

► **BASSUI AND ROSHI KJOLHEDE:** On not clinging to enlightenment

RIGHT AND WRONG AND TODAY'S NEWS: Comments by Allen Broadman

A THERAPIST CONTEMPLATES his parents and his practice



Winter 2024 | VOLUME XLV, NUMBER FOUR

WAY DOWN IN THE bottom right-hand corner of this page is a small paragraph you may have never read. It's about planned giving, or gift planning, or whatever you want to call the meritorious act of including a donation to the Zen Center in your will or estate plan. The importance of this was driven home by our discovery last year that necessary repairs to the exterior of the Mill House at Chapin Mill were going to cost... well, a lot of money.

Out of the blue, we received a bequest from a recently deceased member. Having no children, and being grateful for the existence of the Rochester Zen Center, she left her entire estate to us. At that point we were comfortable in moving ahead with the repairs and, as I write this, they are already underway.

Of course, it is incumbent on the Board of Trustees to approve annual budgets that do not anticipate windfalls like this. But if you're interested in exploring ways that you can surprise and delight the Center's leadership in the future, please read that innocuous little paragraph below. You can simply designate a specific amount or percentage of your estate for the Center or look into the many tax-advantaged options that are available. It's a good feeling to know that you are planning to leave a legacy.—CHRIS PULLEYN

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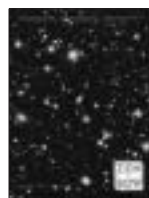
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ON THE COVER

IMAGE BY *Hubble and James Webb Space Telescopes* | This image of MACS0416, a pair of colliding galaxy clusters about 4.3 billion light-years away, combines observations made in both visible and infrared light.



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Soundings

THE BUDDHA IS A PARENT

WHAT AN UNFAIR, yet beautiful thing that our spiritual work was once someone else's pain. We are born with pure essence, but into a world of fears and traumas. As we develop we are products of our environment: the good, the bad, and the ugly.

I am a returning Zen Center member. I had originally found the center through my addiction recovery and being in an Alcoholics Anonymous home group with many meditators. When I was last a member, I was a graduate student working as an addiction therapist. Around 2016, when the opioid epidemic hit, I became overwhelmed and burnt out. I did not renew my membership and went through lots of stretches without meditation.

In March 2020, I woke up with a 101-degree fever and chills and a cough. Quarantined (in a world without COVID home tests yet) and scared, I reached out to an ex-girlfriend I had previously sworn off. Predictably, it did not work out. Questioning my behavior patterns, I began Somatic Experiencing and Attachment therapy. I slowly began to listen to my body and learn about my family history. I found out my mother was the child of an Irish immigrant who had been left at the babysitter's one day, as his family could not afford to feed him. My father was born out of wedlock, abandoned, and taken home by the Geneva Hospital obstetrician.

In 2022, I was coping with daily cardio exercise and making slow progress in my new therapies. At this time the universe dealt me a car accident. On Labor Day of 2022 my car hydroplaned, slammed into a stone barrier and I shattered my heel bone. Unable to support my weight for 2 1/2 months and tiring quickly of Netflix, I returned to zazen.

At the same time, my parents felt compelled to help and reverted into old roles. Suddenly, I was the addicted and mentally ill college student once again. I recovered quickly and challenged these patterns, then asked for space, but it did not go well.



Attachment therapy can be done through re-parenting exercises. You visualize yourself with loving secure parents that keep you safe, protect you, and are always present with you. They are deeply attuned to your needs, your behavioral changes and emotions, and they allow you to take risks. So much of what works about spirituality and its deities is similar to this attachment re-parenting (God, Mother Mary, and Jesus, or an AA Higher Power can be viewed as ideal parents).

As I searched through hours of zazen, I attended a Tibetan retreat and a few short sesshins. I came to listen to my body more. At work and with friends, I vented to others a lot less and instead turned to meditation. I increasingly relied less on the external and just followed my breath.

As the holidays came, I felt unsafe to go home, as I needed more space from my parents. Slowly, it came to me that my parents were enmeshed and had not tackled their own traumas. It was not normal for me to be the emotional caregiver to my unavailable mother (a pattern played out

in my own relationships of course) Yet looking through this, my Buddha within, or my body-mind, had been parenting me all along.

Listening carefully to my body-mind lets me know when I'm unsafe and shows me how to get to safety. It watches me take risks, helps me to let go, recover and learn when I make mistakes. Even when I'm not attuned to my Buddha within, it is attuned to me. The Buddha within is fascinated by my behavior change. It helps me find my emotions and express them in healthy ways. It helps me see my own needs when I cannot and helps me to learn to ask for what I need.

This true self is within us, ready to guide us and support us. It can be typical for my patients in therapy to come in agitated and leave calm and content. I remind them

that this is within them the whole time. The settling and soothing that took place for them happened internally, as it does for us so often on the cushion or in the long hours of sesshin.

Listening to my body-mind helps me to be present and helps me to be with others the way I'd like to be. Perhaps true secure attachment is being comfortable enough with ourselves to not argue, rescue, or enable, when we see a trait of our own in others—having genuine curiosity in others' experience without internal bias or labels of the mind. It can be amazing how someone can open up to us when we see them as just doing their best to adapt to their surroundings.

The world needs Buddhism and meditation because our first 25 years of brain development is far too long a time to go without our social system failing us to some degree. We are born pure, but into a world of other's pain. The beauty is the journey back to the essence and the utter relief that it was always all here within us.—BEN CURRIE ■

WOULD TRANSPHOBIA KEEP ME FROM THE PATH?

BUDDHISM BEGAN for me in a sparse room. Not at a sesshin, but in a rehab for addiction. Before my last day in rehab my counselor knocked at the door. I was reading the dictionary to pass the time. She wanted to share with me a book outlining a Buddhist path to recovery. I couldn't take the paperback with me, but I passionately wrote down its ideas in my notebook. The next day came; my third time in inpatient treatment was over. As I stepped outside the center for substance use disorder in November of 2017, a cold Upstate New York wind hit me. I'd lost touch with the feeling of weather. A wind with a message, to awaken me, or warn me: I was no longer protected by a facility that prohibited drugs from coming in. As a trans woman, the conditions of being unsafe were not new, and yet due to sobriety, that knowledge of my exposure felt understood for the first time.

Those first few months were enjoyable, contrary to what many around me had said about early recovery. I committed my

time to daily meditations, a visit to the Rochester Zen Center twice a week, my outpatient aftercare three times a week, a weekly trans and nonbinary support group, and daily 12-step meetings, such as Alcoholics Anonymous and Heroin Anonymous. I was on SNAP and Temporary Assistance, which granted me a chance to focus on recovery.

Among the variety of supportive communities I aimed to put between me and a potential relapse, the Buddhist recovery group held at the RZC absorbed my energy the most. I never imagined I'd anticipate simply meeting others that prioritized being sober. Belonging to a group revealed how disconnected I had been from people.

The first night I visited my Buddhist recovery group was memorable. Of course, I went to the wrong entrance and parked my car where I shouldn't have. I stood outside, mesmerized by the environment: cultivated gardens, statues, warm lighting, wooden verandas. All this time a diamond was obscured among streets I paced in withdrawal from heroin. I still recall every share I heard in that first meeting.

Eventually, I got my fifth month A.A. coin: a pomegranate red. I remember saving up money from recycling my parent's beer bottles to buy a small statue of Avalokiteśvara; I imagined those many arms reaching out to the many who are suffering, believing that I too might qualify for consolation. I needed visual cues of Buddhism's ideas. I'd arrive at support groups early, rereading my notebook. I reflected on my relationship with *anicca* ("impermanence"). So many times I had desired to freeze the sensation of high pleasure, underestimating the brevity of a drug's effect. Or I'd reflect on the Buddha's second noble truth, signifying how desire and ignorance cause suffering. For an addict such as myself, both desire and ignorance interacted in a calculated way: I desired to use drugs in order to stay ignorant of memories that felt too unbearable to contemplate. Then shame powered a further desire to keep using, to keep me unknowing. Scribbled thoughts like these

▼ Snow and shadows on the courtyard sculptures at Chapin Mill. PHOTOGRAPH BY TOM KOWAL



kyosaku (also **keisaku**) \ k'ō-'sā-kū, kā-'sā-kū \ *n* [Japanese, lit. “wake-up stick”]: flattened stick 75 to 100 cm in length, with which the “sitters” in Zen monasteries are struck on the shoulders and back during long periods of zazen in order to encourage and stimulate them.

