

► **THE END OF THE WORLD AS WE
KNOW IT?** Koan commentary by
Roshi Amala Wrightson

LARRY MCSPADDEN reflects on
leading the online discussion
group Dharma Reflections

WORK PRACTICE: zazen without a
zafu, by Sensei Dhara Kowal

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WE'RE COMING TO the end of the hottest year in recorded history. Forest fire season is segueing into hurricane season, and bitter wars are raging in trouble spots around the globe. The coarsening of society and the rise of far-right movements are seen everywhere, and all this is being communicated in a media environment that is dominated by click-bait and sensationalism.

Whew. No wonder so many therapists are turning to therapy themselves, to grapple not only with what they're hearing in the therapy room but also with their own feelings of anger, sadness, despair, and hopelessness.

In the face of all this, it's worth mentioning that Roshi Amala Wrightson's article in this issue, "It Goes Along with Everything Else," was originally delivered as a *teisho* five years ago, in 2018. At that time, she noted, "Anxieties about the end of the world are not particular to the modern world, but in our era of climate crisis and nuclear weaponry, they have taken on a new force and urgency."

There has never been a better time than now to bring new force and urgency into our practice. There has never been a better time to bring the stillness of *zazen* into the world.—CHRIS PULLEYN

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IMAGE BY Harold Fisk | This meander map of a portion of the Mississippi River valley shows the changing course of the river from prehistoric times (>12,000 years ago) to the year of the map's drafting (1944).



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Autumn 2023

Soundings

THE ROLE OF A TEACHER IN ZEN

LET ME SAY something about a subject that even people who've been practicing zazen for some time seem to be confused about. And this is the subject of the role of a teacher, and the relationship of the student to the teacher. In Zen, it is said that a teacher's function is to preserve his student from the teacher's influence. We have the Buddha himself saying, "Don't accept anything that I give you on faith." Don't accept anything that your teachers or anyone gives you on faith, but subject it to the test of your own reason, which means your own life experiences. And insofar as you are able to, your own spiritual awareness will develop this strong feeling of independence. Sometimes this feeling of independence is confused with conceit, sometimes even a seeming arrogance. But it is not this at all. Unless the student becomes, at the very least, as good as his teacher, he's only half as good as his teacher.

In the golden age of Zen, we have some similar sayings by some of the great Zen masters and others. One, Shitou, who was a great Chinese master said, "I would rather sink to the bottom of the sea for endless eons than seek liberation from all the saints of the universe."

Another master, Wenju, was working in the kitchen. And while he was working in the kitchen, an apparition of Monjushri (Monju) often appeared to him. One day he took up a cooking utensil and threw it at the apparition saying, "Monju is Monju and Wenju is Wenju." Each one is unique, unique in the sense that each one has his or her own karma.

To try to be like anyone else, even like your teacher, is a great mistake. You

couldn't become like your teacher or anyone else actually, even if you tried. At best, you'd be a poor carbon copy. And there's another master, Quingyuan, who said, "The full-grown man aspires to pierce through the heavens. Let him not walk in the footsteps of the Buddha." A book came out a number of years ago called *In the Footsteps of the Buddha*. A well-known book in Christianity is *The Imitation of Christ*. But in Zen Buddhism, at least, this sort of thing is not encouraged.

Deshan was another one of the great Zen masters. A disciple of Deshan said, speaking of Deshan, "Empty-handed I went to him and empty-handed I returned." Of course, there are not many people that can go, unfortunately, empty-handed to the teacher. Empty-handed of course means with your mind empty of all of the baggage that most people carry around with them.

But if one is able to go with an open mind—open mind here means an empty mind—one doesn't return from the teacher with a lot of things that you've learned. You return empty of a lot of things you've unlearned. And here we see, the main function of the master, as Harada-roshi used to say, is to "teach that there is nothing to teach and nothing to learn."

Why then, do you need a teacher? Well, you need a teacher to learn just that. People always want to acquire something. Whether it's learning at the hands of the teacher or anybody else, to acquire something to add to their store of knowledge. This is considered to be such a wonderful thing in our culture. To say to anybody that you go to Zen, let's say, to unlearn everything you've ever acquired? It seems

like an astounding kind of thing to the ordinary person.

There's another anecdote here, about Shitou when he visited his master for the first time. The master said, "Where do you come from?" And Shitou answered that he was from Taochi. That was where the Sixth Patriarch had been teaching. And then his master Ching asked, "What have you brought with you?" Shitou said, "That which has never been lost, even before I went to Taochi." And then the master further asked, "If that is the case, why did you go to Taochi at all?" And Shitou said, "If I had not gone to Taochi, how could I realize that it had never been lost?" Of course, this "it" is our true-nature, to give it a temporary name, a tentative name. One has to have a teacher—ideally, to learn that one has everything within himself.

A teacher can't put anything into anybody. But he can help. He can help people to open their eyes. He can preserve them from going wrong, but he can't tell them what is right. Students are constantly asking for this kind of information. Students will say, I did everything my teacher asked me to do. I followed very closely, listened to his every word, and I never came to awakening. And the implication of this, of course, is that there must be something wrong with the teacher: not with me but with the teacher, because I did everything he told me to do. It's kind of a subtle thing that operates with many people.

Often we hear in the course of the sesshin, at a certain point in the sesshin, "You are now completely on your own. You must find your own way. Nobody can tell you what is your way."

This is a very important point. The whole role and relationship of the teacher and the student is quite different from that in other traditions. And nobody is really a true Zen student who doesn't follow these teachings of Zen.—ROSHI PHILIP KAPLEAU, FROM A TEISHO GIVEN AT THE OCTOBER 1975 SESSHIN, DAY 1 ■

“The supreme sign of great practitioners is that they no longer have any interest in material gain, fame, the respect of others, or being the centre of attention.—DILGO KHYENTSE RINPOCHE”



WALTERS ART MUSEUM

OTGAKI RENGETSU: ZEN THROUGH ART

RENGETSU WAS ONE of the most famous female artists in history.... She created more than fifty thousand pieces of art, which are sought after now as much as they were during her lifetime. Her art, while solidly embedded in Zen Buddhist principles, expresses the pain and joy of life in the world of family, nature, and work—the world of lay life from the Buddhist point of view.

Born Otagaki Nobu, Rengetsu (1791–1875) was orphaned and adopted at a young age.... Nobu was married at sixteen to a young samurai who may have physically abused her. She had three children who all died at an early age. After her first husband died she remarried, but by the time Nobu was thirty-three her second husband had died as well. She returned to live with her adoptive father, a Pure Land Buddhist priest, on the grounds of Chionji temple with one child, who also

died later. There she found a measure of peace, became a Buddhist nun therefore after known as Rengetsu (Lotus Moon), and devoted herself to practice....

Perhaps the pottery and the poetry she inscribed on it were conceived as a moving meditation to resolve the losses she had suffered. She would gather and prepare the clay herself, form the pot by hand (she did not use a potter's wheel), and then on each piece inscribe one of her poems.... Each piece of pottery that Rengetsu created was imbued with her well-developed artistic sensibility, her determination, and her realization, hard won through a life of loss....

*Together we enjoyed
The cherry blossoms
And passed long summers
In the mountains:
Standing here such sadness.*

—FROM *ZEN WOMEN: BEYOND TEA LADIES, IRON MAIDENS, AND MACHO MASTERS* BY GRACE SCHIRESON

HALF THE WORLD FACES MENTAL HEALTH CHALLENGES

A GLOBAL STUDY co-led by researchers from The University of Queensland and Harvard Medical School has found one in two people will develop a mental health disorder in their lifetime.

