

► **NOT A FEEL-GOOD TEISHO:** Some bracing words from Roshi Kjolhede

Q&A: Is it bad for my practice to take an anti-depressant?

DEVOTIONALS: The case for “religious Zen” by Larry McSpadden





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“SITTING IN LIMBO,” Jimmy Cliff sang in 1971, an apt anthem for the uncertainty of these times. “Sitting in limbo, like a bird without a song.” We either have one President, zero Presidents, or two Presidents, depending on one’s political beliefs. We will either be saved soon by a coronavirus vaccine or we will probably get sick. We are either the most racist and divided we have ever been, or in the beginning of a great awakening. We are either trashing our home planet for good and heading for Mars, courtesy of Elon Musk, or we are hoping that fungi will eat all our plastics. So much is in flux.

And so much is not. Where is the stillness? How do we find the eye of the hurricane? If there were ever a time to practice, this is it. Practicing both on and off the mat. Breathing the breath, walking the dog, sweeping the floor, washing the clothes. Or, in the case of Susan Rakow, head of the Cleveland Zazen Group, making the granola: “Every three minutes, remove the pans, stir to avoid burning, check for browning, rotate positions, and time another 3 minutes. Notice. Browning, burning edges, or no change? Until done. Like rounds of sitting. Checking, doing, becoming. Oats and seeds and maple syrup. Coconut and molasses. Checking. Checking. What is done? Unlike granola, the other practice is never done. Constantly changing and learning. Don’t make granola in insulated pans. Don’t grit your teeth and tighten your jaw. Practice settles itself without straining. The horse and cart move on. Where is the driver?”

Thank you, Susan.—CHRIS PULLEYN

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Soundings

COMING TO THE PATH

IN THE LATE 60s and early 70s, I was teaching guitar in Cleveland. Because I was practicing guitar three to four hours a day, sitting in a contorted position with my left foot on a stool, I developed back problems. I found that my only relief came from doing yoga.

One day my phone rang and a gentleman introduced himself as George Faust [a longtime RZC member, now deceased] and said that he was looking for a classical guitar instructor. I had never met the person who referred George to me, and to my knowledge, he never referred anyone to me before or after George.

George began coming for lessons to my house and we became friends. One day, as he was leaving, he noticed a yoga book on my end table and I explained that I was doing yoga for my back. I also told him I was learning Transcendental Meditation. George told me he belonged to a Zen center in Rochester. He said if I ever wanted to learn more I could go to a workshop with him. I had never heard of Zen and knew nothing about it. But I thought, why not check it out?

So this is when my journey began: in April in the mid-70s. In looking back, I feel like the guy who kept knocking on the monastery door and was repeatedly asked to prove his ardor until, finally, his leg was broken when he stuck it in the door to prove he was serious. Or, as Roshi Kapleau used to say, “Seven times down, eight times up.”

On the way to Rochester, George and I encountered a severe snow storm. The Thruway closed and we had to exit in Batavia. It was a long, slow, and treacherous ride from there, but we finally made it to Rochester and I attended the workshop.

Afterward I asked what my next step was to become a member and I was told I should simply come to the Center for a



CHARLES-FRANÇOIS DAUBIGNY/CETTY RESEARCH INSTITUTE

few work days with the staff. I came for three days and after the first morning sitting I was in such pain that I vowed to leave at the end of the day. On top of that people were *bowing, doing prostrations, and worshiping these strange figures* in the zendo. Was this a cult? Scary!

When the work day was over I was putting on my shoes in the link when (then) Bodhin came by with a tennis racket. I told him I loved tennis and we had a short conversation about playing sometime. I thought he was just paying me lip service but that encouraged me to stay another day.

The next morning I was going to see if I could make it to noon. If not I was going to leave. At the lunch break Bodhin came by and asked if I would like to play some tennis after the work day. I was delighted and it got me through my painful day. We were fairly evenly matched and had a great time.

Several months later I applied to become a member and was told it had been too long since I had attended a workshop, and I needed to attend another. George Faust made arrangements with Roshi Kapleau for us to sit in the basement zendo during the workshop because I was a trial member.

During the first break, one of the monitors approached me, asked who I was, and told me to leave because I was not a member and had not enrolled in the workshop. I was miffed but complied and spent the day browsing at Rafe Martin's Oxcart Bookshop. At the end of the day when we returned to the Center, I was approached by Sonya Kjolhede and then by Roshi Kapleau to apologize profusely for the misunderstanding. I was still a bit confused but took it in stride.

Next I came to several four-day sesshins. At that time (if my memory serves me) you could not go to a seven-day until you were a member.

Then one day I received a phone call saying that Toni Packer, who had taken over for Roshi Kapleau, was leaving the Center and there was a huge split. Roshi had told me she would be a good teacher for me. So now I did not know the future or who my teacher would be. It threw me for a loop and into questioning if I wanted to remain.

I decided to stay and was very excited to apply for my first seven-day sesshin with Roshi Kapleau. It was in a May of the early 80s, and the week before it began my grandmother died. The funeral was Saturday so I called to ask the Center if I could come on Sunday, and they said no. At that time, it was all or nothing. I chose to attend the funeral. Once again I was so close and yet so far away. Needless to say, I was disheartened.

Finally, I applied and was accepted for another seven-day sesshin. I don't remember the exact date. What I do remember is that I received my rakusu on April 6, 1985.

Today I'm still sitting and coming to the Center whenever I can. The Center has changed my life in countless ways. I'll end with the line from my favorite chant because I am with “heart humble and grateful.” —GEORGE GECIK ■

“IF YOU ARE unable to find the truth right where you are, where else do you expect to find it?” —DOGEN

I AM RACIST

THOSE ARE SCARY words. These days, “racist” may be the worst thing that you can call someone. The word “racist” can evoke anger, anxiety, shame, guilt, and fear, but I’ll say it again: I am racist. And I’m not scared to own that. Not because I am a card-carrying member of a white supremacist organization, but because I think being able to say that challenges me to be better.

