

Basic Elements of Zen Practice

Teachings from Dharma Rain Zen Center



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Notes on Zazen Practice

Kyogen Carlson (from *Zen in the American Grain*)

For many years I have been teaching meditation and answering questions from those newly engaged in zazen practice. I have noticed several questions that are quite common, coming not only from beginners, but also from people who have been practicing for some time. I would like to share these questions and some answers in the hope that it may be of benefit.

Every so often someone will tell me that he has been sitting for several years, but can only manage full lotus for a short time, and that even half lotus becomes too much to bear after thirty or forty minutes. He will go on to describe pitched battles with ego as the time to sit approaches in which every excuse imaginable not to sit presents itself. Then he may ask for some advice on overcoming the physical and mental resistance he is experiencing. Here we have an excellent example of someone pushing much too hard just to conform to an ideal of what Zen practice should be.

Even if you are sitting on a bench or a chair, if this description sounds very much like you, please be gentler with yourself. Turning the flow of compassion within begins with treating your body with respect and care. It is neither necessary nor wise to strain to maintain any posture, and signs that you are pushing too hard should not be ignored. We have been given an aversion to pain for a very good reason. If the body is sending signals that something is wrong, we set body and mind against each other when we grit our teeth in stubborn refusal to give in to it.

Of course, it is good to make an effort to improve our physical ability to sit, but zazen should never become an endurance test. If we approach zazen with gentle determination and a bright mind, we will look forward to sitting with eagerness. It is really terrible, and completely unnecessary, to face meditation with dread. Too much rigidity in practice makes it joyless, and when it is, people either drift off to other things, or become joyless themselves. Dogen says we should sit in a way that is naturally joyful, [1] and so it can be. When

it is, zazen remains a practice that will enrich us all the years of our lives.

I always recommend sitting for as long as it is comfortable in a given posture, then making the effort to sit for a little while longer. After that, change to another position, or do walking meditation for a few minutes, then resume sitting. Meditation done well for five or ten minutes is far superior to hours of self-torture, so please don't strain to achieve an ideal form, nor be in a hurry to progress physically. That defeats the deeper purpose of zazen. The posture should be so still, centered, and comfortable that the mind is alert and completely relaxed.

I remember how surprised I was to discover that the lotus postures are recommended precisely for their comfort, and also because the postures are a physical expression of what we are trying to achieve in meditation. Sitting in full or half lotus holds your hips in a position that makes your back naturally "erect," because it places your shoulders directly over your hips. This forms a vertical axis right through your upper torso, so that you feel physically "centered." This is also a posture of great awareness, just like when you sit on the edge of your chair at the climax of a movie. In zazen this principle is applied in reverse; by holding ourselves erect, we very easily remain alert. Further advantages include the triangular formation made when we sit cross-legged, which gives great lateral stability to the posture, and the way the position of the hips gives stability front to back.

This stability helps us to remain extremely still, without conscious effort to hold ourselves upright. Since we are not reclining against any surface, our circulation is not impeded and there is no need to fidget. In this attitude of still, alert, centered, comfort we find the essence of meditation, to which tortured endurance bears no resemblance. So, although there is good reason to want to develop the ability to use the cross-legged postures well, straining to do so defeats their purpose and discourages meditation practice. It is better to sit comfortably and regularly on a chair or kneeling (which lack only the lateral stability of cross-legged postures) and gradually work into Burmese or one of the lotus positions when and if it feels right.

The question of how hard to push in meditation also comes up with regard to the length of time we spend doing it, regardless of

posture. People these days are very busy, and it seems like there are more demands on our time than there are hours in a day. It is bad enough when the mind wanders and we get restless and start to fidget, but it is worse when we feel the call of half a dozen things demanding our attention. You can almost hear the clock ticking in someone's head when that happens. The problem arises partly because we try to separate the time for meditation from everything else we do. There are many times that this is actually very good to do, but not when it creates a conflict in our own minds about what we should be doing.

Just as trying to conform to an ideal posture can set body and mind at odds, so can trying to conform to a set time of day, or duration of time for meditation practice. If you don't decide ahead of time that you are going to sit for twenty or thirty minutes, you can bypass the issue of "budgeting time." If this has been a problem for you, try sitting without any predetermined length of time in mind. Decide that you are only going to sit for as long as it feels good to do so. It is so much easier to begin the practice when you can't fail to meet your "quota." As you relax more deeply into sitting, time goes by very easily. Sometimes you will sit for just five or ten minutes, but you will have done so wholeheartedly. At other times, time will slip by and you will realize that for that day, the twenty or thirty minutes was very well spent.

Some days you may find that the urgency of other demands is such that you really should be doing something besides seated meditation. So realizing that, off you go. What I am describing here is a way of letting the deeper mind set your meditation timer for you. It is also a way of harmonizing your practice with all the other things you need to be doing in your life, rather than pitting practice against everything else. This is why very busy people find coming to the Zendo here at the Center all the more important. Once here, a block of time has been committed to the practice. The bells and gongs are in the hands of the Precentor, and the times for sittings and services are set for the benefit of all attending. Sharing practice with other people makes the time spent a mutual contract between all attending, so it becomes something shared. Rather than just taking time for

ourselves, we are also giving it to others, and this makes the practice easier to do.

When to sit can be as difficult to work out as how long to sit. Once again, for busy people with many demands on their time, flexibility within a firm commitment is very important. We once worked with a professional couple with two small children. They were a classic example of very heavily committed people, with unending pulls on their time. At one point, they realized they could tie their evening zazen schedule to their children's bedtime. They would sit as soon as both children were asleep, a time of profound quiet, I was assured. They made a promise to each other to do this for a specific period of time, say three months, except when they had guests, or when their children fell asleep after a specified cut-off point, in which case they let it go for the evening. This way they were committed to regular practice, but did not set that practice against the other things they needed to do.

We have made a commitment at the Zen Center to adapt Zen practice to the needs of lay people. We think of the Center as being similar to the Zendo in a Zen monastery. Only the junior monks have the luxury of living in the Zendo, and of following a daily schedule based entirely on the rhythm of the meditation hall. The senior monks live in quarters around the hall, and look after the various departments necessary for the running of the temple. I know from experience that the demands on senior monks can mean that there are times when don't set foot in the Zendo for weeks. I had to take my meditation in my room when I could get it, just like busy laymen. The disadvantage of lay practice is not having the opportunity to spend several years in training as a junior monk, and of course laypeople are more at the whim of circumstance than a senior monk. But for all other intents and purposes, lay practice is very much the same as that of senior monks. Both must work to make their lives an expression of Zen practice, without relying on the support of monastic forms. The Zen Center is here to help people do that.

Another question that often arises has to do with how to handle the many thoughts, emotions, memories and such that can be so distracting during meditation. I have found that people can vary quite a bit in the types of things that arise to distract them. One person

may be appalled to discover the first time she sits that her thoughts rampage through her mind like a runaway train. Another may find sitting fairly easy and pleasant at first, but a little later discover that whatever emotion is uppermost in his life at that time becomes intensified and almost unbearable during meditation.

Let us first consider the case of runaway thoughts. I have heard descriptions of monumental battles people get into, trying to control their thoughts. While we should not let ourselves be carried away by distracting thoughts, sometimes called “Monkey Mind,” we do better to accept them gently, compassionately, and wholeheartedly. We should start by embracing our own tendency towards Monkey Mind patiently, as one would the prattling of a small child. There is nothing wrong with having an active mind, only in making it the center of your being. The stillness of meditation lies beneath the chattering of the thinking mind, not beyond and separate from it. Have you ever been sitting in meditation, then suddenly realized that you have been a hundred miles away for the last 20 minutes? “Oh, no! Now I have to start over,” you may think. Or perhaps you will bear down extra hard to make up for lost time. But the moment you realize that you have drifted off somewhere, you are, right at that moment of recognition, meditating perfectly. What could be added to this awareness? By gently accepting Monkey Mind it is conquered, and the habitual prattling of thoughts we have grown so accustomed to will gently subside by itself.

People have told me that when distracting thoughts seem extra persistent, they will sometimes break the train of thought by a process something like mentally “blinking.” I think it can be good to do this occasionally if it is done to help grab the will; but be extremely careful of making a practice of repressing thoughts. At one time in my own training I became very good at repressing thought altogether, thinking that “emptying” my mind had something to do with the “emptiness” mentioned in the Sutras. Then one day during a meal I suddenly lost the right side of my vision. Everything to the right of a place extending directly out from my nose simply vanished. My vision gradually returned, but it was a very disturbing several minutes that brought a clear message to relax my practice.

My feeling is that when distracting thoughts persist, one of the best ways to handle them is to count your breath. This is done by

counting each breath as you exhale, breathing slowly and deeply, but naturally. When you get to ten, start again at one. It helps to know there is a difference between awareness, or consciousness, and thought. By being aware of your breathing you become aware that your consciousness goes far deeper than the thinking process. As you focus awareness on the still depths beneath thought, the thoughts will subside by themselves, simply because you stop investing energy in them. As you do this, you are learning to “live” in a place deeper than your own head. In time you will feel a “settling” of body and mind, a relaxation into meditation. As this settling continues, it can help to stop counting your breath and simply follow it; that is, to watch each breath come in and go out without counting. As the relaxation becomes complete, you can let go of following the breath and concentrate on “just sitting.” From here meditation can take many forms, some extraordinarily deep, some ecstatic, some less deep but very meaningful. It is important not to expect anything, but simply prepare yourself for whatever experience is to be given. After all, it is a gift, and not something that can be achieved or taken by force.

Just as it is with distracting thoughts, so it is with any other problem that arises during meditation whether it is intense emotion, feelings of inadequacy, resistance to the teaching, or daydreaming. Since meditation is a process of getting beyond self, all the ways in which we cling to self stand out in sharp relief as we progress. It can help to realize that increased awareness of our own attachments is a sign of progress if we are willing to learn from it. But always it is through gentle acceptance of our limitations that we deepen our awareness of the Buddha Nature. The very thing within ourselves which recognizes and accepts these limitations *is* our own deeper mind, our own Buddha Nature, so there is nothing else to be done.