Professor John McGrath from UQ's Queensland Brain Institute, Professor Ronald Kessler from Harvard Medical School, and their colleagues from 27 other countries, analyzed data from more than 150,000 adults across 29 countries between 2001 and 2022, taken from the largest ever coordinated series of face-to-face interviews—the World Health Organization's World Mental Health Survey initiative.

Lead author Professor McGrath said the results demonstrate the high prevalence of mental health disorders, with 50% of the population developing at least one disorder by the age of 75.

"The most common were mood disorders such as major depression or anxiety," Professor McGrath said. "We also found the risk of certain mental disorders differed by sex." The three most common mental health disorders among women:

- Depression
- Specific phobia (a disabling anxiety that interferes with daily life)
- Post-traumatic stress (PTSD)

The three most common mental health disorders among men:

- Alcohol abuse
- Depression
- Specific phobia

The research also found mental health disorders typically first emerge in childhood, adolescence or young adulthood. ■

dharani \dʰā·rā·ni\ or \dā·rā·ni\ n
[Sanskrit, lit. "holder" (fem.)] : short sutras that contain magical formulas of knowledge comprised of syllables with symbolic content. They can convey the essence of a teaching or a particular state of mind that is created by repetition of the dharani. They are in general longer than mantras.—*The Shambhala dictionary of Buddhism and Zen*

At the Rochester Zen Center, we chant two dharanis: the Shosai Myokichijo dharani and the Daihishin dharani. Also, there is a dharani at the conclusion of the Heart Sutra: "Gate gate, paragate, parasamgate, bodhi svaha!"



*Should I take up
a koan?*

IF YOU HAVE a longing to see into your own nature, you may be able to do that more readily by taking up a fundamental koan such as Mu, What is This?, What is It?, or Who am I? and pouring yourself into it. Ideally, an awakening experience will strengthen your resolve to continue to let go of self-referential thinking and to live a life of openness and presence.

However, if you're in a hurry and grasping at results, if you think you'd like to work on a koan because it seems somehow more advanced, or you imagine it's somehow expected of you, or because you find breath practice boring, you're probably getting ahead of yourself.

Talk this over with your teacher and be willing to take time to ripen. The most promising sign that practice is going well is when unnecessary thoughts diminish, and you start to develop a real taste for simple awareness.—SENSEI JOHN PULLEYN ■

YOU HAVE TO BECOME A FOOL

TRULY, NO KNOWLEDGE is required for you to attain enlightenment. We have a very good example of this in the sutras with one of Shakyamuni Buddha's own disciples named Shurihandoku. He couldn't remember the sutras, much less understand their meaning. He would listen to a Dharma talk, but it would go in one ear and out the other. He was even said to be so dull that he couldn't remember his own Dharma name. Shurihandoku was always scolded by his older brother, who was also a monk, for being such an idiot and not being able to get anything right, and he felt downhearted.

The Buddha came upon Shurihandoku one day when Shurihandoku was crying. The Buddha asked, "What happened to you?" Of course, the Buddha didn't really have to ask that question. The state of a practitioner's mind is obvious to the teacher in the way this person walks, sits, or makes prostrations, and Shurihandoku's state of mind was obvious from his scattered appearance. Shurihandoku answered, "I just can't understand any instructions. I'm never peaceful, and my



practice just doesn't get anywhere. Things just aren't going right. I can't attain liberation. That's really what I am crying about." When your stomach is really aching for food, how one warm, steaming rice ball set before you can make you feel! That's how it must have been then when Shurihandoku suddenly felt himself in the Buddha's embrace. Shurihandoku entrusted his entire

▲ Grate on the campus of Ohio State University
PHOTOGRAPH BY JOHN C. BUCK

being to Shakyamuni Buddha. He became like a clean, clear, white sheet of paper, so that he could entirely accept the Buddha's instructions, and that acceptance was revealed so clearly in his practice.

The Buddha taught him to remember

just two words: “Sweep clean.” Take a broom and work with it steadily; continuously sweep. Look right at your feet and sweep the dust, stroke by stroke. Devote yourself to this one task only, this one stroke. Don’t look off. Don’t look away from what you are doing, and don’t try to do more. Just devote yourself to the sweeping, to this one stroke. Just sweep. Sweep clean.” And that’s just what Shurihandoku did. Inside and out. Repeating, continuing steadily. Wherever he stepped, wherever he went, there was just this broom. One stroke, one stroke.

Shurihandoku swept all of the grounds around Shakyamuni Buddha’s gathering place, and he swept around the gate and then outside the gate—and not little swish swish swishes but strong decisive whoooosh whoooosh whooooshes. From the beginning, Shurihandoku gave his small judging mind into Shakyamuni Buddha’s keeping. He didn’t hold on to any baggage, just this stroke, unbroken, this one-doing. He was able to hear the Buddha’s message and practice it faithfully. And one day while sweeping, he was able to awaken to his original nature.

So here was someone who could hardly remember his own name, but his name has come down to us. A real practitioner has to become in a sense like Shurihandoku. You have to become a fool.—**FROM THROW YOURSELF INTO THE HOUSE OF BUDDHA: THE LIFE AND ZEN TEACHINGS OF TANGEN HARADA ROSHI, TRANSLATED BY BELEND A ATTAWAY YAMAKAWA ■**

A FEW GOLD COINS FROM HAKUIN

DO NOT SAY that worldly affairs and pressures of business leave you no time to study Zen under a Master, and that the confusions of daily life make it difficult for you to continue your meditation. Everyone must realize that for the true practicing monk there are no worldly cares or worries. Supposing a man accidentally drops two or three gold coins in a crowded street swarming with people. Does he forget about the money because all eyes are upon him? Does he stop looking for it because it will create a disturbance? Most people will push others out of the way, not resting until they get the money back into their own hands.

Are not people who neglect the study

A FALSE START

IN THE EARLY days of my interest in Buddhism and psychology, I was given a particularly vivid demonstration of how difficult it was going to be to forge an integration between the two. Some friends of mine had arranged for an encounter between two prominent visiting Buddhist teachers at the house of a Harvard University psychology professor. These were teachers from two distinctly different Buddhist traditions who had never met and whose traditions had in fact had very little contact over the past thousand years. Before the worlds of Buddhism and Western psychology could come together, the various strands of Buddhism would have to encounter one another. We were to witness the first such dialogue.

The teachers, seventy-year-old Kalu Rinpoche of Tibet, a veteran of years of solitary retreat, and the Zen master Seung Sahn, the first Korean Zen master to teach in the United States, were to test each other’s understanding of the Buddha’s teachings for the benefit of the on-looking Western students. This was to be a high form of what was being called dharma combat (the clashing of great minds sharpened by years of study and meditation), and we were waiting with all the anticipation that such a historic encounter deserved. The two monks entered with swirling robes—maroon and yellow for the Tibetan, austere gray and black for the Korean—and were followed

by retinues of younger monks and translators with shaven heads. They settled onto cushions in the familiar cross-legged positions, and the host made it clear that the younger Zen master was to begin. The Tibetan lama sat very still, fingering a wooden rosary (mala) with one hand while murmuring, “Om mane padme hum,” continuously under his breath. The Zen master, who was already gaining renown for his method of hurling questions at his students until they were forced to admit their ignorance and then bellowing, “Keep that don’t-know mind!” at them, reached deep inside his robes and drew out an orange. “What is this?” he demanded of the lama. “What is this?” This was a typical opening question, and we could feel him ready to pounce on whatever response he was given.

The Tibetan sat quietly fingering his mala and made no move to respond.

“What is this?” the Zen master insisted, holding the orange up to the Tibetan’s nose.