The kyosaku is always used to help, never, as is often wrongly supposed, to punish. It symbolizes the sword of Manjushri, which cuts through all delusion; thus it is always respectfully handled. It helps to overcome fatigue, awakens potential, and can, used at just the right moment, bring a person to an experience of awakening.

—*Shambhala Dictionary of Buddhism and Zen*

As most sitters know from personal experience, the stick can be a real aid both for cutting through thoughts and for dispelling drowsiness. Even if we ourselves elect not to receive the kyosaku, just hearing the sound of the stick can bring us back to the present moment and raise the general level of concentration in the zendo.

At every introductory workshop, we take time to explain the use of the stick and emphasize that it's used to support the sitter and not as any sort of punishment. These benefits may not be obvious in the beginning, but as we settle in to the routine of the zendo,

most sitters find it to be a help rather than a distraction or disruption.

Receiving the kyosaku is optional. At regular sittings you won't be struck unless you raise your hands, palm to palm above your head, to request it. In sesshin, the monitors do use the stick “ad lib,” so that no one needs to think about it each time and signal the monitors every time they want to be hit. But don't hesitate to opt out if that works better for you. If you do decide to work with the stick, you're welcome to write a note with feedback for the monitors, letting them know if you'd like them to hit softer or harder, less frequently or more often, or make any other adjustment to how you're struck.—**SENSEI JOHN PULLEYN** ■

coursed through my mind and my notebook as folks entered the meetings.

At the start, my attendance at the recovery group was quite lively, but it turned into something ambivalent. I'd hear many discussing compassion and yet when I'd share, hoping to be compassionately heard, I'd sometimes be dismissed, or even lectured. Sometimes people with longer sobriety would pick apart my shares publicly. Others would interrupt me to offer instant solutions. Yet I met others who were more supportive. They encouraged me to “keep coming back.” Leaving such a peaceful courtyard opened up serenity within me and I'd find myself hugging anybody within sight, even people for whom I grew resentful.

The calm, as *anicca* would have it, could not be sustained. Some part of me was hoping that my meditation could instruct me to a point of arrival, beyond envy, gossip, panic or bitterness. But I felt my confidence warping. I felt my gender dysphoria returning. I was no longer able to repress how staring from strangers made me feel. I encountered more misgendering within my group. Fully conscious reality was settling in.

One evening I and another group member brought our recovery group to an inpatient facility. I felt excited, hopeful to share the message of recovery, only to have inpatient clients debate my existence, deriding my pronouns. The agonies of being transgender weren't resolving as I daydreamed they would. On walks throughout the city, I wondered if I was craving the same thing

from Buddhism that I craved from hard drugs: another escape.

I was 10 months into recovery and a daily practice of Buddhism. I never missed any of my meetings. One night I went to my Buddhist recovery group; as always, I arrived early to greet, hug, and set up *zafus*. This meeting was in a different location: in a church with squeaking floorboards, a faded rainbow flag above the entrance, and heaps of instruments scattered throughout. I waited enthusiastically for this meeting, to rejoice in that special spirit of protection that the word “community” symbolized to me. Upon greeting one member of the group, another misgendered me loudly while attempting to make a joke. Something in me fractured. I saw everyone looking away. A friend put their hand on my shoulder, but a wounded, and perhaps selfish part of me couldn't accept the support. I felt brutally nudged back to a merciless truth around the restrictions of my body, and the powerlessness of how others saw me and treated me. Sweat saturated my skin. During the meditation, I stormed out across those floorboards with their high-pitched cries. I kept thinking back to my time in rehab, to the sight of myself as a broken trans woman in a room of emptiness, with nothing in her hands, except a few turquoise estrogen pills each sunrise. I didn't relapse, but I fell into an old pattern of fleeing the present.

While I can't speak for every Buddhist, addict, or trans person, I can say the experience

of misgendering is humiliating. The first few times I encountered it in my recovery group, I tried to appear unemotional, perhaps out of pride. I imagined the misgendering would eventually stop, I'd arrive within Buddhism, but the stressors relating to being trans continued, and not just in my group. In my outpatient group staff members misgendered me; other people in recovery mocked me insensitively in the waiting room. Sometimes it was so loud I repressed it all—wanting so badly to be respected or just left alone—intensely pretending it wasn't happening. I held so much in, convinced that some humiliation toll I paid long ago was surely finished. How could the humiliations still be happening now?

While sometimes misgendering was unintentional, the mocking wasn't. I worried that transphobia would keep me and other transgender Buddhists from the path. And yet, the clarity and understanding that kept coming with meditation and reflection on the Buddha's teachings of suffering uncovered a greater truth for me: that transphobia itself was the path. Or at least, it was going to be a part of my path.

It didn't matter if my body rested on the dirty floor of a hollow rehab room surrounded by makeshift furniture on wheels, or sat in a peaceful zendo located among acres of meadows and natural springs: the practice was crystallizing the inescapable nature of suffering and the compassionate love that could bud from it. From the storming out of the church

on a pleasant summer night, to the moment I left my rehab on a spiritless winter morning—some realization, that once darted out of the mind’s grasp like a koi, was before me.

Transphobia wasn’t confined to recovery communities or Buddhism. But my expectations were that there could be a reprieve here, within Buddhism. A remission from the misgendering or political demonization; the promise of inclusivity and acceptance that I once saw printed on a laminated sign outside a chemical dependency program. My mind longed for a shelter. To safely be trans. Where anxieties about harm were paused. One could argue heroin did this, but it also paused everything good in life. Only after it wore off, as life was rapidly unpaused, did I become witness to everything that was perishing. Everything from my actions to my livelihood. All elements of the eightfold path withered under heroin. I learned to study that, as Pema Chödrön wrote, “There are no promises.”

I’ve accepted that the dream of community and the reality isn’t always frictionless and untroubled. There’s work involved. I’ve had to work on my own defensiveness, limiting my emotional growth (“The minute you start using you stop growing” is a common sober aphorism). I’m learning to accept where others are at and how best to kindly explain who I am, while helping create spaces that are inclusive and safe for trans Buddhists. We’re all bound to the Buddha’s first noble truth. We all need each other. When we can become a Sangha that learns to suffer together and not cause each other to suffer, beautiful things can unfold.

Transphobia has sadly worsened, particularly from misinformation forwarded online which increased during the pandemic. However, I’ve never felt such a willingness to remain sober, in transition, and organized with others. I feel fortunate to have had the opportunity to create and share Buddhist content for LGBTQ+ folks online through a YouTube channel I created called Queer Plus Lotus. Being present and creative is my protection against intolerance sinking to untreatable depths. Transphobia was not an end to my path in Buddhism: it’s where the authentic experience finally began.—MARY FUOCO ■



DALL-E, DREAMS, AND THE DHARMA

CENTER MEMBER Amaury Cruz has been experimenting with AI image generation using the graphic program DALL-E with AI chatbots Bing and ChatGPT. He writes: “I attach an example illustrating a near-death experience within a dream while I was having an actual cardiac ablation that I thought had gone wrong, and made me feel like transitioning from life because of a ‘seductive call by sirens.’ The chatbot’s comment on this image was, ‘The image captures the narrator’s tumultuous journey, juxtaposing the serene meditative aspect with the stormy, seductive call of the sirens and the influence of modern medical intervention. The scene blends the metaphysical with the tangible, reflecting the depth of existential questioning and the choice between transcendence and earthly concerns.’