Over the centuries Buddhist sages have observed themselves from the perspective of meditation. Buddhist teachings have arisen from this collective observation, and they have much to offer that can help us understand our own experiences. One such teaching is that a sentient being is composed of five skandhas, or aggregates, which are arranged in successive layers. They are: “form,” which is the physical body; the next layer down is “sensation,” or feelings, both physical and emotional; then comes “thought,” which is the mental level of a being; next is “activity,” which refers to drive, or

volition; and finally there is “consciousness” itself. Buddhist teaching on the skandhas also says that these five aggregates of being are subject to change, and so have no permanent *separate* self-nature. They are therefore “sunya,” or empty. But this emptiness also means that they are fundamentally pure in that they are neither separate from, nor in any way impede, the Buddha Nature.

From this teaching I have come to view the five skandhas as the objects of five delusions of self. When we grasp after, or become attached to one of them, we are giving substance to an illusory sense of self. The first is the belief that “I am my body.” Excessive concern for health or beauty or body building are examples of this. The second is “I am my feelings.” The Romantic Age epitomizes this, and some schools of pop psychology seem to indulge in this also. Third is “I am my thoughts.” Descartes formulated the classic expression of this when he stated “I think, therefore I am.” This one seems to be the most pervasive in the West as we place so much importance on our own opinions. Number four comes out as “I am what I do.” This is very common among highly motivated, career-oriented people. “I am a doctor, lawyer, nurse, artist, mother, father, sage.” It can also be formulated “I am my drive to become...wealthy, successful, famous.” And finally, the most subtle and dangerous of all, “I am my consciousness.” It is here that the mistake is made of turning the religious quest into a possession of self.

The practice of meditation is learning to “live” in the stillness beneath all change, which is the true center, or the point at which “we” and “Cosmic Buddha” intersect. To do this is to express Buddha Nature. The case of the woman who finds her thoughts running away with her during sitting is a case of “living in her head.” This is the tendency that leads to the delusion “I am my thoughts.” In many ways this problem is easy to get a handle on, because in meditation at least, it is easy to recognize that thoughts are getting in the way. The second case, that of having emotions linger and intensify while sitting, is an example of living in the realm of sensation. The pull to identify with our feelings is very strong. Since people are a thorough mixture of all five skandhas, attachment to each will come up at one point or another. But these two, thought and sensation, come up first and are the most common. Still, the others will come up in time. The clue to how to handle these

distracting attachments is found in the teaching that the skandhas are absolutely pure, and not separate from the Buddha Nature in any way. The first thing we are taught when starting to sit is “do not try to think, do not try not to think,” and to simply let things come and go without becoming involved in them. Just how wise and deep this teaching is becomes clear when we realize that it applies to every one of the five delusions of self, just as it does to the first distracting thoughts that obscure meditation.

Another question I hear now and then has to do with glimpses of an exquisite state of mind, or of realizations that occur during meditation. But as soon as this tantalizing state arises and is recognized, it suddenly vanishes, and seems to recede further than ever. What is usually happening in cases like this is that the desire to know this exquisiteness leads to trying to catch it with the mind, or to cling to the sensation of it. Like water in the hand, it vanishes as soon as the fingers close around it. Experiences like these are to consciousness the way sights are to the eye, and sounds to the ear. They are not a quality of consciousness itself. They arise and fall in their own time, and cannot be caught and held. It does no good to worry about whether they will come or not, nor can we try to chase them. We can only concentrate on our “just sitting,” and on meditation in daily life. When these experiences come, let them come; and when they go, let them go: just like thoughts in zazen. Our part in this is the “just sitting.” The Buddha Mind will manifest naturally, but it will not respond to our demands.

For many years I wondered why it was that consciousness should be included in the five skandhas that are subject to change and therefore empty. Consciousness is our very deepest awareness, but it does change over time. It is through consciousness that we first glimpse, and then come to know the Buddha, but it is by “just sitting” that we allow this door to open. We cannot cling to these experiences any more than we can cling to our first taste of fresh spring water. The more we experience and the more we learn, the greater the danger becomes of clinging to these things as a possession of self. When this happens, our own experiences become “the Buddha that gets in the way.” They become just another delusion of self. Then we have to learn to get beyond them if we want to continue on the spiritual path. Like the other skandhas, however,

consciousness is pure and fundamentally part of the Buddha Nature. When we just sit and let go of our clinging to consciousness, the mind of meditation arises again and new experiences are possible. What is more, our past experiences are again seen as valuable Dharma instead of as possessions of self. It is a source of endless wonder to me that the meditation practice we learn in the very beginning, just letting things come and go without clinging, is all we really need all along the entire length of the path of training. It is just as Dogen says in “Fukanzazengi.”[2] “That which we call zazen is not a way of developing concentration. It is simply the comfortable way. It is practice which measures your satori to the fullest, and is in fact satori itself.”

1 – “Bendowa” in Kennett, op cit, p. 115; or in “Shobogenzo, Vol. I,” Kosen Nishayama and John Stevens, Daihokkaikaku, Tokyo, 1975, p. 147.

2 – “Fukanzazengi” means “recommendations for doing zazen.” This quote is from a translation by Francis Dojun Cook, in *How To Raise An Ox*, Center Publications, Los Angeles, 1978, p.97.

The Paradox of Effort and Non-effort in Zen Practice

Kyogen Carlson

Not too long ago I gave a dharma talk on “Grasping the Will.” I said then that it was to be one-half of a two-part talk; this is the other half. The image that I used then was struggling to lift a bowling ball with no holes out of a bucket filled with oil. There’s not quite enough room to get your hands under the ball, so you’re left trying to grip this slippery, heavy object with no leverage and no handle. Squeezing and scratching at it doesn’t help. Then you figure out that by simply applying pressure steadily to the ball, holding your hands in one place over some time, the heat in your hands creates some tack, and you get some adhesion. With steady, continual pressure you can grasp it firmly enough to lift it if you move it slowly and deliberately.

Our practice of *zazen*, *shikantaza*, or “just sitting,” is very much like this. Sometimes the practice may seem quite easy, and at other times it may be very difficult. We usually find it easy when we are at ease, and difficult when we are agitated or distracted. If you keep at it long enough, however, at some point you will find it necessary to understand what it means to grasp the will directly. After a year or so in the monastery I realized I had been using anger as a handle, an extra device, to grasp the will. I had learned to use a preliminary step, winding myself up with a subtle form of anger to get motivated to do many things in life, and I took this pattern into the monastery. Once I realized this method was no longer appropriate, that it would not work there, the “handle” came off my bowling ball. I had to find a way to get a grip directly on my own intentionality. This was a very important phase of the practice for me.

The ability to grasp the will directly is necessary to overcome habit energy, patterns of karmic conditioning that we learn to recognize in our meditation and precept work. Eventually we can see the things that trigger our karmic responses even as they happen. Then the ability to hold ourselves still, not taking the conditioned action, opens a door to transformation. Grasping the will in this situation is the hard work of practice, and has to do with “cessation,”

non-action, more than with action. The example that I used in that previous talk was encountering a sticky door. Pushing on it as it resists, we tend to apply more and more pressure against it. The force applied goes up along with the frustration. Grasping the will in that situation can be to recognize when pushing any harder is futile, perhaps counterproductive, dropping that approach, and coming back to zero. Other possibilities can then present themselves.

This is a story from *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones*:

“When the nun Chiyono studied Zen under Bukko of Engaku she was unable to attain the fruits of meditation for a long time. At last one moonlit night she was carrying water in an old pail bound with bamboo. The bamboo broke and the bottom fell out of the pail, and at that moment Chiyono was set free. In commemoration she wrote a poem:

In this way and that I tried to save the old pail,
Since the bamboo strip was weakening and about to break
Until at last the bottom fell out.
No more water in the pail!
No more moon in the water!”[1]

That poem has been really important to me. When I first went to the monastery, I determined that I would immerse myself completely in meditation practice for a year to find out what zazen is all about. After that year I realized that despite my effort at complete immersion, I was in only up to my ankles. So I came back for a second year, and this time I put much more of myself into it. I was investing more of myself in the practice.

So I threw myself into it again with what I thought was complete effort. At some point after that I realized I was wet, perhaps, up to my knees. So, back I went, over and over. All of this had to do with grasping the will and recognizing those parts of myself that needed to go into the venue of practice – to be recognized identified, understood and embraced as practice. This was a time of deepening zazen, but now grasping the will – wrestling the bowling ball – was in recognizing the real significance of the precepts as they reflected on me. Instead of being some ideal way of behaving, they were beacons to show me where my effort needed to be. They shone a light on my

karma and habit energy, habitual points of departure from original, innate bright mind. Understanding and really concentrating on the precepts was as a way to investigate myself and to uncover the hidden parts I needed to put into the practice.

Roshi Kennett used to say that in order for awakening to occur, a student has to hit bottom, to get to the end of their rope. That would drive me nuts. I hated that idea. There I was improving in my zazen, getting it together and learning about the precepts and learning about myself. I was cultivating the paramitas, and I saw my practice as a gradual upward path. How was I supposed to hit bottom when I was going the wrong way?

I could get pretty annoyed when she emphasized this, but eventually I got to a point where I realized there was something I just couldn't do. One day I admitted to myself that there was a naturalness and an ease in some of the people around me that showed in the way they did their practice. These were people who had "done it." They had been recognized as having had the kensho experience. Even as I wondered how I might go about doing that myself, I knew there was no way to make it happen. It seemed so unfair that something like that could be so arbitrary and seem to happen without much rhyme or reason. All I could do was continue trudging away on my upward "lesser" path. I saw people doing exactly what Roshi Kennett described; getting fed up, desperate, and then having this "opening" experience. How do you go about getting fed up and desperate, and how can it lead to awakening? I could have put on an act, wound myself into a good tantrum, but somehow, that didn't seem quite right.

The thing is, we cannot will our way into enlightenment, just like we can't will ourselves into samadhi. It can't be done, but at the same time we can't sleepwalk our way into awakening either. It's a paradox. Effort and non-effort, doing and non-doing, the "gateless gate," a complete contradiction that we cannot figure out. It's the perfect koan.

Once I recognized this naturalness in others, however, it pushed my own effort into a new realm. I think that it was the simultaneous realization of the truth of the experience along with the impossibility of figuring it out that changed the quality of my effort. About that

time I read a passage from Shinran Shonin, the founder of the Jodo Shin Shu branch of the Pure Land Sect of Buddhism. He wrote:

“Whether sage or fool, whether good or bad, we have to simply give up the idea of estimating our own qualities or of depending upon self. Though entangled in sin and depravity, even in living the life of the most despised outcast, we are embraced by the all-pervading light of grace; indefatigable faith in salvation itself is a manifestation of Buddha’s act of embracing us into (this) grace.