Kalu Rinpoche bent very slowly to the Tibetan monk next to him who was serving as the translator, and they whispered back and forth for several minutes. Finally the translator addressed the room: “Rinpoche says, ‘What is the matter with him? Don’t they have oranges where he comes from?’”


The dialogue progressed no further.—**FROM THOUGHTS WITHOUT A THINKER BY MARK EPSTEIN, M.D. ■**

PAIN FOR THE WORLD

WE CANNOT SEE or hear about what is happening to our world—be it job layoffs or homeless families, nearby toxic leaks or far-off famines, war or preparations for war—without emotion. Though we may rarely express them, feelings of fear, anger, and sorrow stir within us. Even the words—fear, anger, sorrow—are inadequate to convey the feelings that arise; for they connote emotions that humanity has known since time began. The feelings that arise now cannot be equated with ancient dreads of mortality. They arise from apprehensions of unprecedented collective suffering that is accruing to our own and other species, to unborn generations, and to living Earth itself.—**JOANNA MACY, WORLD AS LOVER, WORLD AS SELF ■**



▲ Yasaka Shrine (Shinto shrine) in Kyoto, Japan
PHOTOGRAPH BY TOM KOWAL



THE END
OF THE WORLD
AS WE
KNOW IT

HEKIGANROKU (BLUE CLIFF RECORD) CASE 29

A monk asked Dasui, “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?”

Dasui said, “It will be destroyed.”

The monk asked, “Will it be gone with everything else?”

Dasui replied, “It will be gone with everything else.”

THIS KOAN, WHICH DEALS WITH MASS DESTRUCTION, has particular relevance for us because of the predicament, the moral emergency, we are in the midst of as a species.

Because our enormous technological power is not matched by our spiritual development we have reached a crisis-point unlike any other in the history of humankind, one in which all other sentient beings and so-called inanimate things are irrevocably caught up. Human activity is now the dominant force on the planet (a staggering 96% of the planet’s total biomass consists of us humans and our livestock), and it is not only proving deadly for many non-humans but unjust and unworkable for a large part of humanity as well. Either we make a transition to a new life-sustaining civilisation that is no longer fiercely armoured against and antagonistic towards nature (and to whatever else we deem “other”), or we condemn ourselves and future

generations of sentient beings to a more and more diminished and impoverished world, if not to extinction. Our present consumer society measures success in terms of corporate profits—“how fast materials can be extracted from the Earth and turned into consumer products, weapons and waste,” as Joanna Macy puts it, and very few of the world’s leaders are brave enough to abandon the industrial growth model, even if they mouth support of sustainability.

We are in the midst of the sixth period of mass extinction in the history of the Earth, losing 30,000 species a year. All previous mass extinctions were caused by natural processes; the present one is caused by us. Humans are causing such vast physical

KOAN COMMENTARY
BY *Roshi Amala Wrightson*
of the Auckland Zen Center,
from a teisho delivered on
December 11, 2018



changes to the planet that Dr. Niles Eldridge, a paleontologist at the American Museum of Natural History, likens the chaos we are wreaking to that caused by the asteroid that plummeted into the Gulf of Mexico at the end of the Cretaceous, killing off the dinosaurs. Not even the deepest oceans or highest mountains are untouched by the consequences of human activity. As a paleontologist, Eldridge brings a long view to this urgent problem, proposing that Phase One of this particular bout of mass extinction began not with the industrial revolution a couple of hundred years ago, but 100,000 years ago, with human beings' dispersal beyond Africa! Everywhere we early humans went we over-hunted, to extinction, the large (and naively trusting) animals we found there. Only in Africa, where the large animals had a chance to evolve along with us, did they survive. Phase Two began 10,000 years ago with the advent of agriculture, when humans started to transform large tracts of the landscape. The exploitation of fossil fuels has merely allowed the speed of that transformation to go exponential. From the point of view of many other species, human beings have been crashing around the world like a bull in a china shop for a very long time. But now that bull is very, very large.

We human beings have been wreaking havoc because of our limited world-picture, and the climate crisis is our wake-up call. Because of our years of denial and inaction, the situation is urgent and possibly already at tipping point. The IPCC (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change) said earlier this year that "unless we make rapid, far-reaching and unprecedented changes in all aspects of society," we are going to reach catastrophic levels of overheating by 2030. That's less than twelve years away [in 2018]. "Catastrophic" means not enough food, massive displacement of people as sea levels rise, an increase in conflict and wars, societal breakdown. The end of our world as we know it.

OF COURSE ANXIETIES about the end of the world are not unique to modern times. In today's koan a monk comes to Master Dasui and asks, "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?"

The master in this story is Dasui Fazhen (878–963). He was a disciple of Changqing Da'an and took his name from Mt. Dasui in Sichuan province where he taught. A *kalpa* is an eon, the period between the creation of one universe and the re-creation of another universe. It's an extremely long period of time, and also an expression of the cyclical nature

of things in Buddhist cosmology, where everything is part of a beginningless and endless process of creation and destruction. In Buddhism a *kalpa* is divided into four phases: Formation, where the universe comes into existence; Abiding, where it endures for a certain time; Destruction, where it all collapses; and a final phase of Emptiness. Out of this emptiness the whole process begins again. This mythical formulation ties in loosely with the theories of some contemporary cosmologists who propose a cyclical big bang/big crunch model of the universe.

So the monk has probably read in the sutras about the end of the *kalpa*, when everything is consumed by a great fire, and this has raised doubts and fears in his mind. He is confronted with death on a cosmic scale. We perhaps find some consolation regarding our individual deaths; we may die but life goes on, we will leave behind a legacy in our children, or in our good works. But in regards to the annihilation of the universe itself, there's no room for that. So the monk asks his burning question, "Is this one destroyed or not?"

When he says "this one" he is not referring here to his small self, but rather to our unborn and undying Buddha Nature. Won't that at least survive? But Dasui says, "It will be destroyed." The monk can't stomach this and asks for clarification, "Will it be gone with everything else?" And Dasui says, "It will be gone with everything else."

Teachers always tailor their responses to the mind-state of the student. The monk wants some reassurance and some certainty—"Tell me that something will survive!" And his question springs from a dualistic mind, an "either-or" mind (is this one destroyed, or not?). This is similar to the koan Mu, where a monk asked Master Joshu, "Does a dog have the Buddha Nature or not?" and Joshu says, "Mu!" which means "[has] not." Of course, the teaching is that everything has the Buddha Nature. Why then does Joshu say "has not"? The sutras also say that Buddha Nature is unborn and undying. So what does Dasui mean when he says, "It will be destroyed"?

In the *Samyutta Nikaya* the Buddha says, "Is and is-not are the twin barbs on which all humanity is impaled." Students have to find out for themselves what Joshu meant when he said "Mu!" It's the same here. Dasui is giving a teaching here that relates perfectly to the monk's state of mind (the monk is clinging to an idea, and whatever we cling to is subject to birth and death), and is at the same time an expression of an absolute truth. Buddha Nature "goes along with everything else" because you can't



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somehow separate it out from what is destroyed.

But in the verse to Case 23 in the *Mumonkan*, Think Neither Good Nor Evil, Master Mumon writes about Buddha Nature:

You describe it in vain, you picture it to no avail;

You can never praise it fully: stop all your groping and maneuvering.

There is nowhere to hide your True Self.

When the universe is annihilated, "it" remains, indestructible.

This is the other side of the coin. The monk wants to be told that some "thing," some entity will survive when everything is destroyed, but Dasui's response goes beyond concepts of destroyed and not-destroyed. Our longing for an "is or is-not" type of answer comes out of a desire for a safe, secure place where we can rest. Of course, this longing is the cause of our suffering. We suffer because we cling to a notion of some underlying "me" and the need to protect that "me" against the slings and arrows of the world.

