

# Zen Bow

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SESSHIN

# *Zen Bow: Sesshin*

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## The Power of Sesshin

ROSHI BODHIN KJOLHEDE

When the founder of Zen, the legendary Buddhist monk Bodhidharma, sailed from his native India to China and holed up in a hillside cave to meditate for years, he little knew that he was modeling an approach to spiritual practice that would still be going strong 1500 years later. It wasn't just the meditation—that had been around as long as human breathing. Rather, it was Bodhidharma's choosing to entirely withdraw from the world to intensify his introspective work for an extended period of time that was unique.

Bodhidharma and his brother monks would have been astonished to hear that in Western countries today Buddhist meditation retreats draw almost exclusively laypeople (and that there are virtually no Dharma practitioners in the West who are monks in the traditional

sense). But who more than modern-day laywomen and men would have a greater need for periodic meditation seclusions?

Never before in our history as a species have we been exposed to so many forces of diffusion and fragmentation. The tide of new consumer products that has been rising exponentially in recent decades now brings us more digital devices and diversions than anyone can seem to keep up with. The Internet offers endless dimensions of information and discussion and shopping and playing—a universe of abstraction—in which to fill the time that no one seems to have anymore. In the hyper-mobile, cyber-centric lives that most of us live, time—now, commonly, 'space'—has become as precious as it is rare. Our post-modern world is sweeping us along in a noisy, churning rapids of choices and pressures

in which we can barely keep our heads above water. Who wouldn't want to step out of this maelstrom of daily stress and stop for a while to collect himself on solid ground?

For others it's not a feeling of life rushing by so much as having too *much* time. Those caught in this backwater are unable to get any purchase on their lives. They're in a sort of in-between state—neither here nor there. They're at a loss, often having just experienced the loss of a job, a relationship, even their faith. They're treading water, feeling aimless, adrift, rootless. They, too, need to reclaim themselves—their fundamental ground.

Whether we feel besieged by the demands of life, suspended and lost, or otherwise unhappy, the underlying problem is largely one of perspective. How we see the world shapes our experience of it, and both are determined by the mind. This is the premise of meditation—everything comes down to how we use the mind.

In a widely reported study from the 1980s, psychological researchers solicited self-reports of happiness from two groups of subjects with dramatically different recent experiences: lottery winners and those diagnosed HIV-positive. Two years later, the HIV-positive people reported themselves as happier than did the lottery winners. This study confirmed what many of us know intuitively: that what happens to us is less important than what we make of it. Everything we experience is determined by the mind, so to change our experience of life we need to start with the mind.

The preeminent method used to train the mind is meditation. Reading and study won't do it; they aren't training. 'Education,' Roshi Kapleau used to say, 'teaches everything, except what is most important—how to use the mind.' This means learning how to direct our attention. This is the work of meditation.

The Spanish writer and philosopher José Ortega y Gasset hit the nail on the head when he said, 'Tell me to what you pay attention, and I'll tell you who you are.' Moment by moment we either reinforce our mental condition or not, depending on how we direct our atten-

tion. Change—in our life, in ourselves—comes through choosing differently how we employ the mind, and this requires *working* with the mind in meditation.

Daily meditation, then, is essential in order to re-form ourselves. And to accelerate and deepen this process, nothing surpasses the meditation retreat, the most potent vehicle for contemplative work. Sesshin is more of an advance than a retreat. A common literal translation of the word is 'unifying, or collecting, the mind' (another version: 'touching' or 'receiving the mind'). Now, in its essence, the mind needs no unifying; this One Mind is whole and complete just as it is. But to realize this truth we need to collect our scattered minds in meditation. This we do most effectively by sitting in the classic cross-legged posture, or another in which the limbs are drawn together. Since mind and body are not really separable, when the body is collected the mind is more easily unified.

Yasutani-roshi, Roshi Kapleau's primary teacher while he was training in Japan in the middle of the last century, used to say, 'In one strong seven-day sesshin you can accomplish what would take you three years sitting on your own.' By 'strong' he would have meant well-run by a capable teacher, employing methods of strict discipline. In addition to a foundation of ten hours a day of required sitting in the zendo, efforts to maintain these standards at sesshins in the Rochester lineage have always rested on the following four pillars:

*Silence:* Nothing contributes more effectively to stilling the mind than strict silence. This is known to anyone who has spent an extended period of time alone, especially outdoors, as when camping, fishing, hunting, or trekking. In sesshin, talking is allowed only in dokusan, the private encounter with the teacher.

*No Moving:* During formal rounds of sitting no movements that could be noticed by anyone else are allowed. This means no alteration of one's posture in any way and no moving of feet or hands. The reason for this rule, which is standard in Japan, is not only to avoid distracting others, but to deepen one's own concentration.

*Eyes Kept Down:* At all times, except in dokusan, participants are to refrain from looking around. Visual perceptions usually spark thoughts, and in no time the mind has boarded a runaway train of thought. This cascade of sight-prompted thoughts can be averted by keeping the eyes lowered, including, and maybe especially, in the zendo.

*Kyosaku:* The encouragement stick has been a common aid in group zazen since ancient China, where meditation masters discovered a spot on each shoulder situated along an acupuncture meridian called ‘the Triple Warmer.’ When struck at these two points, receptive sitters can find their drowsiness shattered, their thoughts quelled.

These four elements—strict silence, no moving while sitting, eyes kept down, and the use of the kyosaku—together constitute the backbone of sesshin. In addition to these primary ‘bones’ of sesshin, there is the connective tissue that holds it all together: a taut, well-organized structure. Sesshin participants arrive for the week able to all but check their discriminating minds at the door. Each person will find himself with an assigned bedroom, shower time, and zendo seat, as well as a one-hour daily job assignment with a booklet of detailed instructions. Posted alongside these assignments is a daily schedule mandating when and how participants will be engaged, hour-by-hour in silence, from 4:10 AM until 9:30 PM. The bulk of those hours will find people in the zendo, and the only rest periods are at meal times (three and a half hours, total).