I am racist. I am also anti-racist. Two sides of one coin. It’s hard getting to know both sides. When I began this work, it was without Zen practice. I was a college kid who knew that some people weren’t treated well because of their race. I didn’t appreciate how devastating the Atlantic slave trade was and is. I knew that Native Americans were savagely raped, tortured and intentionally eradicated, but I didn’t realize that the cultural genocide continued through 1973 with federal boarding schools and into today, with Americans’ failure to recognize that we live on the traditional land of indigenous people. As a young person, I didn’t know how challenging it can be to uproot

trauma, and I had no sense of how easy it is to pass it down from one generation to the next. (Research is showing that trauma gets passed down biologically, not just through behavioral patterns.) I believed in the American Dream. I was hopeful.

Then one day, doubt crept in. What if I was wrong? I would be devastated if I had a chance to do better and I kept my head in the sand. I had to know, how do I fit into all this? I started learning about how things that I had thought were acts of kindness, were actually harmful. For instance, I thought good not-racist people didn’t see race and were beyond race, and that race didn’t matter to them, but then I learned that it is important to recognize difference and honor it, not erase it with sameness. I thought the melting pot analogy of all these different cultures coming together to form something entirely new was an ideal. I hadn’t considered what kind of cultural erasure happens in that melting pot. My understanding of what it meant to do good was upended.

The more I learned, the more I realized I didn’t know. I started reflecting on

times when I was ignorant of the harm my words caused or the harm my silence caused, and I went through periods where the guilt became so heavy that I would seek comfort in the quiet warmth of depression. Then I learned that dwelling in guilt could also be harmful, as it had prevented me from being able to respond in racially charged situations -- frozen in fear of “doing it wrong.” It seemed impossible: if I acted out of ignorance, I would do harm. If I sat in silence, I would do harm. I began to feel like there were no good options.

At times, I struggled to believe that there was anything I could do that would make it better. Then slowly, I began to accept that white supremacist thoughts were just going to be something I needed to work on. I began to accept my ignorance and privilege, but became determined to act as responsibly as I could. My acceptance of racial bias has allowed me to become better at facing it directly, and gave me some space for action.

I carried the question of race with me

▼ PHOTOGRAPH BY GRETCHEN TARGE



everywhere. Slowly, I began to accept that I wasn't the only one who struggled in this way. Then I saw that there was not a single person who was immune. It was in the air we breathe, the waters we swim in. I had to accept that, as with practice, I was going to get this very wrong over and over again, but that getting it wrong was better than not trying. It's not my fault that I wasn't taught better about race, and it wasn't my teacher's fault — it's a long history, maybe even part of the history of our species.

I began working on the smallest baby steps. I thought that if I were able to become aware of each racially biased thought, then I could think my way into unlearning its logic. I imagined that, in a way, this was the work of purifying the collective consciousness — but, as with Zen practice, eventually we learn that thinking our way out of it isn't the way. Not only was I constantly reflecting on what was said and what could have been said more skillfully, or thinking about things I read or talks I had heard, but I also wanted to do everything I could to not do any additional harm to our world.

Trying to do the work of analyzing each individual racially biased thought through rumination was a very harsh process. When anyone does any serious reflection on race, there is some painful emotional work that needs to be done. That emotional work becomes difficult to access when we are ruminating. Resmaa Menakem, in his book *My Grandmother's Hands: Racialized trauma and the pathway to mending our hearts and bodies*, distinguishes clean pain from dirty pain. Clean pain happens when we can feel our pain, name it, and feel vulnerable in it without denying or avoiding it. Dirty pain happens when we try to avoid feeling any pain, try to explain it away, guard against it, or unknowingly discharge our pain onto another. No deep and complex wound can be solved with rumination.

Finding a balance, along with a sustainable way of doing this work, is a real art and skill, one that constantly shifts as the work changes. And it helps to have a community of people working together to do it well. At the same time, I do find that it's important to continue to challenge myself. Some people are working on surviving, and today I'm in a place of

Q WHAT IMPACT DO anti-depressants, or other psychoactive medications, have on Zen practice? The precepts direct us to avoid substances that “cloud the mind”; does this include all substances that alter our baseline brain functions? Does Zoloft impede progress on the Dharma path?

ETA ALTHOUGH I CAN'T speak from personal experience, having never taken an anti-depressant, I do know that a common symptom of depression is difficulty concentrating and feelings of helplessness in the face of habitual negative thoughts. So the depression itself is “clouding the mind.” Anti-depressants can help with those symptoms—and, of course, anything that lifts the burdens of sadness, low self-esteem, fatigue, and feelings of helplessness from a person's mind can improve their energy and motivation to do zazen.

There are side effects that can be troublesome. For example, some people experience sleepiness with certain anti-

depressants. Another common side effect is tinnitus (ringing in the ears—which I have independently of any medications). It can be annoying but, like any other distraction, it can be worked through.

Of course, we change over time, and you may reach a point where going off your meds makes sense. It really depends on the balance between benefits and side effects. I'd advise not to rush that or make too much of it as a goal. And if you do decide to wean yourself from an anti-depressant (ideally with input from your prescriber), don't do it right before a sesshin or any other especially challenging undertaking. We've learned through experience that stopping your meds and plunging into sesshin does not usually go well.—JOHN PULLEYN

thriving. It would be tempting to rest in a deva realm, where I can luxuriate apart from the suffering, as if I've done all that I can to be a good white lady and keep my hands clean. But I owe my teachers a great debt. They could have sat with clean hands; instead, they pointed me to a path and armed me with the tools I needed to leave this world better than I found it.

