

► **DIVING INTO A SMALL SYLLABLE:** Roshi Kanja Odland examines Mu

CANCER KOANS: living with an acute awareness of impending death

BRONZE LOTUSES fly through the air, bloom in mud at Chapin Mill

SEEN ANY GOOD movies lately? Read any good books? Had any burning questions that you would love to ask other Zen practitioners?

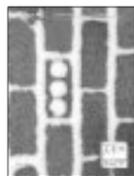
Now that we have mailed eight issues of the revamped *Zen Bow*, I hope you are enjoying it and will think of it when something piques your interest or strikes your fancy. We welcome submission of all kinds of things for *Zen Bow*, from excerpts of books to “found” art to inspirational quotes, poems, photographs, and artwork. And, of course, original work of all lengths, including brief book and movie reviews, reflections, and full-length feature articles.

This issue’s roundtable, on traveling while Buddhist, is an example of something that anybody can get rolling with minimal effort. Just fire off a group email to five or six other members with a specific question related to Zen practice and you might be surprised at what comes back. And don’t worry if you’re not a skilled writer: the *Zen Bow* staff is very happy to work with raw material.

To those who have already contributed, I reiterate our thanks. To the rest of you, please know that you’re welcome to submit something or contact me at any time to discuss ideas for *Zen Bow*. Without you, as writers as well as readers, it would be a lesser publication.—CHRIS PULLEYN

ON THE COVER

PHOTOGRAPH BY *Gretchen Targee* | The driveway of the residence at 233 Merriman Street, Rochester, New York



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All readers are encouraged to submit essays and images at any time and on any topic related to Zen practice. Articles may be of any length. Suggestions for articles and artwork also welcome, as are “found objects” such as quotations, haiku, and/or excerpts from articles in other publications. Submission guidelines may be found on the *Zen Bow* page of the Center’s website: www.rzc.org/library/zen-bow. For any and all questions and suggestions, please email Chris Pulleyn at zenbow@rzc.org.

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Soundings



RICHARD WEHRMAN

HOW TO SIT IN A CHAIR

SOONER OR LATER in Zen practice, we may find it helpful, or even necessary, to sit in a chair. We might want to maintain sesshin concentration far into the night, for example, while needing the relief of some postural variety. Or an injury could temporarily make chair-sitting the only way to maintain daily zazen. For others, joint problems or surgeries make sitting in a chair a more or less permanent necessity.

But chair sitting can also be difficult and demanding. For a while, attached to the idea that “real” zazen meant the lotus and seiza postures, and physically unable to sit well on a mat, I just sat less, or not at all. Eventually, grudgingly, I pulled up a chair. I found there were certain knacks for sitting in a chair, just as there are for sitting on a mat: little details, that when observed and repeated, make a lot of difference in being able to get centered and stay energetically quiet.

These are general guidelines; if you can’t adhere to them exactly, work out something similar that makes sitting manageable for your condition. Experiment! And keep trying. (For more ideas on developing a strong posture in a chair,

see Esther Gokhale’s *8 Steps to a Pain-Free Back*, especially the chapter on “Stack Sitting”, pp. 68–93).

The chair you use must be solidly built, not wobbly. The seat should be firm or firmly padded. The solid, triangular base provided by the lotus posture can be approximated in a chair by having three solid points of contact: the “sit bones” and the two feet. If your legs are short, find a chair low enough that your feet rest firmly on the floor, or place a flat cushion or yoga block on the floor to raise your feet.

If your chair’s height and the length of your shin bones allow it, it’s helpful to place one or two cushions on the seat. Arrange your cushions so they are slightly elevated towards the rear of the seat: put the flat cushion under the back end of the round cushion, or place a wedge cushion under a rectangular support. You want the tops of your thighs to be slanting down, at least slightly, toward the knees, so that the centers of the hip joints are higher than the tops of the knee joints.

To avoid eye strain and make it easier to keep the eyes open, don’t place the chair too close or too far from the wall—your face should be about as far from the wall or divider as it would be if sitting on a mat.

Make sure your chair is square to the wall, so that a line between the two front legs is parallel to the wall. If your pelvis is aligned at even a slight angle to the wall, there will be an unconscious effort to twist the upper body back to square, rotating it on the pelvis, which can cause back strain.

Move to the front of the chair, set your feet about shoulder-width apart, and look down to check that the toes of each foot are equidistant from the wall. Hinge the torso forward at the hips, thrusting the buttocks out behind, and lower them to your cushion. Straighten up. If you don’t quite feel like you are right on top of your sit bones, do what folks sitting on a mat often do: hinge the upper body forward again, thrusting the buttocks out behind (you’ll feel the sit bones make contact with the cushion); then look up and follow the head up, slowly bringing the torso to vertical, keeping your sit bones under you.

Then place your hands, left hand on top of right, with thumbs lightly touching, as usual. The weight of your hands should rest comfortably on your lap; if for any reason this doesn’t happen naturally, arrange a cushion to support your hands.

Take a moderately deep breath, hold it for a second, and roll one shoulder up and back, then roll the other shoulder. Exhale normally. Tuck your chin slightly while lengthening the back of the neck.

With this solid base in place, gently rock the upper body to either side until the torso comes to rest naturally and quietly in the center. Lower your gaze down the wall a bit, de-focus the eyes, and you are all set for a good round of sitting.

Since a traditional lotus posture is optimal for providing stability, other postures, such as sitting in a chair, put the sitter at a modest disadvantage. To minimize this disadvantage, don’t move at all. Important for all, this advice is crucial for those in a chair. Any movement will amplify thought activity; the body and mind are not two.—LARRY MCSPADEN ■

WE SPEND OUR LIVES...

WE SPEND OUR LIVES trying to discover how to live, a perfect way of life, *sens de la vie*. But we shall never find it. Life is the search for it; the successful life is that which is given up to that search; & when we think we have found it, we are farthest from it. Delude ourselves that we have found it, persuade ourselves that here at least there is a point at which we can rest—and life has at once become moribund. Just as to remain in love we must be continually falling in love, so to remain living we must be continually striving to live.

—Michael Oakeshott, *Notebooks, 1922–86*

TERM INTENSIVES FROM A DISTANCE

EARLY RETIREMENT came suddenly, with no time to prepare. As I emerged from four decades structured largely around career into wide-open possibility, the one and only thing I was certain I wanted to do was resume my long-dormant Buddhist practice.

My husband, Alan, and I first discovered Zen in Ann Arbor at a workshop run by Philip Kapleau in the early 1970s. Roshi Kapleau was clearly the real deal—not one of the many dubious gurus that flocked to hippie enclaves during that era.

However, the affiliate groups of the Center became my bedrock—first in Ann Arbor and later in Boston. I’ve no doubt I would have left Zen were it not for them. Their dedication and kind spirits reassured me that this was indeed the path for me. Moreover, just as I depended on them, so too they came to depend on me.

Our numbers were small enough that even the sturdiest Zen students drew from the encouragement of having others there. This brought me to the mat many days that I would otherwise have skipped. I

can’t count the number of times when sitting was the last thing I wanted to do, but feeling responsible to others, I entered the zendo and, once again, discovered it was the best possible place for me to be.

In 1980, Alan’s career took us home to Tennessee—with no Buddhist group of any type within 100 miles of us. Thanks to the affiliates, my faith had grown and so we made it work, just the two of us sitting—that is until we became parents. Full-time careers, one baby, then another, and our desperate need for sleep took precedence. Eventually practice became a distant memory.

Once in a while I’d think back, wistfully, and half-heartedly try to reignite practice on my own. With retirement, though, all excuses fell happily away, and eventually I found my way back to the Zen Center—once again seeking the guidance and inspiration of others.

Almost immediately, I started going to sesshin, which, of course, was an enormous boost to practice. However, after returning home to Nashville, practice was often a slog. I’d give myself pep talks, read books, listen to podcasts, remind myself to just

cook, just walk, etc. It all helped, and yet these didn’t spark what I seemed to crave.

Then one day that spark did ignite in the guise of an email announcing the next Term Intensive. At first I thought it just another Rochester-specific activity—something to ignore. However, Alan had read it more carefully and said out-of-towners could participate too. When I heard it included emailing Roshi, I was all in.

For those unfamiliar with the Term Intensive (TI) program, it happens twice yearly, covering a period of three to five weeks. You pledge in writing to extend your practice in various ways, particularly by increasing time on the mat. Then, once a week you check in, either in person or, if far away, via an email to Roshi and the Head of Zendo. Over the next few days, you receive an email summary of everyone else’s efforts, plus out-of-towners often get an email back from Roshi.

Sesshins aside, TIs have become my favorite Zen Center activity. Here’s why.

First, they make my daily practice

▼ A line of prayer flags in the Himalayas. PHOTOGRAPH BY Dr. Gaylinn Greenwood



more alive. This is the combined result of having to sit more each day, knowing that I’ll be reporting in to Roshi and reading how other sangha members struggle with the very same issues.

Second, I’ve learned that there are times it’s okay to reach out to Roshi or other senior staff members. I have a lifelong pattern of not wanting to bother other people—particularly if I know they’re busy. This ice broke, though, while filling out the TI form for the first time. Reading the list of possibilities, some ancient buttons were pushed and I was in a panic about what to do. I was embarrassed to be in a state over something as simple as a form, but, with patience and understanding, John (then Head of Zendo) called and talked me through it. Between the lines, I learned that you don’t have to wait until things are dire to speak with someone senior at the Center.