With so little free time, participants are granted the experience, rare today, of facing almost no choices for a week. Without choices, we can, to an unusual degree, unplug the mind from the restless activity of its discriminating function. Released, temporarily, from the habit of picking and choosing, we can also soar above the stubborn mental blight of liking and disliking. With little choice but to become one with the hour-by-hour structure of sesshin, we enter a new world, a realm of freedom heretofore unknown to us. This is far more than the freedom to get what we want, which always leaves us wanting.

This is a meta-freedom, freedom *from* the bind of desire and aversion. To those who are tethered to their preferences, this freedom is a hard sell. But the experience of it is exhilarating.

Who would submit themselves to days of seclusion in silence, eyes down, sitting cross-legged most of the time without moving, while bound to a daily regimen without options? No ordinary person. And yet, the most ordinary of people do, most of them college-educated, with families, houses, and jobs: health care workers of every kind, tradespeople, computer technicians and web designers, artists, people in sales and advertising, landscape workers, managers and executives. Since they come informed of the daily schedule and the guiding rules of sesshin, it’s clear that for them comfort and physical freedom are of secondary import. But secondary to what?

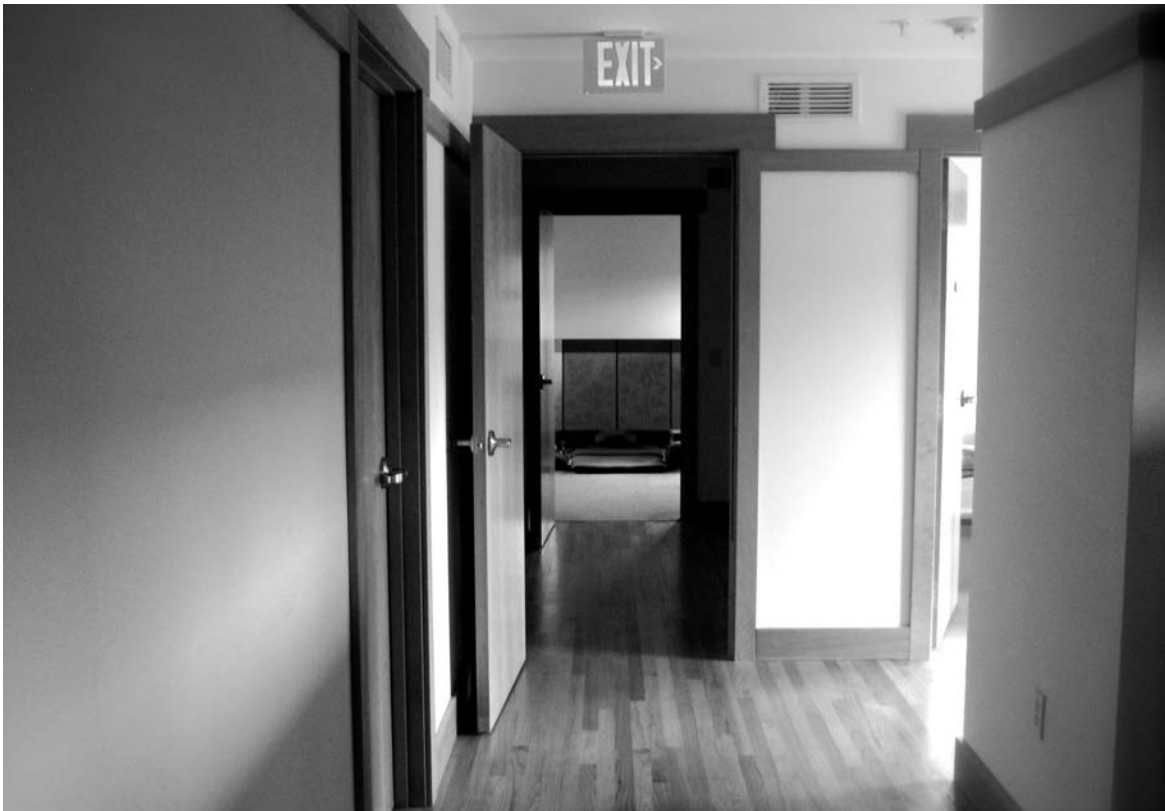
What brings people to their first sesshin? They are looking for something more, of course—more than whatever success or fulfillment they’ve known before, more even than what has come to them through Zen practice up to then: the greater calm, the heightened attunement to others, the increased vitality and awareness sitting has brought to their lives. They want to build on those benefits through a seamless immersion in zazen, 24/7, with others. No doubt they would have read about the demands of sesshin as well as its rewards (probably from *The Three Pillars of Zen*), and most likely would also have heard encouraging reports from those who had been to sesshin.



Now, what would bring people *back* to sesshin after their first? Why would they want to submit themselves again—and often again and again—to the rigors of sesshin, usually having to use vacation time to do so? The simple answer is: because there is nothing in the world like sesshin.

Naturally, there are those who never come back for a second sesshin; their first was too difficult, either physically, mentally, or both. This means, usually, that they were not able to come to terms with their thoughts, despite all





Tom Kowal

the sitting. And generally it is one's self-critical thoughts that prove to be the most vexing.

To be sure, almost no one has an easy time at a first sesshin. In fact, it may take several sesshins to learn how to detach from one's thoughts enough to tap into the riches of sesshin. And it is that early stretch of sesshin that presents the most obvious challenge to untested participants: that of sheer endurance. A seven-day sesshin is a meditation marathon. To pass through it requires stamina and grit even as it further develops these same qualities. In extending themselves beyond their perceived limits, participants discover new depths of inner resources: perseverance, courage, will, and patience.

To realize that these hard-earned strengths lie within us—and can be built up continuously through meditation—is indescribably fortifying to one's self-esteem. 'What fails to kill me only makes me stronger,' Nietzsche noted, and sesshin proves it. But some daring is required, daring based on faith in the institution of sesshin. William James might have been referring to sesshin when he said, 'It is only by risking our

persons from one hour to another that we live at all.' For sesshin, the risk is set when one signs the application form, promising, if accepted, to complete the sesshin.

Where else in our cushioned, comfort-obsessed culture today can we have our mettle tested in such safe conditions? Serious athletic training and competition do this, as do other strenuous physical challenges undertaken voluntarily. But otherwise most of us are disposed to avoid adversity in any form.