When I first imagined Zen practice as part of a bodhisattva path, I couldn't really appreciate how powerful sitting was for this deep healing work. Now, I can't imagine doing any real social change without it. Nor can I imagine having the skills I need to do the collective work if I hadn't educated myself. I believe our Sangha has a real opportunity to do some incredible anti-racist work, but we will need to learn to support each other in developing the skills needed to do it. We share a beautiful spiritual practice, one that gives us the ability to purify our minds and work with greed, anger and delusion; to see through ways of thinking that separate ourselves from one another. But we will need to challenge each other to be better than we were yesterday. We cannot overlook how critical self-reflection is, or how much we will need each other to do it well.—DENÉ REDDING ■

A LIGHT BREATHER

The spirit moves,
Yet stays:
Stirs as a blossom stirs,
Still wet from its bud-sheath,
Slowly unfolding,
Turning in the light with its tendrils;
Plays as a minnow plays,
Tethered to a limp weed, swinging,
Tail around, nosing in and out of the current,
Its shadows loose, a watery finger;
Moves, like the snail,
Still inward,
Taking and embracing its surroundings,
Never wishing itself away,
Unafraid of what it is,
A music in a hood,
A small thing,
Singing.

—THEODORE ROETHKE, from *The Waking* (1953; first in *The Kenyon Review*, Summer 1950)





Riding the

THIS WILL NOT BE A FEEL-GOOD TEISHO BECAUSE TOO many people these days are hurting. I think we need to acknowledge that in a direct way, and see it as a natural

response to the fact that our country—and the world—seem to be unraveling.

It's probably not necessary to itemize everything that's going haywire, but I will anyway, briefly, starting with climate change. In a way, we have to start with climate change because it is a matter of existence—our planet's existence, our own existence. Then there's the pandemic, of course, which just goes on spreading fear and

social isolation, with no end in sight. A recent report estimated that it has claimed two and a half million years of potential life! This year has also brought a record number of hurricanes—so many that in naming major storms the meteorologists ran through our alphabet and had to dip into the Greek alphabet. Scientists say that it's climate change that's generating these storms as well as the record number of forest



BASED ON A TEISHO
BY *Roshi Bodhin Kjolhede*
September 20, 2020

fires—unprecedented, mammoth forest fires.

We have widespread unemployment. Poverty that's worse than ever. Homelessness. Food insecurity. And a cascade of other economic fallouts of the pandemic. All of this is contributing to a rise in drug and alcohol abuse, and to the suicides that come from that. Then there's the ongoing, unrelenting effort on the part of the outgoing administration to sow distrust in institutions of government, in the news, in facts, in the election process, and in science itself. And millions of people are succumbing to these efforts to sow disruption.

This year we have also seen the sickening videos of police homicides of Blacks, including in Rochester, where there has been an alarming spike in crime since the murder of Daniel Prude. We're seeing the irruption of awareness of our country's systemic racism prompting reactions coast-to-coast. And just when it may have seemed things couldn't get any worse before Election Day, we had the death of Ruth Bader Ginsburg, which promised to further inflame our dysfunctional partisan conflict.

And now we're moving into the cold months, with the nights steadily lengthening. More and more people, it appears, are feeling enveloped in gloom. One psychologist described it, from what he heard in his therapy room, as a "lethargic anxiety and abiding loneliness." Things were bad enough in March and April this year, when it was still cold and there wasn't much we could do outdoors. But that was with summer ahead of us, and the expectation that it might well be over by the fall. Now we're descending into the coldest and darkest months, at least here in Rochester.

HAS ANYONE ALIVE TODAY ever seen such an avalanche of threatening change all at once? Who of us wouldn't be feeling disheartened, at the least, or even beset with fear? This is a rough, rough time to be living through, and it doesn't help to pretend otherwise. What we're witnessing now as never before is a basic aspect of the Dharma: that suffering is the very nature of samsaric existence.

We've pretty much coasted along in our relatively short life as a country. With some big exceptions—the Civil War, the Depression—we've gotten by on our good karma. That good karma began with our geographical protection, with oceans to the west and east and friendly countries to the north and south. Our white middle



NOAA

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Now it
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class has enjoyed relative prosperity compared to most other countries. And then there's our immense military might. So we've been riding high for a long time.

But then, how have we used this prosperity and power? Well, long ago we secured our position as the world's number one arms dealer. We've also felt entitled to interfere in other countries' economies, and to conduct unnecessary wars. Why should it be any surprise that all of this has now caught up with us, bringing on a whirlwind of suffering?

Looking back through world history, we see that even the most powerful countries were not spared bouts of mass suffering. In ancient China alone there were plagues and famines such as we've still not known, and civil wars raging for decades. Now it seems to be our turn to face the music. It's time for us to grow up as a country, and learn—or maybe learn in a new way—that suffering is a pervasive aspect of existence. This is the first of the Buddha's Four Noble Truths. We can only deny it for so long.

But we can't be in this tumult forever. That idea, too, would run contrary to the Dharma. Consider the three characteristics of existence, the very heart of the Buddha's teaching. First, the pervasiveness of suffering, and second, impermanence—everything is in flux. (The third is no-self.) So, there it is: we can be sure that things will eventually change for the better (...and then worse again...and then better...). Hopefully later this year. Or next year, or the next year. Hopefully before too many years have passed! But meanwhile, let's hope that we may be learning something from all this.

IN THE ANCIENT Greek tragedy *Agamemnon*, Aeschylus, a contemporary of the Buddha, wrote:

Zeus, who guided mortals to be wise, has established his fixed law—wisdom comes through suffering. Trouble, with its memories of pain, drips in our hearts as we try to sleep, so men against their will learn to practice moderation. Favors come to us from gods seated on their solemn thrones—such grace is harsh and violent.

The good news is that to be embedded in our suffering is the way out of it. It is only pain—

dissatisfaction, discontent, anxiety, frustration—that moves us to change ourselves. In a koan in the *Blue Cliff Record*, Zen master Yunmen declares, “Medicine and sickness are in correspondence to each other.” The sickness invites the first swallow of medicine.

