

# Zen Bow

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UPHOLDING THE PRECEPTS

# *Zen Bow*: Upholding the Precepts

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## The Ten Cardinal Precepts

1. I resolve not to kill, but to cherish all life.
2. I resolve not to take what is not given, but to respect the things of others.
3. I resolve not to misuse sexuality, but to be caring and responsible.
4. I resolve not to lie, but to speak the truth.
5. I resolve not to cause others to abuse alcohol or drugs, nor to do so myself, but to keep the mind clear.
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.
8. I resolve not to withhold spiritual or material aid, but to give them freely where needed.
9. I resolve not to indulge in anger, but to practice forbearance.
10. I resolve not to revile the Three Treasures, but to cherish and uphold them.



Amaury Cruz

## ‘Thou Shalt’ vs. ‘I Vow’

BRYAN HOFFMAN

Many years ago, I betrayed my closest friend. At the time, I was in my early twenties and had been estranged from the Catholic Church for nearly five years. I had sinned with this betrayal, but for me ‘sin’ was no longer the act of violating God’s will. Finding absolution through confessing to a priest, which was my previous path, was not an option. For perhaps the first time, I was forced to confront the fullness of my error. No longer could I merely beg God to forgive me. My friend stood before me in pain, pain only I could help ease. Letting her go may have been an easier road: such action would have allowed me to heal more quickly the wounds I had inflicted on myself; her wounds she’d need to mend herself. More deeply than I wanted to rid myself of the pain, I wanted to keep her in my

life. I was at a crossroads both personally and spiritually.

Spiritually, I needed to decide how to deal with the consequences of my very unskillful actions. When I was a Catholic child and adolescent, when I sinned I would initially feel remorse, but once I had faced my confessor and been absolved of my sins, I felt cleansed, renewed. (Catholic priests, we were taught, spoke for the Almighty.) Even if my transgression had been against a specific person in my life, after confession I no longer carried the full weight of the burden. I had been forgiven by the ultimate authority, the one who would judge me in the afterlife. What, then, did I have to fear? What reason did I have to feel remorseful even if I had hurt another? To be fair, nearly all (if not all) of

my confessors insisted, 'Cleanse your heart and make a sincere effort to avoid these sins in the future.' One priest went so far as to say, 'If you repeat the sin without remorse, then you were never forgiven in the first place.' We were not regularly asked to deal with sin as both a divine and a mortal matter. Nor were we required to make a vow not to repeat the sin.

What of my responsibility to others? If I had stolen candy from a drugstore, the Church did not require that I confess to the store owner. Instead I was given a penance of reciting ten Hail Marys and ten Our Fathers. Prayer alone was not an option when I betrayed my closest friend. I felt trapped between my regrettable action and how to continue in relationship with this person. Where could I turn in order to find peace? I was accustomed to instant forgiveness. Fortunately, for me, my friend magnanimously accepted my deep apology. Yet, she also pointed out the great difficulties we would face as we tried to repair the wide rift I had opened between us. She knew that if she had shrugged off my transgression, my apology may have been too facile. This was a transformative moment for me. She forgave and let the incident go as best as anyone can let go a deep wound.

About the same time I hurt my friend, I joined the Rochester Zen Center and began a daily practice of zazen. At the Center, I took the Precepts during the Jukai ceremony; thus began a great shift in me from 'Thou shalt' to 'I vow.' Under the former paradigm, I was taught to obey Church law because it pleased God the Father. The message was, 'You will obey because it is your duty to do so.' Under the new paradigm, I became responsible for my own actions and helping to alleviate suffering I caused.

We don't find much use for the pronoun 'I' in Zen. We're often cautioned not to overuse

the word because seeing ourselves as an 'I' apart from others reinforces the false notion that we're separate, special individuals, which only fertilizes the ground in which the ego grows. Perhaps we should make an exception with the Precepts. 'I vow' implies accepting responsibility both for the suffering we cause and for alleviating that suffering. Through our actions, we directly alter countless lives. One's 'sin' cannot be instantly absolved. What the Precepts—and our own direct experience through zazen—teach us is that every word we utter, every action we take creates myriad ripples in the world. Although it's a good start to apologize, we must also strive every moment to end the suffering for which we are responsible. We must do this while also recognizing that the path is rocky: we'll likely continue to cause suffering, but through striving for a more compassionate life we can gradually reduce our negative impact on the world.

For many years after I betrayed my closest friend, we both felt the lingering effects of the pain. The aftershocks would often come subtly—one of us would be passive-aggressive with the other; a birthday would be forgotten; one of us would have a flash of anger. Only through many hours of compassionate dialogue would we come to realize the nature of such exchanges. Through this continuous, tireless effort, we forged a deeper, stronger friendship than before.

I vowed not to betray my friend again. Through this vow, I took ownership of my transgression. Only when I fully accepted responsibility for my actions did the healing process begin. The old hurt is there, but it's mostly a callus now. I was forgiven, but I had years of negative karma to expiate.

*Bryan Hoffman has been a member of the RZC since 1999. He lives with his wife in New Jersey.*



# ‘There Must Never Be Habit, Only Purpose’

SUSAN ROEBUCK

The precepts tell us what not to do and what to do. They help us to break bad habits of mind and body. As a modern dancer, choreographer, and teacher, I trained my body for over 30 years. I was constantly vigilant about stopping bad movement habits, but it became clear through the years that I needed to train my mind as well. How? Where? Who could help me?

When I entered Zen training with Roshi Kjolhede at the Rochester Zen Center in 2007, I had no idea that I would not only be training my mind but would be developing morals and ethical behaviors, too! I would also be uncovering my Buddha nature through practicing zazen and upholding the Ten Cardinal Precepts. My old brain habits were finally getting direct attention.