Third, TIs are an exercise in learning about myself and my practice, requiring an honest assessment of what’s most needed and what’s possible. Not only that, it can be fun dreaming up activities likely to boost practice. Its open-endedness makes it a surprisingly flexible tool you can use from wherever you find yourself.

For example, I frequently yearn to “just cook.” So, I made “Zen cooking at least 30 minutes per day” a TI commitment—not just randomly remembering this possibility, but making it a front-and-center commitment when entering the kitchen: love that aging sweet potato into something yummy; blamelessly scrub off

THE MASQUERADE OF CHARITY

CHARITY IS REALLY self-interest masquerading under the form of altruism.[...] There are two types of selfishness. The first type is the one where I give myself the pleasure of pleasing myself. That’s what we generally call self-centeredness. The second is when I give myself the pleasure of pleasing others. That would be a more refined kind of selfishness.

The first one is very obvious, the second one is hidden, very hidden, and for that reason more dangerous, because we get to feel that we’re really great. But maybe we’re not all that great after all. You protest when I say that. That’s great! [...]

I’m not saying that there’s no such



IS ZEN A RELIGION? My whole family is Jewish (or Christian/Muslim/whatever) and I don’t know what to tell them.

You can make a good case for “yes” or for “no.”

Here’s the case for no: If you understand religion

in the usual way—that it’s a shared set of beliefs about the nature of reality that includes God, above us or separate from us in any way—then Zen is not a religion. The three most famous words in Zen are Bodhidharma’s “I don’t know.” The truth of Zen has nothing to do with beliefs or

dogma or concepts. Rather, Zen is a practice to help us see into the nature of reality and confirm for ourselves that there is no separate self.

And that leads us to the case for yes: The direct experience of awakening shows us the truth that lies at the heart of all true religion. Meister Eckhart, the Christian mystic of the Middle Ages, said this: “The eye with which I see God is the same with which God sees me. My eye and God’s eye is one eye.” To see with that one eye is the business of Zen.—JOHN PULLEYN

the oatmeal burned onto a pot; protect those precious fingers from the sharp knife; and smile at the wonder of it all.

Fourth, TIs can true my practice. In particular, some years back I discovered that *metta* (loving-kindness) and other compassion techniques could open my heart, prying me out of self—other pain into places of understanding I’d never imagined possible. When I first returned to Zen, however, I stopped doing them, since they were practices I had learned from Vajrayana and Vipassana Buddhist teachers. But then I discovered it works well to do them as part of TI. In particular, I can check in with Roshi and be sure what I’m doing is truly complementary to zazen.

Last, but far from least, TIs connect me to people I know, giving me glimpses into

our shared aspirations and struggles, and neutralizing the 800-mile gap. I love reading the weekly reports—imagining Jack walking under doorways, Keith and others cutting back on news consumption, a dharma sister not “catching shame” for missing some commitments, Loretta es-chewing her car radio, Phil listening to Joseph Goldstein, Martha working on meal chants, Joanne practicing metta, and so on. They’re all just like me.

Roshi often says that if you can only do daily practice or sesshin, but not both, make it daily practice. Perhaps this is why TIs have become my favorite. They’re all about daily practice—discovering ways to strengthen and inspire this most crucial aspect of walking the Buddha’s path. And you can do them from anywhere.—ANNA BELLE LEISERSON ■

thing as pure motivation. I’m saying that ordinarily everything we do is in our self-interest. Everything. When you do something for the love of Christ, is that selfishness? Yes. When you’re doing something for the love of anybody, it’s in your self-interest.[...]

I said there were two types of selfishness; maybe I should have said three. First, when I do something, or rather, when I give myself the pleasure of pleasing myself; second, when I give myself the pleasure of pleasing others. Don’t take pride in that. Don’t think you’re a great person. You’re a very ordinary person, but you’ve got refined tastes. Your taste is good, not the quality of your spirituality. When you were a child, you liked

Coca-Cola; now you’ve grown older and you appreciate chilled beer on a hot day. You’ve got better tastes now. When you were a child, you loved chocolates; now you’re older, you enjoy a symphony, you enjoy a poem. You’ve got better tastes. But you’re getting your pleasure all the same, except now it’s in the pleasure of pleasing others.

Then you’ve got the third type, which is the worst: when you do something good so that you won’t get a bad feeling. It doesn’t give you a good feeling to do it; it gives you a bad feeling to do it. You hate it. You’re making loving sacrifices but you’re grumbling. Ha! How little you know of yourself if you think you don’t do things this way. ▶

If I had a dollar for every time I did things that gave me a bad feeling, I'd be a millionaire by now. You know how it goes. "Could I meet you tonight, Father?" "Yes, come on in!" I don't want to meet him and I hate meeting him. I want to watch that TV show tonight, but how do I say no to him? I don't have the guts to say no. "Come on in," and I'm thinking, "Oh, God, I've got to put up with this pain."

It doesn't give me a good feeling to meet with him and it doesn't give me a good feeling to say no to him, so I choose

the lesser of the two evils and I say, "OK, come on in." I'm going to be happy when this thing is over and I'll be able to take my smile off, but I start the session with him: "How are you?" "Wonderful," he says, and he goes on and on about how he loves that workshop, and I'm thinking, "Oh, God, when is he going to come to the point?" Finally he comes to the point, and I metaphorically slam him against the wall and say, "Well, any fool could solve that problem," and I send him out. "Whew! Got rid of him," I say. And the

next morning at breakfast (because I'm feeling I was so rude) I go up to him and say, "How's life?" And he answers, "Pretty good." And he adds, "You know, what you said to me last night was a real help. Can I meet you today, after lunch?" Oh God!

That's the worst kind of charity, when you're doing something so you won't get a bad feeling. You don't have the guts to say you want to be left alone. You want people to think you're a good priest! —ANTHONY DE MELLO, in *Awareness: The Perils and Opportunities of Reality* ■

upaya \ü·'pä·(y)ə\ *n* [Sanskrit *upāya*, 'pedagogy'] **1**: skillful means or method, skill in expounding the Buddha's teaching **2**: the ability to guide beings to liberation through skillful means

SKILLFUL MEANS REFERS to the "how" of helping. First comes the intention to help, and then there are any number of ways to go about it. In more exalted terms, it is described as the actions a bodhisattva takes on behalf of all sentient beings. In teaching, parenting, or coaching, we draw from our experience, as well as from our understanding of the person, the circumstances, and the occasion, to try to reach our charges effectively.

In Buddhism, skillful means is one of the two essential components of the Way, along with wisdom. These have been likened to the two wings of a bird. Wisdom in and of itself is of no use, devoid of force or power ("virtue" in Chinese terms). Action without wisdom behind it is deficient or worse. Goethe said, "There is nothing more frightful than ignorance in action."

Transcendent wisdom (prajna) is that which comes from having seen into the non-substantiality of the world—the formlessness of form. This is the essential experience of the Dharma, realized by the Buddha while sitting cross-legged under the Bodhi tree. For him this wisdom began functioning when he stood up and walked to Deer Park, where he employed skillful means in the form of the Four Noble Truths. Essence and function are just words referring to the two sides of reality, and these two are actualized as wisdom and skillful means.

Those of us without the Buddha's prajna

wisdom still have the common wisdom picked up through life experience. Which leaves us with the same task he faced: using it to help others as best we can. To do so skillfully often involves timing, employed strategically (one translation of upaya is "stratagem"). In parenting, this often plays out as knowing when to hold and when to fold. In coaching, instructing, and Zen training, how soon in the process do you make corrections? Too soon can be dispiriting, too late will give bad habits time to set. The Hall of Fame baseball manager Tommy Lasorda was describing skillful means when he said, "Managing is like holding a dove in your hand. Squeeze too hard and you kill it; not hard enough and it flies away." This reflects one dictionary definition of manipulate: "to work, operate, or treat... with the hand or hands; handle or use, especially with skill." Manipulative, however, often suggests using people "for one's own purposes or profit"—the very opposite of Buddhism's skillful means.

Probably the most obvious way to employ skillful means is through words. This is challenging enough for parents, coaches, teachers, and mentors, who learn that they can be most effective by finding the right words at the right time—and knowing when to remain silent. In presenting Zen, the job is both easier and harder. Harder because ultimately there is no dogma to hang onto, no hard and fast answers. Right and wrong are beside the point in sharing our Zen experience; all that counts is effect, and that depends on not only the time and situation but the listener. Words that are helpful to Jennifer may misfire with Jason

(which is why we ask people not to share with others what is said in dokusan). Such is the Law of Dependent Co-arising, a central feature of Buddhist doctrine: it is not this or that, but this (particular person) in mutual correspondence with that (particular person). Everything is relational. Nothing stands apart from every other thing.

And how is presenting Zen at the same time easier than instructing, teaching, or guiding in other fields? Because in essence there is nothing to it. Without dogma or any principles that stand on their own, we are free to respond as called for to any given individual at that time. Again, all that matters is what's practical. Zen is a practice.