What we see going on now on a national and global scale is nothing new. It’s part of the same arc that all phenomena follow: birth, or arising; growth; decay, or decline; and death, or disappearance. As a country we’re in crisis, but in the big picture is that still part of the growth stage? Or have we moved into inexorable decline? Then again, decline is inevitable, since that’s the process of all phenomena.

Empires fall. Whole star systems decline and disappear. Buildings and pets die. Governments and global alliances, too, are subject to decline and dissolution, as are orchestras and sports teams and political parties and yes, Buddhist centers. So, too, marriages, if only when husband and wife die.

YES, WE ALL KNOW that everything passes. So then why are so many of us in a state of high anxiety this year? We’re concerned, of course, about the ongoing misery and death caused by the destructive effects of the pandemic, climate change, economic loss, and political conflict. But all this chaos is also reminding us that to be human is to be stalked by sickness, old age, and death. These storms are tearing at our illusion of permanent selfhood. Death is poking us this year with its icy fingers.

Yes, every one of us will die. And we’ve all been living with that knowledge since childhood: “the certainty of death and the uncertainty of the time of death,” as Dogen so neatly put it. We’ve known that we will someday be separated from everyone and everything we’ve loved. Come on! We know this, and have always lived with it, and we’ve carried on somehow. And likewise we can carry on now even with the threat of our country coming apart at the seams. Even knowing that the world itself will eventually end doesn’t mean that we need to sink into despair.

The suffering we see all around us now leaves us as individuals essentially in the same place we’ve been all along, facing our own mortality while making the most of the time we have.

There’s a koan in the *Blue Cliff Record* called “Daizui’s It Goes Along with Everything Else.” And this is how it reads:

A monk asked Daizui, “When the conflagration at the end of the kalpa sweeps through, and the great cosmos is destroyed, I wonder, is this one destroyed or not?” Daizui said, “It will be destroyed.” The monk said, “But will it be gone with everything else?” [You can just imagine him hoping he’d misunderstood Daizui.] And then Daizui said, “It will be gone with everything else.”

Talk about bleak! But to really probe and resolve this koan does not leave you feeling bleak. Imagine for a moment that you had been this monk, hearing Daizui’s reply. Instead of just repeating the question, how might you have responded?

It’s interesting that Daizui’s reply seems to contradict a line in another koan, case 23 in the *Mumonkan*. In the last line of the verse, Mumon says, “When the universe is annihilated, it remains indestructible.” How do we reconcile these two passages, “It remains indestructible,” and “It will be gone with everything else”?

ONE OF THE VERY shortest of the Buddhist sutras is called the Fire Sutra. The back story is that a certain practitioner of austerities in India, who also happened to be a fire worshipper, asked a question of the Buddha. And the Buddha said to him, “Everything is burning. The eye is burning. All the senses are burning. Thoughts are burning. They are burning with the fire of lust. There is anger. There is ignorance. There is hatred. And as long as the fire finds flammable things upon which it can feed, so long will it burn. And there will be birth and death, decay, grief, lamentation, suffering, despair, and sorrow.” So again, the first of the Four Noble Truths—“suffering is pervasive.”

But then, the final part:

“Considering this,” the Buddha says, “the disciple of the Dharma will see the Four Noble Truths and walk in the Eightfold Path of holiness. He will become wary of his eye, wary of all his senses, wary of his thoughts. He will divest himself of passion and become free. He will be delivered from selfishness and attain the blessed state of Nirvana.”

There are tens of millions of people in this



NOVA

country who don't need to "wake up" to the truth of suffering because they are living through it—financially and through sickness and loneliness or racism, if not also poverty and joblessness. And all amplified by the ravages of climate change. But even those of us privileged enough to have a middle-class existence, and even more so those of us who are white, now have the chance to more fully wake up to the First Noble Truth. We're waking up as a country.

Again, this is no reason to give up. We provide for the future, the present, and the past by continuing to train the mind through zazen. What does that mean? Training the mind in non-abiding. Not clinging. That's what it all comes down to. That's what's common to every form of Zen practice: breath, koans, shikantaza. It's practice and training in not-dwelling in anything—in any *thing*.

And now we have to apply it. Here's where the rubber hits the road, when things are burning down all around us, in all kinds of ways. Now what do we do? Well, let's start with what we *don't* do. We don't dwell on what might lie ahead of us. Morbid thoughts about the future aren't going to help anyone. Even if we're looking to the future in hopes that things will get better, how much will that really help?

What helps is getting better at attending to *what is*. Just this. *Just this*. Everything we're learning here is to not separate ourselves from things as they are. And we do that through zazen. Daily zazen, serious zazen. This doesn't mean that we can't also do Zen practice while engaged in social or political work. We don't have to hole up in our houses—oh wait, during a pandemic that could make sense. Let's say we don't want to reject the wider world while just wishing things were different. But in just sitting every day—and extending that mind of stabilized awareness into our daily lives—we are offering a lot.

ONE OF THE DARKEST periods in Japan's history came during the 13th century—a prolonged stretch of civil wars. The great Zen master Dogen was criticized by some for not getting politically involved to help resolve the violence. But in response he simply insisted, "I wish to be a beacon." That is, a beacon of mind purification for the country. Each one of us can do that, through our practice.

Depending on how much time we have, we

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can also get more actively involved in hunger relief or Black Lives Matter or non-violence, or work to address climate change. If we feel moved to contribute in any of those ways, we can. It does become a challenge, though, when there are so only so many hours in a day. But there's no right or wrong. You do what you feel compelled to do. It's a challenge for each of us to resolve, day by day.

Whatever we actively do, however, we're going to do better if we continue to find time each day for zazen. What does "better" mean? It means that our activity is not driven by blind habit any more than by blind passion. We want to be active, not re-active. Daily sitting enables us to engage with others with less "self" in our intentions, and yes, with energy. And so we're able to help in a more meaningful way.

THESE ARE TRYING times, all the more so since we can't gather together much except online. For those of you who haven't been participating in the daily sittings through Zoom, I urge you to do so. Joining with others is fortifying. It strengthens our resolve to sustain our daily sitting. Even five or ten minutes a day does help, but to sit for a full hour with other people has the power to transform how we see all of this suffering—which means how we experience the heavy weather we're now facing.