“(Our salvation is) ‘natural as it is,’ in the sense that it is not due to our own device or intention but provided for by Buddha Himself. It is ‘natural,’ because we need not think of our own good or bad; everything has been arranged by Buddha to receive us into (this) grace). It is ‘natural’ because (this) grace is intangible and invisible and yet works by ‘naturalness’ to induce us to the highest attainment.”[2]

I’d read things like that before, but at that time in my practice it struck a chord. It resonated. It offered a clue, something that I needed to hear right then. Shortly after that I developed my own mantra: “Please make me worthy of this grace.” Even as I formed it I had no idea to whom it was addressed. It stood on its own: “Please make me worthy of this grace.” What did it mean to be worthy of it? Right here, right now, we’re already completely worthy of it. Not only that, we’re always immersed in it. Yet somehow, for some reason, the aspiration had to arise in me in that form. I had come to the end of reliance on my own devices.

Now let’s look back at the poem by Chiyono. The reason it is so significant to me is that she says: “In this way and that I tried to save the old pail.” She was binding it with bamboo. This is the absolutely essential effort we put into our practice. This is grasping the will, cultivating zazen, investigating and keeping the precepts. This effort includes everything we try in order to improve ourselves. All of these things were my effort to patch up this rusty old bucket of imperfect self.

While these efforts don’t suffice, it is also utterly useless to try to shortcut the process by kicking the bottom out of the pail. It’s not until we put everything into the pail that the shift can take place. That’s the point of the effort; it’s putting our lives into the bucket,

into the practice. That bucket became the whole of my life. It was all of my effort, all of my will and intention, and I had to pick it up and carry it. I had to keep at it until every part of myself went into it. First I had to recognize and identify each aspect, each piece, then place it in the bucket, immersing it in my practice. The last piece, I suppose, was reliance on self. Once everything was in the bucket, there was no place left to go.

There's a zen saying: "Climb to the top of a one hundred foot pole. Then, take one more step." At this point, with everything in the bucket, I came to the top of the pole, but I could not yet take "one more step." I came, finally, to the place of no reliance on self.

A teaching says: "When the blossom is ready, it is opened by the spring wind." Somehow, there will be some causality that touches us when we're ready. There's no telling what it will be. For the monk I was named for it was a tile striking a bamboo. *Toc!* Awakening. For Chiyono, it was looking into the bucket as it fell apart. Awakening. Then, "No more water in the bucket. No more moon in the water." The moon in the water is the enlightenment we can cultivate through our effort. That's the extent of our enlightenment by "self-improvement." Getting to "No more water in the pail. No more moon in the water" is impossible until every part of us is in that pail. Then the breaking of the pail, taking "one more step" is meaningful.

So, at this point in my story, getting all of my life in the bucket, or arriving at the top of my pole, then reading Shinran, I had to reverse field, so to speak, turn completely around, to understand what non-effort meant. At this point, all my striving seemed utterly pointless; I mean truly, utterly, without meaning or purpose. I came to a place where everything, including all my little insights, were irrelevant, without any real meaning, and everything became tastelessness, without flavor or texture. Roshi Kennett called this point in practice the start of a great ninety-day training period, based on Dogen's "Ango" fascicle in *Shobogenzo*. This ninety-day training period begins when you've put everything you have, everything you are, into the bucket and the practice becomes everything. By that I mean it feels as if nothing else exists, or even that nothing at all exists. She said that it usually takes about ninety or a hundred days from the beginning of

this tastelessness to the time when the bottom of the pail is ready to break open.

Right about the 90 day point I spent a day with another monk climbing Black Butte, a group of overlapping dacite domes that is, basically, a big conical pile of angular volcanic debris rising about 2000 feet above the valley floor. It's situated across the highway and a little to the north of the monastery, and we decided to take photographs from the top of the butte to get aerial views of the temple for a brochure. The angle of incline is just about as steep as a pile of loose rock can manage, which makes for a difficult climb, and I was carrying a lot of heavy camera equipment, as well as food and water. We were unaware of a nice, easy switchback path that winds up the far side of the butte, so we spent hours scrabbling up the stupid thing on the wrong side. It was exhausting. I had borrowed a pair of boots that were one size too big, and before long I developed terrible blisters on both feet. We finally reached the top and took the photographs, and discovered the path leading back down the far side. We followed it down, and though we ended up fairly close to the road, we misjudged our position and walked the long way around, across terrain sloping sharply to our left, which is very hard on the ankles. By the time we got back to the monastery my feet were bloody and I was limping badly. It was very late, we had missed dinner and we were exhausted. I had developed a pounding headache.

Eventually we found something to eat and fell into bed. At the monastery we were permitted to sleep in if we had a day like that, and I took the option. The next morning, I came into the monks' hall, the *Shuryo*, and found Roshi Kennett there. I was still aching and sore, so you can imagine how I felt after the day I'd had. As we sat there waiting for breakfast, she made a comment about a monk who, despite everything he had to do the day before, was in the zendo that morning, first thing. She said, "Now there's a monk who really wants the practice." I sat there thinking "Oh, sh*t. I've opened up my veins, giving everything I've got to this place and to this practice, I miss one lousy sitting period, and she praises this person for turning up this one morning. Well, thbbbt!"

I don't remember exactly what happened next, but I do remember burying my face in my hands. I felt empty in a numb sort

of way, thinking “what the hell is the point?” Roshi asked me what was going on, pressing me, and I said, “There’s just no love here.” What I meant was that I felt completely unseen. That’s what I felt. At that point she got up and walked across the room and looked into my eyes, muttered “hmmm,” and went back to her seat.

About then breakfast arrived and the bell was struck. The other monks hadn’t made it down from where they were doing the morning cleaning, so it was the two of us, and one other monk in the refectory. I sat there staring down at my bowls. She said to me, “Kyogen, look up.” I thought, “Yeah, right.” I’d heard that before. She said, “No, I mean it. Look up.” So I straightened up a bit, but kept looking down at the table. To me this meant “Come on now, look on the bright side. Be cheerful. Be a good little monk and do everything with a bright shiny face!” I thought, “Oh, thbbbt.” She said “Listen to me. Open your hands palm upward and look up.” She came around behind me and took my hands and turned them over. I turned my gaze upward and ka-boom! I was overwhelmed by release and affirmation. I won’t try to describe it all, but I ended up under the table, laughing my fool head off.

Through my own effort I eventually put everything, my whole life, into the pail, but that was not enough. With nothing more I could do, I got to a point of non-effort, but that was not enough either. Effort and non-effort came together in the act of looking up. It was an *action* of acceptance, turning toward something with open hands. For me it was where will and faith came together. There was faith that there was something to see or know, plus giving up all reliance on self, a surrender. But it also took taking the step off the 100 foot pole – an action. I had to come to the point of giving up on myself, that “I” could do it, while at the same time putting everything into it, holding nothing back. It is a bundle of contradictions, but Zen practice is nothing without paradox.

There are many different sects and styles of Buddhism, and each country has its own fullness of Dharma. The two largest traditions in Japan are the Zen Schools and the Pure Land Schools. There are many others that have important influence as well, but somehow Zen and Pure Land have a special relationship as the two biggest. There’s a saying that, “Zen and Pure Land are two ends of the tunnel. If you come in by Pure Land you come out by Zen. If you come in by Zen

you come out by Pure Land.” The Pure Land tradition of Shinran puts complete faith in the “other power” of Buddha Mind to receive us into grace. The Zen school emphasizes “self-power” of grasping the will, doing the practice, raising the bodhi seed. But in a profound way the two approaches complete each other in the way they emphasize self and not-self.

In the Pure Land world all you have to do is call on Buddha’s name sincerely and you are born in the Western paradise. That is very easy, but it has a nice little hook; how do you do it sincerely, with a pure heart? I’ve heard it said that if you recite the name in a concentrated way for three days before you die you’ll be ready. But how do you know when you’ll die? You don’t, so you’d better start right away. While the tradition rests upon reliance on the naturalness of grace already given, it can point you toward working hard to be ready to accept it.

Zen, on the other hand, goes at it the other way. You’re told it’s up to you to do the practice, and if you do you can break through, but guess what? Actually, there’s no way that you can do it. Ha, ha, gotcha! You end up having to let go of the idea of self.

The idea of “self-power” and “other power” complete each other. They are two ends of the tunnel we call practice. We are embraced by the Buddha’s grace but we have to move toward it. We have to make the effort of binding the pail, but we can’t make the pail break. The moment in the refectory of looking up was, for me, a completely empty-handed act of faith, a coming together of “self-power” and something not-self.

One other interesting thing about it was that nothing changed after that. I had the same old practice, dealing with the same old stuff. Yet somehow, the view changed. Even so, it was the same world, the same people, the same events, but somehow, different eyes.

In the *Kyojukaimon*, our chapter on the Buddhist moral precepts, you can see the process I’ve been describing. The Tenth Precept is “Do not defame the Three Treasures,” and part of the commentary says “To do something by ourselves, without copying others, is to become an example to the world, and the merit of this becomes the source of all wisdom.” This corresponds with Shen

Hui's teaching in the "Sermon on Sudden Awakening." Near the end he says: "Set yourself your own rules. Penetrate to your own heart." Ultimately, the precepts are not about conforming to a model of behavior. They challenge us to really know ourselves and be true to ourselves at the deepest level. That's what Shen Hui means by "Make your own rules." This does not mean to justify your impulses, but to penetrate to the depths of your own heart. It means to know yourself and be true to your deepest nature. Setting your own rules is simply about that. When you do that, however, all the precepts will be included, and that is what the story I've told you is about. To do this means to put everything into the bucket, it means taking that one really big step. This is doing something by yourself without copying others, because the process will be completely unique for each person. To do it, you cannot rely on conforming to an image of what practice should be. It's much riskier than that.

It takes this effort to penetrate to your own heart, the effort of binding the pail, before we understand what no-effort really is. Now mind you, however, we can understand this in small ways in daily life. I think all of us have. Have you experienced trying and trying and trying something, then stepped back and relaxed a minute, and then had the answer come? That is a moment of non-effort, a small example of the same principle. We chew away on a problem and then just take a day off. The next day, the answer comes easily. The same principle applies in a lot of different ways, but it also applies to this major cycle of our relationship to practice and to the Dharma.

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1 – Zen Flesh, Zen Bones – A Collection of Zen and Pre-Zen Writings compiled by Paul Reps, Doubleday Anchor, Garden City, New York, no date.

