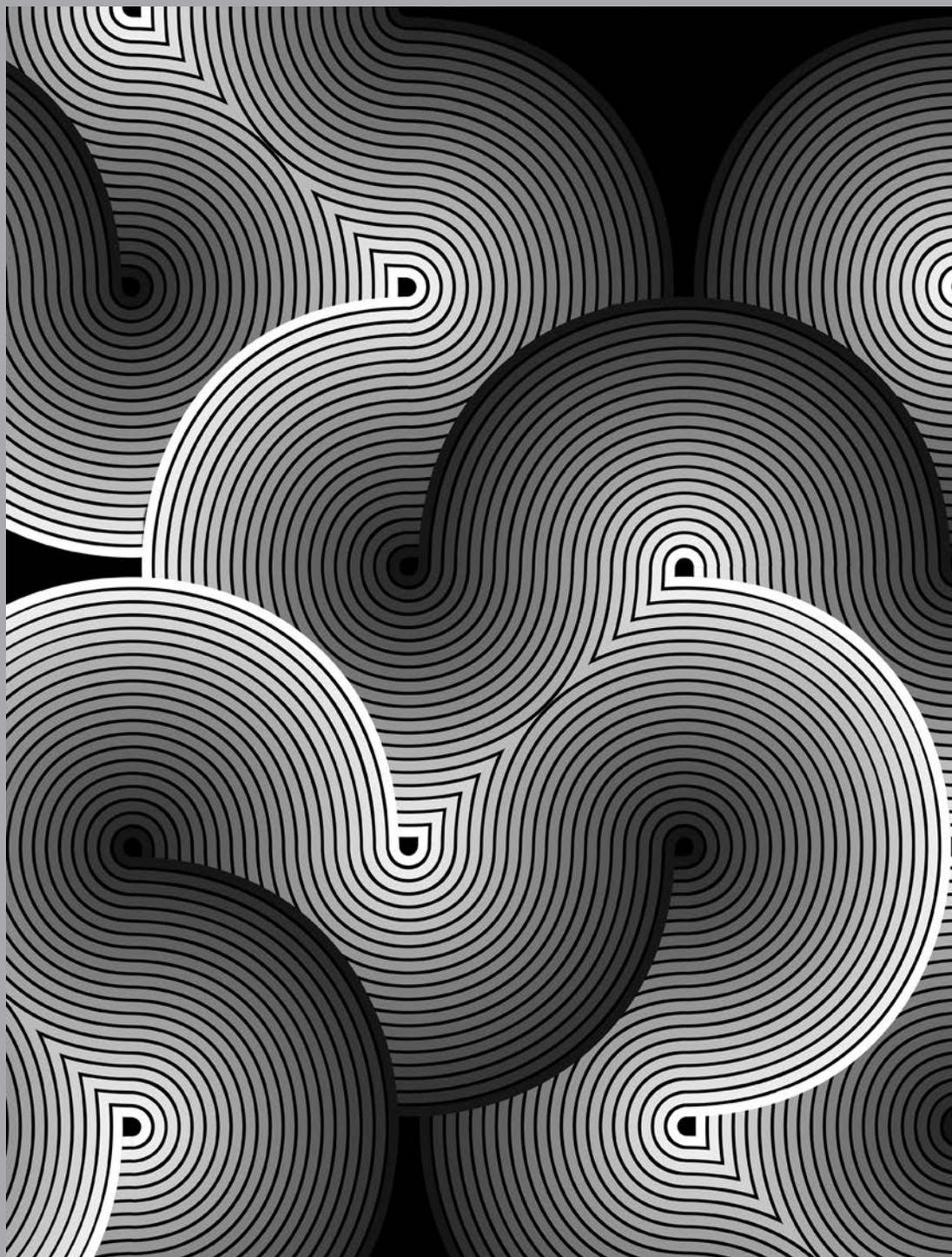


Zen Bow

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SEEING THROUGH RACISM

Zen Bow: Seeing Through Racism

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From the Editors

In this issue of *Zen Bow* we explore seeing through racism as it relates to the Dharma and to Zen practice. The articles are written by teachers and sangha members and represent different points of view and experiences with racism and ‘the wheel of suffering’ that grows out of it. We hope they contribute to constructive dialogue and action aimed at uprooting the delusion of self and other that underlies racism. The RZC ‘Seeing Through Racism’ committee holds monthly meetings and all sangha members are welcome to participate.

—Donna Kowal & Brenda Reeb

In Search of Our Original Face

ROSHI BODHIN KJOLHEDE

The inaugural meeting of the American Zen Teachers’ Association (AZTA), in Rochester in 1987, drew some twenty 2nd-generation North American Zen teachers. After convening in one of the Center’s dorm buildings, we sat in a circle on the floor and began exchanging information about our centers. It didn’t take long for the topic of race to come up, and we discovered that as a group we had seen almost no African-Americans at our centers. I felt a flicker of relief that this was a deficit not borne by Rochester alone, followed by a perplexity that filled the room—Why weren’t more African-Americans coming to Zen? (It’s interesting to recall that no one commented on the absence of Asian- and Latin-Americans.)

Fourteen years later, at a meeting of some 120 Zen, Vipassana, and Tibetan teachers in California, there were only a couple of African-Americans. And not many more Asian-Americans than that.

Over the years, the Rochester Zen Center has seen only the slightest of increases in its non-white membership, and by all accounts it appears that Zen, Tibetan, and Vipassana Bud-

dhist centers in North America overall remain overwhelmingly Caucasian. Practitioners of these three Dharma streams seem to be predominantly what some contemporary academics have called ‘convert Buddhists’—those of us who were raised Christian, Jewish, or with no religion at all. The label given the other main category of Buddhists in North America is ‘ethnic Buddhists’—Asian immigrants or their descendants.

The one denomination of American convert Buddhists that has attracted significant numbers of non-white practitioners is an off-shoot of Nichiren Buddhism, Soka Gakkai International (SGI), a cultish missionary import from Japan. In a 2004 issue of *Tricycle*, Clark Strand wrote that SGI ‘has specifically targeted African-Americans, Latinos, and Asians.’ While it’s true that we could use more racial diversity in the Sangha, who in Zen would propose that we introduce proselytizing as a way to increase our ranks?

Ever since Bodhidharma, the founder of Zen, ours has been the anti-recruitment school. When the Second Patriarch-to-be, Huiko, found him

in his forbidding cave in northern China and pleaded for help, Bodhidharma tested his sincerity with this rebuke: ‘Why should you, with your shallow mind and conceited heart, beg me for the True Vehicle and suffer such hardships in vain?’ About a century later the Fifth Patriarch, Hongren, scornfully challenged Huineng, his future Dharma Heir, when the latter came before him and declared his aspiration to realize buddhahood: ‘But you’re from Lingnan (southern China, looked down upon by northerners at the time as barbaric) and a jungle rat as well. How can you possibly be a buddha?’

Why so harsh? Although these masters certainly knew that their supplicants were as replete with Buddha Nature as they themselves, they recognized the grit required to persevere in Zen practice and wanted to screen out those lacking in resolve. They knew well of the brevity of life (their own included), and didn’t want to waste their time with students who retreated in the face of rough treatment.

The Zen monastic system in Japan has to some extent upheld this tradition of testing the mettle of newcomers. For centuries now a monk hoping to be admitted to a temple could expect to be rebuffed on his first attempt. On his second try, too, he would be told, ‘No room here.’ And then only if he returned again would he be allowed in. This winnowing process became formalized in the ritual called *tangaryo*, which is still employed in some temples in Japan and in this country. The aspiring monk is required to do round-the-clock zazen outside the temple for days, often alone and sometimes through rain and snow. A typical stretch is seven days, but the aspirant might not be told how long it would go on. To further test his resolve, his supervisors sometimes will encourage him, repeatedly, to quit, and tell him that he really isn’t up to the challenge.

Whatever the value of harshly confronting newcomers and subjecting them to Spartan tests, such methods have their drawbacks, and neither Roshi Kapleau nor I ever adopted them in Rochester. For American beginners to Zen, the physical and mental demands of serious

practice, in addition to the cultural barriers in our tradition, are challenge enough. But neither do we want to make things too easy. We owe it to minorities and Caucasians as well to keep the gates of Zen wide open, but without catering to anyone on the basis of race, sex, or any other trait. When we leave it to those interested in Zen to take the initiative and then demonstrate their perseverance, we show respect for their innate abilities while preserving a vital element of Zen culture.

It would be wonderful for the Sangha, like any religious community, to be color-blind. But whose perception is untainted by past conditioning? Boatloads of social-psychological studies that tested implicit-memory effects (priming) and other subliminal association have found that racial prejudice is a universal human trait—in all races. (There is also intra-racial prejudice, in which some African-Americans, say, look down on those of darker skin color.) But these studies also show that apart from old-fashioned, blatant racism, racial prejudice is largely unconscious. It seems that even those on the receiving end of prejudice unconsciously endorse stereotypes—for example, black men pairing the words ‘black’ and ‘violence.’ In a 2011 article, ‘Prime and Prejudice: Why We Are All a Little Bit Racist,’ Paul Verhaegen, P.H.D, writes:

We may all be racist and sexist and ageist at heart, but this is not our doing—we have merely internalized what we have been hearing and reading and seeing our whole life, that is, we are thirsty sponges, and we pick up the patterns that culture happily spoonfeeds us, and we haplessly store it all in our thirsty memory banks, gladly retrieving the connection and filling in the blanks. . . . For most of us, the racist/sexist/ageist inside us may not be a monster of our own making; s/he is not a reflection of who we are, but a reflection of where we’ve been. Being faster to associate ‘black’ with ‘violence’ doesn’t imply that you are a hardcore racist, it sadly just means you’re American.