‘There must never be habit, only purpose.’ In 1974, I heard these words spoken to me as I sat down on the floor among dance students at the foot of dance master Hanya Holm. I was attending a short summer modern dance intensive at Colorado College in Colorado Springs. As a recent high school graduate, it was my first experience in a dance class. My choreographer in our high school productions suggested I attend a summer dance workshop.

I always thought that a master teacher teaches students about themselves through whatever medium they are working in. Hanya taught us about ourselves through dance.

At the time I didn’t know Hanya was a master in modern dance. She was easily in her seventies and quite short. She walked with a cane, which she lifted in the air when emphasizing a point she was making. (She never hit us with it.) She had piercing blue eyes and a braid of hair running down her back with a several small dark bows along the braid. She wore long dark

skirts, socks, and slippers. She spoke with a German accent, speaking few words, directly, succinctly, powerfully packed with the wisdom and deep understanding of how to dance and what dance is. She set up exercises, which taught us about ourselves through a direct movement experience.

After technique class every morning, we sat at her feet and listen to her talk about dance. ‘What is it?’ she would ask. How do we do it? Why do we do it? Were these my first koans?

‘Okay! Now, children! Stand up. Find a place in the room. Turn one foot out, then turn the other foot in. Continue doing so until I tell you to stop.’

We were all turning around, spinning in one spot like a whirling dervish and it seemed as though we turned for 30 minutes! It was probably only a few minutes, and boy, did we get dizzy. When we sat down at her feet again she said, ‘Now you know what turning is.’

Teachers tell you what not to do and what to do, or guide you towards your own discoveries. Guiding us, Hanya would toss out phrases like, ‘There must never be habit, only purpose.’ I pondered these words, wondered about the meaning, and then forgot about them. Dancing was fun, easy, and completely absorbed my attention as I strived for excellence. But I wanted more. I wanted to become a better person. I wanted to get rid of my personality habits that were self-destructive and hurt others. Dance could only go so far in these areas.

As the years passed, my career took me from Colorado to Arizona to San Francisco, through Michigan to east coast cities and, of course, New York. The words she spoke those many years ago became part of me without me realizing it. I found myself saying the phrase about habits and purpose to my own students. I was fortunate enough to have two more master teachers



Tom Kowal

along the way, John Wilson from the University of Arizona and Lucas Hoving in San Francisco.

In 1976 I began studying for my Bachelor of Fine Arts in Dance at the University of Arizona. My main modern dance teacher was John Wilson, and, as part of the curriculum, he taught Dance Philosophy. We were required to write three papers, ‘What is dance?’ ‘How do we dance?’ and ‘Why do you dance?’

In answering the last question of why I dance, I discovered that I wanted to be able to take the skills I learned in the dance studio and apply them to my daily life. If only I could be balanced, responsive (improvisation develops this), strong, flexible, forgiving (of my physical limitations), accepting (of others), understanding, patient, persistent, repeat actions with awareness and purpose, *et cetera*. I didn’t know how to take these things out into my daily life and no one taught me how, but I discovered that Zen

teaches this. I finally found what I was looking for in 2007 at the age of 51. When I did my first Term Intensive, I came face to face with the Precepts for the first time. Ahhh, morality and ethics along with body/mind training—a path to transformation. As we recite in *Master Hakuin’s Chant in Praise of Zazen*:

Upholding the precepts,  
repentance and giving,  
the countless good deeds,  
and the way of right living  
all come from zazen.



I didn’t expect to cross paths with Lucas Hoving, my third master teacher. The way he taught dance technique and improvisation/composition classes brought me closer to what I was looking for.

He asked us to be ‘still’ in dance class. No one had ever asked me to be still. Wow! This awareness changed me inside. Now I was getting closer to the self-discovery and transformation of myself through the dance. We became close and I was his demonstrator and a member of his dance company. Sometimes after rehearsal, I would have tea at his house and we would talk. I noticed an *enso* in a picture frame on his living room wall. I didn’t know what it was other than that it was Asian. He spoke of upstate New York and practicing meditation in between performances in New York City. It was clear that this informed his teaching methods and personality. I wanted what he had.

Together we watched choreographic studies that students would present to him in improvisation/composition class for feedback. I watched him observe the dancers’ work and then take them back to a phrase or moment in which they were absolutely stunning. In that part of their dance, they were complete, whole, and totally committed. He would say, ‘What is that? ... Go deeper. Stay with it.’ Today when I am sitting on the zafu and feel the urge to flee, I tell myself to stay. I just say to myself, ‘stay.’ Then I go past the uncomfortable place and get deeper into my koan.

During my time with Lucas I started a dance that expressed rage. He told me to continue working on it. I was afraid to keep working on it. The next time I showed him my work, it looked like Swan Lake and he said, ‘Where did the other dance go? The one with the crazy lady? ... Go back there. Find out what that is about.’ That dance study became an important solo called Charlotte/Homeless and reflected many facets of a person who has suffered. I danced that solo for ten years in many theaters.

The memory of making that dance with Lucas as my guide has stayed with me my entire life and informs my commitment to Zen practice. The dance is not without merit.

The main method in dance training is a lot of repetition. The results of the repetition are habits. If done in an unhealthy manner, habitual movements can create injuries which can be

debilitating to one’s career. Conversely, movements done with awareness in the present moment, consciousness of one’s body and mind state in each moment along the movement path, create a balanced execution. There is an effortless flow with awareness.