“I am again astounded by the capacity [of AI imaging] to visually externalize the unconscious through the process of ana-

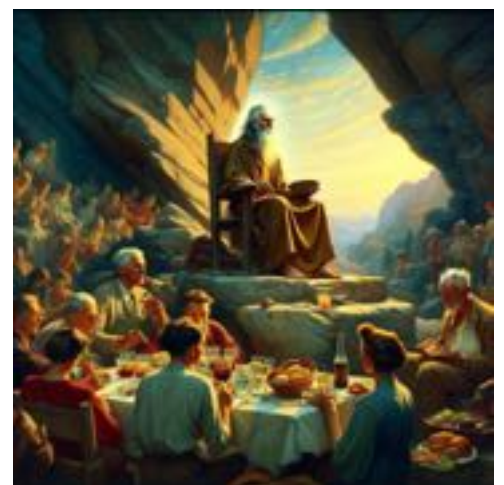
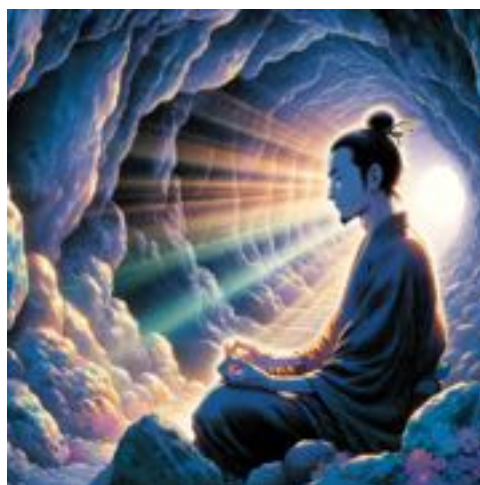


lyzing my writing and reaching into the innermost recesses of the mind. I view this use of AI image generators as a kind of self-psychoanalysis, especially the interpretation of dreams.”

Amaury has also experimented with using passages from Buddhist texts for prompts. The image above was generated from this text:

*With single-mindedness
The master quells his thoughts,
He ends their wandering.
Seated in the cave of the heart,
He finds freedom.*

But what about playing with the illustration style? Amaury generated the image again, once in the style of Japanese manga and another in the style of Norman Rockwell. One chatbot refused to generate the latter, probably due to copyright issues, but the other generated the image seen here, which is reminiscent of the famous Rockwell painting of a family sitting down to a Thanksgiving dinner. ■



IS INTELLIGENCE A HINDRANCE TO PRACTICE?

I DOUBT THAT, since the earliest days of Buddhas, there has ever been a dull or stupid genuine Ch'an practitioner. Also, I doubt that there has ever been a single person who entered the path of Ch'an practice on blind faith. Most people practice Ch'an as a result of a rational decision. Furthermore, Ch'an does not emphasize pure meditative practice at the expense of intellectual learning. An intellectual understanding of Buddhadharma and an appropriate way of life are also foundations of Ch'an practice. If you meditate, but have no idea why you do it, at best your practice will be a shell. It could even be harmful.

Ch'an emphasizes personal experience from meditation, but it is also important to have a correct understanding of Ch'an practice and principles. Without understanding the Dharma, a person would get only limited benefit from the practice. For this reason alone, Ch'an is not averse to intelligence.

For the most part, Ch'an thought and Ch'an practice are rationally based, and Ch'an does not disregard intelligence. However, the question is why Ch'an masters often seem to put down intelligence and learning.

Ch'an masters acknowledge intelligence and learning, but emphasize that they must be transcended. Intellectual knowledge is not ultimate truth. The enlightened state that Ch'an speaks of is beyond thinking, words, and symbols. It cannot be described and it cannot be understood through deductive reasoning.... Ordinary words are insufficient. Quoting Sakyamuni is not sufficient. Relying on the words and sayings of the patriarchs is not sufficient. These descriptions are not the reality of enlightenment itself.

Ch'an masters teach their students to leave behind all concepts, so they may experience enlightenment for themselves, directly. Most people can intellectually accept this explanation, further demonstrating that Ch'an is a rational approach.... Ironically, enlightened beings use reasoning, intelligence, and language to help others practice. To communicate the benefits of Ch'an, they use tools based on knowledge and experience. —CH'AN MASTER SHENG-YEN, FROM *ZEN WISDOM: KNOWING AND DOING* ■



How can I keep myself from dozing off while sitting?

IT'S NOT UNUSUAL to occasionally feel sleepy during zazen. Just like feeling bored, distracted, energetic, and calm, it's one of a wide array of conditions that we all experience. Sooner or later, conditions change without us having to do anything about it.

That said, if sleepiness is a recurring problem, first consider if you're getting enough sleep at night. If not, make adjustments to your sleep hygiene, such as maintaining a consistent sleep-wake cycle and avoiding screen time before bed. Many people find that doing zazen right before bed-

time helps with getting a good night's sleep.

While sitting, pay attention to your posture. If your back is slumped and/or your eyes are closed, you're much more likely to drift off into thoughts and have low energy. Also, don't fall into the trap of judging yourself and evaluating your zazen. Piling on thoughts upon thoughts will only make you feel more tired.

Lastly, don't make it into a thing. Put your trust in things as they are. If you're feeling sleepy, then be sleepy. You don't need to fix a thing. As conditions come and go, our Buddha Nature never "checks out."—SENSEI DHARA KOWAL ■

REFLECTION ON A CRISP WINTER MORNING

*Crystallized peace static in the trees,
Rejuvenating me every time
that I breathe.*

*Take it in. Beauty
Let it out. Better*

By focusing on the out breath, I automatically and unintentionally change my in breath. There is an intricate dance between them that I can appreciate somatically when I am still and present.

When I allow my breath to rise and fall naturally, I notice that the relaxing breath comes in as a direct result of the emptiness created by the exhale that preceded it. If I force a long tense out breath, my in-

hale will need to match its intensity. Likewise, my experience in life mirrors this relationship.

Not only that, when I breathe in, I feel the cool air touch my nostrils and the back of my throat. Then, I breathe out and the same spaces are warmed. Things change in the process. Likewise, my experience in practicing being mindful while off the zabuton demonstrates another parallel. We have the ability to filter the cold of the world both physically and metaphorically, to warmth. It is my duty to exhale warmth and kindness to raise the metaphorical heat—to do no harm and love all beings with compassion.

This is the gift of the container. The sitting. The settling that occurs on the zafu. —LISA M. NICHOLS ■

JUMPING OFF THE CLIFF WITH OPEN HANDS

OFTEN WE JUST don't have enough information and yet must make a decision anyway. The matter may be one of life and death, and still all we can do is make the best of it—decide, according to our heart, our courage, and our generosity. We can then watch to see how well things turn out, but we shall never know how it would have been if we had chosen another path—married another person, picked a different career, fled a war we fought, fought a war we fled. We are mortal, life is limited: facing these truths requires the development of our character in the first

place. Choosing without sufficient information, we enter life completely, and that is our action of integrity.

A man spoke of his experience during the Vietnam War, many years ago.

This man had to decide, without good information, a course that would change everything about his life. The process of developing integrity is still going on—thirty years later he is still holding some of the questions open. To choose is to bear the shame, guilt, and incompleteness that come from action; to choose is to make errors and to live.—JOHN TARRANT, FROM *THE LIGHT INSIDE THE DARK* ■

Zen master Bassui and the journey to awakening

ZEN MASTER BASSUI, OF THE 14TH CENTURY, is widely considered one of the very greatest lights in Japan's history, along with the Zen masters Hakuin and Dogen. As a boy, he came

to wonder deeply about the nature of the self, and after his years of questioning eventually led him to full enlightenment, he recommended to his students the question "Who is the Master?" or simply "Who (or what) am I?" He was unsurpassed in his insistence on persevering until reaching the Ultimate. He recognized that enlightenment

had no limit, and in *The Three Pillars of Zen* warns that to rest in any realization experience, however deep, "would be like one who having found copper gives up the desire for gold." Go for the gold, he urges, and "with such realization you achieve true emancipation. Repeatedly cast off what has been realized, turning back to the subject that

TEISHO BY
Roshi Bodhin Kjolhede

Day 3 of the September 2022
seven-day session



realizes—that is, to the root bottom—and resolutely go on.”

Sometimes when someone may have had the slightest of awakenings, and it’s not crystal clear to me that they have, I will say to them, “I think you’re not quite there yet. But listen, even if it were something more significant, some clearer opening, you’d just want to forget about it.” Whether you’ve seen or you haven’t, it’s the same—let go of it. Just discard everything. Every experience we have, every insight, even enlightenment itself—just leave it behind. Because what’s the alternative? Clinging to the thought of it. In ancient times a Chan master warned, “To have some attainment is the jackal’s yelp. To have no attainment is the lion’s roar.”

After Roshi Kapleau passed me on Mu, I did see the world differently, but it was nothing earthshaking. As a Dharma brother on staff at the time had said about his own little breakthrough, “It was nothing to write home about.” Still another guy on staff confided that he himself had been beset by doubts about his own such experience, but then “after a while, you just stop thinking about it.” As usual, the problem lies only in thoughts. And let’s face it—most thoughts revolve around the self.