Until relatively recently we humans have not had the luxury of avoiding pain to the extent that we can now. Native peoples even sometimes embraced it, in rituals designed for personal transcendence. One of the most sacred passages of the Lakota Sioux was the vision quest, a contemplative rite that normally included fasting, sleep deprivation, and other forms of self-denial, largely in solitude. Sesshin offers the same sort of trial by fire, in spirit if not in the particulars. As such it may be considered something of an initiation rite. The young, who before sesshin may well have not yet grown out of dependency

on their well-meaning parents, often find that sesshin serves as the entrance to full adulthood.

A member of the Lakota could embark on a vision quest for a number of reasons: to better understand a problem, to get perspective on a major life decision, or to gain courage for an upcoming ordeal. These outcomes may also become by-products of the sesshin experience, but for sesshin participants the primary goal, even if not always conscious, is of a different order. It matches what Black Elk cited as the main reason for embarking on a vision quest: to realize oneness with all things.

People return to sesshin knowing, from their first, it will be demanding. But however empowered they may feel from having completed their first sesshin, they will not keep coming just to develop even greater endurance, willpower, courage, and other resources of character. These constitute just the beginning of what sesshin offers. They form the ‘container’ for the true payoff: insight.

In Buddhism, meditation, to be considered complete, must engender two essential qualities: concentration (*samadhi*) and insight. In the first we are using concentration to quiet the turbulence of the mind so that we can then realize the second: seeing into its fundamental nature. This quieting function of zazen is exceedingly difficult to master because of our deeply-ingrained tendency to scatter our attention. Before coming to Zen practice, we’ve spent our life using the mind in an outgoing, or centrifugal, way—scanning our surroundings, using words, surfing the Web, busying ourselves with the ever-arising thoughts and images that comprise our consciousness. This outward-directed mode of awareness has its place, of course, but it presents a one-sided view of reality. To see wholly, we need to balance this centrifugal use of the mind with practice at using it in a centripetal, or in-gathering way. This takes sustained, applied effort, a ‘swimming upstream against the current of habitual consciousness,’ as said in some ancient Buddhist texts. This is the basic work of zazen. It reveals the mind in its quiescent aspect—the realm of *samadhi*.

As a Sanskrit term used in meditation since ancient India, *samadhi* refers to a state of mental absorption that is to one degree or another free of concepts. Focusing the mind and holding it steadily on one thing, sooner or later our thoughts begin to settle. Our breathing slows. Pain recedes. A feeling of buoyancy comes over one, but at the same time one of profound rootedness. These become the experiences of nearly everyone who attends more than one sesshin.

Deeper concentration draws us into a light *samadhi*, in which each sound—the call of a bird, the rustling of leaves, a distant train—acquires breathtaking vividness. Time unravels, and hours fly by. Thoughts reveal themselves as just the surface waves atop an ocean of silence. Emotional states, even the passions, evaporate. Activity becomes effortless. Ideas are seen as the floating abstractions that they are, words as beside the point. In a deeper *samadhi* all relative notions—good and bad, success and failure, self and other—become empty, devoid of meaning. Our consciousness and the world itself both disappear. This is to dwell in the Eternal.

Ironically, though, the Eternal usually doesn’t last long. Unless it opens up into genuine Awakening, it remains a conditioned state, and as such, it passes, usually by the end of a round of sitting. Still, even a fleeting brush with this realm of the transcendent can be awe-inspiring—what those of other faiths might call an experience of God. This is what brings people back to sesshin.

While *samadhi* is its own ineffably rich reward—an end in itself—its ultimate value derives from its role as the womb of enlightenment. It is only out of a state of undivided, illuminated awareness that enlightenment occurs. There could be thoughts or even words in play, but because one is not caught in them, they are as though not there. Thus the Zen term ‘no-mind.’

Zen practice, employing zazen as a generator of *samadhi*-power, often provides a way for us to re-pair self and other, subjective and objective, so that our essential intimacy with the world may be reclaimed. This is the essence of true religion, a word that derives from *religare*,

meaning to bind together. Even the cohesiveness of the zazen posture itself reflects this commitment to reintegration.

With its nearly round-the-clock schedule of zazen, a strong sesshin almost by definition becomes a samadhi powerhouse. And buttressing the sitting effort that is at the core of sesshin, outside of the zendo the practice of singleminded absorption continues, braced by the unbroken silence and taut schedule enforced by the monitors and supervisors. The energetic temper of sesshin inspires the structure, while the structure contains and binds the samadhi-power, preventing this mind-force from 'leaking' through a diffusion of attention. As the collective energy builds, each participant is able to work increasingly effectively, further potentizing the samadhi-power of the group as a whole.

All the elements of sesshin together are geared to one effect: that participants may most effectively detach from both thoughts and environment, allowing the mind to fall silent and reveal our Essential Nature. The Chinese Zen Master Lin Chi, in the ninth century, similarly pointed his monks to this goal:

On the outside cut off all attachments.

On the inside make your mind like a mountain, and enter the Way.

Given the disciplined simplicity of daily life in sesshin, it could be called a week of true monasticism. But when the week is over, most participants are catapulted back to their 'regular' lives, to struggle again with the most unmonastic of challenges: job pressures, bills, family conflicts, and stress all around. That's when that week of contemplative isolation, steeped in silence, can seem unreal by comparison. What good does it do for one in the 'real' world?

A world of good. Even short of having reached Awakening, the sublime states of detachment accessible to us only in a rigorous sesshin change our understanding of life as a whole. We emerge from sesshin with a fresh perspective on our work, our relationships, and our own strengths and vulnerabilities. With our

hearts cleansed we feel closer to others. With our will strengthened we find that we are better able to mobilize our inner resources. We find new significance in the most ordinary aspects of our lives. Not all of these riches come to us after a single sesshin, or even several. But they are innate to us, just waiting to be excavated through perseverance, courage, and faith.