The awareness asked of the dancers is no different than the awareness developed by doing zazen, but Zen goes deeper. We are taught in Zen that all is in flux. It seems that in order to live gracefully our awareness of constant change would cause us to be more vigilant, minding our thoughts, our speech, and our actions. Awareness might help us navigate the changes in our lives that are difficult to accept, the hardest one for most being death.

Master teachers Hanya Holm, John Wilson, and Lucas Hoving gave me recipes not only for good dancing but also for good living. They each asked me to turn inward and do this important work that would express itself in the dance.

‘Our dancing and songs are the voice of the Dharma.’

Master teacher Roshi Kjolhede gives us recipes for right living, asking us to turn inward to discover our balanced, flexible, profoundly human nature. We are asked to prove our True nature, our Buddha nature. The precepts help us to uncover our Buddha nature and to dissolve the habits of mind and body that cause pain and suffering.

‘Then the gate to the oneness of cause and effect is thrown open.’

Awareness developed by zazen makes all this possible. We can have purposeful awareness in each moment. By upholding the precepts we have a chance to move through our lives preventing habits from developing which might harm others or ourselves. It is an injury prevention program in the largest sense of the phrase.

When I looked at the precepts for the first time I thought to myself, ‘Aiy, yai, yai! How can I possibly uphold these? I am so flawed and



unconscious!’ My personality is embedded with habits I don’t want. But by choosing one precept to work on during a winter Term Intensive, I was not as overwhelmed by the magnitude of what the group of precepts called for. Taking each one at different times and bringing them into my daily awareness as much as possible helped me to see where they manifested themselves in me. I began to see when and how they showed up in my personality. Of course, some of them are harder to work with than others. I realized that I had habits of thoughts, speech, and actions that violated a precept time and time again over so many years. I was taking the habit action without being aware of it until *after* I had done it. And of course, the disheartening part is that these hardened habits are my character.



I want to change my character. I want to change. I understand that the precepts are statements of intention.

I intend to change. I don’t know what the change will look like and how it will manifest but I will say after several years of *zazen*, I am not as uneasy, confused, irritated, and anxiety-ridden as I used to be.

I always thought dance was the perfect self-education. I was healthy physically and this informed my mind so there was some balance. But my dysfunctional habits of thoughts, speech, and behavior that hurt myself and others stuck around no matter how long I trained, taught, and choreographed. I danced with famous people and achieved a lot in my career. My body could do almost anything I needed it to do but my mind was not developing as my body did. My mind was still sluggish or too active and thoughts caused me much suffering. I made dances about my suffering but that didn’t really do any good. I saw neurotic and healthy

reflections in the dances I created. Fortunately, I made funny dances, too. I laughed at myself and astonished myself seeing some changes reflected through the years in my choreography but the changes were not sustained because they were not deeply centered changes. I was after this self-transformation by learning the art of dance and it fell short.

As dance philosopher Margaret H’Doubler, wrote, ‘Dance at its best is education at its best, because you are your own textbook, laboratory, and teacher.’ I believed that until I started doing *zazen*. I can now say, *zazen* at its best is education at its best, because you are your own ‘textbook, laboratory, and teacher.’

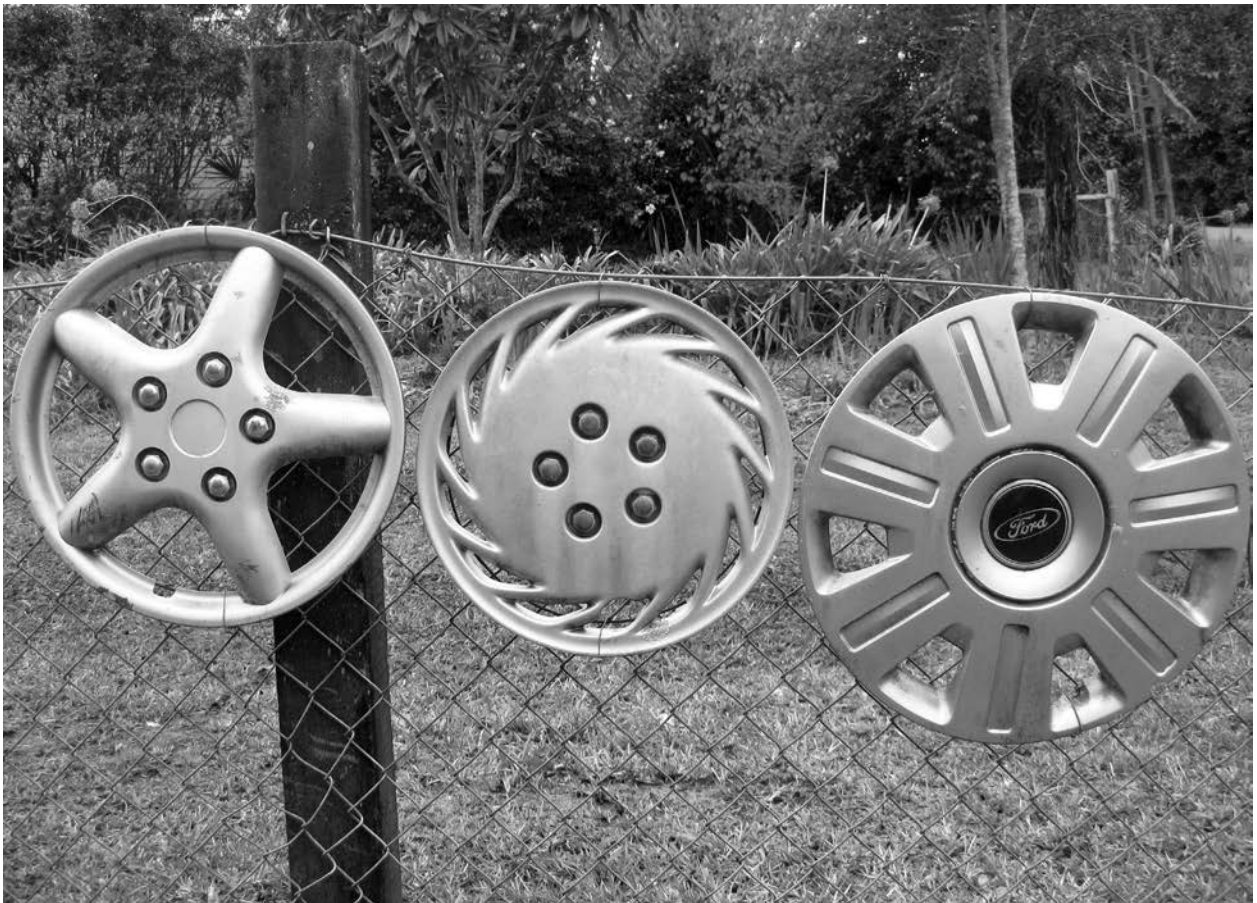
In both forms, a teacher is needed at times to help steer you in the right direction. No one person is an island.