Being passed on a breakthrough koan should not be equated with enlightenment. Usually it means only that you’ve had just enough insight into the koan to stand a chance of working effectively on further koans. Even then, working on subsequent koans can be bruising—Zen master Hakuin referred to them somewhere as “those vile koans.” The good news, though, is that additional breakthroughs may well lie ahead. We can continually have deeper openings as long as we maintain daily sitting and, especially, if we attend sesshins.

After passing a breakthrough koan, we’re less likely to personalize emotional or physical pain because we’ve seen into the non-substantiality of the self, even if to a shallow degree. That’s the difference between before and after: our troubles with the koans are no longer so much about the self. Or to put it another way, there is less weight to the self. That’s another way to construe *enlightenment*: lightening up about the “I,” the “me,” and the “my.”

Let go, then, of every meditation experience, Bassui says. The verse at the end of the Heart Sutra points to the same horizon: *Ga-te, ga-te, para-ga-te, para-sam ga-te*—“Gone, gone...gone beyond...gone far beyond....” If you hold to nothing whatever, Bassui says, “Your self-nature will then

grow brighter and more transparent as your delusive feelings perish, like a gem gaining luster under repeated polishing, until at last it positively illumines the entire universe. Don’t doubt this! Should your yearning be too weak to lead you to this state in your present lifetime, you will undoubtedly gain Self-realization easily in the next, provided you’re still engaged in this questioning at death. It’s just as yesterday’s work half-done was finished easily today.” The Zen and Tibetan masters seem to have taken the fact of rebirth as beyond doubt. Not so most Westerners, dominated as we tend to be by empiricism.

LOOKING AT THE vast process of practice-enlightenment that spans lifetimes, we can draw from the lotus flower as a classic symbol of our True-nature. The lotus grows in muddy water, and an initial breakthrough is just that—the tip of the closed flower poking up out of the water. Then the whole flower has to emerge and, finally, open up. That, they say, is full enlightenment.

“In zazen neither reject nor cling to the thoughts that arise. Only search your own Mind, the very source of these thoughts. You must understand that anything appearing in your consciousness or seen by your eyes is an illusion, of no enduring reality.” That, ultimately, is what illusion encompasses—anything impermanent. And everything is impermanent! “Hence, you should neither fear nor be fascinated by such phenomena.”

Makes me think of makyo, those side effects of intense sitting, which are especially common in sesshin. Hallucinations, crying, strong emotional states, fears, anxieties— don’t fight such things and don’t be enthralled by them. That is, treat them as we treat thoughts themselves. “If you keep your mind as empty as space, unstained by extraneous matters, no evil spirits”—that is, no disturbing phenomena—“can disturb you even on your deathbed. There is a Chinese proverb: “Great winds are powerless to disturb the water of a deep well.”

“WHILE ENGAGED IN zazen, however, keep none of this counsel in mind.” Even while offering the wisdom of his deep realization, still now he’s saying, wait—when you’re sitting don’t think about even these words of wisdom. There’s no need to. You must only become the question: “What is this Mind?” or “What is it that hears these sounds?” (Or, “What is Mu?” “What is it?” “Who am I?”) “When you realize this Mind, you will know that it is the very source of all buddhas and



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sentient beings”—that is, the source of those who are enlightened and of the so-called unenlightened.

“At work, at rest, never stop trying to realize who it is that hears.” Strictly speaking, it’s better to say what it is that hears, since the word “who” implies personhood, the existence of some abiding self. Because of our conditioning, we so easily think of ourselves as an unchanging person. But that would be a static state, and thus contrary to reality. There is, of course, an element of continuity in what we call the “self.” This body–mind complex of physique and personality and character and temperament is relatively stable from week to week. Our friends and family do continue to recognize us as time passes. But it’s a different story when we widen the temporal lens. A Chinese master asked, “Is the man of eighty the same or different from the boy of eight?” Because our essential nature is beyond selfhood, never stop trying to realize what it is that hears—now. And now. And again now. The “it” is not an entity, but a process.

“EVEN THOUGH YOUR questioning penetrates the unconscious, you won’t find the one who hears, and your efforts will come to naught. Yet sounds can be heard. So question yourself to an even deeper level. At last, every vestige of self-awareness will disappear, and you will feel like a cloudless sky. Within yourself you will find no ‘I.’ Nor will you discover anyone who hears.” This is the unfathomable mystery of it all. With no fixed self to be found, what is it that’s hearing right now? What is hearing these very words? What is it?

In the early years of the Zen Center, nearly everyone who moved into koan practice started with the koan Mu. In this we were following standard operating procedure in Japanese Rinzai Zen. Later, as a teacher, I would pitch it, much the way Yasutani Roshi does in *The Three Pillars of Zen*, as “the one barrier of the supreme teaching.” But then, as the years passed, some people who had started on Mu would wonder aloud whether they might do better with a fundamental question drawn from our own vernacular, such as Bassui’s: “What is Mind?” “What is hearing?” Or the primary breakthrough koan in Korean Zen, “What is it?”

Changing one’s breakthrough koan is a fraught issue because to work arduously on a koan usually leads us through periods of frustration, and we may be too quick to see the grass on the other side of the fence as greener. What Pema Chodron said about working with a teacher could also fit with a first koan: “Find a teacher and let him put you through your changes.” And any koan is a teacher.



SHUTANI SESHOPRIVATE COLLECTION

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Still, over time I came to feel that Mu may not be the best breakthrough koan for everyone.

“Do not mistake this state for self-realization, but continue to ask yourself even more intensely, ‘Now who is it that hears?’ If you bore and bore into this question, oblivious to anything else, even this feeling of voidness will vanish and you won’t be aware of anything—total darkness will prevail. Don’t stop even here but keep asking with all your strength, ‘What is it that hears?’ Only when you have completely exhausted the questioning will the question burst. Then you will feel like one who has come back from the dead. This is true realization. You will see the buddhas of all universes face-to-face, as well as our Dharma ancestors into the most distant past.

“If you don’t come to realization in this present life, when will you? Once you have died, you won’t be able to avoid a long period of suffering in the Three Evil Paths.”

The Three Evil Paths are the three lowest of the six realms of unenlightened existence—those of hell, hungry ghosts and thirsty spirits, and animals. He’s issuing the warning that since none of us can know what awful deeds we have set in motion over the course of our numberless past lives, how can we know what consequences are in store for us up the road?

And then he delivers his coup de grace: “What is obstructing realization? Nothing but your own half-hearted desire for truth. Think of this and exert yourself to the utmost!” When I was working on Mu, these words would tear into me like bullets.

AND NOW WE TURN to Bassui in his replies to letters, the first of which is titled “To a Man from Kamasaka.” He writes, “You asked me to write you how to practice Zen on your sickbed. Who is he that is sick? Who is he that is practicing Zen? Do you know who you are? One’s whole being is Buddha-nature. One’s whole being is the Great Way. The substance of this Way is inherently immaculate and transcends all forms. Is there any sickness in it? Your own mind is the essential substance of all buddhas, your Face before your parents’ birth. It is the master of seeing and hearing, of all the senses. One who fully realizes this is a buddha. One who does not is an ordinary human being. Hence all buddhas and ancestral teachers point directly to the human mind so that people can see their own self-nature and thereby attain enlightenment. For the best relief for one perplexed by shadows is to see the real thing.”

And then Bassui draws from a Japanese parable:

Once a man was invited to the home of a friend, and as he was about to drink a cup of wine offered him, he believed he saw a baby snake inside his cup. Not wishing to embarrass his host by drawing attention to it (so Japanese!), he bravely swallowed it. (When I was working with Roshi on one of his books, he referred to this story and said, with a smile, “You know, when I translated this story, at first I rendered it as just ‘snake’—that is, ‘He believed he saw a snake inside his cup.’ But I said to Yasutani-roshi, ‘Who would think a full-grown snake is in one’s cup? Let’s call it a baby snake.’ To which Yasutani said, ‘You Westerners with your rational minds.... This would not be a problem for the Japanese. There’s no need to make it a baby snake.’ But I did anyway.”)

Interestingly, my sister Sunya-roshi was giving sesshin in Mexico when one morning in the dokusan room she looked down, about to pick up her cup of water, and there was a toad sitting in it. You never know what’s going to show up in Mexico. One of my own interesting experiences would happen almost every day when I came out from giving teisho. After walking across this short stretch of lawn, I’d round the corner, and a huge iguana would scamper off the tile roof and flop down at my feet—THUD! The first couple of times this happened, it gave me quite a start. But I came to learn that there wasn’t anything to worry about; he was probably more worried about me. And then he always just scampered into the trees.