FOR 21ST-CENTURY human beings this koan takes on new resonances, because we are now, as a species, agents, and not mere victims, of mass destruction. This knowledge has hung over us since the industrial-scale efficiency of Hitler's death camps and of the atomic bombs that the U.S. dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and is now intensified as the planet overheats, the ice sheets melt, and floods, fires, droughts and famines become more and more frequent. Thus this question about the end of the world has become an immediate one, pressing in on all of us, at some level in our minds. The terror that this monk felt is our terror.

The possibility of a nuclear catastrophe was one of the things that initially brought me to practice. Back in the 1980s, as the Cold War entered its fourth decade, the United States and Soviet Union had about 40,000 nuclear warheads between them, and all these weapons were ready to be fired off, pointed at each other. At that time it seemed quite possible that a nuclear war could be started—possibly by accident—a war that would kill hundreds of thousands if not millions of people, contaminate vast areas, spark an unprecedented refugee crisis and perhaps cause what was known then as a nuclear winter. Contemplating this possibility, a question would come up strongly. How would I respond? Would I rise to the occasion and be able to help others or would I just be a coward? I really couldn't answer this question, but it motivated me to practice. In 1984, working with these issues, I had a series of dreams in which I would witness the start of

"Catastrophic"
means not
enough food,
massive
displacement
of people
as sea levels
rise, an increase
in conflict and
wars, societal
breakdown.
The end of
our world
as we know it.

nuclear war. In one, after the first mushroom cloud has sent everyone underground, I discover a small Buddha figure in the hospital basement where I have taken shelter, and tearfully suggest to those around me that we do zazen together.

In his book *The Fate of the Earth*, Jonathan Schnell explores how humankind's ballooning power to destroy has changed things:

Such imponderables as the sum of human life, the integrity of the terrestrial creation, and the meaning of time, of history, and of the development of life on earth, which were once left to contemplation and spiritual understanding, are now at stake in the political realm and demand a political response from every person. As political actors we must, like contemplatives before us, delve to the bottom of the world, and Atlas-like we must take the world on our shoulders.

As Carl Jung said, the world hangs by a thread and that thread is the human psyche. The ecological catastrophe unfolding around us demands that we all become contemplatives and political actors. How can we respond adequately to life-and-death issues without delving into our minds and plumbing the depths of our own aggression, our own deepest fears, our own profound separation from our world and from the billions of people who suffer under our current system? Philosophical answers are in themselves not enough—they must be urgently put into practice in the ways we interact with others—the way we vote, how we participate in the democratic process, the groups we support, how we earn a living, what we eat and what we do with our leisure time.

Tenkei Denson, a Japanese Soto master, commenting on Dasui's "It Goes Along with Everything Else," says:

The underlying meaning is that the fire that consumes the universe at the end of the eon is already upon you all. So everyone should urgently make a thorough investigation. If you waste time hanging around, you will lose your life.

The truth of annihilation that is brought into our consciousness so violently by the presence of nuclear weapons, and by our overheating planet is not a new truth. But it is present in our world in a way that is clamouring to be recognised, to be seen and heard. The fire that consumes the universe is already upon us all, but also now, in our hands! The Italian poet and social reformer, Danilo Dolci, asked to comment on the apocalyptic world that we live in, said:

It has been astutely observed that apocalypse contains the sense of unveiling or revelation, as well as that of ending. Yet what should we think of this complex of intuitions and nightmares, of desires, dreams and catastrophic fears? I believe that, for a person who is aware, every day has its own apocalypse, every day unveils itself, every day goes into dust. I find one remark of Jung's very telling: each one of us can discover and defuse our most secret traumas in order to set in motion an alternative way of life.

Each of us is a human bomb that must be defused. If we are honest we can perhaps begin to see that the rise of the suicide bomber is not an aberration but a twisted expression of our collective human karma. In family systems theory the suicide bomber would be called the "identified patient"—the family member who most obviously shows the pathology of the system. May our apocalypse be not a literal end, but one that reveals human society's pathology, the particular shape and flavour of its dukkha right here, right now. Because then healing can happen.

The flipside of realizing our destructive potential as human beings is the awareness that what we do matters. When our activities send a whole species into extinction, or cause an ecosystem or traditional culture to collapse, "it" goes along with them. We lose our very life. But if we can take off our armour and defuse our most secret traumas, there is the possibility that we can come back into harmony with the rest of nature. Instead of letting the world overheat, can we throw our attachments on the pyre?

"THE FIRE THAT consumes the universe at the end of the eon is already upon us all." It is through allowing ourselves to be totally burnt up in our zazen, in our efforts to protect sentient beings, and in honestly facing global suffering, that we discover that which is indestructible. How can "it" possibly be destroyed? It is not that we can go to some secure place called Buddha Nature and find safety there. There is no such place. There is no such thing as "Buddha Nature," because if it's a thing then it can be destroyed. Rather, we can burn up in each moment, in our difficulties and conflicts and daily struggles. We can completely burn up so there is no residue. This is our refuge.

THERE IS A CODA to today's koan that doesn't appear in the case itself. After his exchange with

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Dasui, the monk didn't accept the answer he had received and went to visit another Zen master, probably hoping that this master would say that Dasui had got it wrong. So when he arrived he related the whole exchange. After listening, the second master lit a stick of incense, turned in the direction of Dasui's temple, and offered it, praising Dasui's response. He then urged the monk to go back and make his apologies to Dasui for not valuing his fine teaching. The monk followed the second master's instructions and returned to Dasui. The journey may have taken a long time, because when he got back he found that Dasui had died. The monk couldn't make his apologies and was even more perplexed. So he made the journey back to the second master again, perhaps in the hope that the second master would elaborate on why he found Dasui's answer to be so exceptional. But when he reached his destination he found that the second master had also died.

In the second half of the story the fact of destruction/impermanence is brought into the personal realm. In the first part the monk asks his cosmic question about the destruction of the universe, but now he is faced with something much more intimate—the passing away of his teachers. It is really a parable about missed opportunities; the monk had the chance to learn from these two masters, but he wasn't ready to hear their teachings; he was caught up in trying to pin down "is or is-not." Meanwhile life kept flowing on.

THE EARTH HAS SURVIVED five previous periods of mass extinction, each time remaking herself over a period of 10 to 30 million years. The Earth will bounce back, and, though we humans and many of our fellow sentient beings may not survive, "the force that through the green fuse drives the flower" will bloom once more. But this does not mean that we should just fatalistically participate in the destruction of our biosphere. Not at all. We must do everything we can to avert collapse. We can take on the prospect of the destruction of our biosphere, and our part in it, as a way of waking up to both our own fragility and that of the world. The old dream is the human-centric one, a nightmare of separation from the rest of nature and from much of humanity as well. We need to see ourselves as sustainers, not consumers; as upholders of the Dharma living in a Mahasangha that excludes no one and no thing. If not, we will be like the monk in the koan, missing our chance to wake up, and then finding that our teachers—the penguin, the cheetah, the coral reef and all the rest—have gone. ///

▷ FROM THE ARCHIVE



FOR AS LONG as there has been a Rochester Zen Center, there have been members longing for a communal garden. Over the years, gardens have been cultivated by staff and volunteers at the Gratwick Place, Bob and Carol Knebel's farm, Chapin Mill, and even on the roof of the dining room at Arnold Park.

The photo of Roshi Kapleau hoeing was taken at the Gratwick Place, probably in the late Sixties or early Seventies.