In presenting Zen to groups rather than one-on-one, choosing words is trickier because you can't tailor them to any one individual. As a result, some in the group may become confused. After one of the monitors or I have given a short talk in the zendo when there is no chance for questions, some people will come to their next dokusan vexed with a question, leaving me to either explain what I meant or urge them to drop it and just keep sitting. Roshi Kapleau would often cite the Japanese Zen way: "Never explain." But a succinct explanation sometimes will enable an American (especially one new to Zen) to more quickly get back to the business of no-thought, no-reason.

Perhaps the ultimate in skillful means, in any type of teaching or guidance, is simply embodying what we've learned—becoming an example of it. We can call it upaya paramita—no subject-object dichotomy. No means, all end. Or vice-versa.—ROSHI BODHIN KJOLHEDE

ACCEPTANCE IS THE ANSWER

WHEN I AM disturbed, it is because I find some person, place, thing, or situation—some fact of my life—unacceptable to me, and I can find no serenity until I accept that person, place, thing, or situation as being exactly the way it is supposed to be at this moment. Nothing, absolutely nothing, happens in God's world by mistake. Until I could accept my alcoholism, I could not stay sober; unless I accept life completely on life's terms, I cannot be happy. I need to concentrate not so much on what needs to be changed in the world as on what needs to be changed in me and in my attitudes.

Shakespeare said, "All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players." He forgot to mention that I was the chief critic. I was always able to see the flaw in every person, every situation. And I was always glad to point it out, because I knew you wanted perfection, just as I did. A.A. and acceptance have taught me that there is a bit of good in the worst of us and a bit of bad in the best of us; that we are all children of God and we each have a right to be here. When I com-

NIGHT PRACTICE

I
will
remember
with my breath
to make a mountain,
with my sucked-in breath
a valley, with my pushed-out
breath a mountain. I will make
a valley wider than the whisper, I
will make a higher mountain than the cry;
will with my will breathe a mountain, I will
with my will breathe a valley. I will push out
a mountain, suck in a valley, deeper than the shout
YOU MUST DIE, harder, heavier, sharper a mountain than
the truth YOU MUST DIE. I will remember. My breath will
make a mountain. My will will remember to will. I, suck-
ing, pushing, I will breathe a valley, I will breathe a mountain.

—MAY SWENSON, from *To Mix with Time* (1963)

plain about me or about you, I am complaining about God's handiwork. I am saying that I know better than God.—from *The Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous* ■

▼ The Erie Canal in early afternoon during a light snowfall, March 13, 2018. PHOTOGRAPH BY Susanna Rose





CAN CER KOANS

A frozen tree blossoms

BEING & TIME

“TIME IS SO interesting to me now that I have so little of it,” writes Haruki, a young kamikaze pilot-in-training in Ruth Ozeki’s novel *A Tale for the Time Being*. He continues: “Both

life and death manifest in every moment of existence. Our human body appears and disappears moment by moment, without cease, and this ceaseless arising and passing away is what we experience as time and being. They are not separate.” Haruki’s account is based on letters and journal entries from actual kamikaze pilots, many of whom were only 18 years old and forced into these suicide missions. It’s an insightful mo-

ment in a novel full of insights, and, in particular, Zen insights. Ozeki is a Zen priest and the entire novel can be read as a Zen Buddhist allegory that explores time, existence, life and death, suicide, zazen, Buddha-nature, enlightenment, and much more.

I discovered this novel while the thought of my own death was dangling above me like the sword of Damocles; that is, shortly after I be-

TEXT BY *Mark Tursi*

CYANOTYPE BY *Anna Atkins*



MARK TURSI teaches literature and writing at Marymount Manhattan College and New Jersey City University. His fourth book of poetry, *The Uncanny Valley*, will be published later this fall.

gan the most difficult treatment for Stage IV head-and-neck cancer.

A cancer diagnosis is devastating. You've heard this before. You've also probably read at least one cancer survivor's account of his or her struggle and ultimate triumph. This burgeoning genre of cancer-survival literature most often involves someone's heroic journey and admirable survival "against all odds." For practitioners of Zen, we might add another component: finding strength and refuge in the Dharma, the Sangha, the Buddha, and finding sanctuary in zazen and daily practice. My story is not that.

CANCER & CATHARSIS

When Roshi Kjolhede gently suggested I consider writing about my experience with cancer for *Zen Bow*, I immediately agreed—then regretted it. Some people find talking about their battle with cancer to be cathartic in some way. In my least compassionate moments, I call this "disease porn," as it seems to be the inverse of the Buddhist notion of *mudita* (pleasure that comes from delighting in other people's well-being): in other words, finding some kind of pleasure or catharsis while wallowing in the fact of one's own suffering. But, in my better moments, I realize that writing about one's experience with cancer can be transformative for the person who is ill and illuminating for readers who might gain insight into seeing the struggle that results from intense physical suffering and the confrontation with one's own mortality. So it is in this spirit—the hope that my story might inspire, in some small way, a bit of insight, awareness, courage, or strength to someone else—that I write this narrative now.

I am a new member of the Rochester Zen Center, though I have been practicing Zen intermittently for around 20 years. In a recent visit to the Center this past spring, I was able to attend "Movies & Dharma: A Zen Perspective at the Visual Studies Workshop," where one of the short films screened was the 1978 animated film *Why Me?* by Janet Perlman and Derek Lamb. This one struck a chord. The film portrays the realizations and unraveling of a man who is told he has only five minutes to live. With breakneck speed, the main character, Nesbitt Spoon, experiences the entire gamut of emotions: helplessness and grief, angst and despair, anger and fury, and, then, ultimately, the resolution to live as fully as possible in the few minutes he has left. It was a well-chosen piece and really does speak to the insight Zen provides about happiness and living fully and wholly in the

present. There was one specific moment when audience members—largely from the Sangha, I believe—audibly gasped. It was not, interestingly, at the moment of Nesbitt's diagnosis or the wrenching despair he exhibits; but, rather, it was when he mindlessly squashes a spider crawling on the doctor's desk. In the discussion immediately following the film, several members of the audience mentioned the troubling irony of this gesture: nearing his own moment of death, one might think he'd be more acutely aware of other living creatures and acquire a desire to sustain life, however small. But, alas, this is not the case.

One thing that was not mentioned in the discussion—perhaps because it is so obvious—was the symbolism of the fragility of life itself: i.e., how easily the life of any sentient being is extinguished. But there is a deeper symbolic meaning—the metaphor within the symbol—which is how our perception of life itself, of our living as beings in this world, is so easily destroyed. In other words, how simple it is to smash our will, our hope, our strength. And how hard it can be to regain the joy of simply being alive. This perhaps is my greatest take-away from facing cancer: my own perception of life and death shifted. The certainty of death became palpable. The fact of death became instantly believable. And, correspondingly, what it means to be truly alive became a kind of curiosity, a metaphysical puzzle of sorts.

IMMINENT DEATH

We all know that we're going to die. I'm going to die, and everyone I know and love is going to die. Writing this thought, at this very moment, puts a lump in my throat. Morbid? Perhaps. True? Indeed. But it is a truism that we tend to deny, forget, or push aside. It seems we never want to discuss it until it is imminent—until we ourselves or someone we love is stricken with a fatal illness or involved in a horrible accident. In *The Zen of Living and Dying*, Roshi Kapleau quotes from James Farrell's *Inventing the American Way of Death, 1830–1920*:

Keeping death out of mind cuts people off from an important fact of their physical, mental, and spiritual existence. If knowing that we will die is part of what makes us human, then forgetting that we will die threatens our humanity. In the same way, the denial of death in American society also cuts people off

from our common humanity, keeping them at such a distance from the deaths of others that they cannot grieve or mourn except in the culturally prescribed "way." [page 34]

It was cancer that made me see my own mortality with painful clarity, acuity, and certainty. To see it—and feel it—up close, everywhere in my body. Why hadn't I seen it before? This profound change in my body had an equally profound change in my mind: I could not pacify my mind, and I could not find refuge in meditation. Despite all my efforts, my failing body was too much to reckon with. Zen, it seemed, had failed me. No, I had failed myself. This is, at least, what I felt at the moment. And it stung.

The treatment itself—two surgeries, immunotherapy, and radiation—turned out to be a stunning assault on my body. It far outweighed the pain and suffering wrought by the disease itself. The irony of this is hard to reckon with. One of my many surgeons put it this way: "We're going to have to make things really bad for you before they can get good again." He was right.

It is difficult not to sound melodramatic here, but the pain, suffering, and subsequent despair were immense. I did my best to remember the words of one of my favorite Zen masters, the quirky and idiosyncratic Bankei Yōtaku:

Being born into this world and having a body, we must expect to meet with illness. But when you conclusively realize the Unborn Buddha Mind, you don't distress yourself over the sufferings of illness: you clearly distinguish illness as illness, suffering as suffering.[...] Since the Buddha Mind is endowed with a marvelously illuminating dynamic function, not only illness but everything there is can be clearly recognized and distinguished. That's why, when you're faced with the sufferings of illness, if you simply don't get involved with them or attach to them, there's nothing you won't be able to endure. So just go with the illness, and, if you're in pain, go ahead and groan! But, whether you're sick or you're not, always abide in the Unborn Buddha Mind. [Location 1152]

Abide in the Unborn Buddha Mind and endure. Indeed. So easy to say; so difficult to put into practice.