Our experience of the world is not determined primarily by the circumstances we find ourselves in. Our experience of the world is determined by the mind, by how we use or misuse our attention. So, the most intelligent thing anyone can do is practice the Dharma. To work at training the mind not to cling to either the negative or the positive. Not cling to thoughts, but just to find a way to move along with things as they are. This is the highest calling we can reach as human beings. In doing that, we live up to our bodhisattva vows, "All beings, without number, I vow to liberate." In whatever form that takes, whether it's becoming active in politics and social movements, or in the fundamental way, becoming beacons on the mat. Or both!

Again, there's nothing permanent about any state we find ourselves in. This will change. Of course it will change! This is the iron law of life: that things will change. It is the one thing we can count on. And we will suffer less through this change if we can really harness this practice we all have found. This beacon. This resource of all resources. **///**

▷ FROM THE ARCHIVE



RELAXING ON A summer's day, sometime in the mid to late Sixties. From left to right: Roshi Philip Kapleau, H (Harriet) Gratwick, Bill Gratwick, and Audrey Fernandez. The names of the young lady and the Labrador are unknown to the *Zen Bow* staff.

Because of the presence of both H and Bill Gratwick in this photo, we are guessing that it was taken at the Gratwick Place, H and Bill's country estate near Pavilion, New York. H Gratwick was a charter member of the Rochester Zen Center, and many of the Center's earliest sesshins were held at the

Gratwick Place, an almost magical estate that attracted writers, painters, photographers, poets, musicians, actors, and many others. Bill Gratwick's many passions include breeding tree peonies, Dorset sheep, and Arabian horses; designing and building a "dwarf village"; and converting his family's estate into a nearly inexhaustible series of visual delights including gardens, pathways, gateways, pools, buildings, barns, and vistas.

The Gratwick Place was a muse to many, photographed by Ansel Adams, Minor White, and Walt Chappell, and written about by William Carlos Williams, Wyndham Lewis, and Galway Kinnell, among others. Today much of the original estate has been converted into a not-for-profit, Linwood Gardens, whose mission is "to preserve the gardens and the tree peony collection for future generations to enjoy." It was memorialized in Bill Gratwick's book *My, This Must Have Been A Beautiful Place...When It Was Kept Up*.

Thoughts
DEVOTIONAL
and

activities and a devotional attitude are a fundamental ele-

Prayers:

ment of my practice; with this article I hope to encourage

On

you to engage more wholeheartedly, and more often, with

Religious

such activities. If you are skeptical about them, I hope you

Zen

will consider being more open-minded. Devotionals I cur-

rently engage in include chanting, prostrations, mantra

recitations, aspirational prayers, death services, *tonglen*

and *metta* meditations, contemplation of depictions of sacred figures, and devotional reading and reflection.

Let's start by turning to Part Three, "Devotions," in Roshi Kapleau's *Zen: Merging of East and West*. It's still in print, and available in many formats, including on Kindle. If you read that section, you'll get more of what I hope to communicate here than I will be able to convey be-

low, but I'll go ahead and scribble on anyway....

Starting on p. 189 of my version, there is a poignant letter from "Carol" captioned RELIGIOUS ZEN—IT TURNS ME OFF! and a moving, extensive (for him) reply by Roshi. With a little detective work, I tracked down "Carol" (not her real name), and asked her by email if, after four decades more of practice and life, it still "turns her off," and got the reply: "Not as much as it

TEXT BY Larry McSpadden
IMAGE BY Unknown artist,
western Tibet, 15th century



used to!... That letter, which Roshi Kapleau asked me to write, encapsulates my feelings at the time. Coming from a strict Baptist background, which I rejected when I was 13, I wanted nothing to do with religion and still don't participate in some of the more devotional activities at the RZC."

There are many "Carols"—people who have been turned off, if not wounded, by the hammering insistence of religious pronouncements and demands from parents, preachers, teachers, and/or community. Perhaps even more folks are jaded, worn down, and exhausted from the constant blaring of commercialism, materialism, consumerism, and intellectualism—systems that seem almost custom-designed to shut down a child's or young adult's imagination, sensitivity, and openness to the natural world.

It is understandable that in frustration and despair folks would take their experience of having been force-fed entire belief systems, which may contain inner contradictions or go against their own sensibilities, and "round up" that experience to the conclusion: everything that looks or sounds even vaguely similar must be unpalatable as well, not worth even tasting. Here, I'm going to take issue with that conclusion, with what I see as a "rounding error," if you have applied it to devotional Buddhist practices. I invite your injured or jaded parts to take another look at the potential wonder of being, of Mind, of the magical possibilities of the universe.

IN THE ZEN school, the essential matter is always one's root practice, and we are reminded to return to it again, and again, and again. After all, Zen is not a belief system. When a young friend asked me the other day, "What is Buddhism?" I found myself responding, "It is the *science of being a being*—how to do that optimally, while causing the least amount of unnecessary pain to oneself and others." One could also say Zen is the science of how to *wake up* to one's true nature, and then to practice becoming familiar with that nature, thus becoming more and more stable in the realization of that nature, all the while endeavoring to live every moment in harmony with that ever-deepening realization. Whether you are a "Carol" or a committed "secular Buddhist," this probably sounds good so far. And yet—"There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, / Than are dreamt of in your philosophy."—Hamlet (1.5.167-8)

Please allow me to retell a story. It was mid-

summer, 1969, and walking around downtown New Haven, Connecticut, I felt seriously out of sorts. It was hot, my job at the National Gypsum plaster and wallboard factory was no picnic, I was a bit drug-addled, and there seemed to be no clear light beckoning from any future I wanted to be a part of. Perhaps it was the chirp of a bird, or the way the sun glinted off the pavement, that caused me to remember the *Kwannon Sutra* and some of the promises it held. I had read it some two years earlier, and I urgently felt the need to dip into its encouraging message again; however, my copy of the book containing it, *Manual of Zen Buddhism* (D.T. Suzuki), was locked in storage at my college dorm, unavailable until the fall.