2 - History of Japanese Religion, Masaharu Anesaki, Charles E. Tuttle Company, Rutland, Vermont & Tokyo, Japan, 1963, p.183.

Karma and Rebirth as Opportunities for Practice

Kyogen Carlson (*Excepted from the booklet Zen Roots*)

Sometimes thought of as a form of retribution for wrongdoing, karma is neither punishment nor reward. Rather it is just a natural law working upon us like the law of gravity. For the sake of training in Buddhism, though, karma has very excellent consequences, for it offers us the opportunity to meditate and train with our mistakes at a time after we have made them.

If we are training very well, meditating every instant, something will arise in the mind, let us say anger, and through meditation we see and accept it without clinging or rejection. It arises and passes on its own. Because we let it pass without acting on it there is no karma from the anger. To let the anger, or anything that arises, draw us out of the still centeredness of meditation to act out of selfishness instead of Buddha Nature is to make a mistake in training. In just a brief moment self can arise and generate karma. Getting angry at others creates ill will which is reflected back upon us. This is the reaping of karma which tends to reinforce the belief that we are a separate individual “self” among many separate, conflicting “selves.” But the reaping of karma, the ill will, is also our second chance to meditate with the mistake we made earlier.

We have the opportunity to see the results of our actions manifesting in the ill will of others. We can, if we choose, meditate with it just as we do with anger arising in ourselves, and let it come and go without reacting to it on the selfish level. This is acceptance of karma. Thereafter we should find a way to convert the karma through transcendence by making a positive action based on acceptance. Whether or not the ill will of others is affected by this positive action, the karmic effect upon us is converted when we act with all-acceptance. This is the Buddhist version of forgiveness which recognizes that there is no blame to begin with. Accepting karma in this manner turns it into an opportunity to grow in spiritual training.

An example I like to use is of someone, let’s call him “John,” working in a busy office. His boss has been irritable, harping at him

for hours, and he eventually snaps at John to go get something from the supply room. Near the end of his patience and moving abruptly, John throws open the door to the supply room crashing headlong into another man balancing a huge stack of books and papers, which go flying all over the room. Tripped up, and angry at the inconvenience, John glares at the other man, grabs what he came for, and rushes out uttering an oath. Going on about his duties, in time John forgets all about the brief incident in the supply room.

Later in the day, after a coffee break, John is feeling more relaxed. Then he happens to meet the man from the supply room who glares at him with surly unpleasantness, and John feels a twinge in the pit of his stomach. The twinge in his stomach, as well as the reaction of the co-worker, are both due to the workings of karma; one is internal karmic consequence, the other external. This event is also, however, John's second opportunity to meditate through the mistake he made earlier. The twinge in the pit of his stomach is an inner recognition that he had made a mistake, forgetting his own Buddha Nature and acting instead from the selfish self. This little feeling of "yuck" deep inside is just like the arising of annoyance when the papers went flying, for both challenge him to reach deep inside to touch meditation.

What John does now is extremely important for understanding how training works. Often people refuse to recognize the meaning of this little twinge, thinking they can ignore it since the problem was the boss's fault anyway. Our worker might glare back, grit his teeth and avert his glance, or feel hurt and further abused. Such refusal to recognize and accept karma means that the karma will continue endlessly. A different, and equally unhelpful, type of reaction is to turn the little twinge into guilt. This would be for John to believe that he is somehow tainted by his "sin" and needs absolution. This type of reaction often leads to seeking the absolution from the other person in order to cleanse the feeling, or to trying to make up for the mistake with some effort on behalf of the person concerned, sometimes in ways totally unrelated to the matter at hand. Such efforts only enhance the sensation for all involved that something is

wrong. With the delusion of repaying others karma goes on endlessly just as much as through a refusal to recognize karmic consequence.

The answer lies in meditation and the practice of acceptance and transcendence. When the sensation arises in the pit of the stomach it can be accepted just as it is. If our worker does this, letting it arise without fighting it while remaining still deep within, a recognition of the meaning of the feeling comes next. This is to say to oneself simply “Oops, I did act inconsiderately and with annoyance,” but all the while retaining an awareness of innate purity and a deep sense of dignity. But even this is still incomplete. Now an action from this sense of the situation is required. John can say to his co-worker with simple, gentle dignity that he is sorry for what happened earlier. Then perhaps they can commiserate with each other on the pressures they work under. The karma is completely converted. If John’s co-worker chooses to hang on to his *own* annoyance it is his choice and becomes his own problem; our worker did his best, and his own part is now clean.

So just how does karma connect with rebirth? Let us consider John once more. One day he gets into a nasty argument with someone at work, with a man he has difficulty with regularly. This time, however, tempers really flare up. John ends up in quite a nasty mood, but after work he goes home, puts on the stereo, has a glass of wine, the company of good friends, and after dinner he feels quite mellow. He goes to bed happy and relaxed, and wakes up feeling fine. Cheerful and ready for work, he arrives at the office without a bad thought for anyone. Then, on the other side of the room, he sees the fellow with whom he had the argument going about his business. Suddenly, all the negative feelings rush through him again, recreating the mood he was in the day before. All the feelings and negative opinions from the earlier time appear again as if by magic. Where did they come from? What caused them to arise? Nothing new happened to create them. All he did was see the man with whom he had fought, and the man showed no sign of having seen him. This is called relinking consciousness, and occurs when karma from the past appears in the present. This is the rebirth today of the “self” of yesterday.

The Buddhist teaching on rebirth is simply this and nothing more. Karma from the past appears in the present as sensation,

around which feelings, thoughts, emotions, etc. gather to recreate, as it were, the “self” that was present when the karma was made. The duration of existence for any given being, by Buddhist reckoning, is one thought moment and no more. But the karmic stream moving through that being provides the continuity with the past, and from this arises the notion of a permanent self, existing forever in its own self-nature. Karma moves from moment to moment, day to day, life to life, like a flowing stream of cause and effect that is ever-changing, yet connecting past to present to future.

Our true identity, however, is Buddha Nature, which is selfless, not separate from all the rest of existence, and which flows through us unhindered when we meditate every moment, expressing the Precepts in every action. Our true identity as Buddha Nature is sometimes called the True Self, or the Higher Self. Sometimes it is called the Lord of the House. It should be understood that it is not karma that separates us from the Buddha Nature, but ignorant clinging to the notion that the illusory self is real.

Karma will always act upon us for as long as we live, and it is our duty to train within the karmic stream we have inherited. Rather than being free from karma, it is said that the enlightened man is one with his karma. This means he completely accepts the consequences of his actions, while trying to do the very best he can. If you have to break one Precept in order to keep another, or if you must do something that others may not understand, this teaching means you must accept the consequences of doing so, whatever they may be. We must all, eventually, recognize that there is no way to avoid karma completely while still living. This means we must become spiritual adults. Because of this you can see that it is always best to deal with karma as soon as it arises. If John, for example, had accepted his mistake in the supply room right away, he could have apologized and explained that he had no time to help pick things up because the boss was waiting. In sympathizing with the other fellow, i.e. expressing his oneness with him, the karma could have been cleaned up immediately and left nothing unresolved to create future problems.

“Unresolved” is the key word in understanding karma and how it relates to training and the meaning of rebirth. To illustrate this I often ask people to remember the most embarrassing moment of their lives. If you take the time to do this, most likely the event comes

back in vivid detail, and with it comes the sensation of embarrassment, along with the frustration and anger that arose at the time. Here we have karma arising not just from the previous moment or the previous day, but from years earlier. Remembering the embarrassing moment makes you feel again like the clumsy, inept person who years ago made a big faux pas. Undoubtedly you have changed greatly since then, yet that person of years ago seems to come back to life in a moment. This is rebirth. Nothing permanent has gone from past to present, no soul or tangible self from the past has materialized. Just karma of unresolved embarrassment has recreated the perception of that previous self.

Part of the process of meditation and spiritual training involves resolving this old karma still needing to be dealt with. Meditation is like gently pressing on a door. Eventually it opens to reveal our deepest hidden secrets. Events from childhood and early life come back to us, some of which may be frightening, some painful, others neither of these but still meaningful. We meditate with them, resolve them and enter a new relationship to them.

At times memories come up that have very little meaning at all. I remember a time when I had been meditating for perhaps a year and a half when I had vivid recollections of moments that must have made deep impressions upon me at the time, but seemed to mean little other than that. For instance, one day I kept recalling how it felt to be perhaps four years old, standing in a garage on a day in early summer during a downpour. The sounds and smells and the sensation of delight were as intense as the day it occurred. Perhaps I had formed a strong attachment to the sensations at the time and needed to feel them again and let them go. For whatever reason the memory came and went without needing any further explanation. The Buddhist teaching on past life memories simply takes this process back a little further. Such memories are unresolved karma appearing from the past to be felt again, arising in the same way as our embarrassment from years ago, offering us the opportunity to meditate, accept the karma, resolve and convert it.

Buddhists say that the child that was you is gone and is no more. You are not that child, but stand in the same karmic stream. The same is true of other beings that went before. You are not them reincarnated; rather you have merely inherited the unresolved karma

that they have left to be dealt with. This teaching is important, because it states that lessons left unlearned at the time of death, the things we carry unresolved as karma, do not dissipate but remain to be dealt with. Because of this the reformation of self takes place. This “self” that is reformed is like a bubble in a stream. Never separate from the water, it clings to a sense of “I.” The illusion of a permanent separate self-nature gives rise to karma, the force that brings about a new physical being; a new, seemingly separate, bubble in the stream.

When this illusion is no more, when the unresolved karma has been cleaned up, the force that brings about rebirth in the cyclical realms of birth and death ceases, which is the realization of Nirvana. People have occasionally said to me, “Well, since there is no ‘I’ to suffer the consequences of my actions, and since ‘I’ will not be reborn in the future, why should I bother to train and clean up old karma?” It is only the illusion of a separate self that does not really exist. But this illusion will continuously be reformed to suffer from karma until it is cleaned up. You are not the beings who went before in the karmic stream any more than you are the child of ten years old. But also, you feel their karma no less than you feel yourself to be the product of that ten-year-old. Therefore, there is no escape from karma, and the necessity of training is clear.

