

Guiding Sparks

For half a century Ryutaku-ji has been known for opening its gates to Westerners. In the late seventies, I spent some time there and worked with the monks, who jokingly nicknamed me “Robot” for my “motoro” way of painting a roof with them. They let me participate in all their activities except for *takuhatsu*. When they were away on their alms rounds, straw sandals and lampshade hats and all, it turned very quiet on the monastery grounds. I then found myself completely on my own, being only infrequently “visited” by Japanese couples or elderly scholars who came, guidebooks in hand, to admire the art treasures in the temple buildings. These breaks from the schedule were welcome opportunities to stretch my limbs, which burned from the long hours of physical work and zazen. At the same time I felt painfully separated from family and friends, in a culture that I very much appreciated, a culture where I felt almost, but not quite, at home.

I remember being both eager for and afraid of an upcoming sesshin to the point of nausea. At one of these unattended moments, I browsed through some old journals that were kept with a few worn English books on Zen in a forgotten corner. Leafing casually through an old copy of *Zen Bow* (how in the world did this guiding light ever get there?), my eyes were caught by the line: “*The Dharma rings louder than all the guitars in California!*” Immediate joy welled up from deep inside. These two seemingly incompatible aspects of my life – an affinity with Zen and a fascination with music, especially rock music – all of a sudden merged into one upon reading that enthusiastic exclamation. With my pulse accelerating, a cascade of thoughts articulated a new yearning: to be able to speak with the teacher about particular points of practice at least once in a while *in addition to* the inevitable “Just Mu!”; to work, eat and joke with Sangha members; to share the whole range of communal moments, elation, distress, anything *beyond* the obligatory “*hai!*” In short, to relate to fellow practitioners of different levels of experience in our own cultural context. Was I running away again or experiencing a wholesome *makyo*? Anyway, that vibrant remark about the Dharma continued to resonate. The impulse to turn westward felt too vital to be ignored (and found its fulfillment when I stepped into the Link of Arnold Park a couple of years later). But first there was a sesshin to attend.

The day sesshin started a former Sumo-wrestler – accompanied by his physician – arrived in the monastery. He did not look like he would survive the first day. Rather he seemed to be asking for immediate hospitalization by his appearance: terribly overweight, with pronounced shortness of breath and a stooped sitting posture, knees, ears and shoulders practically in one horizontal line. Halfway through sesshin I noticed him sitting with both knees firmly on the floor, back almost straight, shoulders completely relaxed. Never have I seen anyone undergo such a visible change in such a short time. Mysterious practice.

Towards the end of that sesshin, during a formal round of zazen, I was suddenly startled by a single loud crack: the abbot’s stick had landed hard on the shoulder of a middle-aged layman. I could not resist looking up, and gazed directly into his quietly beaming face, a face entirely unperturbed and simply human, in deep samadhi. What did he have that I didn’t? For years, at

regular intervals, these lighthouses kept on pulsating their message into dark rounds of restless zazen. They made their appearance around day two or three of many sesshins. Goethe described such visitations this way:

You come back, wavering shapes, out of the past
In which you first appeared to clouded eyes.
Should I attempt this time to hold you fast?

Then they would usually dissolve when recognized for what they really were: memories, without any substance, that had served as tremendous inspiration in their time. And sometimes they still do.

—*Robby Goldmann*

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