So, I walked the ten or fifteen blocks out to the college bookstore and pulled another copy of the *Manual* down from a shelf and took it to one of the dozen or so open checkout lanes. A pretty young woman at the cash register glanced at the title as she rang me up, then looked at me, and asked, "Have you ever heard of *The Three Pillars of Zen*?" I hesitated, thought a little bit, and replied, "I... think so... Isn't it by Nancy Wilson Ross?" She laughed cheerfully, and returned, "No, my uncle wrote it!"

From the *Kwannon Sutra*: "...Or if a man should find himself imprisoned and enchained with his hands and feet manacled and fettered, let his thought dwell on the power of Kwannon, and he will be released from the shackles."

SOMETIME AROUND 2017, I happened to be on a long car ride with my younger brother, Bruce, who asked me to "fill in the blanks" for him regarding a number of the events and escapades I had traversed in early- and mid-adulthood (including the above story, that tells how I was led, by Kwannon, to the Zen Center). After a couple hundred miles and a lot of laughs, Bruce turned kind of serious, and inquired if I was familiar with the artistic genre of *magical realism*. I replied affirmatively, and mentioned a couple of examples I knew from literature. Then he said, "Larry, it seems to me that a lot of your life fits into that category—you have been inhabiting a world with which many of us are not familiar!"

To that, today, in this "degenerate age" all caught up in materialism and dark worries, when by some even the Buddha's path has been "secularized," I reply, "More's the pity!"

In Roshi Kapleau's reply to "Carol", he wrote: "You ask,... what the devotional aspects of Zen have to do with 'the pure and simple task of find-



LARRY MCSPADDEN feels grateful he learned to read when young, as books on the Dharma in English started appearing when he was old enough to buy them. He first found his way to the Zen Center in 1969.

ing out who I am.’ Actually, Huang Po, in his wholehearted prostrations, was declaring with great eloquence who he was, affirming that his own essential nature and that of Buddha are indivisible. At the same time, in bowing down, he was offering to buddhas the fruits of his zazen out of gratitude for their beneficence, which made it possible.”

Having read everything Roshi published, and to the extent I came to know him through years of practice, I find nothing metaphorical or merely poetical in his talking about the Buddha, or about the buddhas. Many buddhas. *Who make our zazen possible.*

Here is a passage from Andy Ferguson’s *Zen Chinese Heritage: The Masters and Their Teachings* (p.105):

Zen Master Nanquan Puyuan entered the hall and addressed the monks, saying, “Dipamkara Buddha said, ‘The arising in mind of a single thought gives birth to the myriad things.’

“...It’s said that bodhisattvas who have passed through the ten stages of development and attained the Surangama Samadhi and the profound storehouse of all buddhas naturally realize the pervasive wondrous liberation of Zen....

“Although a single phrase of scripture is recited for endless eons, its meaning is never exhausted. Its teaching transports countless billions of beings to the attainment of the unborn and enduring Dharma. And that which is called knowledge or ignorance, even in the very smallest amount, is completely contrary to the Way. So difficult! So difficult!

“Take care!”

The great Nanquan (Nansen), teacher of Zhaozhou (Joshu), *deeply enlightened* as to the real state of things, had no reason to talk—of a Buddha from the past, or of bodhisattvas and their paths, or of “all buddhas”, or of the power of recitation of a single phrase—he had no reason to talk of such things as if they were just ideas to be believed in, or ideals to be pursued. It sounds to me as if he was talking of things as “real” as the table in front of him, as real as the monks in his audience.

I COULD TAKE countless similar citations from the wisest humans who have walked the green

Zen is
the science
of how
to wake up
to one’s
true nature,
and then
to practice
becoming
familiar with
that nature,
all while
endeavoring
to live
every moment
in harmony.

earth, who have taught on the import and impact of karma, the opportunity (and peril) presented from endless cycles of being reborn, about the importance of devotion, about the critical boost to practice arising from (certain types of) faith. My point here to “Carol” and others finding themselves stuck on religious-sounding themes coming from such wise folks: would it make sense to consider, at least as a working hypothesis, that those sages might be seeing clearly, pointing to something that could actually help you wake up and help others? Is it possible that your (perhaps limited) ideas about reality are blocking a part of your potential, and that a grander, more magnificent, even more mind-blowing view of existence might be liberating?

Yes, even the most secular of Buddhists could admit the “absolute” side of this, that their nature is “awakened nature”, that in bowing they are bowing to the best they can be, that chanting might put them in a mind state for deeper concentration—that they are seeking to be free from the duality of subject and object. But what about the “relative” side of these truths, one in which it seems that gratitude for, and relationship with, the power and compassion of innumerable Bodhisattvas and Buddhas is both appropriate and helpful?

I would suggest as a thought experiment one consider whether it is remotely possible for a being to encounter, in this lifetime, even non-religious, secular buddhism, without first having been the beneficiary of the efforts and direct help of a many, many buddhas and bodhisattvas over countless lifetimes.

LATER IN HIS reply to “Carol,” Roshi explains: “It is true that in an ultimate sense every buddha image is so much ‘baloney,’ for it purports to depict that which is beyond all shapes.... Zen master Hakuin once said, ‘Buddhas and bodhisattvas in reality have no form, and as they have no form they are unknown to those who dwell on the materialistic level. They have been given form out of necessity.’”

Note, carefully, that neither Kapleu Roshi nor Hakuin Zenji said such exalted beings don’t exist; just that they are “unknown” to those of limited perception.