Intelligence or Lack of It is Not an Issue: Karma Work and Habit Energy

Kyogen Carlson

About a month ago, as the weather began to warm up, our cat Eppie started getting really interested in being outside. So it was in and out, in and out, in and out. Not too long before this we replaced the screen door on the back. The new door is different in that it is hinged on the opposite side from the old one. So when Eppie wanted to go out one day, I followed her out onto the back porch as she moved underfoot, right in front of me. I started to reach for the handle of the screen door – or to where the handle used to be, on the left. But I stopped before I got there, in mid-action, and moved my hand over to the right side. As I did this, keeping an eye on the cat underfoot, I noticed that she followed exactly the same pattern underneath me. First, she headed for the wrong side of the door jamb, but then she corrected herself in mid-action, a couple feet before getting to the door, at precisely the same moment I corrected my action. I opened the door and out she went.

Now back when this door was first installed, I would go all the way to the door, reach out, then look at it and think: “Oops, wrong side.” But Eppie would press her nose to the wrong side of the door until it opened. Once it was wide open, out she’d go. As a human being, I have vast intellectual superiority over that cat, so that I can see which is the hinge side, which is the latch side, and understand that this determines the way the door opens. But this recognition doesn’t change the pattern, the habit energy of behavior. My small epiphany at that moment was that the cat and I were changing the habit energy regarding the door at almost exactly the same rate. Sure enough, just a week or so later I didn’t hesitate anymore and neither did she. Just yesterday, however, I let her *into* the house through that same door, and I noticed that when we’re outdoors we both still have the old pattern of coming at the door from the wrong side. What’s really interesting about this is that the habit energy is not in the slightest way dependent upon rational understanding. Also, it is state specific. In other words, changing the pattern on one side of the door didn’t affect the pattern on the other side. Not for me, with my vast

cranial capacity, nor for Eppie, who may be sweet, but isn't noted for her mental horsepower. Even though we both overcame the pattern and changed the habit when on one side of the door, when on the other side we're both following the old pattern, and to nearly the same degree.

In the *Fukanzazengi*, which we recite on Wednesday evenings, Dogen says:

“This must represent conduct beyond seeing and hearing. Is it not a standard prior to knowledge and views? This being so, intelligence or lack of it is not an issue. Make no distinction between the dull and the sharp-witted. If you concentrate your effort single-mindedly, that in itself is wholeheartedly engaging the Way. Practice-realization is naturally undefiled. Going forward is, after all, an everyway affair.”

Think about this. The habit energy of opening a door is a very simple matter, but what is this “conduct” he’s talking about? What is going forward? What is beyond seeing and hearing? What is beyond knowledge and views?

Again, I can use my vast powers of reason to understand the door. I can look at it and know the correct way to approach it, consciously direct my attention to the side of the door where the handle now sits, overcome my old pattern, and for that moment the behavior is changed. But the habit energy of reaching for the wrong side first will remain. It is practice, through simple repetition, that actually changes the habit energy, not the reasoning power that only helps me understand that I do, indeed, need to change it.

Our zen practice is as simple as this. We practice with the *zazen* posture, and follow many other forms, but this practice, while simple, is actually very far-reaching. Through Precept study and other means we can recognize patterns of action and the habit energy behind them. This takes a certain amount of conscious brain power. But stepping out of it, acting differently, and cultivating a different body memory, a new body habit, is not a matter of intelligence or lack of it.

It really isn't. It comes from doggedly repeating a new behavior. Going forward like this is an everyday affair.

Speaking of dogs, there is another principle that applies here. When I was at the monastery we had a lot of dogs; hounds, to be precise, which can be difficult creatures. We had and used a dog training book by a fellow named Kohler. He takes a fairly physical and stern approach but there were a few things he said that were very interesting. One is to never correct more than one behavior at a time because the dog will be confused by this. The correction given to change a behavior becomes disassociated from the behavior that you want to correct if you try to address more than one thing at a time. Another thing he said was that after a difficult training session, leave the dog alone. Give him a lot of space. In a way, this method respects the individual dog's process and lets him or her sort it out and even to be in a *mumpf* if they want to. It recognizes that each dog has its own set of priorities, and gives the dog space to honor that.

I came to understand that these simple principles also apply to human beings. Parents take note. When trying to correct a behavior, stick to one thing at a time because while the conscious mind might be able, at some level, to understand all the issues you're trying to address, the behavior itself lies at a more primitive level of the brain. Impulse is very primitive compared to the conscious, reasoning mind. So, given some time, the person could reason out that everything you're telling them makes sense, but at the time you address it, if you address more than one issue, what the other *feels* is just being hassled.

I found that when I'm working at training chant leaders, or when we're dealing with people just getting familiar with the rules for residency, the same thing is true. No matter how capable they are of understanding all the issues at hand, when you come up against it, one thing at a time is what can be handled. Whenever there is something difficult to deal with, we need to give people a lot of space to work it out on their own and trust their own process. Again, this is because intelligence, the mental ability to understand the issues, is actually fairly shallow. By shallow I mean not very deep in the human

being. Reason lies up on the surface, while the impulse to behavior lies very deep in the body, and in the primitive brain.

Now, as for the will. Our practice of *zazen*, on one hand, is to drop into that open, vast, spacious, unconditioned mind. It is also to notice where the mind goes when it's wandering around. Part of our practice is simply to notice it and pay attention to it. A lot of times during sitting I'll say: "Here! Notice. Where is your mind? Is it in the past, the future, in planning, or in fantasy? Wherever it goes, just notice it and let it go." The noticing is important. Learning to identify where the mind goes when it is distracted helps develop the body memory of knowing the difference between being distracted and being in the present. It's not that we're supposed to cut off or get rid of distractions, but rather to become familiar with how our own minds work. Being aware quickly that we *are* distracted aids learning to come back to being present.

A few weeks ago I did a Dharma Talk on the Jim Carrey movie, "Liar, Liar" which is a very silly movie to a great degree, but which I found interesting. He has a spell put on him under which he cannot tell a lie. So he goes through three phases. In the first part of it, whatever is on the surface of his mind just comes blurting out. This is like beginning *zazen*. What happens when you first try to pay attention is that you become aware of all the crap in your head. There's a lot of it sometimes. Up until then we've been able to disregard how much garbage spins around in the mind, and how much time we spend spinning it. *Zazen* is like the spell on Jim Carrey, and suddenly we have no choice but to see everything going on in the mind. Sometimes that's a terrible revelation.

What happens next is that he cannot hide his deeper habit energies and he has to admit to them. It comes out of his mouth. So he condemns himself: "I'm a bad father." The moment he says that there is deep recognition. Another part of our zen practice is to see what we're doing, what the habit energy is, and what it means. When he can't deny it anymore he's ready to change.

Finally, what happens is that he says to himself, "I love my son," and finds that this truth stuff isn't so bad. What's important here is that after becoming aware of his own mind, he learns to change where he directs his mind. Because he can't avoid paying attention,

he finds out what really matters to him. So, where do you direct your mind? One step in zazen is simply learning what our habit energy of mind is. The next is learning to direct it to what really matters. We do that in our zazen practice on the cushion, but also in daily life.

This habit energy of body, speech, and mind can be tricky and very sticky. In zazen we develop a new habit energy of body and mind which is to drop beneath all the nonsense and to find spaciousness, but catching the self is a little trickier in our daily life. That's why we do the practice of reading the Kyojukaimon in the morning, and reflecting on the events of the day in the evening, noticing what comes up and whenever little contractions arise. We just notice it. Reflecting on the day we can see clearly the moment when someone pushes a button, and we can see what do we do with it. As soon as that button's pushed, there's a habit energy of reaction. You can learn to see the match being struck, recognize the the feeling of inflammation, then just let it burn for awhile and go out. Doing that in reflection, we develop a pattern we can eventually apply during the day, during the events themselves. If you can drop beneath the reactivity and let it go, you've changed your habit energy to that degree. This can be profound.

It's not easy. It's kind of like me and the cat and the door. Habit energy is to repeat old patterns, learned patterns of body and mind, which is like automatically reaching for the wrong side of the door. Our practice is to notice it as it arises. Where is your mind? Where does your mind go? Note it. Drop it. When you can do that, you can then turn your attention to the right side of the door where the latch is now located. Every time you do that you change your habit energy, just a little bit, of how you react and respond to things in the world. That's where you really change things. That's how profound transformation can occur.

In daily life, in the hurly-burly of events, we first catch the self after the event. "Oh God, I got caught in that again." Eventually we catch it after we've started it but we're already in it. Then we start to catch it just as it arises but we can't stop it. This is where zazen is so important. Finally we're able to catch it as it arises and have the body memory of coming back to the breath, back to being centered, and the new habit energy of letting things arise and fall. When we can drop the impulse, we really change. This is very different from

layering an artificial behavior on top of an impulse. It's actually changing the impulse, and this is the basis of profound transformation. Thinking about responding from that space, I want to read a couple of the passages we recited this morning.

“Natural and wondrous, it is not a matter of delusion or enlightenment.” It's not how we perceive things, but a matter of responding from a place of deep centeredness.

“Just a hair's breadth deviation and you are out of tune.” It's so easy to lose the habit energy of being centered and mindful of the breath.

“Arrows meeting head on; how could it be a matter of skill?” It's the same thing. Arrows meeting head on is being right on the target, right on your own center moment by moment by moment.

“It is not reached by feelings or consciousness. How could it involve deliberation?” Feelings arise because of karma and habit energy, while consciousness and the thinking mind are on the surface.

Trying to change our patterns with the conscious mind can work in the short term, but habit energy will prevail in the long run. Practice requires patience and repetition. Through this we can cultivate the habit energy of being centered, and this makes all the difference. This is what is most important. Cultivate a body memory of practice. Not just on the cushion but in daily life as well. The cushion is vitally important, but you have to take it out there and make it real moment by moment. We think of habit energy as our nemesis but it's not. It can be our greatest ally when we learn to direct it to that which will really serve us. Practice is a body memory – it too is habit energy.

A story I've told before involves a summer work situation after my first year in the monastery. I found myself dealing with someone who was being absurdly difficult, ridiculously difficult, actually. Nothing I could say was going to change this behavior. This was the wife of an officer on a military base. I was working for a moving company, moving the family's belongings. This woman had gotten burned in a move before, and she decided she was going to have it her way, insisting that we do things that the military contract

guidelines forbade and would not pay for. I knew there was no way this was going to fly!

But no matter how I explained the facts, she insisted that it would have to be done her way. Then, all at once, my reasonableness and patience completely left me. Poof! Gone! I started to get really frustrated, turned around and my fists came up, but then my hands unclenched and went into gassho. This was unconscious and even surprising. As soon as I did that, all the responses in my body changed, centeredness and acceptance returned, and the ability to act appropriately appeared.