Richard von Sturmer

These sobering findings of the research are consonant with Buddhist teachings of no-self. There is no self-standing ‘I’ that can be impervious to the influences of its environment. In the words of Sengcan, Zen’s Third Patriarch, ‘Mind is mind because of things.’ To one degree or another we are all products of our time. Those who were raised prior to the civil rights movement are more likely, probably, than children today to have unconsciously picked up racially prejudiced ideas, especially if they were not exposed to actual *people* of other races. We of that previous generation can now take heart at seeing a shrinking proportion of today’s youth saddled with prejudice.

In Buddhism, delusion (Sanskrit: *bhṛanti*) in the broadest sense may be understood as ‘what the mind gives rise to,’ and certainly by that definition we all are deluded to some degree. But to what extent are we *deceived* by our delusions? In the *Lankavatara Sutra* the Buddha teaches, ‘Delusions also appear to the wise, but

they aren’t confused by them.’ Compare this to the insidiousness of unconscious racism, as seen in the legions of Obama haters who insist that they are not racist. If he were entirely Caucasian, would they really see the man himself as so despicable that he and all of his initiatives deserve their malevolence?

Obama also spent years living in a Muslim country (Indonesia), a fact which, in addition to his race, left him double-loaded as a target for the negative projections of his political opponents. It is not surprising that it was during his Presidency that the term “other-ism” was coined for this wide-ranging delusive filter that prompts such enmity.

Racism is just one of the toxins that can leach out of the mental fractures we project onto the world. Our senses deceive us into perceiving phenomena of different appearances as separate, and the names we’re taught for all those objects—beginning with ‘Ma-ma’—reinforce the illusion of separateness. The result is attach-



Gretchen Targee

ment to what Buddhist texts call the ‘names and appearances’ that lend credibility to the fragmented appearance of reality.

When Mahamati, a disciple of the Buddha, asked him, ‘Why do fools give rise to projections?’ the Buddha replied:

Fools let their thoughts wander among the names and appearances of convention to which they are attached. And as they wander among the multitude of shapes that appear, they fall prey to views and longings concerning a self and what belongs to a self. ... And once they are attached, they are blinded by

ignorance and give rise to passion. And once they are inflamed, the karma produced by desire, anger, and delusion accumulates. And as it accumulates, they become enveloped in their own projections, like silkworms in cocoons, or submerged in boundless states of existence in the sea of birth and death, as if they were on a waterwheel.

This wheel of suffering can be seen turning every day around us and throughout the world. Even when blind passion, arising from ignorance, erupts between individuals, as in the tragic confrontation between Trayvon Martin and

George Zimmerman, its roots may grow out of the notion of ‘us versus them’—that is, group identification, which itself stems from ‘self-and-other.’ Racial and other group identification can serve a purpose as a developmental stage along an evolutionary journey toward a more inclusive identification with the human race as a whole. But it is a double-edged sword. Not only racial conflicts, but wars between nations, religious sects, and ethnic groups, as well as hostilities between political parties and rival gangs, all reveal the suffering perpetuated by attachment to group identification.

Back to that first AZTA meeting, in 1987, and the question, ‘Why aren’t more African-Americans coming to Zen?’ After some discussion that yielded no consensus, one bold teacher offered an answer: ‘I think Zen isn’t active enough for them.’ Hm. But rather than dismissing this hypothesis as simplistic (as I did then), can we consider it, non-reactively, as a partial explanation? It need not be taken as a statement about the basic nature of blacks or whites, but as a matter of different conditioning. From past conditioning, who is more likely to feel at home with a religious practice of silent, unmoving, wall-gazing meditation—those with an animated, musically-rich, vocally interactive church experience, or those trained to sit still in church and listen?

A generalization is not the same as a stereotype. The latter, according to the dictionary, allows for ‘no individuality,’ whereas a generalization can be fair enough as far as it goes. But even a fair generalization can chafe, depending on whom it is characterizing and who is presenting it. *White Men Can’t Jump* may have worked as the title of a 1992 movie, but a corresponding racial comparison that slights African-Americans would be unseemly (unless, possibly, presented by an African-American). African-Americans, after suffering centuries of enslavement as well as ongoing prejudice and injustice (as evidenced, for example, in the recent rash of new state voter-suppression laws), could be forgiven for reacting to even innocent generalizations about racial differences. Whites, secure in the privileges accorded us by society simply by virtue of

our color, can afford to ignore racial jabs. We have never faced the struggle for equality that African-Americans grew up enduring.

From the point of view of the Dharma, all phenomena can be seen simultaneously from two perspectives—that of differentiation (the world of form) and that of non-differentiation (emptiness, or sameness). Even as all individuals, within the many ways of categorizing them—by race, gender, species—are *essentially* one, all are different as well. Walt Whitman, recognizing both the illusion of separateness that afflicts most of us and our longing to see beyond it, asked, ‘Who need be afraid of the merge?’ We could also ask, ‘Who need be afraid of differences?’

When confronted by people with different views, beliefs, or traits, racists and xenophobes make too much of those differences and react with mistrust, fear, or even hostility. Having not seen into the one Mind that is our common ground, they are insecure in their essential identity and feel threatened by differences. But those for whom differences loom painfully large may instead go to the other extreme, denying those differences and criticizing those who point them out. The real problem, though, is not the differences among people (which are fascinating), but the judgments that may be superimposed on those differences. In a koan from the *Mumonkan*, the great Chan master Fayuan directed two of his monks to roll up the bamboo blinds. When they did so, alike, he commented, ‘One has it, the other does not.’ On the face of it, this is just a simple discrimination, but who would imagine that this deeply enlightened master was seeing only the differences between them, or worse, that he saw one as fundamentally superior to the other?

When a non-judgmental racial generalization provokes indignation in someone of the same race as the speaker or writer, it could be that the one who is reacting is doing so out of some unconscious racism of his own. If he hasn’t seen—or won’t see—traces of racism he himself carries, he may project that racism onto the other. If he would acknowledge his own vestiges of racism,

he might not be hypersensitive about it and so quick to condemn it in others.

White guilt further complicates black-white relations. Coupled with the racial prejudice (if only unconscious) common to us all, it can express itself in whites being patronizing or overly agreeable toward blacks, or idealizing black people or culture. How does any of this help them—or anyone? The problem is compounded if white guilt is leveraged by non-whites to gain unfair advantage over them. We whites can shudder at the karmic retribution wrought by our forebears in this country through the institution of slavery and more generally the oppression of minority races, and feeling guilty about this awful legacy is a natural human response (though, in consideration of rebirth, who of us can even say what race we were during America's era of slavery?). But when guilt colors our interactions with others, we can't see them as they are. We are responding not to them, simply, but to them as a category. So we don't want to cling to guilt any more than to any other emotion.

Unconscious racial bias, racial generalizations, white guilt and possibly the exploitation of it, racial hypersensitivity, projections—interracial dynamics are charged with 'subjective emotional consciousness,' to use a Buddhist term. To find our way through this hall of mirrors we can't look for answers in Zen doctrine, which declares that everything we perceive is the projection of our own mind. But Zen practice reveals ever more clearly how our sight is clouded. If we can't see the cataracts that obscure our vision, we must at least suspect that they are there.

If the answer 'Zen isn't active enough for them' is a dubious explanation for why so few African-Americans come to Zen, here is a proposition less likely to be disputed: African-Americans are not drawn to Zen in part because they see almost no one of their own color at Zen centers. As one explanation among others, the adage 'birds of feather flock together' would work in multiple directions, accounting for why so few non-Asians join ethnic Buddhist temples, and so few Asians, too, join 'convert' Buddhist groups, and yes, why so few Caucasians or

Asians belong to black churches. It's no wonder, then, that those of us in the Sangha are buoyed whenever a minority-race person walks through the door of the Center. In fact, some of us are heartened and relieved and grateful all at once.

Why does anyone join any group? What causes us to associate or not associate with anyone? It's all a matter of affinity. A Sangha makes choices, and in doing so over time acquires a character, what the Japanese call a 'wind of the house,' that determines who will find an affinity with it and who won't. But character is a conditioned phenomenon (like all phenomena), and as the Sangha evolves, the affinity between us and people of color may well grow—without our 'targeting' them.

We evolve by opening. It is in accepting our flaws that we move beyond them. If we accept that racial prejudice is an environmental pollutant that all of us, of all races, have had to inhale, we can collectively relax a bit and get to the business of cleansing. This means deconstructing our race-based habit-formations, and that starts with our thoughts and the feelings and emotions that stick to them. The Buddha declared, 'Thought manifests as word; word manifests as deed; deed develops into habit; habit hardens into character.' Change initiates with the mind.