Reflections on Dharma Reflections

NOTE: Dharma Reflections is an online discussion that anyone can drop in on at any time. The discussion takes place the third Sunday of each month from 1:00 to 2:15 PM Eastern on Zoom. The RZC website has a link to the Eventbrite signup that will give you access.

Longtime RZC member and practitioner Larry McSpadden leads friendly discussions, suitable for newcomers and established members alike, on various topics, utilizing short selections of Buddhist writings and teachings.

ZEN BOW: I thought this would be a good time to interview you because I had heard that you were going to stop leading Dharma Reflections. But you said you're going to continue, so that's great.

LARRY MCSPADDEN: Yeah, I took three months

off in the summer, and got back to work on it for the class that we did a week ago and found out that my enthusiasm has returned. And once that cleared up, then the road seemed open. And I got some feedback from the regulars who say they really

INTERVIEW WITH
Larry McSpadden

depend upon it. It's like a monthly service for some of them. For some, it's the only contact they have with the Zen Center.

ZB: How many people are regulars?

LM: Seven or eight—they rotate in and out. But we almost always have at least six and we've had up to 10 or 12. In particular sessions, it's not unusual to have somebody pop in who's never visited before.

ZB: Well, good. So let's go back to the beginning. How did you come up with this idea? What was it that inspired you to start doing Dharma Reflections?

LM: The report on the survey of members [that was conducted in 2021]. One of the most widely expressed requests was a variation on "How do I find out more about Buddhism?" Outside of the sitting, what's the context? What are some of the philosophical and cosmological basics and the terms that we use and things that are mentioned in the ceremonies? Let's get into those in a little more depth. So, when I saw that expressed need, I reached out and said, I think I could do something here.

And, as you may know, I've continued [my study]. I've always been an avid reader, but for the last eight or 10 years, almost all of my reading has been in Dharma-related materials. I've really gotten interested in the Vajrayana tradition. But there are always new books coming out every month about Zen, American and Western Zen. And looking at the sutras and all this sort of thing is just fascinating to me. I have an intellectual as well as a spiritual interest.

ZB: So how would you describe Dharma Reflections?

LM: Well, we've wound up with this core of people and we've done some discussion on, what are you interested in? What would you like to talk about? We started off with a session that went into the value of what's called analytical meditation. That is, considering the ideas and really breaking them down logically, and gaining some faith and some trust. For things like no-self, impermanence, and suffering, the unsatisfactory nature of *samsara*, and all that. So I wanted to start off with that and just say there are different kinds of meditation in some traditions, and there can be some value from investigating them as concepts, but it depends pretty much on the person as to whether they're at a place in their life that it can benefit them or interest them. And then we dove into the four Brahmaviharas (great compassion, loving kindness, sympathetic joy, and equanimity) because they say a lot about the whole field of Mahayana Buddhism. So, what is equanimity from that standpoint? Seeing all beings with the same eye, and having this feeling towards them with the same heart?

And that was fun. We took up each one of the four Brahmavaharas in a full session after having an introductory session on them. So that got us through about a half a year right there.

In preparation for each one of these, I take the subject, and then I go through my library and find passages that are thought-provoking, or that lay the foundation, or that talk about the varieties of ways of looking at these ideas. And those typically run about six to eight pages. And I also put out five or six possible questions for discussion. I try to get these out at least a week, sometimes two weeks in advance of the session, titling them "Notes and Quotes." I email them directly to the regular participants, but they're also posted on the RZC website under Dharma Reflections. Anyone can access each one of these 20 or so documents; a sort of library of topics is being assembled. So if you're interested, say, in the topic of self/no-self, or the taking the precepts, or the Three Jewels, you can just go there and read a few pages. It gives you a concise background and a sense of some of the important points related to that topic.

ZB: That's great. I had no idea that was on the website.

LM: Yes, there are hyperlinks right there under Dharma Reflections to each one of the "Notes and Quotes" documents. We decided at the start of this year that we were going to talk about the path of the Bodhisattva. And I think the first three sessions we talked about, basically, what's on the path, what does it mean? What are some of the ways of looking at oneself as being on the Bodhisattva path and why is that a good thing? What are the difficulties? What are the challenges? How can you work with something like that? Why is it a precious idea to have and to nurture, things like that, and then we started diving in, one a month, going through the paramitas, the perfections. So we've gone through *dana*, *sila*, and *ksanti* was the one that we did just this month. And that's really been lovely. We haven't decided yet whether we're going to stick with the basic six or go ahead and do the full 10 paramitas as outlined in Aiken Roshi's book on the on the subject.

Let's see, what are some of the other subjects we talked about? We spent three sessions on dependent origination; in other words, how, what, why is there something rather than nothing? And how did it all come about from a Buddhist standpoint? How did that happen without a creator or a God? That was a really fascinating discussion, to get into some of the particulars of that. We did the Four Noble Truths. And I think I've touched on everything that we have covered so far.



LARRY MCSPADDEN feels grateful he learned to read 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 Rochester Zen Center in 1969.

ZB: Okay. So the typical meeting then runs about 75 minutes. How does it go? You have a bit of a pre-read, it sounds like six to eight pages, and you've got some questions. So how do you conduct the session? Do you do a little lecture first? Or do you just dive right into the questions?

LM: In the recent three or four "Notes and Quotes," I've started off with about a page of my own thoughts about the subject before quoting from sources. But when we start off a session, if we have anybody new, we ask them if they've looked at the materials. If not, we refer them to the RZC website so they can open it up. And then I will usually just dive in by quoting an excerpt from one of the passages and then ask a question about it. How does this affect your life? What kind of problems do you have with this? Does this make sense to you? Does this challenge or inspire you? Usually, things get rolling then, and often they don't stop until we have to quit, without any further prompting.

Sometimes I'll pull it back to another one of the questions for discussion. And out of six or seven questions that I had listed, it's unusual for us to actually discuss more than two of them. But other things come up, where people are talking about their own life situations, and are asking questions of one another, or somebody will make a comment. And another person will say, "Yes, but," or "Yes, and" or "Here's another way of looking at that." And so I'm usually able to step back and barely be a moderator. Sometimes I'll put in a little push or a little redirect or something like that. But we always have among us the regulars. There's a lot of trust and confidence in one another, and some really good and rich discussions are the result.

ZB: That's great. And do you welcome newcomers to the group?

LM: Absolutely. Yeah. So when we see a new name, we say hi, and ask them, "Where are you from?" Or "How did you find us?" And, "Did you get a chance to look at the material and if you didn't, it's okay, we're just talking here and feel free to jump in when you have anything to say."

ZB: Sounds great. I'm hoping that this interview will spur some more interest in Dharma Reflections, because it sounds like something a lot of people wanted.

LM: Yeah, that's a good idea—hey, members, you all said this is what you wanted [see sidebar]. It's available and it's also flexible, so that if somebody comes in and says, "I missed the discussion on the Three Jewels" or self/no-self or something, we can go back to that; we'd be open to anything like that.

It's very open-ended. Usually we reach a consensus when we decide to head out in a new direction.

ZB: It sounds like even if you took a class in Buddhism, it would not be the same as this.

LM: Yeah, I didn't want it to be a book club. Right? With a lot of assigned reading. Dharma Reflections is more of a Sangha program; we feel like we have a little Sangha. And it is as refreshing to dip into that once a month as it is for me to go down to the local Zen Center twice a week and sit with other people. It's not the same as just reading something alone. And it's not the same as taking a class.

ZB: It's not just an intellectual exercise. Because it sounds like you really try to relate it to people's personal practice.

LM: Yeah. And I try to pick quotes that focus on the practical nature of these ideas. If you're looking at loving-kindness, what does that mean in your life, when you're interacting in a family situation. How do you deal with that? We had a really good discussion this last time on the paramita *ksanti*, your forbearance in dealing with anger and impatience.