We also had our share of scorpions appear in the zendo in Mexico. As part of the opening guidelines that were read at the beginning of sesshin, the monitors would tell people that if while they were sitting on their mat in the zendo they spotted a scorpion crawling toward them, not to just sit still. Even if it was during a round of formal sitting, they should signal to the monitor what was going on. Then the monitor would fetch a glass and a piece of cardboard and escort the scorpion, unharmed, out of the zendo.

BUT NOW BACK to our snake story. “Not wishing to embarrass his host by drawing attention to it, he bravely swallowed it. Upon returning home, he felt severe pains in his stomach. Many remedies were applied, but in vain, and the man, now grievously ill, felt he was about to die. His friend, hearing of his condition, asked him back to his home. The host sat his friend in the same place and again offered him a cup of wine, telling him it was medicine. As the ailing man raised his cup to drink, once again he saw a baby snake in it.



KANO TOTEI NORINOBU AFTER MA YUAN BRITISH MUSEUM

This time he found the temerity to draw his host’s attention to it. Without a word, the host pointed to the ceiling above the guest where a bow hung. Suddenly the sick man realized that the “baby snake” was the reflection of the hanging bow. (Even that stretches the mind—a hanging bow looking like a snake? But now I’m being a logical Westerner....). Both men looked at each other and laughed, the pain of the sick man vanished instantly, and he recovered his health.

And then he continues, “Becoming awakened is analogous to this,” and he quotes the great Japanese master Yoka Daishi: “When you realize the true nature of the universe, you know that there is neither subjective nor objective reality. At that very moment, karmic formations which would carry you to the lowest hell are wiped out.”

Back to Bassui now: “This true nature is the root substance of every sentient being. Human beings, however, can’t bring themselves to believe that their own Mind is itself the Great Completeness realized by the Buddha. So they cling to superficial forms and look for truth outside this mind, striving to become buddhas through ascetic practices. But as the illusion of an ego-self does not vanish, people must undergo intense suffering in the Three Worlds. They are like the one who became sick believing he had swallowed a baby snake. Various remedies were of no avail, but he recovered instantly upon realizing the basic truth.”

So “various remedies were of no avail” is probably an allusion to the ascetic methods of Siddhartha, who thought he could come to enlightenment through self-punishing practices such as near-starvation. This path of asceticism was a respected one in the India of the fifth century BCE. Even today we can see our own, milder versions of that approach with people, for example, who get obsessively involved in extreme dietary practices—anorexia comes to mind—or other severe disciplines. Underneath their conscious aim of achieving self-mastery over the body-mind, or of ethical purity, I believe, is the aspiration to realize their True Self. It’s a stage that some of us need to go through, as the Buddha did on his way to realizing the Middle Way.

Physical pain and other problems can crop up while sitting, of course. And it’s only sensible to do what we can about them. In the case of physical pain, we can find some relief by experimenting with our cushions before taking our posture on the mat. But there’s another way to work with pain. It’s a way that is beyond problem solving: simply absorb oneself more completely in the koan

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or the breath. This can go a long way to clearing away one's physical pains and other problems. Maybe not in all cases, but it can go a long way.

At a sesshin in the mid-70s, I was tormented by a recurring, searing pain in the hip joint, near the groin. It got so that to relieve the pain I was tinkering with the arrangement of my cushions before each round of sitting. I was completely on the ropes. I realized long afterward that I had been just too tense, and that the tension came from my greed for kensho—"Gotta get it...Gotta get it..." Mental grasping creates physical tension.

Finally, in my desperation, I just surrendered to Mu: "Okay—pain or no pain, just Mu! Just MU." The pain didn't disappear altogether, but surrendering to Mu set up a kind of a release in the mind, a release of mental tension, of grasping, which then relieved the pain in the body. Deep concentration on the practice changes one's relationship to the pain. That changes one's experience of it. That's faith at work.

The question for those battling pain is: What do you have more faith in—focusing on posture, or focusing on the koan or the breath? Have faith in the mind, the work of the mind. Trust only the practice. There's a line in the Mumonkan where Mumon says, "Rather than give relief to the body, give relief to the mind."

AGAIN, BASSUI: "So just look into your own mind—no one can help you with nostrums. In a sutra the Buddha said, 'If you would get rid of your foe, you have only to realize that that enemy is delusion.' All phenomena in the world are illusory; they have no abiding substance. Sentient beings no less than buddhas are like images reflected in water." In short, the real enemy is delusion. The problem lies in dwelling in one's thoughts about the pain—which really comes down to thoughts about oneself.

Always remember that when they say "sentient beings" in these texts, it means the unenlightened. It's a common pairing in the sutras and commentaries: "buddhas and sentient beings"—the enlightened and the so-called unenlightened. "So-called" because of another fundamental truth: our Original Enlightenment. That is what we all have in common.

"One who does not see the True Nature of things mistakes shadows for substance. That is to say, in zazen the state of emptiness and quiet which results from the diminution of thought is often confused with one's Face before one's parents were born." In other words, getting into a state of deep, quiet stillness should not be mistaken

for a real breakthrough. And he continues, "But this serenity is also a reflection upon the water. You must advance beyond the stage where your reason is of any avail. In this extremity of not knowing what to think or do, ask yourself, 'Who is the master?' This one will become your intimate only after you have crushed a chunk of ice in fire. Tell me now, who is this most intimate of yours?" And then he himself answers: "Today is the eighth of the month. Tomorrow is the thirteenth!"

HERE'S ANOTHER OF Bassui's letters, this one to the Abbess of Shinryu-ji. "In order to come to awakening you must discover who it is that wants to come to awakening." That advice goes to the crux of the whole matter: get your mind off awakening as an objective, and bring it back to the experiencer—the Subject. "To know this subject you must right here and now probe deeply into yourself, inquiring, 'What is it that thinks in terms of good and bad, that sees, that hears?' If you question yourself profoundly in this way, you will surely enlighten yourself. The Mind which the buddhas realized in their enlightenment is the Mind of all sentient beings, our Essential Nature.

"The substance of this mind is pure, harmonizing with its surroundings. In a woman's body, it has no female form. In a man's body, it has no appearance of male. Like boundless space, it hasn't a particle of color."

On the face of it, Bassui is denying our particular forms of sexual identity, but really he's imploring us to see what is beyond them—and those would include even "non-binary." He doesn't want us to get bogged down in self-concepts. To the extent that we identify as, say, "male" or "Danish" or "White" or "a Progressive" or "old" or "a doctor" or "middle-class," we blind ourselves to the Original Identity that we all share. In Zen master Hakuin's words, we fail to discover that "our True Self is no-self, our own self is no-self."

But to discover no-self we can't deny the self, either, and for some people at certain times, psychotherapy is one way to come to terms with it. It can pull out some "wedges" that bind us to the self, and even free us up in our Zen practice. Years after I had completed the books of koans we use here, I realized that to resolve a lingering emotional issue or two I should try some intensive psychotherapy. It left me utterly confounded as to who this person I'd always thought of myself as really was. It plunged me into the inquiry "Who am I?" so deeply that in sesshin I experienced a deeper awakening than I had with Mu. And that

revealed more clearly than ever the work that still lay before me.

Bassui continues: “The physical world can be destroyed, but formless, colorless space is indestructible. This Mind, like space, is all-embracing. It does not come into existence with the creation of our body, nor does it perish with its disintegration.” In the *Mumonkan*, there’s a line from a verse: *When the universe is annihilated, it remains, indestructible.*

“Though invisible, it suffuses our body, and every single act of seeing, hearing smelling, speaking, moving the hands and legs, is simply the activity of this Mind. Whoever searches for buddha and truth outside this Mind is deluded.

“There has never been a buddha [an enlightened one] who has not realized this Mind, and every last being within the Six Realms of Existence is perfectly endowed with it. Everyone who has realized this nature and attained enlightenment wants to make it known to others. But ordinary people, clinging stupidly to superficial forms, find it hard to believe in this purposeless Dharmakaya, this pure, true buddha.”