THE PATH TO CANCER

What I thought was a painful canker sore that wouldn't go away turned out to be a malignant tumor. The first surgery meant removing one-third of my tongue. The post-surgery pain was stunning. I dealt with it through the use of opiates and simply carried on. The surgery seemed a success, and I lived cancer-free for 11 months.

But cancer doesn't give up so easily. (This is another part of the rhetoric around cancer that can be so troubling. When is one, after all, a "cancer survivor" if the disease can return again and again?) When it did return, it did so with a vengeance. A disease, of course, does not have a will or consciousness—it can't take revenge—but how easy it is to anthropomorphize cancer, especially when it is actually your own body that is creating so much destruction. There's a deep paradox here: anthropomorphizing is intended to provide a sense of safety—humanizing the inhuman, but, in this case, it is the opposite. It demonizes the self, or, perhaps more correctly, humanizes the demon. It seemed as though there was no intruder, no invader but me; it seemed I had done this to myself, so "blaming" added another layer of angst to the mix.

The cancer had grown and moved into other parts of my mouth, including new areas of my tongue, gums, and jawbone. Apparently, it was also working its way into my nervous system, then who knows where next? My brain? So the next phase of treatment was shockingly invasive and involved surgery to remove more of my tongue as well as an entire section of my jaw. In order to reconstruct the jaw, they would have to remove the entire fibula in my left leg to use the bones from my own body in hope that I wouldn't reject it, as well as harvest arteries from other areas of my leg and neck. Could I do without my entire fibula? Removing it saved my jaw but also meant undergoing physical therapy to be able to walk again.

Yet this was minor compared to the therapy and training I would need to simply speak, drink, and eat again. To this day, my speech is slurred and I am able to eat only soft foods and drink liquids. I have also lost about 50% of my ability to taste. Eating is generally an unpleasant and, at times, painful experience and will probably remain so for the rest of my life.

Leading up to the second surgery, I was riddled with anxiety, as I had an inkling of what to expect from the previous one. This one would be

significantly more complex, and the recovery would prove much more difficult. Aside from a fear of dying, the most anxiety-producing thought was the anesthesia. I kept asking the doctors where “I” went when they put me under. “Nowhere,” they insisted, “you’re just out. You’re unconscious. You won’t feel anything.” But I persisted, “Where is my consciousness when I’m anesthetized?” (As it turned out, for more than 12 hours.) “Where does my mind go this entire time? Where am ‘I’ while you are sawing my bones and cutting out the tumor and my flesh?” And perhaps the most bizarre and irrational question I kept asking myself but did not vocalize to anyone else was this: “How will I know if I’m dead?”

How does one answer such a question? It’s confounding and somewhat different than the often-asked question, “What happens after I die?” It’s also rather absurd. There exists an added notion of agency and subjectivity outside of the self (yet the self) and another metaphysical layer regarding death and the question of the identity in relation to death. That is, a keen interest in the ability to know oneself in relation to ultimate reality and the extent to which the self (the ego) persists without the body and beyond death. Does the “self” have knowledge extrinsic to that experience? In this, I am reminded of koan number 55 from the *Blue Cliff Record*, “Daowu Won’t Say”:

One day, the Master Jianyuan Zhongxing followed Zen Master Daowu to a devotee’s family home to conduct a funeral service. Placing his hand on the coffin, the Master asked, “Alive? Dead?” Daowu answered, “I will not say dead or alive.” The Master asked, “Why won’t you say?” Daowu answered, “I won’t say! I won’t say!”

Why won’t Daowu say? Is the corpse not a corpse? Or is the corpse Jianyuan himself? Is it me? Or is it all of us? Isn’t the question really: am I dead or am I alive? Am I both or am I neither? I don’t know how to answer. Aren’t we all, always, already dying? But I think I realize that it is the duality that is the delusion and it is the very notion of “I” that is the challenge or the entanglement. It’s the same question I was asking the oncologists: how do I know if I’m dead? How do I know when I’m truly alive?

Before the second surgery, my struggle with

the idea of the “self” persisted and became increasingly convoluted. The great Swedish crime novelist Henning Mankell, who died of cancer a few years ago, addressed this notion of self-identity and cancer in his book *Quicksand: What It Means to Be a Human Being*:

Now that I have cancer I understand that feeling of being lost. I am in a labyrinth where there are no ways in or out. Being stricken with a severe illness is to be lost inside one’s own body. Something is happening over which you have no control.

It is this lack of control that can feel so terrifying and overwhelming. I was clearly distraught. When I raised these questions with my oncologists, they sent me to a psychiatrist. Needless to say, he wasn’t equipped to answer these questions either. In fact, he seemed annoyed by my persistence, then wrote me a prescription for anti-anxiety medication and sent me on my way. In hindsight, I probably should’ve taken the meds, but I didn’t. I wanted more control of my thoughts and emotions, but not via chemicals. I was already on too many opiates and other medications and the thought of more drugs bothered me. Besides, my concerns didn’t seem physiological; I was asking deep metaphysical and existential questions about consciousness, mind, and existence.

So I tried more zazen. But it was so difficult to sit! The anxiety was like a physical presence—a heavy shadow attached with chains and industrial glue that sank every thought into an abyss and dragged me into the River Styx of apprehension and trepidation. Cancer was like Marley’s Ghost, howling in anguish and dragging chains and ambushing me around every mental corner. I tried turning these questions into a koan: where am I, really? What is the “I” in me? I felt, as they say, like I was losing my mind. But how can I lose something I’ve never found? On and on my mind went.

When the day of my surgery came, I gathered the strength, somehow, and made it through. When I returned to consciousness in post-op my jaw was wired shut and my body was attached to multiple machines: an intubator and ventilator in my trachea to help me breathe, IVs, catheter, etc. I would remain in the hospital for a month. It was a challenging month, but the surgery was not the greatest challenge I had to face.

RADIATION & POOR, HOLE-DWELLING DEVILS

Three months after the second surgery, just as I was beginning to recover, I began radiation treatment. Nuclear war had begun. This is precisely what it felt like: radiation was literally a nuclear assault on the body, 40 days straight of radiation treatment directed at my cancer and surrounding tissue. After a few days, my beard fell out in clumps, intense nausea set in, and I began vomiting several times a day. Then the fatigue, weakness, disorientation, and, finally, pain. After two weeks, I had so much radiation in my body that I was told to avoid public spaces and was not permitted to fly on an airplane. I couldn’t hold my own children or embrace my wife for fear that I would contaminate them with radiation. Fortunately, this lasted only a few weeks, but it felt interminable.

Fatigue and weakness are inadequate words to describe what was happening in my body. It was a Sisyphean effort to simply get out of bed. When I moved it was as if through mud or deep sand on a steep slope, or a thick soupy fog that made every gesture and every step tedious and forced—like trudging through air so humid it clings to your limbs like tight bungee cords. Ascending a staircase was like mountain climbing above the treeline, where the air is thin and the trail is steep. A koan from Hsu Yun comes to mind:

One hour and then another.
Inexorably march, step by step.
Whenever I meet you, we each smile.
But who is it who drags your corpse around?

At the time, I turned this into my own personal “cancer koan”: who is it that drags around this cancer-riddled, radioactive corpse? I was using this koan as a trick of the mind, and it led to more conceptualizing and more suffering! It’s clear I wasn’t “using” the koan in the right way. It was at this moment—in the midst of radiation and this deep suffering—that I seemingly entered a space that my wife and I began to refer to as the abyss: a deep chasm that made me feel like I was truly dying. I was in a deep, deep hole. Was I, like Hakuin, a poor hole-dwelling devil? Was the hole I was in very different from Hakuin’s? Was it of my own devising? So much about cancer is about the betrayal of both the mind and body: one’s own body destroying itself and one’s own mind thrown into despair.

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“cancer koan”:
who is it
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corpse?
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of the mind.

My team of doctors at Memorial Sloane Kettering seemed to conclude that my body was beginning to reject food. Since I had not been able to eat solid food or even drink liquids for so long, I was kept alive with a feeding tube. Unfortunately, my body did not respond well to the “pure nutrition” formulas designed for use with feeding tubes. Consequently, I ate less and less. My stomach shrank and I began to lose weight at an alarming pace. I had begun to reject the very nutrition I needed to survive. I lost 75 pounds in two months. I was dwindling.

Often I would simply vomit everything I pumped into my stomach. It was violent and literally gut-wrenching. When I was able to keep the formula down, I went into what the doctors deemed a “food coma.” It was pure emptiness, but not the emptiness one sometimes experiences in zazen; it was oblivion, but not even the oblivion of the quiet, sleepy, and inattentive mind at rest. I essentially disappeared after I was fed. I fell into a dark hole and simply put my head in my hands and sat immobile, unaware of everything happening around me (exterior to myself) and inside (the interior of my own mind). Where was I? I can’t say. For the first time ever I actually understood the expression, “It felt like time had stopped.” What was happening? Was I falling into the mirror? Was I dying?