Looked at from afar, however, the benefits that flow from sesshin to the participants themselves matter less than those that reach the many who don't attend—their family and friends and co-workers and many more. Without these other beneficiaries, the sesshin experience would be little more than a week at a glorified spa—restorative and cleansing to the individual, but to whom else? Sesshin reveals our selfish tendencies for what they are—a blight on our mind and a corruption of our Self-nature—and leaves us poised to notice and respond to the suffering of others. We return from sesshin better parents, students, lovers, bosses and employees, neighbors and friends. And spouses—I have heard from more than a few sesshin participants that their husbands or wives had suggested, 'I think it's time for you to get in another sesshin.'

Ironically, the ultimate benefit of sesshin, beyond both the personal and social, is also beyond proof. This is the spiritual force that emanates from sesshin while it is occurring. For the power of mind is illimitable, its effects unfathomable. The thirteenth-century Japanese Zen master Dogen was speaking to this, out of his deep Enlightenment, when he declared:

When even just one person, at one time, sits (egolessly) in zazen, he becomes, imperceptibly, one with each and all the myriad things and permeates completely all time, so that within the limitless universe, throughout past, future, and present, he is performing the eternal and ceaseless work of guiding beings to enlightenment.

If that is the power of an individual sitting alone, the collective good generated by dozens sitting together for a week is incalculable.



# A Pomegranate of Hearts

MASSIMO SQUILLONI SHIDO

A taku, four inkin bells, and a group of hearts, close as the seeds of a pomegranate, addressing the koan of existence in the silence of the meditation room. They've been coming every month for almost 40 years, men and women of all ages from completely different social and cultural backgrounds, most from Italy but others from Austria, Greece, Finland, and Germany. They come to take part in the most absolute equality of rights and duties, the sesshin of the Zenshinji Monastery of Scaramuccia, located in the Orvieto countryside, cultivated with vines and olives.

Zazen and kinhin, chanting and dokusan, mondo and keisaku, work and tai ch'i alternate in tracking the Way through an uncharted land that each practitioner has to reach; and then the teisho, which mysteriously appears to have for each disciple *the word that helps to go beyond*, a word 'leeward of poetry.'

Even if it is the thousandth sesshin you have attended, each time it is, in a way, like the first time. The path we follow, hugging the breath, is always something of an unknown quantity. Moving through the world, relating to the *other*, places every being within a storm of contradictions in which we have to immerse our entire being. The sesshin is a special workshop where we apply our practice to whatever we encounter. It is a *different space* in which we systematically look into ourselves, realizing our fundamental nature so that we are able to fully experience the innumerable events of our existence (ordinary, extraordinary, happy, tragic, comic). We are sustained in these arduous trials by the unshakeable awareness that '*the world is perfect just as it is*' and that it is to be lived by transforming the body-mind into flowing water and floating clouds like

*unsui*, which is the Japanese name given to the Zen monk.

And within the big pomegranate tree of the zendo, each of us by our own free choice, alone with ourselves while being close to our Dharma sisters and brothers and the teacher, experiences the physical and spiritual pain, and realizes in the end that there is no fabulous nirvana devoid of suffering awaiting us—no otherworldly paradise—but that we can acquire here and now the greatest possible freedom, which is not freedom from suffering, but freedom *in* suffering.

And time rushes on like an impetuous river. The frisson that we feel every time a sesshin begins, thinking of how many hours or days lie before us, the sense of existential solitude enwraps us. Over the years we learn to accept this frisson and with it the laughter, the good humor, and the self-deprecating irony that is shared by all the participants and with the teacher, Maestro Engaku Taino. Everything contributes to the arcane 'chemistry' of sesshin.

And when our legs, the bicycle, the train, the car or the plane bring us home again, we retain in our hearts the awareness that the little sesshin we experienced at the monastery has been seamlessly replaced by the vast sesshin that is contained in our every breath.

*Massimo Squilloni Shido (www.massimoshido.it) lives in Florence, Italy. He has been a Zenshinji Sangha member since 1987.*

Reference Note:

'The world is perfect just as it is' is the title of case number 14 of the koan collection *Bukkosan Roku* by Maestro Taino (Zenshinji Monastery Press).



Amaury Cruz

## Just This One Breath

DOMINIC CALABRESE

The fear of death. Existential anxiety. These were and are the root motivations that led me to the Dharma. I remember distinctly being about 13 years old and having the overwhelming doubt engulf my body-mind. ‘What is this life?’ I thought. The wonder of this *genjokoan* shot right through the fabric of my being. My spiritual journey had begun.

Around the age of 15, I had my first experiments with drugs and alcohol. Most others see these substances as evil and disgusting but I saw them as the solution I had been looking for. They were my ‘spiritual experience.’ I experienced a certain level of ego transcendence that simply amazed me. As the drugs wore off though, I felt more solid than ever, and also experienced feelings of sadness and hopelessness. Intellectually, I knew my answer would not be found through drugs or alcohol but as the years passed I found that my use of with these substances was not easy to stop. I had fallen into the realm of hungry

ghosts. Eventually my use of substances would cause my body to shut down. In the throes of an extreme case of pneumonia, I was hospitalized and placed on a ventilator. It’s amazing how we take something as basic as breathing for granted. It was only when I was unable to inhale and exhale on my own that I finally felt—intuitively, not intellectually—that this life is sustained by just this one breath. Just this one! It was a sense of fragility that I will never forget.

In 2004, the first time I went into treatment, I had been practicing various forms of meditation and felt that I was on the right path. Upon completing treatment, I attended a workshop at the Rochester Zen Center. I finally felt at home. There was a vague sense that I had stumbled upon something so profound that it made me giddy to think about it. It still does.