“Clinging stupidly to superficial forms”—in the sutras, the Buddha talks about attachment to “name and form.” That’s a standard Buddhist coupling, and one to understand if you’re reading sutras. Name and form are linked because the differences we human beings see in the world of objects have led us to assign different names to them: “table,” “altar,” “flowers,” “tree,” “Jennifer,” “James”.... We employ discriminations, naturally. There is no form, or shape, without a name. But the different names come at a price—they reinforce our belief that the world is fragmented. Once we reach adulthood we become attached to name and form, to appearances. But this world of differences is just half the truth. Within all of the different forms, each with its own

name, all the diversity, there is that which is beyond differentiation. An old Zen saying goes:

Behind the divisible, there is always something indivisible.

Behind the disputable, there is always something indisputable.

THIS IS A TIME of migrating geese at Chapin Mill. In sesshin, especially, the mind can become so utterly empty—so free of mental formations—that we can hear that honking without the word “geese” arising, or even the mental image of them. Let’s listen now, as they teach the Dharma: [*Roshi remains silent, with the honking of geese overhead the only sound*]

How can a teacher compete with that?

“Since the sutras deal only with this Mind, to realize it is to accomplish at one stroke the reading and understanding of all the sutras. One sutra says: ‘The teachings of the sutras are like a finger pointing to the moon.’ When it is said, then, that great merit can be derived from reciting the sutras, this means what has been said and nothing more.” In other words, it’s true as far as it goes, but it doesn’t go that far because it’s just about causation, of piling up merit. Awakening reveals what is beyond causation. It reveals the acausal—the eternal. So in Hakuin’s Chant in Praise of Zazen we say: “The gate to the oneness of cause and effect is thrown open.”

But then he does acknowledge the provisional value of chanting, especially “for beginners.” Like other devotional practices, it is a method by which one progresses “from shallow to deep by degrees. For them it is like getting onto a raft or boat as a first step.” That’s why we do it, why we chant twice a day in sesshin. After all, on this endless journey to full enlightenment, aren’t we all beginners? **///**

▷ CLEANING THE TEMPLE

THE ANNUAL TEMPLE cleaning at Chapin Mill took place on Saturday, February 10, a week after its counterpart at Arnold Park. A hardworking cadre of volunteers and staff spent the better part of a day cleaning all the nooks and crannies that tend to get overlooked... inside the range hood in the kitchen, behind the beds, under the dining room tables, and more. Much gratitude is due to our dedicated volunteers, without which there is so much that the Center could not get done. PHOTOGRAPHS BY CHRIS PULLEYN



THE END OF TAKING SIDES



TEXT BY *Allen Broadman*

EDITH A. CURTIS/VICTORIA AND ALBERT MUSEUM

Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing, there is a field. I'll meet you there.

—RUMI, 13TH CENTURY SUFI POET

MOST OF OUR LIVES,

our actions are unfolding within a variety of frameworks—contexts from which our actions, speech, and thoughts arise, and from which we construct meanings for our experiences. Dictionaries typically define *framework* as something like “a system of rules, ideas, or beliefs that is used to plan or decide something” or “a frame of reference.” Although frameworks sometimes provide valuable context and help us solve certain kinds of problems,

at other times they prevent us from finding solutions or deeper understandings. And at still other times, a framework within which we think, feel, and act becomes a prison. But how do we know the difference? How will we know if we're being aided or hindered by the conscious and unconscious frames of reference at play when we're thinking through a problem, feeling through a situation, or taking action to make an important change?

Here's an example of the limitations created by frameworks: dilemmas. When we're facing what feels like a dilemma, we spin around and around in a cycle trying to overcome the dilemma, to force it to crack open into what we imagine will be the "right" choice. We make pros and cons lists, we look at the situation from different angles, we do research into the details involved, getting finer and finer amounts of information that we then analyze even further. What are we hoping for? We hope that somehow the next item on the pros/cons list will be the tipping point that reveals the right path through. Or that some new information which was missing before will lead to revelation about how to choose. We spin and spin hoping for resolution that never comes. It can be painful to feel caught in such a situation, and an ancient metaphor is to be "caught on the horns of the dilemma"—ready to be gouged by a bull's horns—that's not very pleasant!

BUT DILEMMAS DON'T really exist. That is, they don't exist in an ultimate and reality-based sense—they only exist within the conceptual frameworks out of which the dilemma arises. If we can muster the power to step outside the limiting frameworks, the dilemma disappears completely. A dilemma can only exist within a context that implies that there is a right course of action, and that we can know it ahead of time. The dilemma's oxygen to burn comes from a set of assumptions that tell us if we make the "right" decision, the pros will happen and life will be good, but if we don't, then the cons will happen and life will be bad. It is not the choice that is the ultimate problem, it is dilemmaminded thinking that is the problem.

Even our best predictions, the most informed and calculated ones, are just educated guesses. And that's when things are simple! When they're complex, the infinite forces acting on situations are impossible to decipher. Do you really believe that you can know what's going to happen tomorrow or next week or next year, after you take or don't take some job you're thinking about? Or get married or not? You can't even know with certainty what's going to happen a minute from now in the room you're sitting in! Making a pros and cons list is not going to make your guesses "right" and will not guarantee the outcomes of your lists. Even the idea of knowing the probabilities in advance is an illusion. That's why financial services ads on radio and television give the legal disclaimer: "Past performance is not a guarantee of future results."

If you step out of the frameworks of the predictable, foreseeable "future," then the dilemma is gone. There can't be a dilemma because there can't be a right or wrong choice in the conventional sense. What's really happening is that your choice will have consequences, which will lead to more choices, which lead to more consequences, and so on and so on. There's a choice for sure, and we choose the best we can given the situation. Then we live the effects, and then we choose again. If in the choosing there is just choosing and in the action there is just the action—a total immersion into the action—then the "dilemma" fades into nothing. If we let go of the framework, what remains is just the best we can do in the moment, but without all the anguish of believing there was ever a "right" choice and we missed it. Certainly, we should spend some time and effort thinking about what to do—that's productive! But the anguish of dilemma can be dropped. The reality is simply this: there is a choice, and we make it. Then do that again.

Paradox is another sign of being trapped in a limiting framework. There are no paradoxes in reality. Reality is. Reality cannot be right or wrong, it cannot be simple or complex. It is what it is. What human beings call paradox is when our thinking within some framework cannot sufficiently explain (to us humans) why reality behaves as it does. Science is filled with paradoxes, none of which are real because they depend wholly on the frameworks from which they arise. The dual nature of light as wave and particle is one long-time example that physicists have been confronting for over a century. But light just is, and light acts as light does. It manifests one way in some kinds of situations and another way in other kinds of situations. There is no paradox of light. Light is light. The paradox exists only in the minds of the people who are stuck thinking with conceptual models that cannot explain reality well enough to feel satisfactory to them.

SOME FRAMEWORKS are very intimate. I have been practicing Zen about 25 years, and my first in-person encounter with practice came about 30 years ago when I attended a weekend Intro to Zen workshop at the Rochester Zen Center with Roshi Bodhin Kjolhede, the abbot at the time. I still remember Roshi Bodhin's sincerity and calm demeanor, and his clear commitment to helping people, but without pushing anything on them. He was simply offering a method of practice that could change how we live and possibly transform



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our experience of our own lives. I remember thinking and feeling so strongly: He's got something and I want what he's got. That desire was a driving force in my starting and continuing Zen practice, and in that regard, the desire was temporarily helpful. But that desire and way of thinking also trapped me in a framework that was very limiting.

It turned out that Roshi Bodhin didn't have anything that I needed to get, although I imagined a long list of knowledge, wisdoms, and qualities he must have possessed to be as he was. It ended up that it was what Roshi Bodhin didn't have which made his way of being in the world so different. I had it backwards! It took years of practice to start seeing the invisible walls of that framework—my believing that others “had” what I needed to “get.” Why does it take so long? Partly it's because there is plenty of space to navigate within some frameworks; they can be very expansive, even within their limits. And yet all the paths within them eventually lead to dead ends. Just because a prison is big and has room to move around in doesn't mean it's not a prison. But it can take a long time running into many different dead ends before we notice we're even in a prison.

AS I WRITE THIS, two major wars are consuming almost all the media energy and time that there is: Ukrainians fighting Russians, and Israelis fighting Palestinians. The hostility, violence, and suffering of war is being experienced directly by millions, and by tens of millions more who are somewhat less directly impacted—distant families, friends, loved ones, and others. And these are just the wars that get the media attention—as is always the case, war is happening all around the world, in Africa, Southeast Asia, and other places, with equally brutal results, yet often unreported, and ignored by most except those most directly affected.