I suggested earlier that we practice to be able to live in harmony with our ever-deepening realization. Zen practice and training seemed quite difficult for me in the first few decades; looking

back, I see that I was straining primarily to save myself, to get free of my own pain. Through continued practice, I recognize now, with gratitude, the wish to awaken *in order to help others* has become my primary motivation. As a result, practice and training are not now so grievously hard. So, here's a prayer (yes, "Carol," a *prayer*) to consider saying out loud: "If there are any benevolent, skillful beings who can hear my voice, with the power to assist me in any way, I ask that you help me uncover and develop my indwelling *bodhichitta* [awakened mind], my wish to wake up endlessly so as to be able to help all beings be freed from suffering."

Here's another I intone regularly, using the name of one such being who already has proven helpful in my life: "Kannon, please bring into my life and my awareness whatever teaching or lessons I most need to learn and practice now, in order to develop and reinforce a solid and sustainable trajectory on the bodhisattva path."

Or a reliable fallback in hard times for me: "O you Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, I don't even know what to ask for. Please show me just that much."

WHEN WALKING IN the woods here in Indiana, I have surprised more than a couple of friends when I shouted out the names of different Bodhisattvas to birds and squirrels. I often whisper those names to tiny insects who land on my fingers or sleeve. I wake up every morning and state aloud my intention to be of benefit to others, and right before lights out at night I dedicate any benefit or merit of the day to the liberation of all beings. "Religion" can, and I think should, be a little bit wild, a little bit crazy, and it should definitely be *your* religion. What feels good? What stretches your boundaries, opens you up, clears your sight? Do it! And then do it "religiously," without apology.

I hold the insights of traditional Buddhism on rebirth as being critically and literally true descriptions of reality as it is. I am excited about the prospect of having countless eons ahead of "me" in which to continue this practice, deepening realization, and coming to be able to really help the countless beings. I recognize that "my" past is likewise incalculably immense, and that I've taken every opportunity to make all the mistakes and do every evil deed imaginable; for this reason, I take repentance ceremonies seriously, and undertake them repeatedly (it is plausible to me that purification of such activity streams is an available alchemical process).

"Religion"
can, and
I think
should, be
a little
bit wild,
a little
bit crazy,
and it should
definitely
be *your*
religion.

THERE ARE SEGMENTS of each one's spiritual journey where it is better to do very little reading, or perhaps none at all. A "good" book, I've heard several times from Roshis Kapleau and Kjolhede, is one that "gets one back on the mat!" and I wholeheartedly agree. Just an hour ago, on FaceBook, I read of two women Zen teachers, one killed yesterday in a car accident, another facing imminent death today in hospice after a long career of teaching and service to the dying and bereaved. Impermanence stalks us, each one, right now. Let's not waste time.

But, when it's time to read, the reading that most inspires me these days falls in two categories: the great Mahayana sutras, and the lives and personal teachings of the most amazing religious people. The scope, the scale, the vastness, the profound depth, and the mystery of all the times and universes—of the infinitude of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas and their incredible powers and benevolence—reading about these in the sutras inspires me to practice. And, in the other category, in addition to the profound teachings of the Chinese, Korean, and Japanese ancestors we are familiar with from teisho, I delight hearing about the exploits and wondrous deeds of the twenty centuries or more of siddhis, sages, hermits, enlightened saints, and blessing-bestowing vagabonds from the Indian and Tibetan traditions. Such readings remind me there is magic interfusing this existence, magic that is available to reinforce and accelerate spiritual growth.

"Magical thinking" is often used as a pejorative term, referring to someone stuck in "LaLa Land" with no ties to the "real world." As for me, I wouldn't want to live in a world devoid of magic and miracles... why should I? Taking another passage from that segment on Nanquan cited earlier:

"Why is it that phenomenal existence is empty? If there is nothing within mind, then how does one explain how the myriad things arise? Isn't it as if shadowy forms differentiate emptiness? This question is like someone grasping sound and placing it in a box, or blowing into a net to fill it with air. Therefore some old worthy said, 'It's not mind. It's not Buddha. It's not a thing.' Thus we just teach you brethren to go on a journey."

What do you propose to make of *your* journey? Are you using all the tools and maps available to make the most of it? **///**

▷ ON THE ROAD

SCENES FROM BOROBUDUR, the world's largest Buddhist temple. Borobudur is located in central Java, Indonesia, near the city of Yogyakarta. Built in the 9th century, Borobudur's design incorporates 504 Buddha figures and 2672 relief panels, many of which portray the life of the Buddha. It is a UNESCO World Heritage site and the number one tourist attraction in Indonesia.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY JOHN AND CHRIS PULLEYN





Sightings

CORRECTION

In the Summer issue of *Zen Bow*, on page 19, the headline reads, “After the Center’s first-ever online sesshin in June, we asked the 8 or so participants for feedback.” The number should have been 80.



FURTHER REMARKS

Dear Zen Bow,

I SAW THE request for submissions and suggestions on racism-related topics.

Don’t know how widely known it is in the US but there is an amazing documentary series available on YouTube called *Eyes on the Prize* which charts the history of the civil rights movement from the early 50s in the south, and then as things happened nationwide later on. Amazing footage, incredible interviews....

You can check out the opening episode series by going to YouTube and searching for *Eyes on the Prize* (Part 1).

Very moving and inspiring—

should be obligatory watching, really! Just stunning.

All the best,
SENSEI KARL KALISKI
Glasgow

Dear Zen Bow,
I was reading your latest issue and noticed a reference to Camus’s *The Plague*. The plague in the novel is not based on a historical event, but Camus was right on target with many of his observations about how people respond to such a crisis. I write to point out that the story is set in the fictional city of Oran about a hundred years later than 1849. The narrator says the year is 194-, so it was set in the 1940s.

MARK NOBLE

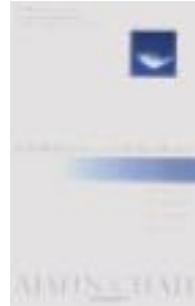
IN PRINT

GIVEN THE exigencies of the time, *Zen Bow* asked some Sangha members “What do you think is the best book to be reading if one is anxious these days?” Here are some of their replies.