Where did that come from? I didn't think about it; I didn't choose it. My body remembered the habit of practice, and put me back in the space of practice. It is the body memory of practice that we can rely upon.

When I watched my mother die, I became deeply aware that the only thing left was her habit energy. That's all that was there. Her mind had deteriorated from some form of dementia and it was going all over the place. She'd be agitated and anxious and all the things she would obsess about in her life were there just spinning and spinning and spinning.

e cannot rely even on our own brains. But if you take this practice deeply and seriously, ingraining it in your own body and down into the primitive part of the mind, this you can rely on. I believe it. It's important to start now. Habit energy is not something you can generate in a snap of the fingers. We talk about sudden enlightenment. Sudden enlightenment is simply the realization that there's nowhere to go. To be in tune with that deeply and consistently is something you have to cultivate.

There's a sign on a church over on 39th Avenue I saw and laughed at recently. It said: "Good habits you have to cultivate. Bad habits are like weeds, they grow by themselves." There's truth in that. Practice requires cultivating the body memory of being centered and knowing where your mind is, and what your breath is like. Knowing where your own center is takes that cultivation.

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Practice and Everyday Koans

Richard Fumyo Mishaga

She reminds me how much I hate traveling: “We will have to remain here at the gate a little longer while the mechanics finish checking . . . ” The flight attendant’s voice is drowned out by a chorus of groans. The humid cabin air stagnates; there’s no circulation on the tarmac. It’s Friday night, and homeward-bound business travelers are packed in tighter than sheep in a holding pen. I am exhausted from a week of long work hours and intense meetings and negotiations. My back aches, and all I want is to be in my own living room, collapsed in front of the TV.

In my snit, I choose not to participate in the customary complaining and good-natured bantering among the business travelers who know these delays so well. I bury my face in one of the airline magazines that always clutter the pocket of the seat in front of me. I quickly snap through pages of the magazine -- classic displacement behavior, as I have no intention of reading any of the articles. But my eyes are drawn to an advertisement with a Franciscan monk in a monastery garden. For some reason, this scene reminds me of Zen Master Tozan’s monastery.

I think once again about the koan of the young monk and overhear him asking the Master, “Where is this place where there is neither heat nor cold?” Tozan fires back, “When it is hot, heat kills the monk.” Tozan’s direct and wonderfully succinct reply comes over me like a bucket of ice water. With my body, I intuitively sense what it means to be killed by the heat, to drop the resistance, and to experience the fundamental essence of a moment without preconditions and without self. I am still hot and sore and tired but this life surfaces, marvelous in its complex fabric extending in all directions of space-time. I have an inkling of what it means not to be controlled by the old patterns of thought and behavior that condemn me to relive my self-centered feelings in isolation. I can be fatigued and uncomfortable. Accepting these conditions in this moment for

what they are, I realize that I am liberated from any expectations about them.

My practice these days off the zafu seems to be a lot like this incident on the plane. Some of the ideas in Zen Buddhism that I studied with my mind a few years ago are now being revisited spontaneously and more intuitively with my whole body. I think that I am beginning to sense meaning in those everyday koans that define my existence. I do not feel the intellectual obsession to expand my knowledge of Buddhism and Zen as I did before. I feel more comfortable meditating with the basic ideas, descending into what I already know, and allowing the edge of my bubble to expand through intuitive insights into my everyday koans.

Now this process of pressing the everyday koan seems perfectly natural to me, this slow, rhythmic unfolding that all sentient beings must certainly face, each in his or her own good time. By way of contrast, I must admit that I have always had a perverse curiosity about systematic koan study and those who undertake it. As I look around me, I see every human, cat, and shrub wrestling with the all-encompassing koans that result from situation and personal karma. I cannot fathom why anyone would willingly subject themselves to the tension and stress that must certainly be imposed by a formal koan “study program.” My raw life is about as complicated as it can be. As I face the blank, imponderable wall of my everyday existence, I am content to have slight moments when realizations arise as they may.

This grasping hold of the everyday koan strikes me as the quintessential expression of one’s individuality. I must face myself and my situation by myself. No teacher or companion can do this koan for me or mark the way through its labyrinth. I enter the Cave of the Blue Dragon alone. When I finally understood that my teacher was not going to fix my life or walk me through the “Zen” experience, I became comfortable knowing that my everyday koans were truly mine. I walk this path by myself, and I must muster the compassion to allow others to know and do the same. And yet, as I settled into the rhythm of my own pace, I began to sense a synergistic connection with other Buddhist travelers following their paths. For

me, this connection adds a rich new texture to my everyday experiences.

Last spring I felt a strong sense of this connection, this other facet of the everyday koan extending beyond my individuality, when I was preparing for a class discussion of Dogen's *Zazengi*. I sensed that there are certain koans that must be faced by everyone who takes up this practice, when "the Mind that seeks the Way" arises within them. Although our personal, individual responses to these koans may vary, the barrier that must be pressed is the same for all. When Dogen asks, "Why are training and enlightenment differentiated since the Truth is universal? Why study the means to attaining it since the supreme teaching is free?" he poses this koan for all the generations who follow.

We all must wrestle with this paradox. We may even consider that our Sangha is defined by the shared koans, such as Dogen's koan, that must arise along this way. Our Sangha cannot be recognized by the similar cultural and socioeconomic conditions typical of Asian Buddhist communities, such as the monks of Tozan's monastery or the peasants of a Japanese mountain village. We come from very different family backgrounds with different values and have different roles and responsibilities in society. We have little that is truly common to all of us who share this practice, except our mutual koans. Experiencing these koans not only links us together here but also connects us to past generations and sets the bounds for Sangha in the future. Sangha, viewed as individuals facing the same, shared koans, is readily apparent in the initial experiences of those just beginning to practice Zen meditation.

I enjoy leading Introductory Meditation Workshops. Invariably, certain expectations arise in newcomers. The participants want to discuss the benefits of a meditation practice and what it will do for them. I understand this curiosity because we all suffer and we all initially came to the Center hoping to find some kind of relief. The opinions at the workshops cover a spectrum, from those who know exactly what they are going to get out of this effort to those who want someone to tell them why they are here. Sometimes I would really like to tell them that they are already enlightened. Therefore, if they have the discipline and fortitude to stick with this form of practice, they will "get" absolutely nothing for their pains. Of course,

I do not. This first koan, Dogen's koan will arise. How can anyone understand it from the realm of dualistic goals, the world of the beginner? Each of us must experience Dogen's koan, one of those shared koans that defines us. We must press it gently by ourselves until the dualities fuse and the clouds temporarily part.

When I began meditating, I had expectations, too. I worked hard at the form, anticipating that I would get with the program and advance to the next stage, whatever that was. Realizing I had limited time, I had to make the most of each practice session. To maximize my time and effort, I reasoned that I would need optimum conditions, so I usually scheduled zazen for periods when I was rested, energetic, and in a good mood. I got nowhere with my plans; I felt as if I was beating my head against the blank wall. I continued, although frustrated, and gradually abandoned my plans and schedule, doing zazen when I could because there was nothing else I could do. I began to sense that Dogen's koan was less formidable than before. It seems that I have made a pact: I agree to sit for a while, in silence and dignity, just to manifest Vairocana. In turn, he allows the universe to unfold for a while without my assistance. Now I just do zazen: sleepy or alert zazen, happy or sad zazen, achy or well zazen, confident or frightened zazen, shallow zazen, and, once in a while, deep zazen. It's all the same, it's all gray. What has changed is the sense of what might be called urgency, and a willingness to focus on the "question" and not my expectation of the "answer."

This effort helped me realize that what is really important is the question; the answer, in one sense, is irrelevant. The question, i.e., process of the holding of the koan, encompasses, expresses and engulfs the result. Taking the mind of meditation with me off the zafu means that I focus on distilling the koan *du jour*; I sense it throughout the day, and I express the essence of it by pressing the karmic moment and concentrating it to its simplest expression at one point in time and space. If and when I accomplish this, the duality of question and answer drops. The answer is obvious for the answer is always there; the question and answer are complete. How can they not be? Only the illusion of the duality, the "obstructing mountain and great rivers," separates them. I have found great comfort in knowing that no matter how difficult and insurmountable an everyday koan seems, the answer to it exists and is always there right

in front of me. Having faith in the certainty of an answer releases me from uncertainty and fear of the unknown. When I realize this, I can function freely and, with gratitude, accept life as it unfolds, both the pleasant and the unpleasant.

Since the distillation of an everyday koan is the living expression of an individual being, it is necessarily defined by time and place. The answer, too, will be dependent on a unique and unrepeatable set of conditions. Therefore, a koan is unique and can never really be “asked” or “solved” twice. Sanzen, in one sense, is a formalized metaphor for this experience of the everyday koan. The trainee brings a distilled question to the Master but the asking and the response are unique to that moment – ask again another day and circumstances will have changed, the answer is different.

I have noticed this uniqueness in my daily work, where I am confronted with conflicts between environmental and economic needs. There is really no set approach for getting at the heart of the matter, even though the general problem is familiar. After years of taking stands on issues, representing positions, and negotiating solutions for clients, I have come to realize through my practice that lasting solutions to particularly knotty environmental conflicts cannot be resolved from the world of dualities. Fundamental solutions to complex environmental problems are not necessarily based in technology, nor are they a matter of right or wrong. Solutions to environmental conflicts do not lie in preconceived conceptual principles of what is fair and just. These are all dualities; fairness and justice are relative, subjective terms. Solutions based on these dualities will be temporary, which means the koan is not really “solved.” More confrontation is merely held down like a beach ball beneath the surface of the water. When the pressure is relaxed, the issue will again arise.

Through zazen, I realize that fundamental solutions to such koans lie in accepting these dualities as they are and the different points of view they represent and then looking beyond them. My practice has convinced me that a solution to these deep-seated conflicts is there but will only be realizable when I can understand, for example, the logger in the owl and the owl in the logger. Since I can only realize the logger in the owl and the owl in the logger in a particular moment and place in the karmic stream, I can only realize

the answer in the same moment and place. Asking the “same” question in the same way again but under different circumstances and another time will yield its own unique and immaculate solution.

Taking the mind of meditation into my daily life and attempting to live it through my everyday koans has another by-product -- the sense of freshness and surprise as unexpected results manifest themselves. By focusing on the process without regard to the result or solution, the mundane circumstances of daily life express their uniqueness and offer clarity and guidance as I travel through my everyday koans. The ring of a telephone, the feel of cold steel, the pull of a broom, and a picture in a magazine in a hot airplane -- all blossoms bursting forth in Tozan’s “spring beyond time.”