We at Dharma centers can't de-bleach Zen on our own. Can African-Americans, Asian-Americans, and Latinos who encounter the Rochester Zen Center and other Caucasian Buddhist centers, either at our websites or in person, see beyond whatever other-ism they too might harbor? To see without coloration those who look different (and maybe talk differently) is no easy thing; to do so completely is to see through the world of appearances and to realize that everyone's True Self is no-self. Seeing through racism only truly happens by seeing through separation, the many ways that we divide the world. This is the work of a lifetime, an effort that may be articulated in a fundamental question, two versions of which would be: 'What was I before I was white' or 'What was I before I was black?' 'What was I before I was ... ?'

The Flowers Poem

Editor's Note: Adapted from a Japanese verse, this poem appeared in Roshi Philip Kapleau's The Wheel of Life and Death (Doubleday, 1989), as well as in the later edition titled The Zen of Living and Dying (Shambhala, 1998).

The world is a flower.
Gods are flowers.
Enlightened ones are flowers.
All phenomena are flowers.
Red flowers, white flowers, green flowers,
yellow flowers, black flowers,
all the different kinds of the colors of
flowers, all of the different kinds
of love's shining forth.
Life unfolds from life and returns to life.
Such an immense universe! Oh many lives!
Flowers of gratitude, flowers of sorrow,
flowers of suffering, flowers of joy,
laughter's flowers, anger's flowers,
heaven's flowers, hell's flowers.
Each connected to the others
and each making the others grow.

When our real mind's eye
opens this world of flowers,
all beings shine,
music echoes through mountains and oceans.
One's world becomes the world of millions.
The individual becomes the human race.
All lives become the individual—
billions of mirrors
all reflecting each other.
There is death and there is life,
there is no death and no life.
There is changing life, there is unchanging life.
Flowers change color, moment by moment.

Such a vivid world! Such a bright you! ...
You were born out of these flowers.
You have no beginning and no ending,
you are bottomless and limitless,
even as you are infinitesimal dust ...

You are the flower.
You are love.
All beings shine out of colors.
You are one, you are many,
only one moment, only one unique place,
only the unique you.
Beside you there is nothing:
you dance, appearing in all

From nowhere you came, to nowhere you go.
You stay nowhere. You are nowhere attached.
You occupy everything, you occupy nothing.
You are the becoming of indescribable change.
You are love. You are the flower.

A Loving Challenge to My Dharma Sisters and Brothers

JIM THOMPSON

I have a bumper sticker on my car that says, 'Question authority,' yet I have found it hard to generate the courage to do that when it comes to challenging what we do at the Rochester Zen Center. Specifically, I point to the lack of sensitivity to race in our primarily white Sangha.

It was hurtful to attend our annual meeting, where we talked about our spiritual past, present, and future but totally ignored the topic of race and how institutional racism manifests itself, even at the Zen Center. Is the Sangha color-blind? It appears that the Sangha's whiteness is not actually seen as a problem, or at least not as a significant one.

The topic of racism has been brought up and worked on before at the Zen Center. There is a 'committee' dealing with the issue (our Seeing Through Racism group), so I guess one could say it's 'being addressed.' But is that enough? I say, no, not at all! Though we are all 'nice people' at the Center, I'm afraid that we are complacent, and we know that complacency does not work well in Zen. The problem of racism is a koan that needs to be seen into. If we cannot solve it, how can we expect the American people to do so?

Our Seeing Through Racism group has focused much on 'white privilege.' White privilege, to me, is being able to ignore the topic of race at our annual meeting.

Since I attended the annual meeting, why didn't I bring up the issue of racism? Because I am attached to authority and procedure. Racism wasn't on the discussion list. Also, racism isn't a good, touchy-feely subject to liberal-minded folks, unlike the topic of the environment. So I allowed myself to be subverted by the dominant paradigm of our meeting.

By the way, don't misunderstand me about the environment. I know that climate change is perhaps the most critical topic in this era of human life. But also consider that a significant part of the 'climate' is the smog of white domination, a juggernaut which over several centuries has conquered and acquired and subjected ... and even changed the nature of our internal monologues. Because white domination is standard over most of the earth, we have come to think that it is normal.

If we look at history we can see that white hegemony was fueled by the lucrative practice of chattel slavery of African people that began 400 years ago. In order to carry out this atrocity, white slave traders had to have other white people buy into the concept that what they were doing was justified and even spiritually correct. This is not theory, but established fact. Over hundreds of years, through brute force, laws, social contracts, and media representations, white superiority and entitlement have been promoted, and history has been rewritten (as it is by any conquering people), particularly in the United States.

These individual and collective acts from our history were the seeds of *institutional racism*, and today's institutions, including the Zen Center, operate out of that mode. Living the legacy of our past has caused a malaise, a *dukkha* in our souls that leaves white people feeling depressed and black people feeling oppressed. It has infected the mode of operating of this society, allowing immense greed, anger, and delusion to grow. How else, except because of institutional racism, can the Zen Center remain benignly unconcerned about still being a white institution in 2013? How can it remain unconcerned with



Tom Kowal

understanding its role in dismantling—or perpetuating—institutional racism?

One need not be personally racist to unwittingly support the status quo. If we don't see through this impediment, we will not be able to move in the best direction to save ourselves and our environment. We must repair the ship of human endeavor even as we are sailing it.

Still, what does all this race stuff matter, if in Zen we want to go beyond thought ... beyond racism? After all, that's why people come to Zen practice: to find their True Nature. Indeed, that is why I have remained at the Zen Center for forty-five years, *in spite of being a black man* But I feel that the hidden viewpoints, assumptions, and blind spots about black people are the reasons few black people have remained as members. Being non-white in a largely white Sangha makes it difficult to feel that one's background is understood or respected or even of much interest to others. My wife Shirley and I raised

three children as 'Zen Center kids,' and they definitely got some spiritual nourishment from this exposure. We even had them do meditation and chanting. But there were other aspects of the tool kit for living in the world that were deficient, and some things in our culture that were precious to us could not be experienced by them. On a simple level, for example, the moving singing of Negro spirituals that Shirley and I were familiar with was largely unknown to them as they grew up. Our experiences could only be acquired second-handedly by them. We were chuckling recently at how we are happy we don't have young kids to bring up in this day and age, due to those same issues. And not being able to show them people who 'look like them' in one's most profound place of worship is ironic, when black folks are all around in other arenas.

But making everyone feel welcome does not seem to be a priority at the Zen Center. I think that at most black churches this would be a

priority. Even whites would be welcome. (Remember that black churches were developed in the first place because blacks weren't welcome in white churches.) Black folks are aware of the problem of racism in a more visceral way: it is in the realm of the visible to us. It is also a regular topic among black families and friends. Frequently, often in subtle ways, black people experience slights and unfair treatment by whites who don't even know they are committing them. And when we go to a community event, often a measure for us of its true value and sincerity is whether there are more than a token number of black people there.

Whites continue to feel afraid of blacks due to biased media portrayals implying our innate violence and crudeness, and whites tend to avoid socializing with blacks or visiting them. 'White flight' continues to occur. Not simply to the suburbs (and there are many reasons besides race to flee to the suburbs). But to the safe haven of higher social classes and to religious groups that allow them to maintain the illusion that they are good and happy people ... perhaps even people who have 'the answer' and who do things the 'right' way.

In reality, we need to avoid being so 'good,' and we cannot afford to be too happy. We must realize that we are sick, and experience it fully. We don't have to be Bodhidharma to see that the whole world is sick.

Yes, I too am afraid to realize that sickness. That is probably why I've wrestled with Zen for forty-five years with no 'break-through.' And these thoughts of separation could set me back another forty-five years. Still, they must be passed through. If they aren't worked through, and I end up sitting in my house as a happy person, what good is my training? I've remained in the Rochester Sangha because I believe that our Sangha members do indeed want to understand the pain of the 'darker brother' as well as unraveling the delusion of the 'lighter brother'—to see through racism. Our Sangha needs to realize that our task is more than maintaining equilibrium in life and balancing our budget. We must

take risks. Who do we really believe are our brothers and sisters? Who makes up this Sangha, in whose wisdom and warmth we take refuge? I appreciated that Roshi devoted a teisho this past spring to racism and another to tribalism. His sanctioning of the need to see through these issues is very powerful. Roshi also authorized us to have a chanting service dedicated to seeing through racism, a version of which took place this September. I am hoping it can be done on a regular basis, because it is so easy to slide into forgetfulness if we don't remain vigilant on this issue.

Frederick Douglass said three famous words: 'Agitate ... agitate ... agitate!' 'Power,' he said, 'concedes nothing without a demand.' As soon as we let down our guard, the unseen forces of delusion quietly grab the reins. The invisible injustices clinging to our culture and entwined with racism then flourish—things such as sexism, heterosexism, ableism So we can take nothing for granted; we must agitate that status quo, through our questioning. The vow to awaken for the sake of all living beings is the seed of that questioning. As Kannon awakened to the cries of the world, we must awaken to our neighbors' suffering. So we need reminders to unearth what is not visible. We need agitation.

Zen master Ichu said that what is needed is continuous 'Attention, attention, attention!' Indeed! Every moment! And let us take this ALL the way home. Don't just be aware. Drive that awareness deeply into the fabric of your heart and that of this bleeding society by acting on it. Shine a light on *all* its dark recesses. *Agitate, agitate, agitate.*

There is a spiritual made very popular in the Civil Rights Movement. It begins, 'This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine!

What is that? How will you do it?

Svaha!

Jim Thompson lives in urban Rochester with his wife Shirley. Retired from work as a physical therapist, he continues working to see the 'Beloved Community' actualized.