When Things Fall Apart by Pema Chodron is the classic, though I’m actually finding moody plague-era historical novels weirdly helpful.—
CECILY FUHR



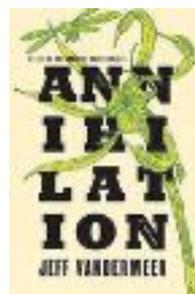
I recently read *Everything Arises, Everything Falls Away* by Ajahn Chan. Found it straightforward, inspiring, makes complete sense in navigating



the unknowable future. Hey, nothing is for certain, nothing lasts, just let go...—
BARRY
KEESAN

Yes to Barry’s recommendation. Also, I find repeating the Heart Sutra gatha is very helpful.—GRETCHEN TARGEE

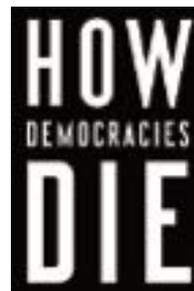
Octavia Butler’s *Earthseed* series, which resonates so strongly with many aspects of our current predicament(s), and



the *Southern Reach Trilogy* by Jeff VanderMeer to encourage leaning into the unknown.—
LUKA

HÄKKILA

How Democracies Die by Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt and *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century* by Timothy Snyder. Because if we don’t face our fears directly, they



loom in the dark and continue to haunt us, plus we need to know how to respond to them effectively. And *The Singular Universe and the Reality of Time*, by Roberto Mangabeira Unger and Lee Smolin, to remind us of the bigger picture.—TOM ROBERTS



ON SCREEN

THE MOVIE: MY OCTOPUS TEACHER DIRECTED BY PIPPA EHRLICH & JAMES

REED ¶ *What it’s about:* This nature documentary follows a filmmaker, Craig Foster, as he befriends an octopus living in a South African kelp forest.

Why it’s worthy: This is a visually and emotionally en-



thrilling story about one very thoughtful man’s journey to heal himself. Emotionally overwhelmed, lost and burnt out, he enters another world: an oceanic kelp forest. There he “meets” and becomes fascinated by an octopus.

Foster makes a commitment to visit this enigmatic mollusk every day for one year. In time, his relationship with her becomes one of love. They swim together, developing an intimate bond over the course of a year. Dur-

▷ SIGHTINGS

ing that time, we are witness to the trials and tribulations of each of their lives. She suffers and recovers from a shark attack; he attempts to meet the challenges of parenthood. Both struggle, survive, and grow through their life cycle moments.

Because an octopus lives for only a year, we are able to follow their story to its heartfelt end. But more than that, this story has us asking questions about our own lives and the matrix we live in. If you find yourself moved by this film as I have been, you may come out of it living a different life. —DEBORAH ZARETSKY

SANGHA NEWS

CHAPIN MILL UPDATE: DEDICATION OF COURTYARD SCULPTURES

A LIGHT RAIN had slicked the paving stones in the Chapin Mill courtyard, but thankfully stopped in time for the dedication ceremony on October 21, 2020. In attendance were 20 members, mostly staff, who stood masked and socially distanced in the courtyard. After a brief introduction by Roshi, Todd McGrain, the sculptor, made some remarks, including:

Much of what I do is mysterious to me. I don't really feel like I've made these. They seem to have appeared now that I'm here with them. I feel as though they have always been here....

The process is mysterious as well, going from imagining to making to installing. In a way it doesn't stop then, so there's this added mystery of the fact that the work is outdoors, changing in every season. And the water becomes the shape of the solid, which couldn't be more different in a material sense....

There are so many contexts in which I say such things and get the side-eye, or the shoulder shrug. But I never get that here. It's a wonderful thing for me to work with people who have such a deep understanding of the things that I care most about. Thank you.

Roshi then recounted his reactions when he first saw a model of the sculptures:

I was thunderstruck at how perfectly this pair of sculptures reflects the dual nature of reality at the heart of the Dharma... every imaginable thing has these two sides to it: the absolute and the relative... the realms of differentiation and nondifferentiation... form and emptiness.

And the lotus—a symbol of the True Mind we all have in common.... The lotus is the most common symbol in Buddhist literature and art. It grows up out of the mud and, even though it originates in



MARGARET MIYAKE

that muck, as it rises up out of the water it is unstained. It is perfect, just as we all are in our original nature.

Attendees then circumambulated the courtyard, chanting the Kannon Sutra. Each person in turn scooped a cup of water out of the pool of the submerged lotus and then proceeded to anoint the above-ground, blossoming lotus with it. —CHRIS PULLEYN

▲ ▼ Autumn leaves decorated the concave lotus (ABOVE), which Roshi has described as “emptiness,” as contrasted with the convex lotus “form” (BELOW). Kinhin during sesshin will encircle both sculptures via the covered walkway, but can also be done in the courtyard in a figure eight loop.



CHRIS PULLEYN



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RZC ONLINE

THOUGH WE ARE still unable to resume sitting together in the zendos at Arnold Park and Chapin Mill, the Center has been able to establish opportunities for members and non-members, in town and far away, to come together for daily online sittings and for regular sesshins. After good results with two-day, four-day, and five-day sesshins, we will hold our first online seven-day sesshin in January. Our first remote introductory workshop took place in October, and we will continue to offer them every seven or eight weeks as we did before the onslaught of COVID. A second workshop will have taken place early in December before we go to press. For a summary of all the ways you can connect online with the Center, see the “Practice in the Pandemic” section on the Center’s website, www.rzc.org.



NEXT ISSUE

How will you remember 2020? What has it meant to you? What, if anything, did you learn from it? We invite all our readers to submit elegies, obituaries, or (if you’d rather go shorter than longer) epitaphs for a most, er, unusual year. But don’t let these forms constrain you. Also welcome are photographs, drawings, cartoons, interviews with your children, and letters to your hypothetical great-grandchildren to explain what the heck happened this year. The deadline for submissions? Before year-end, of course.