I joined staff later that year, and I happened to be in the garden the day Roshi Kapleau died. To be honest, it was his greatest teaching in my

opinion. The transition was so seamless that I stood in amazement at what I was witnessing. He seemed to know where he was going. He seemed to have resolved the questions of birth and death. On that day my faith in awakening grew exponentially. Perhaps even I could resolve my doubts. I heard about sesshin from reading books and talking to staff members at the Center, but had never been to one myself. I remember having a lot of feelings of fear, which of course I realize now were just ripples of thought, completely insubstantial. It was 2007 and there was a four-day sesshin coming up led by Amala-sensei. Being still quite apprehensive, I told myself that I would just go to help set up for the sesshin and nothing more. Sitting at the dining room table, I remember Amala-sensei coming over to me and asking, 'So, are you planning on staying?' I told her no. Actually, I think I came up with some stupid excuse that she saw right through. With compassion, she asked me to at least stay for the opening ceremony and if I wanted to leave after that I could. Ha! Causation is such a wondrous thing! I took my seat and as the sesshin started, I felt myself part of something so grand and infinite that it finally clicked. I would be missing the greatest opportunity of my life if I left this zendo! I decided to stay, and let me tell you, I was hooked! I think I even came down with a bit of the Zen sickness because I was not prepared for concentration like this!

Soon after the four-day sesshin, I attended my first seven-day sesshin ... and then I boarded a plane to Europe. I had met a wonderful woman from Poland and decided to give it a shot. After all, I could practice with the Polish Sangha.

After I arrived in Poland, I sat quite a bit and attended sesshin with Sensei Sunya Kjolhede. I even co-led a zazen group at a local yoga studio three days a week. Despite my efforts, all wasn't well. Perhaps I was having difficulty adjusting to a new culture away from family and friends. Whatever the reason, I fell back into my old habit energies. As I slowly drifted into despair, I thought about coming home to the States. I had left my loved ones back in Rochester and had

begun to miss them dearly. Slowly but surely, I found myself drinking a bit here and there, but it didn't seem like such a big deal. But obviously it was, for it progressed to a daily thing that I could no longer control. I would soon lose everything, including what sanity I had left. One day, I awoke completely jaundiced, my skin covered in a yellow tinge. My liver was shutting down. If that wasn't enough, I had also contracted pneumonia with both lungs infected. I was told by my roommate that I walked into the bedroom and collapsed on the floor. An ambulance was called and I was rushed to a second-rate hospital, the likes of which I can only say was out of a horror movie. I was in a coma for several days.

As I came to, I found myself with various tubes emerging from my trachea and nose. I was also restrained to the bed because of trying to remove the alien apparati I found myself attached to. It was truly surreal. I was reassured by doctors and nurses that I would be okay, but looking into their eyes told me a different story. In the meantime, and without my knowledge, my mother had been called and was told to take the next plane to Poland. They told her that I might not make it. I can only imagine the pain, fear, and worry she had to endure on that nine-hour red eye to Warsaw.

As night came, my condition began to decline further. The treatment I was receiving was not clearing up the pneumonia. Taking just one breath became a chancy thing. The doctors feared the worst. As I lay in the hospital slipping away, I realized very suddenly that a sense of dread was coursing through my veins. It was dark. Not a spacious dark, but a suffocating dark. I felt myself falling away from my body. I kept telling myself to 'just let go.' My ego was having a freak-out of monumental proportions. I was so terrified of annihilation. It was during these moments that I realized how easy it is to think one's practice is so much more developed than it is. I really believed that I had, to a degree, resolved my fear of non-being. Ha! Dying is the true test and I was failing miserably. This was not how Roshi Kapleau died. I must have passed out, because when I came to the doctor

was standing over me lamenting, 'You almost just died, I'm not sure how you're still here.' 'No kidding,' I thought sarcastically. As the following days and nights passed, I slowly recovered. I was absolutely leveled by this experience.

On the flight back to Rochester, I felt a sense of wonder that I was even here at all. Each day since has literally been a bonus and a gift! As I tried to integrate my near-death experience, the closest thing I could find that even came close to it, in the sense that I experienced my entire world (being?) collapsing down to just this breath, was sesshin. In sesshin, there was a

renewed sense of faith and determination in this Dharma and in this Mind that I could never acquire by reading all the sutras and shastras ever written. I knew if I was ever going to have a chance of knowing where I come from or where I am going to, I would find it at sesshin. There is no greater opportunity. This is where we can let go completely and absolutely. We can practice dying one breath at a time.

*Domenic Calabrese has been a member of the Zen Center since 2004 and has been attending sesshin since 2007.*

## A First Sesshin

DWAIN WILDER

*Editors' Note: The following is an excerpt adapted from a Coming to the Path talk by Dwain Wilder on October 30, 2011. The complete podcast is available at <http://rzcpodcasts.blogspot.com/>.*

The opening ceremony was just magical. The tea. The cookie. The napkin. The deliberate demeanor, the measured pace. It was deeply quieting and yet it seemed like a precursor of what was to come. And then there was a *long* period of instructions. Keep your eyes down. Don't talk. Try not to think. Find your work assignments and complete them during the work period. If you run out of work, stay busy and find something else to do. Keep your eyes down at all times. The list seemed to go on and on ...

This was beginning to feel like boot camp. But the next morning, I sat down, I crossed my legs, it was okay. About mid-morning the pain started to come. All right. You get up, walk around, the pain goes. You sit back down. The second day the pain was worse. The pain went away at kinhin. But it was right back there every time. Roshi Kapleau was giving the teishos on someone, I can't remember who, and they were all filled with giving up, letting go of everything.

He said it will feel like dying, and it was beginning to feel exactly like that.

On the second day at the lunch break we were serving ourselves soup and cottage cheese with apple. I happened to look up (which I should not have done) and there was Michael Disend standing and facing the wall and eating his soup. He was about two inches away from the wall. With a completely blank stare at the wall and a completely blank mouth taking in the soup in a measured fashion.

And something inside of me said *we are all going to die*. I hightailed it up to dokusan. I confessed this to Roshi, that we were all going to die. He said he understood completely that I did not want to die for Zen, I wanted to live for Zen! I said 'Yes!' with as much enthusiasm as I could muster. But all I really wanted was to survive. I would have agreed to anything at that moment, if it included my surviving this sesshin!

Somehow he bucked me up for the rest of the day but by the end of the day I was beginning to cry in pain. On the third day the pain was unbearable. By mid-morning it felt like I was on the wrong end of the phoenix rising from the ashes cycle, the one where the phoenix is burn-





Richard von Sturmer

ing to ashes. My legs and hips felt like a ball of fire. In the afternoon dokusan I told Roshi that I couldn't take it and I had to leave. He grew very stern.