There are many frameworks at play in people's minds that tragically drive these conflicts, but one stands out to me: Take a Side. It seems that everywhere I look, people are insisting that these conflicts have good actors and bad actors, and that everyone must pick a side. It's a kind of mental illness written large on a global stage. Pick a side of what? We have a conflict in which group A commits violence against group B, and then group B commits violence against group A, and together the two groups escalate that violence against each other until bystanders in groups C, D, E, and more are drawn in and receive violence also. Group B claims that “Group A started it” as if it were a

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conflict of children on a playground. Group B acts as if the “start” is whatever and whenever Group B says it is, disregarding a thousand things that came before the “start” they want to use.

Group A says it's all Group B's fault and they provide a hundred years of historical facts to prove it. Group B says it's all Group A's fault, and they provide a hundred years of historical facts to prove it. Sometimes it's a few thousand years of history that is used to justify who is right and who is wrong. And all the while the bombs keep dropping. People are dying, homes destroyed, traumas being sown that will reverberate for generations to come, just as we are now living the traumatic effects from other violence and hostility. How imprisoned in a faulty framework must someone be to demand that we pick a side of all that?

THE TAKE A SIDE framework has all sorts of faulty assumptions. It assumes there are clearly distinct “sides” and that these supposed sides are filled with people who all believe and act in the same way. It further assumes that some sides are acting clearly “in the right” and other sides are acting clearly “in the wrong” and that we can know the difference. These are invalid beliefs that don't map to any reality. The people we label villains often act in ways that are heroic, defending their way of life or even their very existence. And the people we label heroes are often killing indiscriminately, causing death and destruction to many.

Yes, it's true there is good and bad action, and often it's mostly clear which is which. But that doesn't mean there are good and bad people. The people we label “good” sometimes commit atrocities, and the people we label “bad” sometimes commit great acts of kindness. Can you look into the totality of a person's life and mind and use some kind of moral arithmetic to decide if they've done more good than bad, or more bad than good, and how often, and in what ways? Can you see into a person's lifetime of actions and know who they have impacted and how, and do you believe you can then correctly decide if they are a net “good” or “bad” person? Really? Truly? And if you acknowledge that you can't do that for even a single person, how can you do it for a group of thousands, or a nation of millions?

We are not compelled to take a side—taking a side is a choice. We can choose to not take a side, that is our option. Not taking a side does not mean abandoning your sense about what is right and wrong, or what is just and unjust. It means stepping out of the framework of labels like good and bad

people, of heroes and villains, and seeing that violence and hostility are playing out through people, all of whom believe they are in the “right” and who themselves are suffering even as they cause the suffering of others. Ignorance and delusion are real forces and although they may not excuse action, seeing them in effect in people is a more accurate perspective of what really is. At the least, it is more accurate than demonizing those who think, feel, and act differently from us.

SO, WHAT TO DO? If one doesn’t take a side, then what? The *Dhammapada* is a compendium of some of the oldest Buddhist teachings there are. Here is a verse from one of its early sections entitled “Violence”:

*If, desiring happiness,
you use violence to harm living beings who
desire happiness,
you won’t find happiness...*

This is another way of saying that the only way through and past hostility and violence is letting go of any framework in which hostility and violence are presented as sensible ways to act. This is the spirit of the end of taking sides.

For some, not taking a side may feel too difficult and even wrong, because the stakes of the situations feel so high. For those feeling that a side must be taken, one option is to expand the meaning of “sides.” Social forces and media forces are often telling us what the sides are—they are predefining the sides and force-feeding that narrative to everyone. The convention is typically to make the sides into two groups—either two organizations, two nations, an organization and a nation, etc. But why should those be the only sides that are your options to “take”? You might consider that bystanders are a side. Bystanders means all those people impacted by a conflict who wish no harm to anyone and want the conflict to end. Don’t they get a side? Why is it only those people or groups or nations that are firing weapons and dropping bombs who become the sides you supposedly must choose?

No, taking sides does not mean being passive or avoiding action. We can give support to the people whose values and actions are aligned with our own beliefs. That support may include our actions, words, donations, and more. But can you give such support while remembering that those

you support may also be committing violent and hostile acts, and that they are making imperfect choices and actions in a difficult and complex situation? Can you support one set of people and values, without demonizing people with different values and perspectives? Without turning them into adversaries or villains, but instead seeing them as people also caught up in a cycle of hostility, but who think and feel there are different paths to resolution?

VIOLENCE AND HOSTILITY were as prevalent in the time of the Buddha as they are now. Although the conventional weapons of violence and destruction are more powerful today, the ultimate weapons of violence are the same—our human thinking, illusions, anger, and conditioning. Those are some root causes of conflict, and the real source of damage, much more so than guns or bombs. If we could resolve the root causes, then our societies would get rid of the guns and disarm the bombs! But maybe that’s a long way off, and we must make decisions now, as things are.

As we try to figure out what to do in a complex world, we might keep our focus closely on our direction. Are our actions, speech, and thinking moving us in a direction of harmonious coexistence with what is? Or are they increasing the feelings of separation and conflict between ourselves and what is, as if “ourselves” were somehow not what is? We don’t have to be perfect—if we move in generally wholesome directions, there is plenty of room for mistakes—wrong turns, reversals, pauses—we just notice and get back onto a generally wholesome direction.

Buddhist teachings reveal that paradoxes were well-understood (at least by some) at the time of the historical Buddha. It was known that our intuitions about reality can be mistaken—highly inaccurate conceptual models for what actually is. And to the extent that we’re stuck in those inaccurate models, some of the actions that are in our real best interests and in the best interests of others, may seem counterintuitive. Here is a teaching from the very first chapter of the *Dhammapada*—fundamental advice placed at the very start and ground of some of the oldest Buddhist teachings there are. We can all do well to hear its call today:

*Hostility never ends through hostility.
By non-hostility alone does it end.
This is an ancient truth. III*



TEMPLE CLEANING IS a Zen tradition that goes far back in Japan, but also to the beginning of the Rochester Zen Center in a rented house on Buckingham Street. Roshi Philip Kapleau, shown here with his beloved Electrolux vacuum, was an active participant, as are today's teachers, Senseis John Pulleyn and Dhara Kowal.

One incident from the Center's early days is often cited to illustrate the character of our founding teacher. One day someone knocked on the door of the Buckingham Street house, no doubt looking for a Great Master. When Roshi Kapleau opened the door, he was mistaken for the janitor. He was greatly pleased.

PHOTOGRAPH BY ALICE WELLS



Sightings

ON SCREEN

THE MOVIE: ALL OF US STRANGERS (2023, dir. Andrew Haigh), adapted from Taichi Yamada's 1987 novel *Strangers*
¶ *What it's about:* Acclaimed Irish actor Andrew Scott (best known stateside for his turns as Moriarty in *Sherlock* and the Hot Priest in *Fleabag*) stars alongside Paul Mescal, Claire

Strangers explores these themes and more, and does so whole-heartedly.—LUKA HÄKKILÄ
CONTENT WARNINGS: alcohol and drug use, homophobia.

FROM THE ZENDO

ENCOURAGING WORDS

I want to read something, some remarks from a deeply

some way we need to see things, some technique that we can find. And, actually, all we need to do is to get out of our way, return to what we are at the deepest level. It's what Zen practice is about, or any legitimate spiritual discipline.

Just be simple. Breathing in, just breathing in. Breathing out, just breathing out. It's hard to be that simple. It takes practice. We need to understand what our role is. It's why Ramana Maharshi says, "Any shape or form is a cause for trouble." Any idea that we're holding in our mind, sooner or later, we need to let it go. And we do that by this devoted focus on our practice, whatever it is. Inevitably, it's very, very simple. And then change happens outside of our direction. We don't need to keep in mind what we want to get to. We just need curiosity about what's here already, faith that we are worthy. Something about every person is absolutely wonderful. As we say in Buddhism, all beings have Buddha-nature. We're all Buddhas. We just don't see it.

There's another guy I want to read from. You may have heard of him; his name is Franz Kafka. He wrote "The Metamorphosis." I'm not aware that he had any particular spiritual practice. But reading this, it's clear that he had something going on. He said, "You do not need to leave your room. Remain sitting at your table and listen. Do not even listen. Simply wait. Be quiet, still, and solitary. The world will freely offer itself to you to be unmasked. It has no choice.