But I found I had no intention of dying. Not yet, anyway. How did I know this and how did I gather the requisite strength? I don’t know. It’s too easy to say I gathered strength from my loved ones: a loving wife, two young daughters, mother, brother, sister, aunt, cousins, and many friends who came from across the country—as far away as California, and Montana—to visit me and give me love, courage, and, perhaps, many of them thought, to say goodbye. Everyone tried to give me encouraging words: “You have so much to live for.” “Stay strong.” “Keep your head up.” But the deep, boundless love I have for my two girls, my wife, my family, and my friends did not translate into strength and courage. In fact, I never understood this and I still don’t. Of course, I love my wife and kids. Of course, I wanted to live. But how could I take that love and turn it into strength? If I did do this—if I transformed love into resolve, determination, or courage—it occurred on a very unconscious level. It seemed extrinsic or peripheral and not a willful, intentional act. Was it me who was doing this? If not, who?

ZAZEN IS NOT 'POSITIVE THINKING'

A frozen tree blossoms
in the dead of winter.
Rising autumn mist reveals
a collage of red and gold.

This is the “capping verse” from Dōgen’s *True Dharma Eye*, Case 136: “Zhaozhou Asks About the Great Death.” The language is lyrical and beautiful and very much like a haiku. But for me, the content is wishful thinking. I have yet to know or realize the blossoming Dōgen describes, yet I remain hopeful. Perhaps this haiku by Richard Wright suits my mind more:

I am nobody:
A red sinking autumn sun
Took my name away.

This is the first of over 4,000 haiku written by Richard Wright shortly before his death. Wright is famous for his long books of prose—the novel *Native Son* and memoir *Black Boy*—and is one of the most important writers and spokespersons for Black Americans of the 20th century. Towards the end of his life he explored Zen and, according to his daughter in the introduction to *Haiku: The Last Poetry of Richard Wright*, he embarked on a kind of “self-nurturing” through Zen and haiku.

In her intelligent and thought-provoking book, *Bright-Sided: How Positive Thinking is Undermining America*, Barbara Ehrenreich investigates the toxic impact of the positive-thinking movement on American culture generally, but with a specific focus on cancer. She goes so far as to suggest that cancer patients are often blamed and chastised if they are not able to “put a happy face” on their illness. She suggests that the wider culture pressures people into “staying positive,” and if they don’t, they are deemed responsible for their own declining health. She argues that “the failure to think positively can weigh on a cancer patient like a second disease.” It’s a dangerous kind of pressure to just stay positive. She shows the way in which the “sugar-coating of cancer” comes at a dreadful cost that, in its most profound incarnation, has become “a tool of political repression worldwide.” This might seem hyperbolic at first glance, but I don’t think so. Her arguments are sound and valid, and one of her most interesting conclusions is this:

The alternative to both [the delusion of positive thinking on one hand and despair and depression on the other] is to try to get out-

This sounds
an awful lot
like Zen
to me: to see
things as
they are.
To experience
it directly
and not
become attached
to the disease,
the treatment,
the suffering,
or any of it.

side of ourselves and see things “as they are,” or as uncolored as possible by our own feelings and fantasies, to understand that the world is full of both danger and opportunity—the chance of great happiness as well as the certainty of death.

This sounds an awful lot like Zen to me: to see things as they are. To experience it directly and not become attached to the disease, the treatment, the suffering, or any of it. Zen is the Middle Way, of course. What draws me to Zen is its rigor and difficulty. It is “the work” itself. In *Anna Karenina*, Tolstoy writes:

What is precious is not the reward but the work. And I wish you to understand that. If you work and study in order to get a reward, the work will seem hard to you; but when you work, if you love the work, you will find your reward in that.

So this is where I am now: working hard at my practice, practicing hard at my work. Like Haruki in Ozeki’s novel, I am seeing the world, in some ways, for the first time. My eyes are more open than they have ever been. This new seeing has not been more joyful or even more enlightened. I have not experienced what the historian and philosopher Jennifer Michael Hecht refers to as “post-traumatic bliss”—the idea that survivors of a near-fatal experience are happier than others due to a kind of “exquisite gratitude.” I don’t know why I never got this joyful jolt, but I didn’t. Suffering from the disease persists in all parts of my life, and I admittedly remain fearful of its return.

If cancer does return somewhere else in my body, I like to think I will be ready for it. But I’m not sure I am. When my death comes, I want to say I’m ready to accept that too. But I’m not sure I can say this either. I don’t feel particularly courageous or even resolved. I’ve been awfully angry and irritable throughout this whole journey, as well as fearful and anxious. I am trying my best to experience my life directly by doing more zazen and applying the same principles of Zen to every moment of my life. My Zen practice went from intermittent and sporadic for many years to what is now a deeply committed and very consistent practice.

Does this mean I need to admit there is something positive about my struggle with cancer? That it is the cause of and impetus for a serious Zen practice? I don’t know. Might I have arrived at this moment—where I am now, who I am now—without the disease? I can’t say. **///**

RECENTLY SCOTT GEMMELL, a member in Madison, WI wrote to *Zen Bow*:

One thing I wrestle with is how to deal with integrating practice into my day when I am traveling for either business or pleasure. I travel extensively and this is an area that I really struggle with. Sometimes I simply have to accept that I will have to make compromises. It would be interesting to me to hear from Sangha members who travel in any capacity how to juggle these things—maintaining a sitting practice and eating a vegetarian or vegan diet—a bit more elegantly than I have.

Scott went on to mention the Happy Cow app as very useful in finding good places to eat, and his email then spurred an online discussion among Sangha members who travel frequently.

I DO A BIT OF flying to Sweden three or four times a year plus flying to Canada in the summer and to Rochester once a year.

I try to do zazen on the plane and sometimes it works well but not always. I sometimes take my round cushion with me. But the best thing I’ve learned was to do zazen while lying in bed. I wake up at 2:00 or 3:00 in the morning and I do my practice lying in bed—really good for working on koans. I usually read the koan before going to bed and keep it in my mind. And whenever I wake up during the night I pick it up again. And it works very well. It’s enjoyable to enter the world of the koan at night!

MAHER DARWAZEH
Vancouver, BC (Canada)

I TRAVEL ABOUT once a month. I find doing zazen on the airplane to be great. Once I get settled in and the plane starts flying, I meditate. When I get to the destination I admit to having difficulty finding time, but getting up early and doing chair sitting also works for me.

ALICE PENTLAND
Rochester, NY

THIS IS A PERSPECTIVE of an academic, so it may not apply to those who travel for business. Typically, I’m asked what my dietary needs are (a lot of folks assume I eat kosher) and are fine with providing vegetarian. When asked where to eat I recommend Italian—I can nearly always get a vegetarian marinara spaghetti or cheese pizza. I do not recommend a ritzy vegetarian restaurant as I’ve found the food rarely to be worth the cost.

I travel almost exclusively by air and have a routine where I fall asleep before the plane takes off. When I wake up I spend much of the time doing zazen in my seat. Especially for inter-continental flights it helps tremendously! Also, remember to take aspirin and consider compression stockings on long flights to decrease chance of clots and pulmonary problems.

In my room, I use pillows plus folded towels for a cushion. As I tend to get up early in the morning and take an early morning nap at home and cannot do this on the road, I tend to sleep in an hour or so extra and then do formal zazen before breakfast meetings.

BRYAN ROTH
Durham, NC

BECAUSE TRAVEL makes it exceedingly difficult, if not impossible, to maintain structure, I think of “travel practice” as an opportunity to work differently—to be flexible, stay centered and in-the-moment, while yielding to the challenges of being on the move. Along the way, there are plenty of opportunities to do zazen: in an airplane seat or in airport lounges, particularly during the inevitable delays. (Unexpectedly long delays are also a good opportunity for me to experience gratitude for the people who are doing their best to keep air travel safe.)

When out of town, and especially when I’m in another time zone and out of synch with my local hosts, the best time for more focused practice is generally early mornings or late at night.

It’s so much easier now than it was in the past to observe a vegetarian diet. Nowadays, I rely almost exclusively on TripAdvisor and Yelp to find solid veggie restaurants and am hardly ever disappointed. You can sometimes use those same apps to find decent options at airports, especially in larger hubs. When I’m traveling through smaller cities, unless I know for sure what restaurants are in the airport, I’ll pack a couple of sandwiches ahead of time.

Most US and international hotels these days offer a breakfast buffet that is usually a vegetarian bonanza: fruit, oatmeal, granola, yogurt, eggs, etc. Finally, as when backpacking, I always carry survival food—dried fruit, nuts, protein bars, etc.

BARRY KEESAN
Rochester, NY

LIKE BARRY, I TEND to think of travel as an opportunity to practice with uncertainty, and recently started calling my trips “travel sesshins.” Sometimes with the long layovers, multiple flights, delays, and time zone differences, it does seem quite an ordeal. However, I’ve found that practicing on the plane, especially when I’m about to reach the destination, creates a great sense of calm and prepares me for the arrival and the new time zone.

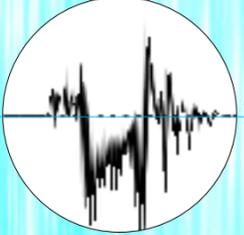
Sitting is always challenging when traveling but the approach that works best for me is doing it first thing in the morning. I went through a phase of packing inflatable cushions (they work great but take space), incense supplies, and mini Buddha statues for the trips, but now I just use pillows and towels as they come with the room. Doing a few prostrations is a great way to end the meditation and get ready for the day, and in the evenings, I do a few minutes of yoga and then sit down to meditate.