'Dwain, you can do this.'

'No I can't.'

He took a second look and said, 'Do you realize if you leave you will never be accepted at a sesshin again?! No matter what?'

I had this great sense of relief! And I said, with whatever condolence I could dredge up, 'Yes I realize that I would never be able to return.'

'All right Dwain, there is a group coming to join the last half of sesshin tonight. Can you hang on until tonight? Slip out with all your things during the rest period after dinner so you won't disturb anyone with your absence or your leave-taking.' The man could be very gruff. I told him I could do that. So I went back to my seat.

Well, that had worked out well! I would be leaving in a few hours. A deep peace settled over me.

It lasted through the exercise period, through the short sitting round before dinner, which had always been one of the most painful sitting rounds for me. Now it was peaceful. Dinner, peaceful. The evening round, I kind of forgot to leave. I even forgot to tell Roshi that I forgot to leave. Throughout the evening there was a deep peace.

It actually took me several years to figure out what had happened. What had happened was that I had to get to a place where I could authentically and authoritatively say 'No, this is not for me,' before I could authentically say, 'All right. This is for me. I don't understand it but I can take it.' Only after I was able to say *no* was I able to say *yes*, at that depth.

On the fourth day I thought I had this sesshin figured out. A nice sitting before chanting was great, then the sittings after that ...

And then I was right back at the wrong end of the phoenix cycle. I had nothing left to say to Roshi. What was there to say? I just suffered through it. On the fifth day I just suffered. On the sixth evening I went to Roshi.



‘I don’t know what to do with this pain. I cannot stop squirming.’ I was in tears.

‘Well squirm a little if you need to.’ So I went back and squirmed. I was bawling.

There were these kyosaku sticks that the monitors used to tune up the zendo, sort of like a very complex orchestra. It was like getting raw energy into the whole zendo and into my own body when I was struck. When the kyosaku is administered all you hear is a pattern of *whack*, *whack-whack*.

By this time I was just out of my mind with pain. Pat Simon, the Head Monitor, must have

taken three minutes to get up behind me. *Wham, Wham! Wham!* WHAM! And in my surprise all of the pain burst into nothing, and I burst into laughter.

And I said, ‘What is mind? What is aware? What just happened?’

*Dwain Wilder moved to Rochester in 1970 to study with Roshi Kapleau. He lives with his wife, Katherine Denison, their dog, Sedona, and their macaw, Layla. In addition to doing volunteer work, he is a poet, activist, and luthier.*

## Sesshin: The Microcosm of the Macrocosm

SUSAN ROEBUCK

This was my third sesshin. Seven days and seven nights with my Sangha. The privilege brought both excitement and dread. Before sesshin we gathered for our last meal with conversation, before the tea ceremony, the bells, the silent meals, the sound of the kyosaku stick, and the sounds and sensations that fill the zendo inside and out. During this October 2011 sesshin, I discovered the powerful structure of sesshin. This is an ancient dance with no beginning, and certainly no end. I asked Roshi who the originator or choreographer is, and it seems that this goes so far back in time, there may be no answer, no one.

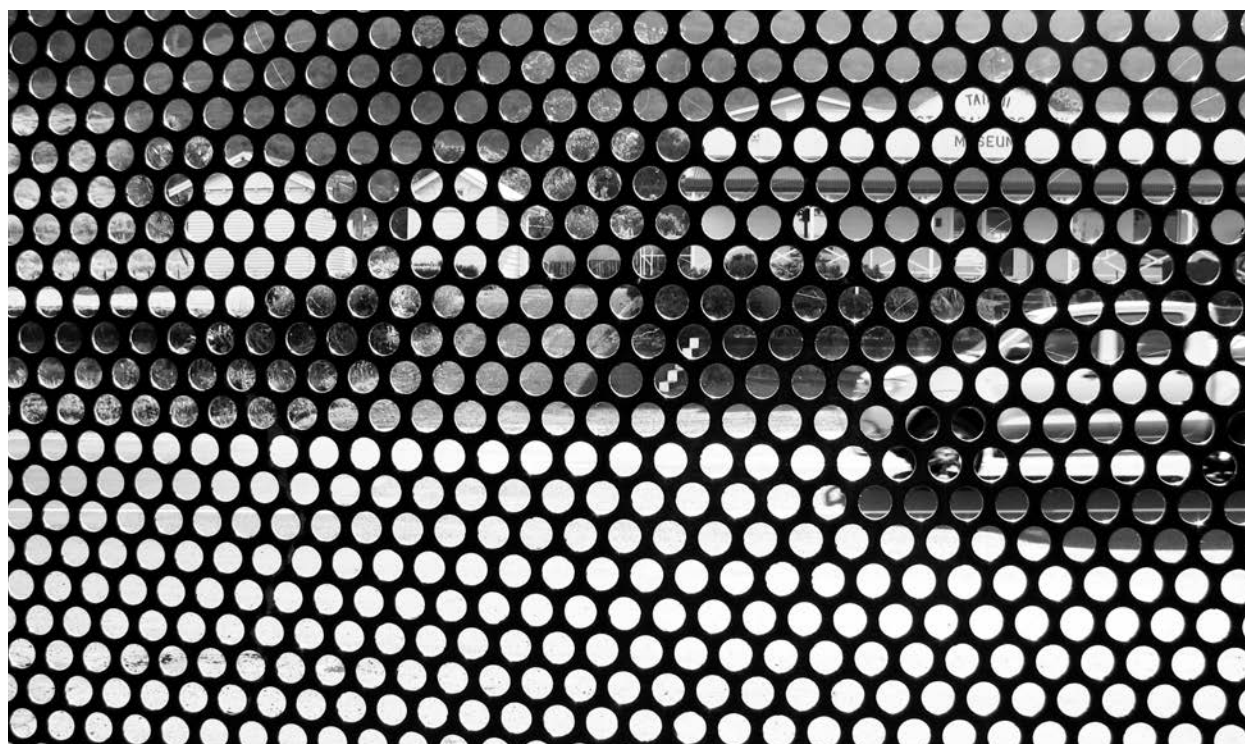
So it goes.