Amaury Cruz

Impressions from the South

KEITH CARPENTER

You've got to be taught to hate and fear,
You've got to be taught from year to year,
It's got to be drummed in your dear little ear,
You've got to be carefully taught.

You've got to be taught to be afraid
Of people whose eyes are oddly made,
And people whose skin is a diff'rent shade,
You've got to be carefully taught.

You've got to be taught before it's too late,
Before you are six or seven or eight,
To hate all the people your relatives hate,
You've got to be carefully taught!

—*You've Got To Be Carefully Taught*, lyrics from
Rodgers and Hammerstein's *South Pacific*, 1949

I was born in North Carolina in 1955 and grew up in South Carolina. In the early 1960s people

could be denied access to a school, a water fountain, a bathroom, or a job in a night club, as well as to floor seating in a movie theater, courthouse, restaurant, the front of a bus, among other places because of the color of their skin. This sounds crazy now, but that was the reality of the time.

I still have many racist images and words rattling around in my brain from when I was a boy. The 'n' word was tossed about frequently and a lot of insulting phrases were used when referring to someone of African descent. I can't remember when I saw or heard about it, but the earliest insulting image is the blackface used in minstrel shows and later in vaudeville. A white man (or two) would wear black theatrical makeup on his face and make his lips look large, don white gloves, and act out a stereotypical, cartoonish caricature of a black person while singing and dancing. An insulting idea that goes with this

image is the notion that black people are shuck-in' and jivin,' lazy, and can't be trusted. These terms have even been used by political commentators when talking about President Obama and his policies.

Some other negative images that are part of my cultural upbringing come from popular television and other forms of entertainment:

→→ *The Little Rascals*, a series of comedic shorts produced in the 1940s, revolved around a group of poor, mostly white kids with a few from other ethnic groups. The stereotyping was unrelenting.

→→ The *Amos 'n Andy* show. Truly cringe worthy.

→→ Eddie 'Rochester' on the *Jack Benny Show*. I read that Jack Benny made a strong effort to tone down the racial stereotyping, but Rochester really was Jack Benny's valet. He had a gambling problem and he wanted to avoid work.

→→ Uncle Remus from *Song of the South*. He worked on a plantation and was very happy.

→→ The crows from *Dumbo*. Watch and listen to the dialogue.

→→ Sunflower the Centaur in *Fantasia*, a servant to the white centaurs. It was scrubbed from *Fantasia* in the early 1960s.

→→ *Show Boat*. This musical has an interracial subplot. One of the characters is passing as a white woman and is illegally married to her white husband. It's illegal because of the anti-miscegenation laws of the time that weren't declared unconstitutional until 1967. (Most states were repealing the laws, but not all.)

→→ Black people as cursed by God. The curse of Canaan by Noah from the Bible has been used to justify slavery and treating others as inferior. One interpretation of this myth is that Noah was shown disrespect by Ham, Noah then curses Canaan (Ham's son), and God steps in and curses Canaan and his descendants with black skin and slavery. Yes, some really believed this—maybe some still do.

→→ In *To Kill a Mockingbird* one sees all the black people segregated in the courtroom and made to sit in the balcony. This was common before the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The two movie theaters in the small town I grew up in had an entrance for white people and another entrance for black people that would go up to the balcony. Theoretically we all now have equal access to everything, and yet



While it's probably wise to trust one's gut when meeting a stranger, how much are we influenced by images that have been drilled into us from an early age up to the present moment? Can we drop our preconceived ideas and see others as they are? Bringing it back to Zen practice, all are endowed with Buddha Nature, but it is often covered up by deluded thinking, specifically the idea that we are separate from others.

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Gradual Awakenings

MARTHA HOWDEN

For everyone I knew, from birth through college, segregation was the law of the land and was accepted as a given. I was born in January 1939 in Richmond Virginia. For the first twenty years of my life, there was no one I knew who questioned segregation in school, church, or the local media. There was no one I knew who questioned the separate schools, water fountains, toilets, and doors to enter. There was no one I knew who questioned the total whiteness of the town council, of the owners of businesses lining the streets of downtown, of those who were sitting at the lunch counters in the dime store on Main Street.

For the first five years of my life, like many white children of the south, I was cared for by a black woman. Dorothy, a tall and beautiful young black woman, who took care of me, lived with us. Wherever we traveled, Dorothy cared for me. She stayed with me at my grandmother's house in Harrisonburg when my parents went away and when my mother was having another baby. When World War II came and we moved to Arlington to be close to my father who had enlisted in the Navy, even then Dorothy came with us. I spent more time with her than anyone else during those years and have only fond memories of her. However, it was also made clear that she was not one of us. She was Other.

The melting pot of this country, as we saw it, was a mixture of people of European descent. There were no awakenings, individual or institutional, during these years that shook our complacency about the white order of things. In 1954, *Brown v. Board of Education* had ruled separate schools are not constitutional. I was a sophomore in high school and Virginia schools were continuing with segregation as usual. I was in college when there were rumblings of trouble in Arkansas, which seemed so far away and irrelevant since the Virginia schools were still

segregated. There were some actions I heard about later in Alabama and Mississippi where black adults and even children were standing up for equal rights and sometimes being killed for wanting what the law was now saying was rightfully theirs. Although I had some awareness of and uneasiness about the violence, it seemed far removed from my life. For example, I recall in 1960, when I turned 21 and wanted to register to vote, I asked my father about the literacy tests I had heard everyone had to take. He laughed and said those tests aren't for us, not to worry. I did not question this practice.

A friend of my younger sister was my first contact with a significant person in my life who was concerned about racial injustice. She stopped by my house on her way to the March on Washington, held on August 28, 1963. I was shocked and surprisingly moved by her action. I had not known she felt this way, and her family and mine were best friends. Questions and concern began to stir in my mind about what was happening to black people who were struggling to gain access to the same privileges as whites. The September 15, 1963 bombing of a church in Birmingham, where four children died, was the catalyst that fully brought my attention to what was happening in this country, and it began to bring me out of the stupor of racist thought. At the time of the bombing, I was the mother of a 14-month-old son, with another child due to be born in November. I related as a mother who would be horrified and devastated if one of my children was killed. The common thread of 'mother' connected me to this disaster. At this time I had no understanding nor had I even attempted to understand the depth and breadth of the tentacles of racist laws and how every institution in our country participated in this deception. I understood, now, that children and adults with black and brown skin were being



David Merulla

killed, even when they were not doing harm to anyone. The passion with which these children and adults were standing up for the same rights that ‘we’ have touched something in me I had not felt before.

This beginning of some level of understanding and stirring of concern for the injustice of the treatment of those of dark skin did not go away. Between 1967 and 1969, while we were living in Georgia, I became acquainted with the Episcopal Order of the Sisters of St. Helena. These women were the first social activist friends I had made. I joined with them in their voter registration efforts, going to neighborhoods and churches to encourage black citizens to register and vote. Martin Luther King, Jr. was scheduled to come to Augusta to speak at one of the churches, and I had planned to go. The talk never happened because he was assassinated.

Our neighborhood in Augusta was the last street before the beginning of the black neighborhood. A tall wooden fence separated the two neighborhoods. We lived on the side of the street with the fence bordering our back yards.

A black pastor and his family moved onto our white street, directly across from our house. We were visited by a realtor asking if we wanted to sell our house. Our street was a natural for the realtors to choose for steering families who had enough money to move to a nicer home, since we were so close to ‘their’ neighborhood. We had no interest in moving; however, many families left. My children had been climbing the fence to play with the black children on the other side, and they slowly began to come over to our yard to play. We had phone numbers to call to send each other’s kids home. These years in Augusta were seasoning the experience of unfolding awareness, of the gradual awakening to the issue of racism. There was still a strong sense of the Other, although there were also times where ‘the black Other’ was another mother or neighbor, not ‘the help.’

Our move to New Orleans in 1969 continued the unfolding awareness when I heard about the New Orleans Free School, which was based on the Summerhill Education Model. Equally important to me was its commitment to being

a fully racially integrated community school open to anyone, regardless of income. It was just opening as we arrived in New Orleans, and it had received a grant to be able to operate with no tuition. The person who started the school was steeped in study of the education system's failure to provide meaningful education for minorities. Parents were expected to be as fully integrated into the school as they wanted to be, and many were. This was the first time my entire family experienced daily interaction with black, white and mixed families working, teaching and learning together as a common occurrence. The only time when there were reminders that racism was still alive was on our school camping trips to the Ozarks. We often had difficulty finding places to use toilets or would get disapproving looks as we climbed out of our crowded vans. These years in New Orleans were another important part of the gradual awakenings, especially from the daily personal interactions and interracial experiences that were new to my life. The belief of the Other was still alive, but the experience of 'the other' had become 'friend.'

My family's move to Rochester in 1974 was a step backward into a more segregated environment in terms of the initial school experience for my children and the neighborhood we had moved into. My children were still attending an alternative school, but there was only one child of mixed race, which was very different from our life in New Orleans. There was only one parent in the school who was a person of color. Although a social conscience had been developing, with racial injustice as one of my primary concerns, 99.9% of the people in my life were white. The only exceptions were the visits I made to the Rochester City Jail as an advocate through Jail Ministry. We moved to Rochester soon after the Rockefeller Drug Law was enacted, born in large part from institutional racism. All of the incarcerated people I visited to make sure they were being connected with the services they needed were persons of color, and for most of these, both men and women, their crime was drug possession. The only other regular contact

with any person of color during the first decade of our life in Rochester were the visits from my children's high school friends, some of whom were black and Hispanic.