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Personal Koans

Kyogen Carlson

“Koan” is the Japanese pronunciation of the Chinese word “kung-an,” which means public record. This was a legal term, used in the Chinese courts of law, that referred to records of cases that set precedent and were used as reference. In Zen, koans are records of particular kinds of events and exchanges that have dharma significance. Often they include a story, and when we study them there’s a lot we can glean from that aspect of them. However, there’s a method by which you investigate koan at a deeper level. You are assigned a koan in order to uncover a particular point, and part of the method is not to tell you what the point is. You have to find that out yourself. You bring what you think it’s about into the dokusan room and the teacher listens and says, “No. No. That’s not it.” So you keep working on it until you uncover it.

You have to memorize the koan story and then get it down to the key part. Eventually you may be assigned a wa-do, a tip-end. You take the story and get it down to one word, even just one syllable, and your meditation is just to focus on that. An example would be the classic koan, “Joshu’s Mu.” In Japanese “mu” means no. A monk asks Joshu, “Does a dog have buddha-nature?” The set-up for this is someone grappling with the teaching about buddha nature, because the Buddhist texts say that all beings have buddha-nature. The monk comes with this question and Joshu says, “No!” Kind of surprising answer, when you consider the Buddhist teachings on this. So the koan is not about whether a dog has buddha-nature, but about why did Joshu say no? This is a breakthrough koan, and you end up focusing on that one word “no.” When you hear Japanese monks “mu-ing” all the time – they’ll chant, “Muuuuuu...,” they’re working on this question.

Another kind of breakthrough question might be, “What is your original face before your parents were born?” That one doesn’t have a story that goes with it, that’s a constructed koan that came later, but you’re given this question. And you’re not supposed to just come up with an answer, because there isn’t really a right answer per se. Still,

you have to demonstrate that you've understood what it's about, so you come in and you sort of demonstrate this to the teacher. Breakthrough koans are about the fundamental point, about an absolute view, about big questions. We might say they are about the *why* of it all. The thing is, there is no answer to why, and yet there is a way to *demonstrate* an answer.



When I was college student, I sort of stumbled into the “big view.” I had an accidental glimpse of perfection – everything exactly as it should be, a tranquil sense of everything right. It seemed to answer that big question, except that I hadn't really formed the question yet. I hadn't yet done the work, so I couldn't hold this answer, I couldn't touch it, and I could feel it slipping away. I desperately wanted to understand this, to connect the dots, to make this relative life and everyday world harmonize or mesh with this view that I'd had. Of course, I found out later that this is what practice is – simply to harmonize this life, this breath, with this large view. But I knew nothing about that, so this perception was fading, and I was kind of like, “Come back!” I hadn't yet clarified my own deepest question, but this experience did raise way-seeking mind.

Then I read about zazen practice, and there was something about this zazen practice that made me think, yes, there's a bridge there, there's a way over this chasm that I feel. So after graduation I was off to the monastery like a shot. I decided I was going to stay for a year to learn this zazen practice. Ten years later I realized I was never going to quit, so here I am. That's because my search wasn't just about learning meditation. I once heard my teacher Roshi Kennett say something about questions, particularly about dokusan or sanzen where you come in and meet your teacher, or mondo, which is public question and answer with the teacher. She said that when people come in with a question, there's a question on the surface, there's a question underneath that, and then underneath that there's the fundamental question. And really, all questions resolve into this one, almost wordless question. In my case, I had come to the monastery looking for zazen, but the question under that was, “How do I harmonize myself with what I had glimpsed?” And under that was the fundamental question.

Some of my koans got formed when I was very young. (I've heard it said that the reason that parents can push your buttons is because they're the ones that installed them in the first place.) There were a lot of positives in the way I was raised, in a household with a strong religious practice, real practice. It was a Christian Science household. Christian Science is a very idealistic religion; part of its teachings is that we are a part of God's perfect *idea*. This is sort of similar to the Buddhist mind-only school, which teaches that it's all mind. In Christian Science, God's perfect idea is what we really are, and everything is part of this. It's all part of God's perfect idea and perfect plan, and all problems can be overcome – that includes sin, disease, old age and death – when we see that these are just illusions that arise within this view. There's a whole theology about how those illusions arise that I won't get into here, but basically everything earthly and component, compounded things, are not real. They're kind of an illusion, and that's similar to Buddhism, in a way.

The Christian Science view is that if you really demonstrate this, if you become very in touch with this perfect view, then you can rise above it all. This is called ascension, and Jesus' story is a kind of model. This ascension is something that you can accomplish in your own being; you become Christ-like. There's something kind of cool about this, but it is supposed to mean that you can heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the leper and cast out demons. Metaphorically there's something rather nice about this, but trying to make it concrete and practical has a certain problem. It basically has a big denial issue when it comes to dukkha. I've come to think of Christian Science as a very highly refined system of denial.

As a child I was expected, and was being taught, to demonstrate this practice by not being sick, and to rise above these illusions. In practicality what happened was I went to school sick a lot. When I couldn't demonstrate as expected, I knew that I disappointed. I disappointed my parents, particularly my mother, because she really wanted me to be able to do this. She was trying really hard. When I look back at it I can see there was all this hope and aspiration for me, but it's really hard when what you want is a little bit of comfort, understanding, a little sympathy, and you just aren't going to get any of it. The positive side of this is that I saw my parents work through a number of different kinds of issues – conflicts, life questions –

using their religious practice, and it's a good method for that, it actually served well. That was good for me. I saw that there is benefit to actually seeking, to practice, to working in spiritual way. I did learn from that.

A lot of my fundamental koans came out of this situation. I realized in some kind of unconscious way that I could never really meet the perfect expectations – it just isn't going to happen. After all, when you look back, hey, all the Christian Scientists that ever lived died, they all failed. Which is OK, everybody fails, but the way this was presented to me as a child really pinned me against something in a very tight way. I could never measure up to what this expectation was about. Early in my life this question, this whole issue, boiled up, bubbled up, as a very odd kind of a question: "In God's perfect world, with everything having a place and a function in harmony, what's with flies and mosquitoes? What the hell are they for?" They just bug the hell out of me – they're the fly in the ointment, so to speak. I really puzzled about it; it was a question that came out of this conflict that I felt.

A deeper aspect of this question, when I got into the monastery, was, "What is the measure of perfection?" I had had this perfect view and I had this imperfect person, and how does this harmonize – what's going on here? What should this world look like? What should this life, my life, look like? What am I supposed to really be? This is really what it comes down to. Then these questions finally clarified into fundamental point questions, and sitting still within those questions brought me to the wordless one question. When you are sitting with the question in that still place where everything kind of stops, you're getting really close. Breakthrough happens right on the other side of that wordless block.

I've sat with this personal koan for many years, and finally heard a story that addresses this question in an interesting way. A monk asked an old master what he had learned in his years of practice, and the master answered, "One stick is as long as it is, one stick is as short as it is." When I heard that I thought, there's something here, something about this that's important. Later I heard a teaching from Koho Zenji (my teacher's teacher), who was very small even for a Japanese. He would say, "A daikon is still a daikon, even when it is very small." In Japanese, daikon means "big root," and it's a kind of

radish which grows like a big fat carrot. But a daikon is still a daikon, even when it is small. That's saying more or less the same thing as, "One stick is as long as it is, one stick is as short as it is." Stickness and daikonness are not measured that way – and this was getting to my question about measuring. Eventually the insight really came that it's *true*. We have to make an effort, but there is nothing to gain. We don't have to be a bigger stick or a bigger daikon – we're already there, we just need to accept it completely. And yet, there is always something to do. It's a very simple formula, but finally I really, really knew it.

There's a phrase from our old translation of the "Kyojukaimon" that said, "The wheel of the dharma is always turning and lacks for nothing, yet needs something." Everything is perfect as it is, and yet every moment needs something. It's about our effort, the way we turn the mind, the way we take this next step, the way we address this moment, it needs something. After I had this kind of opening about this, I heard a story from another monk practicing at the monastery. She told of how, when she first got to the monastery and discovered practice, she was full of enthusiasm for deep acceptance. She was deeply impressed by how you can get past all of your issues if you just accept things as they are. You could say she was one of these evangelical converts to all-acceptance practice.

This monk left the monastery one summer to work in a convalescent hospital for people with spinal cord injuries. Many people there were paraplegics. She thought, "Oh, I'm going to bring this acceptance practice to people!" But they just sort of sent the message: bug off, sister. They were having none of it – particularly several people were just like, "What do *you* know?" So she kind of backed off. Then one day a quadriplegic came in, and his work was to go to these places and to talk to more newly injured people who were grappling with their situation. The monk said that when this man entered the room it was almost as if the light in the room went up. He came in with this almost beatific acceptance, and he met each person and they responded to him in this profound way. He was there, he was on the other side of this thing that they were grappling with, and he was able to say everything she had been trying to say, but with effect. I don't remember how she put it, but what struck me was that in this situation, it was *she* who was handicapped, and he

who was not. One stick is as long as it is, one stick is as short as it is, and it depends on circumstance. I had this idea from Christian Science that you had to perfect in some way – but what way? You cannot measure it that way. And it doesn't matter, it truly does not matter, because when you touch it, you've got it. Perfection is about being ourselves without opposition, long in some situations, short in others.

My question about the measure of perfection is a variation on that traditional koan, “What is your original face before your parents were born?” I could have been assigned that koan, and I probably would have related to it, but finding my own internal koan made it urgent to me. It arose in *my* life from the questions and the formations that I had. It was mine and it was vitally important to me. I want to impress on everyone that all of our confusions, all our issues, our stumbling blocks, arise because of a fundamental paradox in existence itself, the root of dukkha – that life and things and situations are both complete and incomplete, both perfect and imperfect, they require effort and yet no effort *at the same time*. This is also the essence of Dogen's koan, “Why is practice necessary if we are already innately enlightened?” He had his reasons for asking it that way, but it all boils down to that one thing – you're already there, and yet practice is necessary. He solved it when he realized that practice is how we *express* it.