As we unpacked and readied our rooms, setting out our belongings in a way so as to simplify their use and keep the koan up front in our minds, I was aware of the silencing of our voices, the eyes down, and the footsteps towards the zendo. This marked the preparation and transition from the ‘outside’ world into the deep darkness and brilliant presence of our Sangha. The separate units coming together as a flock of geese heading south to find food (spiritual nourishment), good weather (the cold that keeps us awake), food (that balances our system and pro-

vides sustenance to keep going), and a place (a resting field) with water nearby (the little plastic cups with our seat numbers), where we could quench our thirst together and alone.

I carefully organized my toothbrush, clothing, and pills in preparation for the week ahead. With quick, easy, and almost silent access to these personal items, I would not disturb my roommates. Taking the final trek from my room to the zendo for the opening tea ceremony marked my beginning of sesshin. Again I felt the excitement and dread, wondering why I had come here to this place. Then I sat on my cushion and felt the presence of the Sangha, my Sangha, my family, my people. A sigh of knowing entered my body and mind. I am grateful to be here.

Each of us comes to this resting place, landing in and out of time—as some say, sesshin time. Just as the seasons pass and change, we move, or rather dance and sing, throughout each period—never really holding absolutely still. It may look like we are still from the outside but there is always movement within the stillness. The sitting at times feels grueling because of the way we think about being still; but truly the body and mind keep moving constantly, even



Tom Kowal

as our legs and hands remain tucked in towards our center like a bird on a perch—ever presently aware and awake, listening, sensing, making noise (small coughs, and gurgles, swallows and short breathes, even a moan or sobbing here and there). The myriad of human emotion and sensory experiences are all contained in our sesshin microcosm.

Throughout sesshin we listen for the changes that we make together in unison. At times one of us disappears from kinhin (the circle dance, the circle of life, the enso) to get a drink, use the bathroom, or adjust clothing. And in so doing our presence dies to the group as we spin off and out only to return to the circle in completion, revived, reborn, and re-minded of our place among others and with others as not separate. We are ordered in our kinhin movements so that we might be whole and create the circle. Surprisingly, the circle remains intact even when we leave and return in seeming disorder.

When I spin off to the water table, I come back fresh, ready to tackle this body/mind dilemma and hoping to soar free in the ever-changing currents. I want to soar on my cushion

with the others. The breath supplies the buoyancy; OUR group breath supplies the buoyancy as we encourage each other on our still journey in silence.

And so sesshin begins and in the beginning, I knew it was going to end.

The first two or three days, I was in so much physical pain that I thought I would not make it through. Roshi and the monitors, too, had doubts. However, with encouragement from the sound of the stick, the sangha surrounding me in silence and sound, and compassionate monitors, I made it through all seven days!

During those first few days, I became aware of the person next to me and felt guilty that I struggled so much with my body, perhaps disturbing him. For that first part of sesshin, the pain became my koan, and I was so very grateful to Roshi for getting me on track, and soon, MU came into focus. I was somehow able to find my way through and transitioned to focusing on how much I ate and slept, all the while trying various sitting positions and hoping beyond hoping I could find the settled physical place that I had come to know in past sesshins.

But alas, each sesshin is different, as each day outside of sesshin is different, as each moment is different and changing—the movement of the sesshin, the comings and goings in and out of the zendo, the dining room, the work areas, etc. are no different than the movement of our lives. This sesshin taught me that its microcosm reflects the macrocosm precisely. It became so clear for me this time, even though I had understood it intellectually before. This time, I felt it. I lived it.

By the fourth day, I had gathered so much energy that I stayed up all night. The walking meditation inside and outside the building gave me a feeling of peaceful exuberance that I had never known. I walked on the earth sensing it turning beneath me so that I was really just in one place, moving my legs in an animation like on a treadmill. What a trip! Usually the metaphor of a treadmill connotes no forward movement (in a negative way) but I experienced a freedom and joy, lightness much like a child playing with the ground beneath me. I didn't care where I was going or if I ever got there.

Back with the group, we walked together in the zendo. There too the circle dance continued, seeming to stay still in its form while parts of it, or rather people, left the form, disappearing, dying, and then returning again and again, joining in their designated place and continuing to spin together until settling and finally nesting on the cushion as still as can be.

The dance on the cushion is small, microscopic almost. The skin and the bone receiving the nurturing from the internal organs without any effort from us ... an old awareness of the automatic system in the body that becomes so loud as we sit. The heart beating and breath moving in and out joining with the air, connecting to all those who are breathing with us. Finally, our mind trying so hard, or with ease, to synchronize itself via the koan—recognizing the thoughts as they arise and then bringing the mind back to the koan over and over and over again forever.

Our songs, the chanting together, give voice to our species. We croon together, separate voices that become more harmonious as each day and night passes. Corny as it may seem, I began to love each and every one in the group, grateful for their strength of presence, the voices they contributed, without which I would never have made it through to the seeming end of the seventh day.

This is it. Sesshin teaches us that this just is. Zazen teaches us that this is it. As we struggle with our thoughts telling us that 'this is difficult' or 'this is easy,' the silence, the space, the vast world emerges and a smile crosses my face. Then the smile slips away and I am hearing, sensing, seeing without knowing, without likes and dislikes. The bell rings at the end of the round and we spin around on our cushion, moving into another section of sesshin. We stand and bow ... relieved perhaps ... and the thoughts come and go, as we try to not try but rather, just be. Practicing being—so that we might take this being in our microcosm that is sesshin, that is life beyond the grounds of Chapin Mill.

When sesshin ends we spin off again much further away from each other, from Chapin Mill, our microcosm of the macrocosm. We go into our much larger world—re-entering as it is sometimes called—taking with us all that we have experienced, all that we are that is different then when we arrived, all that comes from our dances and songs that we do alone and together through sesshin.

'We must do this again!' And again and again. This microcosm teaches us how to BE in the larger macrocosm, because inner peace, kindness, compassion, and wisdom along with other products of our sesshin efforts appear in each one of us without trying, without studying, only trusting the process, the structure of sesshin. I still wonder who the choreographer is.