ZB: So it's rooted in practice, in daily life.

LM: About half of the group or a little more than half have a daily practice. And a couple of them, I think, have no other contact with the center other than Dharma Reflections. They just really like the group—they just feel like it's their church, almost, and they have been outspoken in saying, "This is really important to me."

ZB: So some of them are people that are not members of the Center. How did they find out about it?

LM: One of them that's a regular just found it through a Google search; they were curious about Buddhism or about Zen. And then there's word of mouth: "Hey, you ought to check this out." We have a gamut of ages, I'd say we run from the late 20s to the mid-70s.

ZB: The fact that people can be part of it and not have an active practice might lead them to practice.

LM: For some, it has laid the foundation for that. And it's also something that somebody could dip in and out of; it's not a long-term commitment. If somebody saw a topic or two that were interesting to them, it's fine to just come in for a couple of sessions. Just pop in and join up and then maybe, you know, football season starts and you want to do something else.

ZB: Really appreciate your time, Larry, and really appreciate what you're doing.

LM: I'm really happy to do it. ///

COMMENTS FROM THE 2021 SANGHA SURVEY

"Everything I know about Zen is through applied practice but opportunities for textual analysis are limited."

"I would definitely love a chance to study Buddhism more deeply."

"I'd love to actually study Buddhism—I want to use the library more but I don't know where to start. If there were a formal study group, I'd happily join that."

"Beyond teisho and the RZC library, I don't feel there's anything really drawing me in and educating me about Buddhism, for example a study group of some type."

"While meditation may be at the heart of practice, I think there may be more trust in the practice if we could know the framework behind it."

"I would love more lessons on Buddhism. I feel like I don't really know a lot even though I agree with what is said in teisho and get good insight from them."

"I think that there could be more discussion or a seminar on what the sutras actually say. Or historical Buddhism which I think we really only hear about during sesshin."

"I would appreciate the opportunity to participate in more discussions about Buddhism and our Zen practice."

WORK *PRACTICE*



In the Zen tradition,

work practice has long been part of the daily monastic schedule, dating back more than 1,000 years. Traditionally, it involved manual work, such as cooking, cleaning, gardening, and other routine activities that require minimal thinking. In a practical sense, work practice enables a monastery or residential training center like ours to function daily. But, more importantly, it's a form of active zazen, bringing our practice "off the mat" and into the world.

The work period is traditionally held after the morning sitting, following breakfast. Everyone is assigned a job; everyone contributes—in the spirit of the old Zen saying, "A day without work is a day without food." At our center, on a typical day, work practice involves tasks such as preparing lunch, cleaning the zendo, and doing various chores that maintain the buildings and grounds. Often, residents

are joined by volunteers, who take advantage of the opportunity to enrich their practice with the mutual support of Sangha. We all do our part in supporting a training program environment that is ideal for mindful work, including maintaining silence as much as possible.

However, what constitutes work practice has evolved over time to reflect the changes in the way humans live and work. Beyond simple manual tasks, today's work practice includes preparing reports and spreadsheets, coordinating events, maintaining a website, creating social media posts, and troubleshooting an array of technology issues that can arise in offering hybrid sittings and sesshin. Each of these tasks requires a specialized skill set and use of the intellect to some degree or another, and they are necessary in order for our center to function and thrive in the 21st century. Likewise,

TEXT BY *Sensei*
Dhara Kowal

many people in our Sangha perform intellectual tasks as part of their livelihood.

In contrast to simple manual work, engaging our practice can be more challenging when employing our thinking, analyzing, conceptualizing mind. The simplicity of just cleaning a toilet or just washing a bowl makes it easier to put our whole body–mind into what we’re doing. Yet, we can still experience a state of flow—that is, concentrated absorption—when performing cognitive work. It just has a different quality to it.

No matter the task or project that we’re working on, our attention should be on becoming completely one with whatever we’re doing, moment by moment. In this regard, work practice is not about goal completion. It’s not about getting from point A to point B. We’re so conditioned to set goals, and upon completing them successfully, we may be inclined to bask in a sense of accomplishment. But the spirit of work practice is just the pure doing without striving for some kind of attainment or end result.

Work practice is also not about efficiency; it’s not about getting something done in the shortest amount of time. This really runs counter to mainstream work culture where great value is placed on efficiency—especially from the vantage point of managers and CEOs, or those who are tracking “the bottom line.” At the same time, work practice is not about performing a task extra slowly or painstakingly. In some situations, we do need to respond swiftly; we need to keep to a strict timetable. What’s most important is that we’re being responsive to what needs to be done and that we’re absorbing ourselves fully in what we’re doing, again moment by moment.

ANOTHER POINT TO embrace is that work practice is not about achieving perfection. Perfectionism is a personality trait that involves a preoccupation with some imagined standard of success. In other words, it’s an expression of wanting to be in control. Of course, doing an excellent job isn’t inherently bad. It can be a product of devoted attention and care—even love. But if our efforts are driven by an attachment to success or a fear of failure, then we’re caught up in thoughts and judgments about ourselves. We’re also clinging to ideas about how others may evaluate our work. Confronting habits of mind is part of the process of work practice, just as it is in sitting meditation.

Put simply, work practice is *zazen* in motion, just like *kinhin* and chanting. But it’s certainly not a substitute for sitting. The stabilized mind of awareness that we hone while sitting is the foundation

for practice in activity. It’s what equips us to be present, to unify mind and body.

Ordinarily, when our attention is divided, our experience of work is that of drudgery. We get bored, we feel impatient or resentful. We just want to “get it over with.” Even when doing a simple task such as raking leaves, if our attention wanders, we’re cutting ourselves off from the present moment. Perhaps we’re making plans or ruminating on something that happened in the past. We might feel frustrated by the volume of leaves or the weather conditions at the time. But there’s another way to rake, and that is *no-mindedly*. Just moving the rake back and forth, changing directions, and forming a pile. Just the musty odor of decaying leaves, the crunch of dried-up leaves underfoot, the crisp autumn air. Just that.

If you’re working on a koan or breath practice, in many situations it can be difficult, if not impossible, to keep your focus on it during work. It doesn’t make sense to be counting inhalations and exhalations while you’re chopping up carrots with a sharp knife. Not only will your attention be divided, but you risk injuring yourself. Sometimes we just need to let go of our particular practice in such moments or let it fade into the background. What is more important is that we direct our attention fully to what we’re doing, while letting go of random thoughts that pass through the mind.

WHEN IT COMES TO physical work, a wonderful resource is the book *Sweeping Changes: Discovering the Joy of Zen in Everyday Tasks* by Gary Thorpe. In a chapter titled “The Way of the Broom,” Thorpe says:

Could anything be simpler than sweeping your own floor? Complications arise only when “thinking” interferes with performance. When you become too conscious of your actions, too careful, you can encounter a kind of “nervous” negative energy. Oddly enough, too much thought can result in the same kind of disjuncture as absent-mindedness and lack of concentration. When you strain too hard to create beautiful music, you fumble the notes and the music suffers. Even sweeping the floor can become awkward and ineffectual if done with too much care.

We need to allow ourselves to flow unimpeded by thoughts. That said, when we’re learning a new task, we do tend to overthink it. Initially, we try hard to follow the instructions carefully, but when we get it into our body we’re off and running. It’s



SENSEI DHARA KOWAL has been practicing at the Center for more than 20 years. Sanctioned to teach by Roshi Bodhin Kjolhede in 2022, she now co-leads the Rochester Zen Center with Sensei John Pulleyn.

just like learning how to ride a bike. If we're self-consciously thinking about using our feet to push the pedals and our hands to steer and operate the gears, we're not going to enjoy the ride and we just might topple over.