It will roll in ecstasy at your feet."

We just need to let the process play out, have faith in the practice. So many people have done this for so many hundreds, thousands of years.

We don't need to be special; we just need to be faithful. Keep it up.—SENSEI JOHN PULLEYN, 11/7/23

UPCOMING EVENTS

SOON-TO-BE SENSEIS

This year Roshi Bodhin Kjolhede will sanction two more of his students as Zen teachers. Both of them have spent many years working through the koan collections with him and playing leading roles in their respective Sanghas; both have also trained at the Rochester Zen Center for more than a decade.

Rick Smith, longtime group leader of the Madison, Wisconsin Zen Center, will be sanctioned in a ceremony in Madison on Saturday, April 27. Coincidentally, the Madison Zen Center will be celebrating its 50th anniversary later this year.

Richard Von Sturmer has

▼ Rick Smith



DAVE VANDERTE



Foy (*The Crown*), and Jamie Bell in this profound, deliberately disorienting film following the life of an isolated, struggling TV screenwriter (Scott) who delves into his own past for creative inspiration.

Why it's worthy: *All of us Strangers* is a beautifully shot, sensual, romantic meditation on the interwoven nature of love, memory, and the human need for connection.

What does it mean to know and love another person? Can a human being truly exist "alone," as a separate entity? Can we meaningfully distinguish between thought and reality? These are pertinent questions for many of us involved in Zen practice. *All of Us*

enlightened Indian sage who died in 1950. His name was Ramana Maharshi. Here's what he said: "Your duty is to be, and not to be this or that. 'I am that I am' sums up the whole truth. The method is summed up in the words 'Be still.' What does stillness mean? It means destroy yourself. Because any form or shape is the cause for trouble. Give up the notion that I am so and so. All that is required to realize the Self,"—that is, to come to awakening—"is to be still. What can be easier than that?"

Oh, of course it's not so easy, as we're all finding out here, moment by moment. But we have this idea that there is something that we need to do,

▷ SIGHTINGS



RICHARD VON STURMER

▲ Richard Von Sturmer

spent many years working for the New Zealand Sangha in a close teaching partnership with his wife, Roshi Amala Wrightson. His sanctioning ceremony will take place in Auckland on June 30th, the day after the Auckland Zen Center celebrates its 20th anniversary.

AT CHAPIN MILL

THE MILL HOUSE BEES

Constructed in 1811, the Mill House at Chapin Mill is the oldest building on the property and is now undergoing major exterior renovation. For about the past 20 years, there has been a honeybee hive in a wall on the third floor, with the exhaust fan louvers serving as their entrance. We have peacefully coexisted with the bees this whole time, with only the occasional sighting of bees flying around indoors and honey dripping from the window trim.

Knowing that both the bees and the contractors would be at risk during the renovation, finding a solution for the welfare of all was in order. With the help of a Sangha member who used to keep bees himself, we hired a husband-and-wife beekeeper team, Christine and Wayne Wilkins, who also specialize in the safe removal and relocation of hives. They arrived at 8:30 AM on a Saturday

morning and didn't finish until 6:00 pm, carefully removing the hive and placing the sections of honeycomb into hive frames and boxes. The bees will continue their lives an hour and a half drive east of Chapin Mill, in North Rose, NY.

The initial infrared image of the hive was deceptive, making it appear much smaller than it actually was. After removing the outer layer of paneling, it was apparent that the bees had chewed away at spots in the old half-inch layer of fiber insulation sheathing beneath it, making the brighter orange (thus warmer) spots in the image look as if the bees were concentrated in that area. During the removal process, we discovered that the hive was much larger and extended into the adjacent ceiling.

The beekeepers methodically removed the honeycomb, section by section, and inserted each into wood frames. They used rubber bands to hold the pieces of comb in place temporarily. The bees will gradually add to the existing comb and attach it to the framing themselves. Even though the beekeepers weren't able to find the queen, they were confident that she found her way into the set of hive boxes by observing the colony's behavior. Through the entire process, there was no sign of distress in the bees as they were gently transferred to the boxes. —TOM KOWAL



TOM KOWAL



TOM KOWAL



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UPCOMING EVENTS, MEETINGS, AND CEREMONIES

(In-person, hybrid, and online)

ZEN 101 (*hybrid*): Saturday, April 13, 11:00 AM–12:30 PM. At our introductory workshops, we cover the basics of zazen: posture, breath practice, and kinhin (walking meditation). In Zen 101, which is held on the Saturday following each workshop, we discuss the more outward forms of Zen practice such as:

- ▶ Prostrations: How do we do them and why?
- ▶ Traditional Zen chanting.
- ▶ Getting acquainted with some Zen terminology (e.g., Bodhisattva, Jukai, rakusu, etc.).
- ▶ Ceremonies throughout the year (Jukai, Bodhidharma Day, the Buddha's Birthday, etc.).
- ▶ What else would you like to know? A question-and-answer session.

The program is free and is held at the Zen Center, 7 Arnold Park. You're also invited to attend the informal sitting in the zendo (meditation hall) at noon, as well as lunch with the staff at 12:30. If you are interested in attending, please RSVP (truemant@rzc.org) by Friday at noon so we can get a head count for those attending lunch.

Finally, if you can't make it in person, Zen 101 is broadcast on Zoom. Contact Jissai Prince-Cherry (jissaip@rzc.org) for the codes.

DEPRESHZEN (*online*): DepreshZen is an online support and advocacy group for Sangha members with depression and anxiety disorders. The group meets weekly for an hour on Saturdays at 3:30 PM Eastern. This is a safe space to talk openly and educate ourselves and others about living with these conditions from the

perspective of Zen practitioners. As the group's playful name suggests, we hope to work toward reducing the social stigma associated with mental illness. If you're interested in participating, need Zoom access, or have any questions, please contact Tom Kowal (tomk@rzc.org).

DHARMA REFLECTIONS (*online*): Dharma Reflections takes place the third Sunday of each month from 1:00–2:15 PM Eastern on Zoom. Longtime RZC member Larry McSpadden leads friendly discussions, suitable for newcomers and established practitioners alike, on short selections of Buddhist writings and teachings. If you're interested in attending Dharma Reflections meetings or need more information, contact Larry (larry.mcspadden@rzc.org).

INTRODUCTION TO ZEN MEDITATION WORKSHOP (*in person*): Saturday, April 27

CHAPIN MILL WORK RETREAT, PART I
Friday–Sunday, May 10–12

ANNUAL MEETING OF ZEN CENTER TRUSTEES (*hybrid if necessary*): Saturday, May 18

EXTENDED SITTING (*hybrid*): Sunday, May 19. Daily sittings are great, but an extended sitting is a chance to wade further into the waters of zazen. You'll get a break from stress, a taste of a sesshin day, and maybe even a new perspective on your mind and life.

The extended sitting schedule consists of four blocks:

- Block 1: 6:15–7:30 AM
- Block 2: 8:30–10:30 AM
- Block 3: 11:00 AM–12:45 PM
- Block 4: 1:30–3:00 PM

Private instruction will be offered during block 3.

While it's all right to come to just part of the day, we do ask that participants commit to staying for all of the two or three rounds of sitting in any one block.

For those attending online, some forethought and prep can help you create a more supportive environment for sitting, allowing you to make the most of this opportunity. Setup tips for extended sittings and sesshin can be found at www.rzc.org/sshins-meditation-retreats/setting-up-for-online-sshin/.

To receive Zoom access or for questions about how to participate in Private Instruction, email Jissai Prince-Cherry (jissaip@rzc.org).

BUDDHA'S BIRTHDAY (*in-person*): Saturday, May 25

REPENTANCE CEREMONY (*hybrid*): Thursday, June 20

CHAPIN MILL WORK RETREAT, PART II:
July 5–7

UPCOMING SESSHINS

(All are hybrid)

APRIL 7-DAY SESSHIN
April 13–20
Led by Sensei John Pulleyn

JUNE 7-DAY SESSHIN
June 1–8
Led by Sensei Donna Kowal

JULY 7-DAY SESSHIN
July 13–20
Led by Roshi Bodhin Kjolhede

More information about the Rochester Zen Center's sesshins may be found under "Sesshin" on the Center's website (rzc.org).