*An RZC member for 6 years, Susan Roebuck lives in Rochester.*





Amaury Cruz

## Makyo

*Editors' Note:* In Zen Buddhism, the term 'makyo' is used to describe a variety of deceptive or hallucinatory phenomena that may arise during zazen. Makyo typically occur during periods of deepening concentration such as experienced in sesshin; however, one can be in a state of focused attention without encountering makyo.

Makyo engage one or more senses. For example, there are auditory makyo where one may hear music or voices. Visual makyo can take the form of shapes, patterns, or colors. Tactile makyo include physical sensations such as the feeling of bugs crawling or a burning sensation on the skin. An example of a scent makyo is the smell of baking bread. Additionally, there are more subtle makyo that involve emotional mind-states such as an overwhelming feeling of well-being or contentment. Regardless of their sensory form, makyo are peripheral to prac-

tice—they are not something that we should attempt to cultivate or devote attention to.

Because makyo can be alarming, distracting, discouraging and/or enticing, most Zen practitioners need to learn how to handle them should they arise. The experience of makyo varies and is common enough that we decided to invite a group of experienced sitters to share their experiences. The first account describes a makyo experience that Roshi Kapleau had, as told by Roshi Kjolhede.



After one of his early seven-day sesshins, at Hosshin-ji, Philip Kapleau was approached by one of the sesshin monitors, who said, 'Kapleau-san, you were doing something strange on the sixth night. As you were sitting in the zendo, you began doing this (and the monk imitated

him, reaching forward, first with the right arm and then the left, making a grasping motion with the fingers). I've never seen that before. Is it a special, Western makyo?' And only then did Kapleau remember—he'd been in a deep makyo, walking through an American supermarket, helping himself to the steaks and eggs and other foods that he had had to go without in the temple.



I'm a musician, so music has always been my makyo Achilles' heel. Visual stimuli, not so much—I could go and see a ferociously gory slasher film two hours before the opening ceremony and sit through the whole sesshin without thinking about it even once. But music—that's another story. Tragically, sesshin for me has always been haunted by perfectly-rendered, CD-quality tunes spun by a teeny, tiny DJ living in my Alaya storehouse consciousness.

It used to be much, much worse. When I first started going to sesshins, the songs would plague me. Round after round, hour after hour, day after day, the set list would repeat itself, like a bad top-40 station in a world where top-40 lists consist of only two or three songs. And not just any songs, mind you. DJ Alaya Storehouse was apparently a big, big fan of 80s stadium power ballads. I'd get Foreigner's 'I Want to Know What Love Is,' REO Speedwagon's 'Keep On Loving You,' Journey's 'Open Arms' ... you get the idea. Once you've heard fifty straight note-perfect renditions of Survivor's 'The Search Is Over,' searing knee pain comes as a welcome distraction.

But things are better now. After a few years of practice, the tunes got less intrusive: DJ Alaya Storehouse started hanging with a hipper crowd, so the music got better (Bon Iver! The Killers!), and the volume got turned down considerably. It's still there, of course—it only takes one Adele song playing on the radio in the diner where I'm eating breakfast five days before sesshin starts,

and I'm guaranteed at least a couple of rounds of 'someone like yoooooooooooo' fading in and out of awareness. But those dark, dark days of power ballads are, thankfully, over—just call it one of the many fruits of practice.



I'm at a truck stop—one of those huge ones with what seems like acres of parking for the big rigs. It's night, and one 18-wheeler after another is rolling in, accompanied by the sound of their massive engines. To the side the restaurant is lit up with its neon signs. It's all so vivid that when I suddenly snap out of it I can hardly believe I'm sitting in the center aisle of the Arnold Park zendo, in sesshin.



My first two seven-day sesshin were probably among the most painful experiences of my life. Pain arising out of tremendous resistance to the entire sesshin experience, a resistance that was both conscious and unconscious. During the last several days of sesshin in the basement chair sitting room of 7 Arnold Park before the evening block of zazen, I was overcome by a dark sense of foreboding and dread, a pitch-black depression and bleak despair. As the 7 o'clock hour approached, my mind plummeted to its nadir. There was neither hope nor salvation.

Two or three years later, at other sesshin, I couldn't understand what I was experiencing. I didn't know if I was in sesshin or outside of it. When going to dokusan, I would tell Roshi Kapleau that I felt like I was falling out of sesshin. He would snap back at me in a sharp uncompromising voice, 'Don't fall out of sesshin!' Somehow I found the strength in that painful admonishment to continue. This happened several times.

I'll never know how I survived those early difficult years. It really comes down to a testament of faith-mind persevering against, what at the time seemed to be, all odds.



From Indra's Net



*Ascending the Mountain Ceremony*

On February 25, Sensei Amala Wrightson received Dharma Transmission from Roshi Bodhin Kjolhede at the Auckland Zen Centre. Sensei was sanctioned to teach in 2004 upon completing formal koan training with Roshi. The AZC was established in 2003 by Sensei and her husband Richard von Sturmer.

*Zendo Dedication*

On April 29, the Cleveland Zazen Group celebrated its zendo dedication ceremony led by Roshi. A run-down 1813 house was recently purchased and renovated. The Cleveland Zazen Group has been practicing together for over 40 years and previously held sittings in the home of Susan and Larry Rakow. Approximately 40 people attended the ceremony, which was preceded by a weekend meditation intensive.



*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.

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## *Zen Bow*

NUMBER 1 • 2012

### Eating

Our bodies require nourishment every day, and each time we consume food we are presented with an opportunity to practice clarity of intention and mindfulness. This issue will be concerned with the conditions we encounter—physical and emotional—when we consume food. Submission deadline: June 18.

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### Illness & Practice

Zen practice helps us to live with illness and the clarity, helplessness, anger, and weakness that accompanies it. This issue will explore how the experience of illness can serve as a catalyst for deepening one's practice. Submission deadline: July 6.

Articles and images on other topics are also welcome and may be submitted at any time at [zenbow@rzc.org](mailto:zenbow@rzc.org).

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