Another practice that grew out of travel is based on the fascinating fact that you might walk by or meet strangers at airports who you may never see again in your whole life, but with whom, in that moment, you are connected. So often I will walk around airports, bearing witness to these special meetings and providing my presence, a smile, a conversation. There have been many special encounters, and I am deeply grateful for them.

VALENTINA KUTYIFA
Rochester, NY

And just as the little word *fire*, when your house is ablaze, stirs and pierces the heavens more quickly, so does a little word of one syllable, when it's not only spoken our thought, but secretly intended in the depths of the spirit. The depth is the height, for spiritually all is one, height and depth and depth, length and breadth.

—from *The Cloud of Unknowing*, written by an unknown 14th-century monk or priest

A small syllable  of great power

KOAN COMMENTARY
BY *Kanja Roshi*

WE ARE LIVING ON a platform that has been artfully shaped by our own narrative. Continuously, we tell stories and visualize scenarios to make it feel more solid, safe, and known. But it often feels quite unsteady, as if the winds

of the world shake it, so we hold on to stories that are meant to strengthen and solidify it. But some of us will at some point feel a deep need to listen to something other than the voices that try to convince us about the immutable Me-ness of that platform.

If we ask a Zen instructor for advice, we are told to just sit still and listen to our breath in-

stead of all the stories. We sit down on our platform and after some initial struggle, the breathing becomes the main focus and we sense a space within and in between the inhalation and exhalation. In the midst of that space we notice a faint sound, but at first we cannot hear it clearly. We keep listening after the sound and we ask: What is it? And with that question we

► OPPOSITE A spectrogram of the syllable *mu* OPPOSITE INSET A plot of the waveform of the same utterance

fully turn our attention to it and we realize that it is not just coming from a space within but actually from everywhere: it is in the depths and heights of oceans and the skies. After some time, the shape of that sound becomes more penetrating, like one clear syllable echoing from within infinity.

A STUDENT ASKED Joshu, “Does the dog have Buddha-nature or not?” Joshu answered: “Mu.”

Mu turns up as the first case in a koan collection called the *Mumonkan* in Japanese and *The Gateless Barrier* in English. The word koan means “precedential court case.” Koans are stories that are often built on dialogues and when they are used in zazen the person who practices with koans often works with the commentaries and verses that accompany them. According to some scholars, the first story about a dog and Buddha-nature appears in China over 1000 years ago. In “Joshu’s Mu,” as in so many koans used in Zen practice, there’s a dialogue between a less experienced Zen practitioner and a more experienced Zen practitioner.

So what is this “Buddha-nature” that a dog might or might not have? It is an expression for the awake nature that is free from misconceptions about a separate self, the always-present mind that we awaken to when we let go of the notion of a solid and separate self. It is the unhindered true nature of life itself, being itself, which becomes naturally obvious to us when we let go of knowing and not-knowing and enter the mind of unknowing. Does a dog have that nature? How could it not have that nature if it is unhindered and always present? Unknowing here doesn’t mean the opposite of common knowledge, intellectual or scientific knowledge. It is something else entirely: the mind that cuts through and swallows up both knowing and not-knowing. When Mu becomes fully yours there’s no division between the one that calls and the one that answers: you call Mu and Mu calls you. “Unknowing space” becomes visible and you experience a great freedom, because even though things, feelings, thoughts, and everything else comes and goes as usual, your experience now shows that the unhindered, unknowing space is always present.

The late Robert Aitken-roshi calls Mu an arcanum. This is a Latin word that means something like “secret of secrets” or a secret remedy. In the everyday use of the word Mu in Japanese,

it means “does not have” or simply “not” or “no.” But if Mu is a secret, it is an open secret.

Mumon, the master who compiled the *Mumonkan*, once wrote the following verse:

*Mu! Mu! Mu! Mu! Mu! Mu! Mu! Mu!
Mu! Mu!
Mu! Mu! Mu! Mu! Mu! Mu! Mu! Mu!
Mu! Mu!*

IN ANOTHER VERSION of the koan Joshu answered “Yes” instead of “No.” Zen teachers say that Joshu’s answer, be it no or yes or neither-yes-nor-no or both-yes-and-no, is “a direct presentation.” The great power of this small syllable comes from this alive directness. Its power comes from your engagement in this very moment. That it is a dog is not important; it could be a crow, a worm, a cow, a tick, or anything else. Mumon’s verse for this koan in our version of the *Mumonkan* goes:

Dog, Buddha nature—the full presentation of the whole; with a bit of “has” or “has not,” body is lost, life is lost.

When we have made the decision to pick up Mu, calling out Mu, and listening to Mu, there’s no use getting entangled in questions “about” Mu. They will just create new platforms that we hang on to. It’s like any relationship: if you keep creating too many questions (and answers) about the person and the relationship in your own mind, the actual relationship gets covered up and the real person is pushed aside. If we want to get to know someone or something intimately we need to encounter it directly. Then we need to care deeply about it: being passionate about communicating and giving it our attention without letting our preconceptions stand in the way. And when we acknowledge that real knowing is a kind of passionate unknowing, our relationship will be a true one.

Traditionally in Chinese and Korean Zen, the most common way of practice with a koan was to take up a so called *huatou*, or *wato* in Japanese, which literally means something like “word head.” A wato is what is left when all unnecessary words are stripped away and nothing is there but “the fundamental cry of one syllable.” Mu is such a syllable, a core word, a fundamental call that we can practice with early on but also for the rest of our lives. In Japan,

teachers in the Rinzai tradition of Zen started to use so-called koan curricula for practice. These are systems of many koans that people work with in various Zen traditions even now. In our tradition we more or less follow the Harada-Yasutani koan curriculum. But the first step in koan practice is always a wato like “(What is) Mu?” or “What (is it)?” Or “Who (am I)?” “Who (am I)?” is not originally from the Zen tradition, but it is a natural existential inquiry that can be used as a wato. When a teacher has determined that someone has “opened to” Mu or another wato thoroughly enough, the teacher will give them subsequent koans to practice with.

THERE’S A RISK of becoming very goal-oriented when we start practicing with watos, and some of the traditional Zen teachings can sometimes become confirmations of our feeling of inadequacy. We ask ourselves (and the teacher): I don’t get it, so what is wrong with me? Why can’t I be successful in this practice? Growing up in a society that promotes personal success and the reaching of individual goals rather than seeing value in the process as a whole, people cannot help but approach practice with a mind set on success versus failure, and sometimes get very frustrated when it takes time to open up to the wato. Sitting with Mu, Who, or What will bring you face to face with existence itself, with life, death, and impermanence. It is not about goals, success, or failure, and that is a great challenge but also great freedom. A wato like Mu will carry you beyond all speculations, to a place where there’s no use for small talk or niceties, where talent and smartness won’t help and where the ordinary way of approaching things doesn’t work. We must enter a world of unknowing, which can be very disconcerting.

In some Asian cultures, in spiritual practice or education one uses shaming as a device to motivate people. Someone said that in Tibet, for example, this works quite well because people in general are very relaxed. But here, in our Western-Lutheran culture, there’s a conditioning coming from notions of sin and guilt so that we react negatively when we hear such traditional Zen expressions as: “You are useless rice bags, good for nothing—just do it!” That style doesn’t work well in our culture because we take it too personally. What in Japan is called “words without flavor” we

When we
have made
the decision
to pick up
Mu, calling out
Mu and
listening to Mu,
there’s no
use getting
entangled
in questions
“about” Mu.

might interpret as negative or punishing. Another example is: “Why do you wander from this to that, stop searching for something—just Mu!” We might hear it as an accusation, even though it is just an energetic expression meant to inspire.

ZEN PRACTICE CAN seem harsh and intense, at least from what you read in books about traditional Chinese and Japanese temple training. The energetic expressions are easy to misunderstand, sometimes because the translations are not good enough, or because the cultural context is misunderstood. Some translated expressions become more one-dimensional than they were in the original language. When I met Japanese people in Japan, I experienced that they integrate softness and sharpness in a subtle way; it’s a culture where falling cherry blossoms and swords meet, and it’s sometimes hard for us to really grasp the essence of that. We might see contradictions where there are none, and when we encounter Zen and hear or read expressions like “Be like an iron wall,” or “Cut off your delusions with the sword of Mu,” we don’t know how to interpret them and they can make us anxious in a negative way. My own experience is that if you are already full of energy and have reached a deeper level of concentration, strong words as well as quite hard strikes from the *kyosaku* can work as an inspiration. But in times of more sensitive mind states, they can be counterproductive.

Compared to how it was when I started my Zen practice at the Rochester Zen Center in the mid-1980s, we do things differently and the approach is less intense. We use the *kyosaku* less, and the fact that more people practice *shikantaza* now than before also affects the general atmosphere. Maybe the way to express it is that people’s practice is still intense, but it is a quieter intensity, more like a glowing coals than a blazing fire, and glowing coals do sometimes catch fire and a blazing fire produces burning coals. What I want to say here is that it doesn’t have to be either/or; sometimes it is one way and sometimes another, but we do not aim for creating an intense atmosphere by pressure from the outside. Instead we try to let things happen more naturally, even though some kind of intensity is needed.