We can experience joy in anything we do, including in what we may think of as rather mundane tasks, when we allow the self to drop away. When you work no-mindedly, there is the potential to be so absorbed that you're not aware of what is happening around you. But that's not the whole of work practice; there is also a mindfulness dimension of being aware of your body in space, harmonizing and working in concert with everything and everyone around you. In a practical sense, if we're not aware of people and objects around us, nor of changing conditions while we're working, we're likely to bump into things, lose our footing, and perhaps even injure ourselves.

But what about work that requires mental activity? Do we have to abandon Zen practice altogether? When you're writing, reading, coding, or analyzing, it certainly can feel like thought-centric work, especially if you're sitting for hours at a desk, staring at a screen. But there are things you can do to engage your practice even with these kinds of work—first and foremost by simply focusing on what you're doing and letting go of extraneous thoughts just as one would with manual work.

WHEN I WAS A university professor, I used to spend a lot of time working at a computer, reading and writing, and to a lesser degree I still do as a Zen teacher. In order to get intellectual work more into my body and out of my head, I learned that it helps to pay attention to posture while seated at my desk. It also minimizes the potential for issues with back or hip pain due to poor posture. Taking advantage of screen breaks is also helpful. Every time you take a break, whether it's to stand up and stretch, or to go use the bathroom or get a drink of water, it's an opportunity to reengage your practice in a bodily way. This requires us to drop the cognitive work, drop it right there in that moment when we make the shift to taking a break. Whatever you were just thinking about at your desk, drop it and be one with what you're doing right now. Just opening the office door, just walking down the hall. It's an opportunity to be one with your body in motion, whereas at your desk you may be largely stationary with the exception of fingers tapping at the keyboard.

It is also beneficial to avoid juggling multiple tasks at once, a habit that sabotages immersing ourselves in what we're doing. If we're toggling back

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At the same
time, work
practice is
not about
performing a task
extra slowly
or painstakingly.

and forth between, say, preparing some written report and checking our email or cell phone, our attention is split. The same goes with listening to music while working. In a Hidden Brain podcast about the value of "deep work," Cal Newport, author of *Deep Work: Rules for Focused Success in a Distracted World*, says that while most people know that there's a price to pay for multitasking, "What they're still doing is every 5 or 10 minutes, a 'just-check.' Let me just do a 'just-check' to my inbox. Let me just do a 'just-check' to my phone real quick and then back to my work. And it feels like single-tasking. It feels like you're predominantly working on one thing. But even those very brief checks, that switch of your context even briefly, can have this massive negative impact on your cognitive performance. It's the switch itself that hurts, not how long you actually switch."

Newport is describing the difference between doing one task at a time and doing it simultaneously with the awareness in the back of your mind that you've got emails in your inbox or a text message waiting for you. While Newport's research focuses on the impact for work performance, we can readily see that it also applies to Zen practice.

The way to protect your mind from such distractions is by consolidating tasks or designating time for "shallow work," says Newport. For example, checking email only once or twice a day and putting your phone on DND—even better, putting it somewhere out of sight. Another strategy is to designate blocks of time to work without interruption. The extent to which one has the opportunity to do this will depend on one's office environment. In some work circumstances, we need to make ourselves accessible and available to others.

THE MOST IMPORTANT takeaway on work practice is that cognitive tasks need not be construed as activities that are separate from or un conducive to Zen practice. We don't abandon our True Nature when we're using our thinking mind. It's not other than who we are, even when we misuse our attention. Our True Nature is always and already functioning whether we realize it or not.

The famous lay practitioner Layman Pang (740–808), who made a living and supported his family as a merchant, said, "Drawing water and carrying firewood are spiritual powers and sublime functions." So it is with writing reports, adding up numbers, and tending to a customer. In truth, there's nothing about our lives that is not practice. Nothing. No event, no location, no time of day, no activity, no single moment that is not the embodiment of our True Nature. ///



Autumn 2023

Sightings

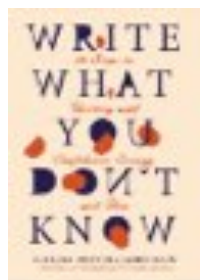
IN PRINT

THE BOOK: WRITE WHAT YOU DON'T KNOW BY ALLEGRA HUSTON AND JAMES NAVE

¶ *What it's about:* On its surface, this book is an approach to enabling writers to write with greater depth and presence. However, it is more than a set of simple writing exercises and prompts, and this is where it intersects with Zen Buddhism.

Why It's Worthy: As a writer, I know that just like my daily zazen, writing is a practice. This book leads you to a different way (of the practice of writing), one that parallels what we learn, over time, about the practice on the mat and within our daily lives.

The problem faced by writers, whether novice or experienced, whether poets or prose writers, is remarkably similar to the problem faced by both neophytes and experienced meditators. So often the obstacle to writing (or writing freely and well) is the writer as self-editor. It is the imposi-



tion of the analytical mind on the writing process. As the authors of the book note, there is time enough for that once the writing is done. This is the key to writing what you don't know. Clearly you always know what you are writing, but they suggest ways in which you can bypass the self-editor, the ego, and be wholly in the moment of writ-

ing without filters, without doubt, and without imposing intention.

When they ask the writer to “cede rational control” of the writing, they might have used the words of Affirming Faith in Mind: “When preferences are cast aside, the Way stands clear and undisguised. But even slight distinctions made set earth and heaven far apart.” Of course, the subconscious mind knows what is flowing from the pen, but it doesn't seek to direct it; it is an observer. The I, the ego-critic of the writer, is not at the table, so it allows the subconscious, non-rational mind to hold the pen.

What the writers are suggesting is, write from your “don't-know mind.” As importantly, the authors suggest that you *not* write with any specific goal, nor with any specific outcome in mind. When you write to attain something, some outcome, you miss everything along the way. As Shunryu Suzuki wisely put it, “As long as you seek for something, you will get the shadow of reality and not reality itself.” In this book, what happens, what is written, happens. You aren't driving the car, you are along for the ride. You are wholly present in the moment of the actual writing. “Do not go searching for the truth, just let those fond opinions go.”

In a key chapter in the book the authors remind us to “write without attachment.” Being in the moment requires that you not cling to another, prior moment. They might



▲ TOP: Anna Belle Leiserson, Jissai Prince-Cherry. BOTTOM: Sensei John Pulleyn

have quoted Dogen in this chapter, “Forgetting oneself is opening oneself.” Just as sitting on the zafu is a practice that can lead to finding the True Self, writing with this method can lead to finding the True Writer. I can say from experience with the method and practice of “Write What You Don't Know” that it takes time, it is a practice, but every once in while you find the writing equivalent of a moment of written kensho. So is this a book about Zen? Of course not, it is a book about writing. Or is it?—LOU FABER

BEHIND THE SCENES

MEET THE TECH TEAM

THE QUALITY AND variety of our online offerings would not be possible without our dedicated tech team. It's astounding how much work goes on behind the scenes to keep everything up and running smoothly—it truly takes a village.

Jissai Prince-Cherry is a full-time RZC staff member working from her home in Louisville, and Anna Belle Leiserson volunteers full-time from Nashville. Many of their responsibilities used to be

handled by Sensei John Pulleyn when he was Head of Zendo. Currently he serves as the local presence of the tech team, providing input on upcoming ceremonies, sesshins, and other events, and working closely in their weekly team meetings with Anna Belle and Jissai to keep the website and Sangha communication accurate and up-to-date.