I have learned from my Zen teacher, Roshi Kjolhede, that upholding the Precepts, in addition to sitting *zazen*, further helps steer us in the right direction. The Precepts point to the places all humans have trouble with.

My purpose now is to sit every day. The beauty of it is that in just the sitting ... the changes take place just by observing myself. I once heard it said, ‘recognition and liberation are simultaneous.’ I have also discovered that to deepen this process, the Precepts must be brought into awareness. This was a natural progression for me. It was *zazen* first and then practicing the precepts.

I am constantly changing, and *zazen* along with the precepts steers me in the direction towards grace and purpose, free of habits.

*A member of the Center for seven years, Susan Roebuck is a retired dance professor, K-12 substitute teacher, and hospice volunteer. Her main dance partner is her four-year-old grandson, Roman, who leads beautifully.*



Richard von Sturmer

## Holding Fourth

ANDY STERN

I remember the first time I took my daughter, age ten, to the Zen Center's annual precept ceremony for children. During the ritual she was rapt, repeating each phrase with her whole heart. But after, on the drive home, from the back seat, she asked what she should do if there was a surprise birthday party for someone she knew. If she told them about it, she would ruin the surprise, but if she didn't, wasn't she breaking the Fourth Precept, *I resolve not to lie, but to speak the truth*? I replied that the question was a really good one, and that sometimes the Precepts are challenging to apply. I asked her what she thought would be the most considerate or

kind choice for that person, and, after a few moments, she decided that not telling about the surprise seemed best.

Welcome, I thought to myself, to the sometimes tortuous job of applying the precepts to one's life in the practical here and now. And just as my daughter was struggling with the fourth precept, it seems to be the one that has been the most irksome for me over the years.

The first problem is that the precept does not consider either the context of the situation or the *how* of the truth telling. Where is the line in skillful communication—between coloring the truth to accommodate what seems to be called

for and lying? As a physician, I have patients of all kinds—depressed, anxious, intellectually high functioning and severely mentally challenged. It would obviously be silly to speak to each patient in the same way, even though the ‘truth,’ if I were to tell you, might be exactly the same. Sometimes it is skillful and kind to withhold the details of a dark prognosis. Generally I do not tell young women with a first symptom that it is very, very likely, perhaps years away, that more such symptoms will occur and that their fairly minor first event will evolve into multiple sclerosis. If I did, they might be entirely healthy for years while having to deal with the heavy burden of knowing they likely have an incurable neurologic disease. That ain’t right. However, if they ask, ‘Do I have multiple sclerosis?’ as many do having heard something from their referring physician or coming armed with Google-derived information, my answer gets way closer to ‘the truth.’

Judgment, kindness, experience, empathy, consequences, and context all factor into how I respond. But the Precept leaves them out. I suppose, if I were a rigid moralist, I would forever be either inflicting harm by telling some generic unadorned naked ‘truth,’ or punishing myself for violating this Cardinal Precept. It is sort of like a recipe that says, ‘Add a pinch ...’ to which I think, please just tell me how much so I can really get it right! The best guide for me is not my brain, but my gut—if my stomach knots, I am

either not speaking skillfully or I am lying. And, of course, if the Precept were more precise and easy to obey, where would the practice of mindfulness go? Where would we find the depths of our experience? How would we learn intimacy?