The Zen teacher James Ford writes that his teacher told him, “Awakening is always an acci-



ROSHI KANJA ODLAN is a Dharma Heir of Roshi Kjolhede and a teacher at Zenbuddhistiska Samfundet (Zen Buddhist Society), which includes Zen centers in Sweden, Finland, Scotland, and Germany.

dent,” and says himself: “If awakening is an accident, a wato can make us more accident-prone.”

ZEN PRACTICE IS not about achievement, but rather about losing or letting go. This can sometimes become a tricky contradiction: we are told that there’s nothing to achieve, but at the same time it is said that we must pass through a wato to be able to work on subsequent koans.

Here we have to develop trust in ourselves, the practice, and the guidance from our teachers. It might seem like there’s one set way of moving through practice, but it isn’t so. And practice isn’t a quick-fix but a lifelong relationship. It can be difficult when other people seem to move much more quickly than us in practice, but it’s not helpful to question that with a “Why?” because we will never know why, and that kind of question just becomes a hindrance. If we play football on a field with others, our playing will not be meaningful if we focus on thinking about why others run faster or kick harder. On the surface of things, it seems like the best way is to be fast or kick hard, but this is a superficial way of looking at it, especially when it comes to spiritual practice or other areas of life that go beyond common rules.

But to develop fully we always need to do it thoroughly, deeply, and passionately. If we just do a little bit of practice now and then, or do it without real engagement, it won’t transform us in any significant way. Everyone’s practice-process in Zen is a mixture of effort and flow, and for some the effort comes first and the flow later, for some the flow comes first and the effort later, and for some it seems like it’s a lot of effort for a very long time and there’s not much flow. And mixed in with effort and flow are periods where not much at all goes on, when everything is very ordinary, but the thing is to stick with it whatever goes on. People are different, depending on many factors—call it karma if you like, or bio-psycho-social conditioning, or maybe a combination. Our conditioning is what brought us face to face with Mu or other practices. For me personally, the encounter with my first wato, Who?, was crucial. Even though the breath practice I did for two years before I picked up Who had a deep impact on my life, that small syllable shocked me in a fundamental way. The platform I was living from started to shiver and

creak and with time I realized it actually had a diving board built into it.

LASTLY, I WILL GIVE you my own comments on the first seven sentences of Zen Master Mumon’s comment on Joshu’s Mu in the *Mumonkan*:

For the practice of Zen it is imperative that you pass through the barrier set up by the Ancestral Teachers.

Can you see that it is a diving board? Then use it!

For subtle realization it is of the utmost importance that you cut off the mind road.

To dive, you have to jump off the diving board!

If you do not pass the barrier of the ancestors, if you do not cut off the mind road, then you are a ghost clinging to bushes and grasses.

If you do not use the diving board to jump, it is useless.

What is the barrier of the Ancestral Teachers? It is just this one word Mu—the one barrier of our faith.

Oh Mu, oh Mu, oh Mu.

We call it the Gateless Barrier of the Zen tradition.

It is here, now, in the midst of our life.

When you pass through this barrier, you will not only interview Joshu intimately. You will walk hand in hand with all the Ancestral Teachers in the successive generations of our lineage—the hair of your eyebrows entangled with theirs, seeing with the same eyes, hearing with the same ears.

Hello, my name is Joshu and all I have to say is Mu!

Won't that be fulfilling? Is there anyone who would not want to pass this barrier?

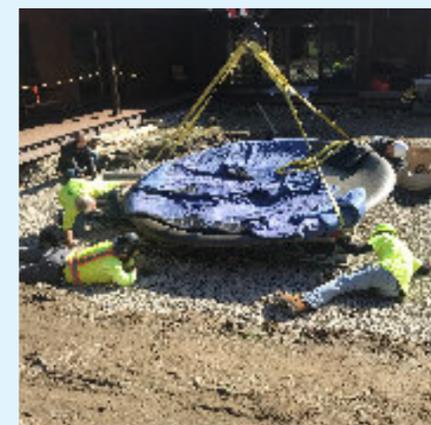
Splash! ///

▷ WORK IN PROCESS

THE CHAPIN MILL Retreat Center courtyard now features an inspiring centerpiece! On October 28, two lotus-themed sculptures were installed with the help of a massive crane and crew of contractors. The crane operator lifted each sculpture over the Retreat Center roof and gently lowered it into the courtyard, while other workers guided it into position.

One of the sculptures is concave and will contain a reflective pool once the plumbing is completed next year. The other is a lotus blossom rising up. The concave pool is the negative space to the positive form of the convex sculpture, conveying the oneness of emptiness and form. In Buddhism, the lotus flower rising out of the muddy water symbolizes the purity of our enlightened mind arising out of the suffering of samsara, while not separate from it.

With the support of a generous donor, the sculptures were designed specifically for the courtyard space by Todd McGrain (BELOW, with Eylr Kubicka during the installation), the same artist who created the centerpiece for the Founder’s Garden at Arnold Park and *Sitting Still* on the eastern bank of Chapin Pond. Todd’s other projects include two documentary films, *The Lost Bird Project* (2012), which is based on his multinational sculpture installation in memory of extinct birds, and *Elephant Path/Njaja Njoku* (2018), which documents the plight of elephants in Central Africa due to civil war and poaching.



▲ Incoming! A crane lifted the sculptures into the courtyard of the retreat center, where they were lowered slowly, with many micro-adjustments, into place.





Sightings

IN PRINT

THE BOOK: THE ART OF DYING WELL: A PRACTICAL GUIDE TO A GOOD END OF LIFE BY KATY BUTLER ¶ *What it's about:*

This book lives up to its title. The author has divided the final chapters of life into a series of phases, from vigorous old age to final breath. They are: Resilience, Slowing Down, Adaptation, Awareness of Mortality, House of Cards, Preparing for a Good Death, and Active Dying. Each chapter begins with a brief description of the phase, outlining the accompanying abilities and disabilities that commonly appear. This is followed by a to-do list that will help one maximize quality of life and independence as challenges continue to accumulate.



Why it's worthy: There has been an increasing stream of books looking at death and dying since Roshi Kapleau published *The Wheel of Death* in 1972. [An updated version, *The Zen of Living and Dying*, is still in print.] More recently, we've seen a surge in the medical specialty of palliative care with a focus on helping patients with serious illnesses examine their personal values and chart their own course in the latter part of life.

What I most enjoyed about this book is the format. In addition to the chapters examining each phase, an important section reviews the "trajectories" of different illnesses along with appropriate coping strategies. Numerous personal

stories and case histories help keep the book engaging, as well as illustrating the tasks that need to be attended to at each phase. Importantly, the author repeatedly addresses issues which pertain to friends and family, making this a valuable resource for those supporting the elderly.

Because of the author's style and practical attention to what needs to be done at each stage of the dying process, the reader finishes feeling empowered. I once had a patient who told me, "Doc, I know that everyone needs to die but I was hoping that, in my case, we could make an exception." Well... no. But this book will serve as a valuable guide, to be used in conjunction with that most important way of preparing for death: zazen.—GRANT SWANSON

CELEBRATIONS

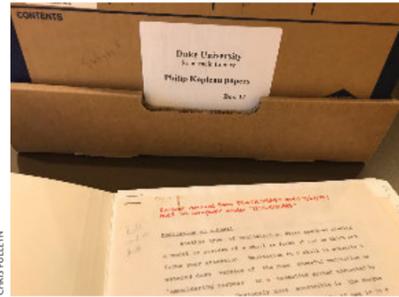
PHILIP KAPLEAU SYMPOSIUM ¶

It took 15 years since Roshi Kapleau's death, but the wait was worth it. On this past October 11 and 12, Duke University celebrated the Center's recent donation of Roshi Philip Kapleau's collected papers to its archives with a symposium honoring the Roshi's work and legacy.

The story of how Roshi's papers found a home in North Carolina is both long and short. After years of lying fallow, principally in the Center's attic and basement, they drew the attention of Rebecca Mendelson when she served on the Center's resident staff. Rebecca eventually left staff to become a graduate student in the Duke

Department of Religious Studies, where her mentor, Professor Richard Jaffe, was assembling a leading collection of American Zen archival materials. Rebecca put Roshi and the trustees in touch with Professor Jaffe. After an extended period to allow a volunteer cadre of Roshi Kapleau's students to vet the collection for privacy issues and to scan selected items that the Center may want easy access to, the collection of 18 file boxes were delivered to Durham, NC, and entrusted to Duke Archivist Andy Armacost.

Professor Jaffe offered the Center a wonderful cap to the transaction: a symposium at Duke to mark the collection's availability to scholars, Zen students, and others interested in a glimpse into Roshi Kapleau's life and thinking. A dozen or so of Roshi Kapleau's students were able to make the trip, and were joined by a number of Buddhist scholars and by Andy Armacost, who



▲ The Philip Kapleau archive on display in Duke's Rubenstein Library.

led off the event with a display of Roshi's papers, beautifully refiled and sensibly catalogued by the archive team, and with a detailed explanation of how they would be preserved.