The next decade consisted of graduate school and family turmoil, and in 1989 I ended up at the Rochester Zen Center. I had been attending a joint Episcopal-Presbyterian Church in the South Wedge that was very integrated, but I had been increasingly drawn to Buddhist teachings. When I joined the RZC, the only sadness I felt was the realization that it was primarily white. We formed a racism committee in the early years I was at the RZC, exploring what we might do to make Zen more available to people of color. I'm not sure what happened to that early committee, but here we are, back again and questioning how do we work with this issue that has seemed so hard to move.

Part of the gradual awakening in terms of racism as it has continued throughout my life has involved making conscious my own unconscious racism and then seeing that institutional racism and my individual racism are not separate. It was not until two summers ago that I began to study more in depth the history of racism in this country and the factors that contribute to our living in an increasingly segregated country. Our Seeing through Racism committee has watched several documentaries that show how racist policies led to banks refusing mortgages to people of color after WWII, resulting in a concentration of people of color only able to find housing in the inner city. Racist attitudes led to 'white flight' to suburbs, escalating the segregation of neighborhoods and schools in those neighborhoods. The influences of institutional racism have created cities with ghettos of poor schools for the poorest kids, lack of meaningful or any work, and broken homes and lives from generations of living in poverty. There is a disturbingly large number of black males in the inner city who drop out of school and end up in jail or prison with longer sentences than for white males who commit the same crimes. These prisons have become big business as

many have been privatized and have become a mechanism to disempower people of color, who disproportionately occupy them. Integration has been the law of the land for 50 years, but it has not happened. There are many professional people of color today in all types and levels of work environments, but the numbers are low. There are few truly integrated neighborhoods, and most of them are in the city. A couple of families here and there does not constitute significant integration.

Why should this be an issue for us, here, at the RZC? Where do social justice issues fit in our practice? So many people think that with the election of a black president and the increasing presence of people of color in white collar positions and graduating from college we are beyond racism. The Supreme Court recently said as much with its dismantling of some of the voting rights legislation this past June. It is painful to recognize how deeply imbedded these attitudes are in the structure of our minds and institutions. Yet how could they not be? We come to see through our practice the reality of mutual causality. Events and objects in this universe arise due to causes and conditions. We are not separate from these causes, we are deeply imbedded in these conditions.

Since January of this year, coinciding with the arrival of the Rochester Museum and Science Center's exhibit called 'What is Race?', there has been a local initiative in exploring access to adequate health care, education, criminal justice, and economic opportunities for white people and people of color here in our city and county. The outcome of these months of exploration has been to highlight the significant disparities of access in every one of these areas. These disparities have been documented in a book which was just published this spring called *The State of Black Rochester* (Rochester Area Community Foundation, 2013).

What does this mean for our Sangha which sits in a beautiful building, in our silence of deep meditation, only several blocks away from the

PATH OF PATHS

*What is conscious becomes path.
 What is unconscious becomes fate.
 Whenever path and fate
 converge, cross or separate,
 there arises destiny.*

—DWAIN WILDER

areas where these disparities are most prevalent? Does our meditation inform us of our complicity in this condition called racism? In our complacency or denial we can point to the black middle class of professionals, the black businesses which have been successful and a two-term black president, which are all important successes. But when you look more deeply, the disparities of today are across all the same areas as they were in my youth, without the blatant rigid boundaries between white people and people of color. What do the Four Vows we chant over and over mean in the context of our Sangha in this community of such disparity? In this thorny history of our land, may those of us who are white look deeply into the disparities resulting from our white privilege, to which we have so often been oblivious. May we recognize our own subtle and not so subtle participation in these disparities. May we liberate our hearts and minds, as we chant 'All beings without number I vow to liberate!'

Martha Howden is a grandmother of six, grandmother in law of one. She is a grateful sister of the Shades of Sisterhood.

Speaking of Racism ...

TOM KOWAL

I don't specifically recall my first observation of or exposure to racism, but I clearly remember the moment when I realized that there is a problem with treating people differently based on the color of their skin. I was probably around the age of five, sitting on the kitchen counter and watching my mother wash dishes or prepare a meal. I had probably just finished watching Sesame Street and was practicing my rhyming out loud. I am always reminded of this occasion when I hear a the child of a friend or family member do the same thing. At some point I must have rhymed some words, real or made-up, and one of them was the 'n word.' My mother immediately stopped what she was doing, looked at me sternly, and told me to never repeat that word. I was a bit dumbfounded at her reaction and, like most children at that age, I simply asked, 'Why?' Her response was something like 'because that's what mean people used to call black people and it's not nice.' Being that I lived in a town that was 99% Caucasian, the few people that I had observed with a different color skin than my own were likely on TV. I'm pretty sure that I was confused why someone would be mean to the people on Sesame Street or Mr. Rogers just because they had darker skin, but I likely didn't dwell on it for more than five seconds before I was confronted with more important issues, like a peanut butter and jelly or bologna and cheese sandwich for lunch.

It wasn't until the age of 13 or 14 that I recall being truly aware of the serious consequences of racism and discrimination. In my Social Studies class, we watched films and had discussions about the Nazi concentration camps in Europe during WWII and the movement for civil rights in the United States in the 1960s. The images of the bulldozers pushing dozens of bodies into large pits and of police officers using dogs and fire hoses on black demonstrators are for-

ever etched in my memory. I remember being stunned by what I had just watched; however, I was also at an age when boys were not encouraged by their peers to show any concern for such things—it wouldn't be 'cool.' So, instead my friends and I would trivialize racism by making jokes and throwing it into the mix of other topics of discussion. It was more important to prove how 'manly' we were even though we really had no clue about sex, girls, and ... well, sex. The guys who had the older and wiser 16- to 17-year-old brothers often dominated these discussions; after all, they had much more knowledge on these topics.

As much of an impact as those images and discussions of the Holocaust and the civil rights struggle had on me, they were still just historical facts on the pages of textbooks and could easily be left behind when we went home from school. Yet, issues of discrimination and racism seemed to dominate the news during my high school years in the early 1990s. There was the televised Rodney King beating and resulting riots, the increased tensions in Northern Ireland, and graphic reports on the bloody Rwanda conflict and the war in Kosovo. At that age, it was hard enough trying to figure out why there were certain cliques in school and where I 'belonged,' never mind trying to understand global disputes. However, in my young and developing mind, I do recall being confused about the conflicts in Ireland and Rwanda. They were 'white vs. white' and 'black vs. black,' while at home I could literally see the difference in people to know who was against whom. This distinction did not clarify anything though. Our high school was part of the 'Urban-Suburban' program where some, predominantly black, students from the Rochester schools would ride a bus to attend school in the suburbs. I became good friends with some of these students and this experience

likely had an enormous impact on my perception of racism. Whereas before making these friendships I may have taken lightly any racist comments made by others, I could now see them as baseless—my black friends did not fit those ignorant generalizations, and therefore it didn't make sense to judge anyone on the basis of his or her skin color.

It was at that same time in my life when I started to get hooked on the wave of grunge music, which had a raw sound and centered on themes of social alienation. I used to listen to music without really trying to figure out the message implied in the lyrics because I would have been caught up in other thoughts; however, the band Pearl Jam stood out as having something to say, even if I couldn't quite put my finger on it. One song that especially grabbed my attention was *w.m.a.* (White Male American). Some of the lyrics are as follows (edited for length):

He won the lottery when he was born ...

Trained like dogs color and smell
Walks by me to get to him
Police man

He won the lottery by being born
Big hand slapped a white male American
Do no wrong so clean cut
Dirty his hands, it comes right off

Police stopped my brother again
Police man

Jesus greets me, looks just like me

At the time I didn't quite appreciate the reality of the song (which was supposedly written on the spot after the lead singer's experience of sitting outside a recording studio with a black friend when out of nowhere two white police officers on bikes came over to harass his friend), but ever since then, and to this day, it pops into my head when I see an example of racial injustice. Admittedly, outside of watching and read-

ing the news, I don't often observe racism, most likely because I exist in my own little white middle-class American bubble that doesn't directly expose me to it, but when I do, it always seems to happen in a situation where I least expect it, such as an extended-family gathering where people have a few drinks and start talking about politics or the latest news.

Before practicing Zen, I would hear racist remarks and just walk away or ignore them, thinking to myself that these were ignorant people, and I don't want to waste my time with them. Today I realize that I was probably just distancing myself from and not acknowledging the existence of racism in my own state of ignorance. I started practicing Zen at the age of 24, and it's hard to say how much of my change in perspective on racism can be attributed to zazen and how much was a normal part of becoming an adult. It is clear that my awareness of how my own speech and actions can serve to reinforce or reject racial discrimination was accelerated by sitting and the introspection that comes from it. After a couple of years of sitting, I found myself becoming angry when a family member made a comment about someone based on their ethnicity or skin color. My response took the form of a rude or sarcastic comment directed at the family member's ignorance. Of course, sarcasm did not really seem to help make family members more aware of their discriminatory speech; it just made them annoyed with 'the Mexicans' and me.