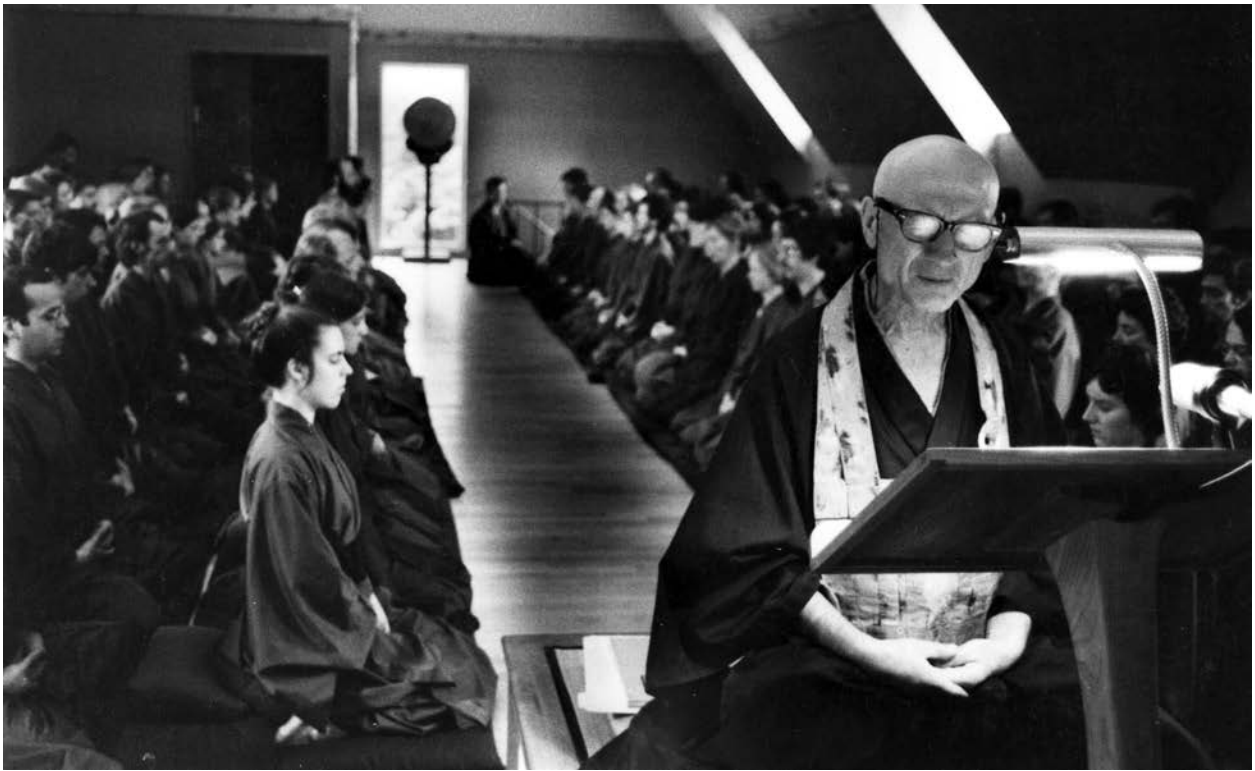
Another difficulty for me is the struggle to label correctly ‘the truth.’ I ‘believe’ that climate change will almost certainly cause unprecedented human suffering, and I now spend my life raising that awareness. Am I *speaking the truth*? Is it my opinion? If I hold this idea too strongly, will that emerge as an obstruction in my practice? When we are exhorted in *Affirming Faith and Mind*, ‘If you would clearly see the truth, discard opinions pro and con,’ where is that fine line? How do we know truth? The Buddha advised to know *only* from our own experience. Where is my own experience of climate change? Nowhere!

And then there is that annoying and inspirational life credo from the *Prajna Paramita Hridaya*: ‘Holding to nothing whatever ...’ Nothing whatever? Not even truth? Not even the Precepts?

Oy vey ist mir.

*Andy Stern’s passion is working to raise environmental awareness. As Executive Director of The Lost Bird Project, he has taken a leadership role both locally and nationally. The mission of his non-profit organization is to connect more deeply to the earth through art.*





RZC File Photo

## Why the Appeal of the Buddha's Way

ROSHI PHILIP KAPLEAU

*[Editor's Note: The following is a transcription of a talk given by Roshi Kapleau at Parents' Weekend in 1972. It was originally published in Zen Bow, Vol. 5, No. 4 (Fall 1972). Parents' Weekend provided family members an orientation to Zen practice at a time when the Rochester Zen Center was brimming with young trainees—and at a time when the country was grappling with the pain of the Vietnam War. In his talk Roshi Kapleau describes the conduct and character that can be cultivated through serious Zen practice, and therefore we found it to be a fitting contribution to this issue, which is dedicated to exploring how the Precepts can be manifested in daily practice.]*

Welcome, all of you, to this weekend. It is gratifying to see so many parents and relatives here.

To begin with, why are we having these two special days?

Nobody needs to be told that the gap of age and experience—the generation gap—is considerable, but the main reason for this workshop is a spiritual one. Buddhism teaches that the primary cause of our being born is the desire for rebirth, and that the secondary, or contributing, cause is a mother and a father. It also teaches that each of us 'picks' his own parents, which means that we are born through a set of parents with whom we have a karmic affinity. So the parent-child relationship is, spiritually speaking, the most profound. Brother and sister are biologically closer, but the bond of spirit that unites parents and child is of a deeper order. The child who estranges himself from his parents, and the parents who renounce their children, are inviting pain at the root level of their being. To heal such breaches is the basic reason for this workshop.



Another purpose is for greater understanding of Zen Buddhism. It leads, within the family, to increased love, affection, and respect.

Lastly we hope parents will want to do *zazen* themselves and transform their own lives. The door is open to everyone. Some parents present today have attended a formal seminar-workshop and are practicing Zen. I hope more of you will want to begin, not so much for your children's sake as for your own.

### *Peace*

This talk is called 'Why the Appeal of the Buddha's Way?' At least five reasons can be stated, of which two are most pronounced: first, its emphasis on peace, inner and outer; and secondly, on personal experience as a substitute for conjecture and theorizing about the fundamental questions of our lives.

How strong is the yearning for peace in the minds of our people—especially among the draft-age young, who have to fight this immensely unpopular war, who feel its terrible suffering so personally.

This yearning for peace has grown up with the young—a consciousness nurtured into growth by awareness of concentration camps and atomic bombs. It is intrinsic to their pain and aspiration. It is the persistent voice of their spiritual quest.