The symposium featured two of Roshi Kapleau's Dharma heirs—Bodhin-roshi and Mitra Bishop-roshi—reflecting on the man, his teaching and its roots in his Japanese monastic and temple practice, and the huge project of Americanization which he undertook and which each of them has continued, all the while taking care to hold onto the



▲ Symposium speakers, left to right: Richard Jaffe, Peter Gregory, Roshi Bodhin Kjolhede, Roshi Mitra Bishop, Rebecca Mendelson, Jeff Wilson.

▷ SIGHTINGS

baby as the bath water drains away. The five talks were: "Ferocious Self-Cultivation: Lay Zen in Early 20th Century Japan," by Rebecca Mendelson, Ph.D. Candidate, Duke University

"Philip Kapleau's American Zen," by Roshi Mitra Bishop, Dharma Heir of Roshi Philip Kapleau and Founder, Mountain Gate-Sanmoji Zen Center

"The Philip Kapleau Papers in Context," by Professor Jeff Wilson of Waterloo University (Canada)

"Yasutani's Five Types of Zen and Keiho-Zenji," by Peter Gregory, Emeritus Professor, Smith College

"Philip Kapleau: Planting Seeds while Trailing Vines," by Roshi Bodhin Kjolhede, Dharma Heir of Roshi Kapleau and Abbot, Rochester Zen Center

Rebecca's lecture and slide presentation were especially fascinating, describing the Zen boom in early 20th century Japan which laid the groundwork for Philip Kapleau's being able to find entry and acceptance into both monastic and lay practice groups in Japan. Without that, no Center, no us. In a way, it was like visiting the world into which one's grandparents were born and discovering how one's own conception was made possible.—TOM ROBERTS & MARY WOLFE
The URL for the archive is <https://asianpacific.duke.edu/events/philip-kapleau-papers-zen-buddhism-post-world-war-ii-japan-and-united-states>.

WORLDWIDE

FIRST SCOTTISH SESSHIN IN THE KAPLEAU TRADITION

¶ Everything that we've been working towards over the past



◀ After sesshin: Rochester, Sweden, Scotland—Is it the same? Is it different?

decade or so here in Glasgow has been about providing an opportunity for people in Scotland to experience Zen practice and training in the same way that I have been fortunate enough to experience it, both in Rochester and Sweden. Establishing a permanent city center is key, of course, providing the regular chance to sit, teaching opportunities like dokusan and teisho, and, importantly, Sangha.

We've been running "city sesshins" (non-residential practice periods at the Zen center) for some time now. No small thing, but not the same as the 24/7 experience that is a "real" residential sesshin, which provides the chance to dive in and experience the mind in a different way. I've been thinking about this for three or four years now, and—to be honest—I have been concerned about the work that a residential sesshin would involve.

A couple of years ago, we got a tip from another Buddhist group based in Glasgow about a venue that could work. Ardfern is a small village on the west coast of Scotland, around 2½ hours from Glasgow. It's in a valley on a sea loch with views out towards the Inner Hebrides. Off the beaten track, isolated, and with stunning views and walks in all directions (apart from one of course!), Ardfern

seemed to have real promise.

I called on a close friend and colleague from Germany, with whom I've sat many sesshins in Sweden, and asked if he'd be head of zendo (and photographer—thanks Markus!). Fortunately, we also had a Sangha member training at Zengarden. So Anna was sentenced (sorry, assigned) to run the kitchen. Together, we spent many hours planning the meals and putting together a budget, training her as tenzo (head cook), and trying out recipes on Zengarden residents. Steadily, things fell into place.

It's difficult to describe how much work needs to happen just to get a bunch of people to sit still. But, finally, we made it to Ardfern, got the space set up, rooms allocated, jobs sorted, and ceremonies rehearsed. Sesshin itself was six days, give or take. We had a number of people with experience of residential training and sesshin

who helped to smooth the way, as well as plenty of people who could bring a real beginner's mind to sesshin. Once we got started, it felt like we'd been doing it for years. Even the occasional mouse scratching around under the floorboards was little distraction.

After sesshin—once we had scoured the surrounding hills in the darkness looking for the housekeeper's young dog that had got lost—we finally got to light the open fire in the living-room. And a chance to use the piano. Always handy to have a conservatory-trained pianist in the Sangha!

What next? Well, regular Ardfern sesshins now have their place in our schedule. And it's great to know that people can get serious Zen practice and training right here, without needing to spend years traveling abroad. I think of it as a kind of long-overdue carbon offset for all my own flights and travel over the years.

But I guess there's still one thing that we lack here that Rochester and Sweden both have. Maybe we need to make the owner an offer he can't refuse...—SENSEI KARL KALISKI





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► JANUARY

			1 -	2 Z Ch Z Dk	3 Z Ch	4 Sh ▶
5 Z	6 Z	7 Bn	8 Z	9 Z	10 Z	11 Z ◀ Sh
12	13 Z Dk	14 Z Ch Bn gl pl Ch	15 Z Dk Ch TEMPLE CLEANING AT ARNOLD PARK	16 Z Ch Z Dk Ti	17 Z Ch Z pl	18 W
19 aD Z Ch Te Y	20 Z Dk	21 Z Ch Bn gl pl Ch	22 Z Dk Ch	23 Z Ch Z Dk Ti	24 Z Ch Z pl	25 Z Ch TEMPLE CLEANING AT CHAPIN MILL
26 Z Ch Te Sg	27 Z Dk	28 Z Ch Bn gl pl Ch	29 Z Dk Ch	30 Z Ch Z Dk Ti	31 Z Ch Z pl	

► FEBRUARY

						1 Z Ch Fs
2 Z Ch Y	3 Z	4 Z Ch Bn gl pl Ch	5 Z Ch	6 Z Ch Z Ti	7 Z Ch Z pl	8 Z Ch Fs
9 Z Ch	10 Z	11 Z Ch Bn gl pl Ch	12 Z Ch	13 Z Ch Z Ti SESSHIN DEADLINE	14 Z Ch Z pl	15 Z Ch Fs
16 Z Ch Y Sg	17 Z Dk	18 Z Ch Bn gl pl Ch	19 Z Dk Ch	20 Z Ch Z Dk Ti	21 Z Ch Z pl	22 Z Ch Dk Fs
23 Z Ch	24 Z Dk	25 Z Ch Bn Sh ▶	26 Z Dk Ch	27 Z Ch Z Dk SESSHIN DEADLINE	28 Z Ch Z	29 Z Ch Dk ◀ Sh

Schedule subject to change. For the latest updates, please see www.rzc.org/calendar/

A.M. EVENT	ALL-DAY SITTING	FINDING YOUR SEAT	TEISHO
P.M. EVENT	BEGINNERS NIGHT	GROUP INSTRUCTION	TERM INTENSIVE
ALL-DAY EVENT	CHANTING SERVICE	PRIVATE INSTRUCT.	WORKSHOP
SESSHIN	DOKUSAN	SANGHA MEETING	YOUTH SUNDAY
CENTER CLOSED	DHARMA TALK	SESSHIN	FORMAL SITTING

► MARCH

1 Y	2 Z Dk	3 Z Ch Bn gl pl Ch	4 Z Dk Ch	5 Z Ch Z Dk	6 Z Ch Z pl	7 W
8 Z Ch Te	9 Z Dk	10 Z Ch Bn gl pl Ch	11 Z Dk Ch	12 Z Ch Z Dk	13 Z Ch Z pl	14 Z Ch Dk
15 Z Ch Te Y Sg	16 Z Dk	17 Z Ch Bn gl pl Ch	18 Z Dk Ch	19 Z Ch Z Dk	20 Z Ch	21 Sh ▶
22 Z	23 Z	24 Z Bn	25 Z	26 Z	27 Z	28 Z ◀ Sh
29	30 Z Dk	31 Z Ch Bn gl pl Ch				

JANUARY 1

CENTER CLOSED

JANUARY 4-11

SEVEN-DAY ROHATSU
SESSHIN with Roshi
(Chapin Mill)

JANUARY 15

TEMPLE CLEANING 9:45
AM-12:30 PM (Arnold
Park)

JANUARY 16

TERM INTENSIVE
opening ceremony 7-9
PM (Arnold Park)

JANUARY 18

INTRODUCTORY
WORKSHOP (Arnold
Park)

JANUARY 19

ALL-DAY SITTING 6:15
AM-3 PM (Arnold Park)

JANUARY 25

TEMPLE CLEANING 9:45
AM-12:30 PM (Chapin
Mill)

JANUARY 26

SANGHA MEETING 10:30
AM (Arnold Park)

FEBRUARY 13

APPLICATION DEADLINE
for February four-day
sesshin

FEBRUARY 16

SANGHA MEETING 10:30
AM (Arnold Park)

FEBRUARY 20

TERM INTENSIVE closing
ceremony 7-9 PM
(Arnold Park)

FEBRUARY 25-29

FOUR-DAY SESSHIN with
John Pulleyn (Chapin
Mill)

FEBRUARY 27

APPLICATION DEADLINE
for March seven-day
sesshin

MARCH 7

INTRODUCTORY
WORKSHOP (Arnold
Park)

MARCH 15

SANGHA MEETING 10:30
AM (Arnold Park)

MARCH 21-28

SEVEN-DAY SESSHIN
with Roshi (Chapin
Mill)