As a part of the Four Vows we recite, 'All beings without number, I vow to liberate.' When I first came to the Zen Center, I would just 'go with the flow' and recite it, while writing it off as some 'idealistic mumbo-jumbo' that nobody could expect to achieve or even be foolish enough to try. We're just saying it to make ourselves feel good, right? I mean, there are seven billion people on the planet, plus all of the animals that face abuse—where would we start?! Then one day in sesshin I recited the Four Vows and broke out in tears upon saying that first line. I understood deeply what that line is really addressing. I realized that I had been holding so

many people in my life hostage to my own preconceptions of what they should be or how they should act—holding on to incidents and comments made by a friend or family member in the past and treating them as if they were unwilling or incapable of changing themselves. As my practice continues, so has my comprehension of what it means to liberate all beings. Over and over again, I become aware of the prejudices that pop up in my mind upon meeting someone new and immediately categorizing them as being ‘left or right’ on the political spectrum, or being a certain way because they are from a certain geographical location, or associating them with a racial stereotype—thoughts that seem to be ingrained in my mind from prior life experiences.

A part of me believes that the discriminating thoughts about race and ethnicity that occasionally swirl in the back of my mind are less severe than those experienced by people from prior generations, and likewise they are likely stronger than those in the minds of younger people. I’m not naive enough to think that a societal problem as complex as racism will go away anytime soon, but I would like to think that the worst is behind us, at least in the United States. One way to think about the process of social transformation is to compare it to Niagara Falls. All the racial tension that built up during the first half of the twentieth century was like the force of the Niagara River leading up to the Falls, the turmoil of the 1960s civil rights struggle. Perhaps today we’re still in the process of emerging from the rough waters at the bottom. In my own life, just looking at the number of close friends, neighbors, and family members who are in interracial relationships or are same-sex couples (some now married) gives me some hope that a collective enlightenment of sorts is unfolding. Just nine years ago I can recall watching the Democratic National Convention when John Kerry was running for president and the young Illinois state senator, Barack Obama, gave an inspiring speech. I was riveted by his words and expression, but would I, or anyone else reading this, have really believed that he could possibly

be president just four years later? The response that he has received from those on ‘the other side of the aisle’ over the past several years has been frustrating (and at times disturbing), but I think it will likely have a net-positive result by ‘airing out the dirty laundry.’

As my Zen practice continues, my approach to engaging with acquaintances and family who make an underhanded racist comment has evolved, and I now seem to be able to prevent myself from responding out of anger or frustration. Instead of throwing judgmental comments back at them, I have been trying to find questions to ask them in a manner that is not insulting but will allow them to see how foolish they sound. For example, in a recent discussion about a robbery in the news, a family member suggested that the crime occurred because the suspect was black and couldn’t be trusted. I was able to pause, take a breath, and simply ask, ‘Oh, have you never heard of a white guy getting arrested for robbery?’ In the past I would have blurted out something along the lines of, ‘Well, that’s a stupid and racist thing to say!’ and the discussion would have devolved into a messy argument. But, this time it resulted with him trying to justify his comment by stumbling on his own words and I could see some glimmer of shame in his face as the conversation changed.

I know that we have a long way to go until we can consider racism to be anything close to a thing of the past, but I think it isn’t that hard to believe that it is possible. After all, just a few hundred years ago at the time of the Salem Witch Trials, it would likely have been inconceivable that Barack Obama could be the president of the then-future United States of America, not just because of the color of his skin but because he was left-handed. Hopefully the modern day accounts of people being harassed, assaulted or killed because of the color of their skin, sexual orientation, nationality, religion, gender, etc. will seem as ridiculous as burning someone at the stake for using her left hand.

Tom Kowal lives in Rochester and currently serves as Chair of the Center’s Board of Trustees.

Who Are We?

The Hazards and Difficulties of Seeking Diversity

DWAIN WILDER

Zen Master Dogen wrote ‘Gourd with its tendrils is entwined with gourd.’ This means we are all intimately bound up, wound up with each other. Truly inseparable.

—Alan Senauke, *Zen teacher and social justice activist*

The matter of racial diversity within any group, including our Sangha, is woven of unexpected threads of complex, even bewildering, meanings. The matter touches on racism, surely, but it also touches on the blindness of white supremacy and the profound and intimate blindness of being a member of any oppressor group. It touches on the history of an institution, its trajectory through time and cultural dynamics as it matures. It touches on a peculiar acuity that may be one of the only blessings accruing to an oppressed people: the ability to see the emperor’s new clothes for what they are. The oppressed can know their oppressor more surely and intimately than their oppressor could ever guess.

Yet to state the situation so baldly is to overdraw the point. Being oppressed, of course, has its wounds, scars, and suppressions that inevitably warp ordinary perception to some degree. Each of us knows, in our own way, how difficult it is to see with a sharp eye the insincerities and blandishments of those who possess more social and cultural power than ourselves without deeply feeling the sting of the thing and wishing it were different. And, to some extent, we find ourselves the center of focus for the resulting pain, its objective (as indeed individuals and members of an oppressed group are). Thus the original, simple, direct vision becomes diminished to some degree; the ageless human story of direct perception of reality mediated and woven into concern for our own safety, survival, and self-

hood. For all this, though, we have a common history of slave-owning and slavery, of outrages ranging from lynchings and worse, to daily discriminations of all sorts, abuses and insults and difference-making where no differences in fact exist. It is a history that has given ample reason for the sons and daughters of slaves down the generations to know, with dire necessity, the mindset and habits of the ever-present oppressors who have borne down on them so unremittingly.

The foregoing discussion might prompt us to ask, ‘Why are more blacks not joining us at the Zen Center?’ It seems this question is exactly backwards. As a group of white people of every class and means, we are more mobile in almost every way than the people we would beckon to join us, and largely unaware of what oppressed people might find inhibitory in the merest visit to the Zen Center. So perhaps this question becomes ‘Why aren’t we going to where the oppressed people are? Why are we not doing *za-zen* on the street corners where they are being beaten by the police? Why are we not standing by them, as unscrupulous bankers and their henchmen fraudulently throw them out of their homes? Why are we not showing up with *casse-roles* at doors of mourning where there has been rape, pillage, and any of the other almost daily outrages perpetrated on the black communities of inner-city Rochester?’ And so on, as any generally informed reader can do by extension. And these seem to be questions of simple merit. What is so inauspicious about taking up such questions? Perhaps something might even come of it.

I began turning these matters over in my mind many years ago. I must admit that the conclusions I have drawn, for all their obvious



Sally Bittner Bonn

relevance to a social activist, have an attraction all too similar to the Sirens' call. How could that be? If you want to spread the Dharma, take it where people are suffering. Could this be anything other than the essence of the Buddha's teaching? But what I have learned, throughout a long, on- and off-again career as a social activist, is that there is a constant temptation for me, a six-foot-two white male, to declare something on the order of a final cleansing of the trappings of white supremacy. 'I've moved beyond racism, and now stand ready to work shoulder to shoulder with oppressed people.' This is an egregious naiveté, harmful to both the oppressor and to those oppressed. Racism is a matter woven into a society. It springs from roots far back in our sentient beginnings, a time when fear of the stranger and of the unknown had real survival benefit. Of course, we've elaborated so much on that survival instinct that our modern culture's—I daresay any modern culture's—racism is hardly recognizable as a survival benefit. Yet

we subconsciously and inevitably cling to it as if it were either just that very benefit, or, worse, a perk of being superior. Why should we do so, in the face of the idiocy of the notion?

The simple answer is because the rewards are so great. We are fond of thinking that our place in the world, as Eurocentric white people (and other immigrants to various degrees), and its benefits are a result of our individually sterling character, or our family's or community's or—if one need reach so far—of the exceptional yet inherent goodness of our national magnanimity. To scrape the bottom of a barrel, we may even believe that we are at least better than those we despise, those who are lower on the class hierarchy. Quite the contrary, white people's station in life as members of a dominant culture, no matter what the class standing or means, is almost entirely due to the machinations of white supremacy, rebounding through the centuries of our forebearers' oppression of indigenous First Nations, black people, and almost

all immigrant and religious minorities. Some of the immigrants to our shores have been able to raise themselves more or less swiftly to sufficient economic and social standing to gain admission to some if not all of the benefits of white supremacy. But not those whose forebears arrived in slave irons, and only those First Peoples who would forsake their indigenous culture to a degree that our appointed bureaucrats find—to this day—fitting and satisfactory.

The fact of the matter is, I cannot extricate myself from racism any more than I could bootstrap myself out of the culture I was born into and nurtured by and daily depend upon. It is a racist culture. How could I not be racist when I am embedded in and benefit from the racism of a racist society? All the diversity workshops in a lifetime would not do anything more than make me aware of my racism. And yet that benefit would be great indeed—far greater than any attainable by hoping to stand free of racism. For with that insight—the inevitability of our racism as members of an oppressor class—comes the possibility of using that very status to be the most powerful ally imaginable to those who suffer the indignities and wounds of racism. A white person acting as an ally can wield great influence indeed. But only as long as the ambition is focused on changing one's peers within the oppressor class one belongs to. The temptation, of course, is to begin to believe that one can conjure up in one's mind what the victim of racism needs and stride forth to conquer ills on the victim's behalf. And that is the mistake at the core of the 'proactive' attempts to take matters into one's own hands, as discussed above. Such attempts are mistakes activists are liable to make over and over.