Buddhism, I think it is fair to say, is preeminently a religion of peace. Throughout its long history, which began more than 500 years before Christ, it has never fought or urged a religious war. The Buddha emphasized that peace in and among nations is the consequence of a peaceful, loving heart. This, in turn springs from right understanding and selfless activity. Where there is no inner harmony and understanding there can be no outer peace. And wherever you go in Asia the figure of the Buddha symbolizes tranquility, harmony, and compassion. The appeal of Zen Buddhism is that it offers a tested way, a proven method, to realize for oneself this inner peace.

### *Personal Experience*

In Zen there is abhorrence of the abstract, of the non-concrete. And so it is usually described as a religion beyond words and letters. It also abhors an intoxication with words for their own sake, with empty verbalization. We've all heard the high-flown phrases of politicians and heads of governments: 'Always seek a just peace,' et cetera, *et cetera*, but their actions belie these fine words. To counteract this, Zen emphasizes feeling and acting rather than thought and talk. Please understand this: Zen does not condemn thought—it wants it grounded in something deeper than mere verbalizations.

Parents know how much young people insist upon the need to experience for themselves. This goes back to the best tradition of our pragmatic philosophers, Dewey and James. It seems to be an existential theme of our culture. Zen's appeal is to personal experience and not philosophic speculation as a means of verifying ultimate truth. Another's experience of Truth is never your own. And no one can do *zazen* for you. You must discover the truth of yourself and others by yourself. A picture of food won't fill an empty stomach.

And there is greater awareness today. Especially among the young of this country. They won't stand for what they call bullshit. You've got to put yourself on the line. You can't practice Zen and remain phoney—not for long. There's no way to play the usual games. Nothing less than purity and genuine sincerity will open the gates of Truth, Compassion, and Wisdom. When true inner freedom comes—the freedom to be the master and not the slave of your life—it comes not from the teacher, not from the Buddha, and certainly not from any supernatural being. It comes from one's own unfaltering yearnings and exertions.

### *Simplicity and Naturalness*

This appeal of Zen is often overlooked. Precisely because modern life is so complex and sterile,

with the superabundance of machines which are the manipulators and we the puppets; because life has become so dry and fractured we yearn for the natural life—unrefined food, unpretentious clothes, simple living conditions.

There is a deeper aspect: Buddhism teaches that we are all rooted in the same reality. What is common to all, both animate and inanimate is this Buddha-nature. The absolute value of *every* thing makes it a great transgression against our own fundamental natures to willfully destroy or waste *any* thing. Americans are so used to wasting and squandering, particularly things like water, paper, and electricity. This waste makes for insensitivity, because it implies an indifference to the ultimate value of the wasted thing. Insensitivity breeds ego, and ego breeds pain. So we find ourselves separated and removed from things, from life, through this dull indifference.

When one accepts, practices, and realizes the Buddhist teaching that man doesn't stand apart from nature, then there can be no abuse, exploitation, or pollution of the material world, for to do so is to abuse, exploit, and pollute ourselves.

### *Enlightenment*

This is really an abstract term. What is preferred in Zen is the phrase 'to open the Mind's eye.' And this means to answer the most essential of all questions namely, 'Who am I?' or more properly, 'What am I? What is my True Nature? Why was I born? Why must I die? What is my relation to my fellow man?' To be human means to ask these questions, and to be truly human means we must get an answer. Until these questions arise to consciousness, we can lard our lives over with all kinds of activities, worldly involvement, that leave us no chance to reflect on ourselves. But sooner or later these questions arise, and then there is no escaping them. They burn within us, and intellectual answers give us no peace. We pick up books dealing with the human situation, the meaning of life, and get all these beautifully set-out phrases, these flowing metaphors, but they do not answer the question. Only the gut experience of self-awakening sat-

isfies the gut questioning. And personal experience becomes the final testimony of Truth.

This is the flavor of Zen discipline. Self-defeating games won't work. Here you must be utterly sincere. Enlightenment never comes until we have achieved this kind of selfless purity. And you must work very hard to become pure-minded in Zen, to clear away the clouds of your irrelevant ideas, prejudices, notions, and hard-set opinions that constantly pass through and really pollute our minds. This is the primary pollution, the defilement of the mind. And *za-zen* is a discipline to cleanse the mind so that our inherent purity, wholeness and radiance, which is obscured by all this mental grime, can come out. Then our inborn love and compassion will shine in our lives. That is what enlightenment is about.

### *Continuity and Unity of all Existence*

This may strike some of you as a rather dubious reason why people would want to come to the Center to train in Zen. But actually it is valid. We are not like strung-up telegraph poles. Life is interrelated. We can look at all existence from two points of view—the relative and the absolute. When we say relative, we mean from the point of view of things changing. From this standpoint we can speak of the summer changing to fall, of cause and effect, time, space, Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. At the same time we must experience life from its absolute, which is to say the point of view of everything as one Mind, without distractions of any kind. The most remote star, the most super nova, is nothing different from one Mind, the one Mind in which we all participate.

In our culture many people, particularly the young, sense this in a vibrant, alive way. They feel it intuitively and naturally, even before formal practice. And our culture has become so empty of rituals, ceremonies, and holidays which point to this Truth. People feel the absence. So the rituals and ceremonies which we have here are much more than a foreign imports—they fix the things in our minds, giving them a poetic

grandness which enriches and sustains us. But above all they acknowledge the unity of life.

Karma teaches us that we must take responsibility for our actions, that we are the architects of our own fate, and this also tends to emphasize the continuity of existence. If we are dissatisfied with our life today—the product of the way we thought, felt, and acted in previous times—then we certainly can change it. All this is Zen. Zen further says, ‘You can’t change anyone or any-

thing unless you change first, unless you purge yourself of your false thinking and acting.’ Before you know it, you are changing those around you, and pretty soon there is a whole arc of influence that develops. More than any teaching I know of, Zen provides a method and a discipline that have stood the test of 2500 years, and it has behind it the experience of so many people who have looked into their own minds and awakened to the Truth.

