight 807 to Minn / St. Paul
Back straight, eyes down, chin tucked,
Hands palm-in-palm.
The movie in my mind slowly fades
I chase after each image,
And then I hear Roshi insist:
"Just the breath! Just the breath!"*

—DAVID AHRENS

Countless Good Deeds.

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Fear

'There is only one journey. Going inside yourself,' wrote Rainer Maria Rilke. And, at some point during that journey, encountering fear becomes a part of everyone's practice. Fear—and its cousins panic and anxiety—is a universal response to the unknown. Does fear drive you to the mat? Or, within zazen at home or during sesshin, does fear sometimes make it nearly impossible to continue? How does fear relate to your practice? Readers are invited to submit articles and images pertaining to the theme of 'Fear' to the editors, Donna Kowal and Brenda Reeb, at zenbow@rzc.org (or mail to the Center). Content on other topics related to Zen Buddhist practice are also welcome and may be submitted at any time.

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