So, in order for one who is aware enough of his or her own racism to be an ally against racism, he or she needs to stand shoulder to shoulder not with the oppressed (unless directly invited to do so), but rather with the racist at one's elbow and somehow compassionately foster awareness of racism in one's own community. All reassurances of our fellowship with the oppressed,

and protestations of affection, and so on that we might feel urged to proclaim are more properly made to one's fellows among oppressors—with alacrity and sincerity. This is possibly much more challenging work, and one's body language and perspiration are good measures of that. And when the racially oppressed see whites truly and reliably taking stands against racism, perhaps from time to time they will respond. The answer might come in the form of suggestions for what the subjects of our racism need from white people, who might be their self-declared allies. Or perhaps the response will simply be to let whites continue striving to sort out their own community. Certainly a daunting task, and several lifetimes of work. Always, the decision to stand directly with people of color to confront racism needs to be predicated on cooperation and consent with the black community. To do otherwise is to risk placing the very people we hope to aid in grave danger by our very presence, as well as by our inherently naïve ideas of what is needed.

This leads to my central question: what value are these observations regarding the matter of fostering racial diversity in the Rochester Zen Center's Rochester Sangha? Most obviously, it suggests that there is little we can do by acting directly to foster racial diversity. Though the problem is not entirely of our making, we are embedded in it and we depend on it. Furthermore, the best we can do to become aware of the circumstance is to continue to practice zazen. Perhaps the most direct thing we could do is bring to awareness the Zen Center's cultural history, and how the varieties of oppressive behavior, both within the Center and in the surrounding city of Rochester, have resulted in the karma we now must expiate. In fact, there is just such a working group called Seeing Through Racism that is doing just that, and has been meeting for some time now. Acting as allies of the racially oppressed within the growing awareness of our ineradicable racism is a more straightforward course than to aspire to ridding oneself of its influence enough to go to the black community

with various plans of action, to somehow ‘make a difference.’

And yet, as the epigram from Dogen reminds us, we are all one, our fates and lives intertwined. How do white people align this reality with a decent modesty regarding our abilities and desires to make a substantial difference in the suffering our perceived supremacy has wreaked on people all around us? It is naive to simply sit in the zendo with the assurance that if we come to some enlightenment of one degree or another as to our true nature, that the insight will directly translate into a transformation of the personal circumstances of those suffering around us, that somehow the fruit of all those hours on the mat will be equivalent to fewer beatings, less thugery, or the halt of official rapacity, and a balm for what has been done. Yet it is naïve to believe it is not so, too.

One of the recurring themes of my practice lately is working out how I can bring to the silence of zazen the outrage I feel about matters at large in so many dimensions of our culture. It is so easy to chase after these outrages or to chase them away. It is harder to sit in their midst, feeling their intensity, their urgency, and the power somehow bound up within them. It is like sitting in a fire, searching for a way to become the center that has no name. From time to time, I am reminded that the Great Way is the Middle Way, and that in a world of problems I must somehow engage with them intimately if

I am to do so with integrity. I also understand that I am a single person and that persons need boundaries in order to live. These are both two and not two. Sometimes I can understand that. Other days I can only endure it.

As an activist, I am aware of my tendency to work on problems outside my own neighborhood. Somehow they seem less daunting than the ones I live with day by day, and more exotic and interesting—seemingly more ‘bounded’ and solvable. The most striking thing in Dogen’s remark is its utter hominess. Gourds. Roots. Entwinement. You see it every day, in someone’s garden near you, in the grape vines clambering up the trees in the woods. It is so easy to be at one with the whole world. It is really hard to be at one with the neighbor who places disturbing election signs in his front yard, on my boundary line. Easy to crack a joke with him, easy to offer to help with the snow plowing. It’s hard to find an opportunity to confess more candid feelings, searching for a way to open up a frank discussion about intimate, powerful differences in experience and perspective of outlook. This is the diversity that needs to be worked on. The one closest to home.

Dwain Wilder lives with his wife, and their dog and parrot, in a cottage on the edge of a large dark forest, where he builds musical instruments. He has been an RZC member for a number of decades.

Countless Good Deeds.

If you’re thinking about financial planning, estate planning, or both, please remember that there are myriad ways you can help the Rochester Zen Center through planned giving. The right kind of plan can help you reduce your taxes significantly while providing for a larger, longer-lasting gift to the Zen Center. Because there is a wide array of bequests, annuities, trusts, and other financial vehicles to consider, you’ll want to work with your financial advisor to decide what’s best for you. Long-time Zen Center member David Kernan, an attorney who concentrates his practice in tax law, has generously offered to help point you in the right direction at no charge. For more information about planned giving and David’s offer, please contact the Center’s receptionist.



Richard von Sturmer

Waking Up to Racism

SENSEI AMALA WRIGHTSON

If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come here because your liberation is tied up with mine, then let us work together.

—Lilla Watson, Aboriginal Activists Group

In New Zealand in the 1970s, Maori activists started pointing out to Pakeha (New Zealanders of European ancestry) that while most Maori had to be bicultural in order to survive, Pakeha could get by being monocultural. So it is for me and the rest of the members of the dominant group—we can stay ignorant of our privileged position and insensitive to others without too many obvious consequences. We are a bit like devas enjoying our heavenly existence, living comfortably but complacently, blind to the sufferings of Samsara. We have to make a conscious effort to open our eyes to our privilege and its consequences, and not just once, but repeatedly.

When I was 20 I took my first steps to learn about the Maori world by formally visiting a *marae* (Maori sacred meeting place) and finding myself, in my own country, in a place where I didn't know the rules and couldn't speak the language. It was shocking to see the extent of my ignorance. Slowly I learned about Maori protocol and culture, and learned enough of the language to be able to sing a song or two in a group (singing *waiata* is an integral part of being welcomed into a Maori community). Later on, my husband Richard and I wanted to learn more so we joined a committee that was raising funds to build an urban *marae* near where we lived. We worked on the project for several years and learned a lot, especially from the two elders leading the committee, Rangi and Arnold Wilson. I would still not call myself bicultural, but thanks to the fierce promptings from Maori activists to learn about Maori culture—as Fred-

erick Douglass said, ‘Power concedes nothing without a demand’—I am less ignorant than I once was, and the ongoing problems that Maori face in Pakeha-dominated society are more real to me. Yet I still find myself harboring passively racist views. It comes with being a member of the dominant group. I don’t need to be ashamed of that, but I do need to be vigilant.

In his essay in this *Zen Bow* issue, one of the most senior members of the Center, Jim Thompson, points out that we white folks have the luxury of not even seeing race as an issue in our Sangha. A black person does not have that luxury, as Jim’s letter so poignantly expresses. We whites *can* avoid the issue to some extent, and have done so at the Center, but to continue to do so is to remain in a comfortable cage that prevents us from truly facing our collective karma. I was at the annual meeting that Jim mentions, and had not thought anything of our exclusive focus on balancing the books and reducing our ecological footprint, until Jim pointed it out in his article.

In the story of the Buddha’s awakening, we are told that Prince Siddhartha ventured out of his father’s palace at the age of 29 and saw ‘for the first time’ a sick person, an old person, and a corpse. The story is that not only had he not seen sickness, old age, and death, he had never even heard of their existence. It’s hard to believe that a well-educated and intelligent young man could be so ignorant. But the story points to a psychological truth—we can see but not see, hear but not hear. Up until that point Siddhartha had not taken in what these facts of life really meant for him personally, existentially. They had just been abstractions for him. How many of us experience racism as a mere abstraction? And to what extent do we really *see* non-whites and the subtle and not-so-subtle ways in which they regularly suffer because of racism, let alone see how we too are diminished by this injustice?

In the last issue of *Zen Bow* that dealt with racism, back in 1995 (nearly 20 years ago), I described the experience of waking up to my ignorance about the realities of racial inequality in

Rochester. In the summer of 1994 the Center’s staff joined a volunteer program to help reduce violence in the city, called the Rochester Challenge. One of the aspects of the program was picking up trash in some of Rochester’s poorest neighborhoods (mainly as a way of bringing people from the suburbs and the inner city together), and we participated several times over the course of a month or so. In that article I wrote:

Even though I’ve been training in Rochester on and off for nearly six years, our weekly visits to the Northeast of the city (barely ten minutes’ drive from the Center) were a revelation to me. I had never visited these neighborhoods, and I was appalled both at the desolation there and at my ignorance of it. The barricaded stores, the derelict houses and vacant lots, the piles of trash and broken glass everywhere, gave the place the feeling of a war zone.

I now understand more fully that black neighborhoods *are* war zones, created by redlining (the post-WWII policy of not helping black folks into home ownership), and ravaged by unemployment, the aptly-named War on Drugs (which disproportionately punishes poor black families), white flight, inadequate funding for education, and a host of other policies that have their roots in racist attitudes. And racist attitudes were also behind the fact that a huge part of the city of Rochester, starting only a block or two from Arnold Park, had simply not existed for me up until that point. As a white person living in a white environment, the black part of the city had been invisible to me. I was like a stroke victim who had not been seeing the left side of my dinner plate.