Here's a glimpse into the working worlds of both Anna Belle and Jissai:

JISSAI PRINCE-CHERRY:
Maintain the online calendar:

- Enter spiritual activities (sittings, ceremonies, sesshin) and Sangha programs as well as meetings and other activities in the calendar.
- Reserve space (both in-person and online rooms) for the activities.

Update the website: I consider the website to be another depiction of what's on the calendar. This is especially true of the home page.

- Edit the audio files and make

▷ SIGHTINGS

podcasts (Dharma talks, teisho, Coming to the Path talks) and their transcripts available on the website.

- Manage volunteer transcript editors—we currently have two people serving as transcript editors, and they do an awesome job!
- Create fillable forms (e.g. sesshin applications), retrieve data from the forms, and render the data useful via rosters and spreadsheets.
- Gather information for the weekly Sangha email; distribute the email and post it on the website.

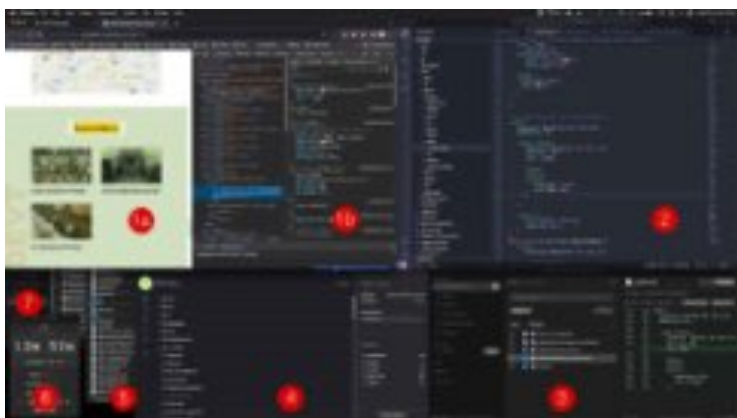
Manage online (Zoom) zendo:
This a biggie for me! The job includes managing daily sittings,

Zoom access, you name it! This is also a big one for me.

ANNA BELLE LEISERSON:

I tell my friends (and really mean it) that being the RZC webmaster is the best Web gig I've ever had—and I've had a lot, both as a professional and a volunteer. It's even better than coding my own sites. I love working with Sensei and Jisai—plus quite a number of other people.

Here's an example of what my screen looks like when there's coding in progress. The task here was correcting a mistake I made in the font color for "Practice With Us" on RZC's home page:



sesshins, ceremonies, meetings, and events on Zoom.

- Train and manage volunteers and their schedules (Did you know we have eight volunteers hosting our 12 weekly Zoom sittings?)
- Helped jumpstart and/or assist our affiliate Zen Centers with their online operations and sesshins
- Act as tech support for Sangha members participating in spiritual activities on Zoom as well as for volunteers hosting RZC Sangha Programs on Zoom.

Respond to emails sent to the RZC Receptionist: This includes inquiries about our workshops, Finding Your Seat, making payments, buying incense, sesshin,

1. Google Chrome browser:
 - a. Left half shows localhost (development) server
 - b. Right half: Chrome's code inspector
2. Visual Studio Code: for doing the actual coding
3. Tower: code version control
4. CodeKit: for compiling Sass to CSS
5. CyberDuck: for file transfers
6. Howler: Time app that howls at me after 30 minutes so in theory I'll take a break
7. Finder: local file locator
8. Not shown (buried underneath): Mozilla's Firefox browser (my favorite browser) in Cloudflare, a service we use to speed up rzc.org



▲ 2023 GROWING SEASON AT CHAPIN MILL

This year, Sangha members returned to cultivate the garden under the walnut trees behind Klava House. This garden, recently dubbed the Walnut Garden, was initially planted by Ralph Chapin many decades ago. Two rhubarb patches, planted over 50 years ago, originate from Ralph's era tending this garden.

For the 2023 season, crops harvested include rhubarb, garlic, butternut squash, Swiss chard, and a steady stream of arugula. Over 15 pounds of Champagne Rhubarb was cut and frozen. Champagne Rhubarb, with delicate thin red stems, originated in the late 19th century and is still prized for its sweetness. The butternut squash plants yielded about ten squash, which was surprising given the shade over the garden. The garlic crop was successful, yielding about three dozen heads.—BRENDA REEB



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REACHING THE WIDER SANGHA: ONLINE AND HYBRID OFFERINGS

MORE THAN EVER before, the RZC is reaching out to those who can't be here in person. All events and groups are listed in the online Zen Center calendar and may also be found on the website under the "Community" tab. In addition, the weekly member e-newsletter has been redesigned to put upcoming events front and center, so don't neglect to check it out if you want to know what's happening.

UPCOMING EVENTS, MEETINGS, AND CEREMONIES

(More details are available on rzc.org)

FINDING YOUR SEAT (*online*): Saturday, November 11, 11:00 AM–12:00 PM. Looking to get your Zen practice going? Have questions about zendo protocol, sitting posture, etc.? Finding Your Seat meets most Saturdays via Zoom. It's super informal and a nice way to get to know people and ask questions.

ZEN 101 (*hybrid*): An informal class aimed at de-mystifying chanting, prostrations, ceremonies, Zen vocabulary, etc. Participants will have a chance to ask questions. Saturdays, 1:00–2:30 PM (check calendar for upcoming dates).

DEPRESHZEN (*online*): Next meeting is Saturday, November 14, 3:00 PM. DepreshZen is a peer support group for Sangha members with depression and anxiety disorders. If you're interested in participating or have any questions, please contact Iriz Robles (irizelma@rzc.org) or Tom Kowal (tomk@rzc.org).

**INTRODUCTION TO ZEN MEDITATION
WORKSHOP** (*online*): Saturday, November 18. Led by Sensei John Pulleyn.

CEREMONY OF GRATITUDE (*hybrid*): Sunday, November 19, 8:30–10:30 AM. On the Sunday before Thanksgiving, the Center will hold our annual Ceremony of Gratitude, beginning with zazen at 8:30 AM. During the ceremony, offerings will be made by and on behalf of the Sangha, and participants are invited to write statements of gratitude that will be read aloud during the ceremony.

ZEN OF LIVING AND DYING (*hybrid*): Sunday November 19, 11:30 AM–12:30 PM. A support group for members coping with issues of life, death, and illness. It meets every two weeks.

DHARMA REFLECTIONS (*online*): Sunday, November 19, 1:00–2:15 PM. Friendly discussions of Buddhist philosophy and practice, led by Larry McSpadden. It meets monthly.

PARENT PRACTICE GROUP (*online*): Monday, November 27, 8:15–9:15 PM. An education and support group for Zen Center parents, led by Susan Rakow.

UPCOMING SESSHINS

(All are hybrid)

DECEMBER 2-DAY SESSHIN

December 8–10

Led by Eryl Kubicka

JANUARY 7-DAY SESSHIN (ROHATSU)

January 6–13, 2024

Led by Sensei John Pulleyn

FEBRUARY 2-DAY SESSHIN

February 6–8, 2024

Led by Ven. Jissai Prince-Cherry

APRIL 7-DAY SESSHIN

April 13–20, 2024

Led by Sensei John Pulleyn

JUNE 7-DAY SESSHIN

June 1–8, 2024

Led by Sensei Dhara Kowal

WORRIED ABOUT THE COST OF SESSHIN?

Although our sesshin fees are moderate compared to those of other meditation centers, we know that money is tight for many of our members. The Zen Center's Training Fund was established specifically to help cover the cost of sesshin and training programs. It's an anonymous, peer-to-peer fund in which members donate to assist others. So don't hesitate to ask for support if you need it.

To donate to the fund or request assistance, look for Training Fund under "Practice with us" on the RZC website.