## On and On

ELIZABETH MCMAHON

Communicating is central to being human. The process of speech has always intrigued me, particularly how we use words or not. It amazes me how quickly words can be misunderstood even with good intentions, or how easily thoughtless words can slip off the tongue.

One year ago I retired, sold my house in Fairport, New York, and relocated to Bend, Oregon to be closer to my family. My daughter and her family live in Bend and my son lives in California. This past year has been quite an adventure—wonderful, challenging, exciting, downright scary at times, and exhausting at others. I have become increasingly aware and sensitive to the nuances of speech as I have navigated a new community and culture and new family dynamics, given my close proximity to my daughter and son-in-law. I changed from the ‘visiting Mom/Mamo’ to the ‘living-down-the-street Mom/Mamo’! And of course I also entered the daily life of a 7-year-old through my granddaughter. Challenging, yes, yes, yes! Without the practice, going to the mat daily, I wonder where I would be with it all ... a boat without oars.

The precepts involved with speech are the fourth, sixth, and seventh. These precepts are very difficult for me, and yet they are at the heart

of building trusting and compassionate relationships. Recognizing that I am a work in process and have a long way to go, I have chosen to look at these three precepts from the viewpoint of the spirit of them rather than any specific meaning.

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

As with all the precepts, these precepts are not intended to be commandments but rather they describe how a truly enlightened one would act. As I mentioned previously, during the past year I have focused more consciously on communicating in all my relationships. Although I was not engaging intentionally in precept practice, I was aware of a need to grow in how I communicate with others. To become a more honest and compassionate listener. To catch myself when the urge to speak rose up and stop, consider the wisdom of speaking and listen instead. To listen deeply, listen with the eyes and the heart.

This, I believe, right now, speaks to the spirit of the above three precepts and reflects the Noble Truth of Right Speech.

Through continued daily zazen, I am able to see more clearly and readily my weaknesses in communicating. How I hesitate, hold back, or jump in and redirect the flow of communication, rather than compassionately listening, deeply listening to the other. Of course, the 7-year-old Zen Master in my life, transparent as young children are, points this out with ‘no gap,’ I must say! ‘Mamo, you’re not listening!’ And so I notice again and again and again and continue on, opening more to listen and really hear what the other is trying to share. Interestingly, I have also found that I am becoming more compassionate with myself, listening and being gentle when I notice, oops, that didn’t work well. Now I am more apt to encourage myself to try another way next time, instead of harsh criticism.

Just before leaving Rochester I participated in an introductory group experience in Non Violent Communication (NVC), a communication model developed by Marshall Rosenberg, P.H.D. I had previously read about NVC and was quite interested in learning more. This group training convinced me that the model was a great tool for deepening communication skills and working on the precepts related to Right Speech. After I had relocated to Bend, I joined a group of NVC practitioners that was devoted to studying and teaching the NVC skills as developed by Rosenberg.

Although I have learned much about communication in these past few months, I know the NVC model is the beginner’s way—there is much, much more to learn through the richness

and depth of this otherwise simple model. It has given me ways to listen to others and to myself. I find myself listening with increased ease, listening for needs, expressed or not, and asking what the other might need or want. Recently I was with a friend who began to share a very hurtful experience she had had. I noticed that I was able to pause, see what was happening for myself (I am okay listening right now) and was able to just be there and give her my complete attention. She talked and talked, then stopped. We sat in silence for awhile, then I began to lean toward her. Then she said, ‘It’s okay. I’m okay, I know now what needs to be. I just needed to talk it out. I guess I just needed to be listened to.’ I have had several similar experiences like this. What was different this time was I had a comfort level that was not present in the past. I believe this was because I had an effective tool to use.

Learning to communicate more effectively has been a lifelong process for me. Creating relationships and communities that are trusting and compassionate is also a lifelong process. I hope to continue to develop my communication skills, increasing an awareness of listening to the needs and feelings of self and other in the moment, then responding to what shows itself. This process will support me in maintaining the spirit of the precepts regarding speech and being part of creating more trusting, compassionate relationships and communities where I just happen to be right now!

*Elizabeth McMahon has been a member of the Zen Center since 2002.*





*Merging Without Moving:  
Earth Vigil and the People's  
Climate March*

Dawn was still two hours away, but our pulses were racing as we converged outside the Zen Center to board our bus to New York City and the People's Climate March. The coach and driver had been hired by Andy Stern, who subsidized the trip so that anyone could afford to go. Ten dollars got you a round-trip ticket, and for another \$10 you could crash at one of three unoccupied, clean condominiums in Brooklyn. Half of the fifty seats were taken by Zen Center members, and the rest by others galvanized by climate change: local Quakers, yogis, and non-Zen meditators. All had committed to sit in support of the Climate March, but as a force in itself: Earth Vigil. Our slogan:

Silence can speak louder than words.

Stillness has the power to move.

The day before the march we staked out our encampment on the edge of Central Park near Columbus Circle (59<sup>th</sup> Street between 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> Avenues). It was on a grassy knoll overlooking the street, where we would be seen as supporting the marchers, sitting as part of the movement. We sat that day for five hours, just to ramp up for the event itself. In that stretch of time, hundreds of passersby stopped in their tracks to photograph us, on cell phones and bigger cameras. This was fun!