For a while after the Rochester Challenge campaign had finished, the Center kept up a connection to those poor neighborhoods by regularly returning to do *takuhatsu* there. (*Takuhatsu* is a term we use at the Center to describe the practice of picking up trash mindfully and in silence, our own form of ‘taking the Dharma

into the streets,' which is the meaning of the original Japanese term, though in Japan it refers to monks begging for alms as they chant 'Ho,' which means 'Dharma.')

But that connection was not maintained. Chapin Mill was donated to the Center around that time, and during the years of construction when staff and volunteers were really stretched, *takuhatsu* was suspended. When it began again we returned to just cleaning up the streets immediately around the Center.

Much more recently I again became aware of my unconscious racism. Around 2009 or so, when I entered the country on one of my annual visits back to the Center, I noticed a very distinct shift in my perceptions of the black folks I encountered at LAX and in other airports and public places beyond. It was as if I had suddenly gone from seeing African American strangers in two dimensions to seeing them in three. I regarded them with a new kind of appreciation, respect, and curiosity. What had changed? Between this particular visit and the previous one I had been exposed to a powerful work of art, *The Wire*, a Dickensian portrayal in five parts of the life of a North American city, so captivating that we had gobbled up all five seasons on DVD over the course of a few months. No doubt many *Zen Bow* readers have seen this HBO production, which is about much more than the city of Baltimore. It is a subtle and finely-modulated exploration of the soul of post-industrial America, seen through five lenses: the war on drugs, the docks and the decay of the country's industrial base, the city school system, the news media, and local politics. Most of the cast is black, and each actor portrays a richly-delineated and nuanced character functioning in a narrative context that explores the core issue of racial inequality in America. It is not that I hadn't been exposed to black characters in films and on TV—I had been, and that was the problem! So often media portrayals of African Americans are two-dimensional stereotypes, either violent criminals or the token minority member on the team of the 'good-guys,' played by a black actor but whose part is usually not written in a way

that shows what it is really like to *be* black in a racist society.

Several related lessons can be drawn from my not-seeing. Indifference is a symptom of separation, physical and emotional. This separation is an inherent part of racism—how it tends to perpetuate itself. It is by avoiding black folks, and/or seeing them as people of no consequence, less real than me somehow, that I stay numb to the full extent of their pain. Also, in the absence of direct experience the media play a huge role in shaping my opinions, both negatively through stereotypes and disinformation that reinforce my ignorance while maintaining an illusion of familiarity, and positively through works of art such as *The Wire* that can raise consciousness and stimulate empathy. *The Wire* acted on me like a loving-kindness meditation, opening my heart-mind to the inner world of a whole host of black characters.

We view ourselves, others and the world around us largely by means of shared ideas. Not even the Buddha was immune from this. Until his stepmother Mahapajapati, with the help of Ananda, drew his attention to her (and her 500 followers) longing to live the homeless life, creating the order of bikkshunis was not on the Buddha's agenda at all. Mahapajapati had to beg him three times, and Ananda also had to ask three times, as well as pointedly question his teacher about women's ability to awaken, before the Buddha, with some misgivings, agreed to their request. Not recognizing women as full human beings with the same spiritual aspirations as men was 'normal' in the India of 2500 years ago. Mahapajapati and Ananda had to 'agitate, agitate, agitate,' but the Buddha was open enough to eventually respond to their entreaties.

There is also a more recent—and cautionary—example of this kind of non-seeing. Our Dharma great-grandfathers Roshis Harada Daiun Sogaku and Yasutani Hakuun Ryōkō both supported their government's imperialism during the Second World War. Their Zen training had not equipped them well to critically engage with and see through the rhetoric of their rulers. Though there are models

of resistance in Chinese Chan history, we can also learn from other faiths, such as the prophetic tradition found in both Judaism and Christianity. In Judaism and Christianity this tradition includes not just the prophets but others with strong religious conviction who speak out against injustice, corruption, and immorality in their community and in the ruling elite, even if their words are socially unacceptable. The Quakers coined the term ‘speaking truth to power.’

It is also worth noting that even when people do resist, they can only do so much in the face of a corrupt and broken system. *The Wire* shows over and over again how ethical, intelligent, and creative individuals try to change things for the better but are often thwarted and even punished for their efforts. You’d think this might be depressing, but is actually uplifting in its truthfulness. At least they try. The collective myth, rehearsed in ten thousand Hollywood movies, is that a single hero can come along and make things right. Real life is not so simple. The Three Poisons of greed, fear, and indifference are not only in our hearts but are woven into our institutions, which is to say into *the ways in which we relate to each other*. We need to recognize this, step beyond our culture’s emphasis on individualism, and see how embedded we are in the system, in the grip of what Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci called the cultural hegemony. This takes critical thinking.

The role of a Zen Center is to cultivate people, to develop people of good will. But we need to take care that this emphasis on personal liberation doesn’t slide into indifference towards societal ills. We come to a Dharma center to work on ourselves and to wake up. But if the Three Poisons are to be found not only in our hearts but also in the structures which shape us and our interactions—in our political system, courts of law, cities, schools, media organisations, banks, and so on—then playing our part in working on these institutions, however slow, difficult and unrewarding that may be, is also necessary. My

liberation is irrevocably tied up with yours. As Toni Morrison says, ‘The function of freedom is to free someone else.’

Perhaps before our next annual meeting we can have a community-wide discussion about what we as a Sangha might look like if we were more sensitized to issues of race. Back in 1995 we held a special repentance ceremony for racism—it was long! There was a quite a backlog of regrets—people felt obliged to repent for their parents and grandparents as well as themselves. But perhaps a regular event would be help to

‘All beings without number,
I vow to liberate.’

clear that residue. Confession and repentance are a way to publicly acknowledge an effort to change a habit. Atonement is another. In New Zealand the Treaty that was signed between Maori chiefs and Queen Victoria in 1840 was consistently and repeatedly dishonoured for over a century, but the Government, thanks to the insistent demands made by generations of Maori leaders, has been negotiating settlements of those breaches tribe by tribe: acknowledging the wrongs, making a formal apology, returning land where possible, and paying compensation. The negotiations are hard-fought on both sides, but the results are mostly healing. There is still a long way to go, but a start has been made. What would atonement look like in the USA? What would it look like at the Zen Center? In what small ways could the Sangha make a difference locally? What have other Sanghas done?

In Buddhism, a degree of Right View is understood to be a necessary first step on the Path. Until we see the problem, not much can be done. But once we get an inkling of this or that kind of suffering and its cause, we can give rise to Right Aspiration, and begin the process liberating ourselves and others. Racism persists because of mental and physical separation. Together we can find ways to break down this separation.

Amala Wrightson lives in Auckland, New Zealand, with her husband Richard von Sturmer, and is Director of the Auckland Zen Centre.

Seeing Through Racism

Chanting Service Return of Merit

Editor's Note: The return of merit below was written in 2012 by sangha member Jim Thompson in collaboration with the Seeing Through Racism committee. Jim notes that it is 'a particularly American one. It is offered primarily to African Americans, although racism hurts everyone.' As part of a special chanting service dedicated to seeing through racism, it would include the Ten-Verse Kannon Sutra, the Shōsai Myōkichijō Darani and the Heart of Perfect Wisdom.

May the merit of our chanting be returned

To those millions of African people who perished in the Middle Passage,

To the millions of African people who were enslaved, tortured, dehumanized
and treated cruelly,

To the millions of African Americans since slavery who were dehumanized
and physically and psychologically abused,

To the Native American Peoples who were fought, driven from their homes
and nearly exterminated,

To those people of European descent who forsook their deepest nature to
enact or ignore these crimes,

To people of all colors in this nation who, burdened by the imprint of the
past, have continued to suffer from the delusion of racism.



From Indra's Net

Chapin Mill Retreat Center Altar



Tom Kowal

The beautiful altar backing that was installed last spring in the zendo at Chapin Mill will soon be paired with the altar itself. This photograph shows the work in progress on the altar base, which is constructed out of cherry. Most of the cherry wood being used to make the altar is derived from trees that were formerly on the Chapin Mill property (they were removed years ago to widen the entrance road). The altar design was created by Sensei Gerardo Gally (Casa Zen, Mexico City) and the construction is being overseen by local sangha member Bill Lindenfelser.

Earth Vigil

As part of a 350.org day of national demonstrations in support of the environment on Saturday, September 21, 2013 the Zen Center collaborated with The Lost Bird Project to hold an 'Earth Vigil.' The public sitting held outside Rochester's Gannett building, where the *Democrat & Chronicle* is published, was intended to raise awareness of the need for more in-depth media coverage on environmental issues. The rainy weather didn't prevent approximately 100 local sangha members and friends from sitting in silence for two hours. Other public sittings have taken place on a weekly basis at the Inergy plant on Seneca Lake.



Andy Stern

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Relationships

For practitioners of Zen Buddhism, relationships present us with an opportunity to work on ourselves and realize both the differences and sameness in self and other. Contributors may consider many facets of relationships: intimacy and practice, attachment or ego in relationships, working through loss or conflict, relationship to self, the challenges of being in a relationship with someone who doesn't practice Zen, choosing a single lifestyle, seeking a spiritual partner, or working with the Third Cardinal Precept, 'I resolve not to misuse sexuality, but to be caring and responsible.' To bring this broad topic to focus, we ask writers to consider significant relationships between or among adults. Submit articles and images to the editors, Donna Kowal and Brenda Reeb, at zenbow@rzc.org.

Submission deadline: February 21, 2014

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