The Main Event: Rain had fallen during the night, in defiance of the weather forecast, but by mid-morning we no longer needed covers for our sitting cushions and improvised mats. We were saddled up and ready to go—nowhere. Earth Vigil had staged two previous public sittings, both in Rochester. The first had drawn some 100 people, who sat through two hours of steady rain. The second, scheduled in the middle of a weekday for better media coverage, did bring plenty of local reporters and cameras, but few people to join our sitting. This third event would be of a different scale, we knew, but after some three hours of sitting, the broad street in front of us was still empty. What we didn't know was that around the corner, out of sight and earshot, hundreds of thousands of marchers, stretching for blocks, were poised to move.

Once the lead marchers reached us, it was as though a dam had been opened. Based on a range of estimates that appeared in the media beforehand, we had figured that maybe 150,000 people would take part. Afterward, the *New York Times* reported 311,000, based on the work of thirty-five crowd-spotters and an analysis by a Carnegie-Mellon mathematician.

Our Earth Vigil spot, on the edge of the march and overlooking it, would have served as a good reviewing stand. But rather than just supportively watching the pageant before us as would any spectators at a parade, our mission was to truly unite with the march in the deepest way—through no-minded absorption. Oddly enough, then, some of us saw little of it, because



The above photo from the People's Climate March was featured on the *Democracy Now!* Facebook page. A similar shot was included in a *New York Times* video covering the event.

we were doing *zazen* as intensely as we could, eyes down. That was the point of our sitting—to offer, through our concentrated presence, the very ground of sanity, the unmoving awareness that can best nourish any movement. We aspired to actually *be* the unwavering attention needed to address what is the world's ultimate threat.

I did steal a glance now and then at the deluge of humanity before us, and always saw multiple photographers standing on the sidewalk, just thirty feet away, with their cameras trained on us. This left me feeling all the more responsible, then, to hang tough, shifting position as infrequently as possible. Drawing inspiration from the marchers' spirited surge, I held my posture for an hour, then another hour, assuming the march would end soon. But it kept coming and coming—a river of people flowing past us for four hours. A couple of bathroom breaks were non-negotiable, though, and provided the chance to take in the moving spectacle coursing in front of us. It was an assemblage of

tribes, each with its own specific cause, all of which were related to global warming. Most of them were chanting their own slogans, sometimes accompanied by booming drums, horns, even whole bands. Altogether there must have been thousands of bobbing signs—demands, pleas, and messages that were sometimes gripping but often leavened with wit. (It should be noted that no signs were to be seen demanding that individuals take responsibility for conserving resources themselves.) Many marchers were in flamboyant costumes, and some stood atop floats. This was America at its best—our *candō* spirit, presented with exuberant creativity and harnessed through months of organizing by a wildly diverse army of volunteers. Sitters and marchers alike—every single one of us—had to feel uplifted by this human tide crying out for the survival of our planet and our descendants.

Our guiding principle was that of Manjusri, Bodhisattva of Wisdom, who embodies the transcendent aspiration of 'doing nothing, yet leaving nothing undone.' The marchers (which

included a Buddhist contingent) were like the agents of Samantabhadra, Manjusri's complement, the Bodhisattva of Action. These are like the two wings of a bird.

As the multitudes continued to stream by with their banners, we in Earth Vigil seemed to become enfolded in them, and they in us. We had been trusting that the marchers would not see us as setting ourselves apart from them; after all, we were all doing the same thing, just in different ways. But we were unprepared for just how responsive they would be toward us. For four hours we heard directed at us, over the din of the march, cries of, 'THANK YOU!' and 'THANK YOU, EARTH VIGIL!' Many of them waved to us, sometimes placing hand to heart, and some, after finishing the march, came back to join us, sitting with their signs lying beside them. Most just gazed at us, appearing to be arrested by the one thing you never see in New York City: contemplative silence. The words of the poet Percy Shelley might come close to describing Earth Vigil's place in the cacophonous event: 'A smooth spot of glassy quiet / 'mid those battling tides.'

Yet there was no battling, no disorder—another tribute to the organizers' planning skills and everyone's communality of purpose. Some

observers later commented that the hallmark of the march was its spirit of good will. There was passion but hardly a trace of militancy. Some of the signs expressed frustration, but without enmity. It was a tsunami churning with the exhilaration of finding over 300,000 people joined with you in a global vision for the welfare of all. It had echoes of Woodstock, but with an aspirational thrust to it.

The signal moment of the march, an acoustic version of the stadium 'wave,' came, as planned, at exactly 1:00. It was to be the sound of a great alarm, a collective shout to awaken those who would still deny the peril of climate change caused by human greed and shortsightedness. By some unknown (to us) trigger, a kind of jubilant war cry swept through the march with shocking speed. It tore through the marchers with such force that some of us could only imagine that it was a jet streaking just yards above the marchers' heads, yet so fast that we all missed seeing it. It was electrifying, like an unearthly roar to save the earth. And it drew a spontaneous cry even from us Earth Vigilantes. After all, silence, too, can be an attachment!

—*Roshi Bodhin Kjolhede*

*Countless Good Deeds.*

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### Practice Where You Are

In modern Western culture, many Zen practitioners live in places that are geographically distant from a Zen center or community. They sit without the support of a local Sangha and have limited opportunity to receive private instruction from their teacher and attend sesshin. Indeed, this is the lifestyle of many out-of-town members of the Rochester Zen Center. For this special issue, we invite members to reflect on their own experiences with practicing away from the Center, including essays about participating in the Term Intensive Program.

Submit articles and images to the editors, Donna Kowal and Brenda Reeb, at [zenbow@rzc.org](mailto:zenbow@rzc.org).

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