There is a second type of koan, in addition to fundamental koans. They are upaya koans, or function koans. They function more in the relative view, they're the smaller questions about particular, about *how* or *what*. I find that they all relate back to the fundamental ones, but they deal with how to take action moment by moment, appropriately, in the circumstance as it arises. For me, any kind of a double bind brings up an upaya koan. For example, authority versus self-determination – when they clash, it puts me right on the edge of this. What is right action in that situation? It used to happen with my teacher a lot – she had a very different mode, a different way of being in the world, than I did. I was a jisha, one of her primary attendants, and she would assign me to do something in a way that would make me think, “No, I can't do that.” She would want me to do something

that I might not think was right, or at least not right for me. My idealism would struggle with the actuality of my situation. Where's perfection then? What should I do? Is the stick long or short? Should I assert my view, or surrender to this other view? Sitting still within that, dropping the judgement and getting past either-or, I could usually find a way. It's not an answer such as, always do it this way, always do it that way. But when I was caught in a conundrum, if I sat very still the way would appear. I could meet the situation in way my teacher could recognize and was still true to myself. I could answer the koan.

These are daily life koans, which we have to meet over and over and over, and you don't find a final answer. Every time you resolve an upaya koan – it's annoying – later on you'll find yourself wondering, "Why do I have to deal with this question again?" Well, you're a human being and this is life, so get over it. When we do that we learn to meet events in a useful way, in a way that functions and expresses the fundamental point, genjokoan. With a balance of acceptance and courage and assertion we find a way. This is the essence of the middle way between yes and no, between my way and another way, between assertion and surrender.



Examine your own life and look deeply at the questions and conflicts that bug you – the ones that really get you. Look at them very carefully. Then clear away irritation and opinion – I don't like this, this shouldn't be – let that drop. This doesn't mean you surrender to what you think is wrong, but you sit still with it and drop all the crap. Be very still and let the underlying question arise. Then you sit still with that and you come to the one wordless question. The answer to that cannot be put into words, you simply open to it. Just like you can't tell a paraplegic how to accept his situation – but someone can *demonstrate* it. That's what it's like.

It helps to do this work in a community of people who understand this, realize what this is about and support it – although maybe not always in the way we want it to be supported. Practicing with community or with a teacher helps because what's valuable is having the process seen, having your own struggle with it witnessed, which then makes it more visible to you. It's hard to do it by yourself

– it’s kind of like shaving without a mirror, you need something that reflects back. You can do it on your own, but it just takes whole heck of a lot longer. Living intensely in this monastery it took me ten years. I am joking about that somewhat, because actually it’s a lifelong process. It’s good to get going – decide to pick this up and really investigate it. Our lives are full of our own deep questions.

This means you already have everything you need to study the buddha way. It appears in your life just as it is. It can be a lay life, it can be monastic, it can be temple life. You can be married, single, engaged in a career, doesn’t matter. Koans are everywhere and our method is simply to point to what is already there and to help bring it out and clarify it. Look at your life and your experiences just exactly as they are, and then use precept study and zazen and mindfulness practice to clarify what these questions are about. They definitely appear. Sit very still with them and let them clarify. This is everyday life koan practice – genjokoan. Your koans are already there – they’re already well installed. They are really just aspects of the fundamental koan, the paradox of particular and universal. I encourage you to get going.



Q: Sometimes I don’t know whether I am stepping back, or whether I am tuning out to the problems that face me.

A: When you are sitting and tuned into yourself, there’s an inner knowing – I think of it sort of like a light – and when I’m moving away from where I’m supposed to be it goes out. Or you can think of it as a hum, a sound. It’s like there’s something that’s alive and when I move away from it, it goes dead. Sometimes stepping back is actually going *towards* this – you think, let’s stop and sit still, and it brightens – and sometimes you move away from something you need to be addressing and it goes lower. So you move back. If you cultivate your awareness of that feeling, it’s not that you won’t make mistakes, but if you get way off, you’ll know. When you are really on point, it will be really alive, really there. The “Song of the Grass Roof Hermitage” is about this. This is called the old man in the hut – Sekito calls it that – that kind of acknowledges. It doesn’t guide by telling you what to do, it simply tells you when you’re not doing it and when you are – yes and no.

Q: It seems like the way we are talking about this, you have to get into it, move forward, dig in. But in a way it's hard to know what to do – should we count malas, what should we do?

A: When it ain't broke, don't fix it. Notice when you're not feeling that kind of pressure, and just relax. Then notice when your sense of balance is off, pay attention and consciously look at your inner workings. When things get really messy, you've got lots of good material to work with. Roshi Kennett used to say that assigning a koan to somebody is like a phrenologist knocking someone over the head in order to raise a bump to read. Assigning a difficulty in order for someone to have something to overcome is really kind of stupid. Just examining your life closely, looking at what's going on, is all you need. But... understand that looking deeply is really important because our koans are essential. There's is no such thing as a perfect way to be in this world, and because of that, koans are everywhere. If someone thinks they've got it figured out, they're deluded. Investigating koans is everything. Just look – it's all you have to do.

Q: Can you say something about how elusive koans can be sometimes? I had this vision of all of us concretizing what you were saying and going around and asking each other, "Hey what's your koan? My koan is..." My experience is that I'll be able to put a personal koan into words one day, and then the next day the words don't apply anymore.

A: In telling my story, I chose particular examples that I have had time to digest. Those are the things that I can name pretty clearly after 35-40 years of this, but the stuff I'm working with at any point in time is not so easy to say. Some of the double bind koans are very difficult to explain, why it puts me in that position. I think what's important about this is knowing what the feeling is – suddenly it's kind of like, not knowing what to do, or feeling anxious, agitated, frustrated, or whatever your thing is that puts you in that position. Once you know what that is, you can go, "Oh, I know how to practice with this." Investigation is everything, getting the feeling of it, knowing it in your body and knowing how to be still in it, that's what all this practice is all about. Being able to talk about it 25 years later is nice, but...

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Sangha as Practice

Kyogen Carlson

Traditionally there are said to be three “treasures” in Buddhism - buddha, dharma and sangha. There are several aspects to the three treasures. We can speak historically of buddha as the person, Siddhartha Gautama, who became Shakyamuni Buddha, and of dharma as the teachings that he and his spiritual descendants left us. Historically, sangha is the people who commit to Buddhist practice and follow the teachings.

In our particular tradition we understand another way of looking at it, a deeper way, where buddha is awakened mind itself, dharma is the truth of all events, and sangha is our deep connection with everything. Awakened mind is the whole universe itself; when we look deeply into everything that happens in this world, it is so construed as to point us toward this truth. For example, even dukkha [1] works to do this, to get us to release our attachments. Everything is just so construed, which is a remarkable thing. When we acknowledge this - that awakened mind is the quality of this universe and that dharma is everything that points towards this truth - then we find sangha in the sense of that deeper connection with everything.

There is yet another way of looking at the three treasures: as practice. To understand this, it is useful to consider the Zen teaching that there are two prerequisites for awakening: *samadhi power* and *karma relationship*. Samadhi power is the time spent in deep zazen, committing time to it and really doing it over an extended period of time. What happens as a result is samadhi power is said to accumulate, which in a way doesn't make any sense. But what this means is that through time spent in zazen our perspective shifts from the phenomena that move through body and mind to the space they move through. This has an effect - just spending time in this zazen practice, being aware of the space through which thoughts, feelings and impulses move. As we shift our perspective to the space itself, a profound change is beginning to happen in us.

Then the second aspect, karma relationship, is where practice is completed – it is meeting events and conditions. Karma relationship

is where our practice of precepts comes in, our practice of meeting sangha comes in, and we make an effort to bring practice into daily life. Learning to let go of our habit energies and patterns and learning to find that spaciousness in difficult circumstances – that’s karma relationship. There’s a point where it all matures; there is a ripening of conditions and a profound awakening can occur. Karma relationship is a way to summarize what is going on in the Zen stories of the way master and disciple meet each other - there’s a ripening of karma relationship that’s expressed in those moments when the turning word occurs and the student has an awakening experience. But all events in our lives, and all the people we meet, can be teachers in that same sense when we understand karma relationship.

We can think about samadhi power as cultivating buddha, or the practice of buddha, where buddha is spacious, awakened mind. Karma relationship is dharma and sangha as practice - meeting each thing or being, understanding it as dharma and letting it turn us toward awakened mind. With buddha and dharma it is fairly easy to see how those things relate to samadhi power and karma relationship, but sangha is a little different. It’s a little subtler.

Part of the way karma relationship is found in sangha practice is the way that we end up being seen - we come out of hiding, let who we are be without any veils at all, and end up seeing ourselves as well. One of the most challenging and valuable things about spending time in a monastery is that everyone there can see very clearly who we are because there’s no place to hide. You’re just there, relentlessly, with the same group of people, and since everyone else can see you so clearly, you may as well see it, too. This is like coming out of the closet and being ourselves, and it is karma relationship - sangha and connection and being seen.

Sangha as karma relationship is also seeing others. This is another part that is really important - to open to other people, to see who they are and start to recognize how practice works in their lives, how samadhi power and dharma is expressed in who they are. We recognize other ways of practice and how awakening manifests in other people. When we do that, in some way those things become

accessible to us. When we're in non-opposition to the way others manifest, in some way we have access to it, we are informed by it.

We speak sometimes of sangha as this deep connection with everything, and that's great when we understand what that is - but for the most part, the whole universe as sangha is good on paper, it's good in theory, but in practice it is difficult to realize. The real value of a sangha is usually found first in a *specific* sangha, a local sangha, a community of people who practice together. It is a group of people that sees and values the inner process, and validates deeper vision. A sangha is a community in which everyone is working to understand and thereby validate this shift in perspective to deep mind, to big mind - that shift in perspective that occurs when we stop attaching to phenomena and open up to spaciousness.

It's really important to have this kind of sangha - or a teacher, but sangha is really where it happens. We are informed as we see other people practice, and we are seen practicing - both our failures and our successes are witnessed. This is what's going to guide us and help us understand how to do this training. A community like this is hard to find, it is a very precious thing. It's difficult to encounter. That does not mean the first sangha we encounter is "the" great jewel that everybody needs to find. There are different styles and forms of practice - devotional practice, and this concentration practice that we do, among others - so there are different types of community. It's important to find a match, a place that works for each person.

There is great value in practicing together in a group, and keeping a form - for example, putting your shoes straight in a particular place and making space for others - but there is also a paradox here (Zen is big on paradox). That little gesture of putting your shoes straight creates a connection with others that's subterranean, like the root system of grasses. The little ways that we bow, all those things that we do the same way cultivates this connection. However, much of the time, our practice in zazen, in Zen, is a very solitary thing. No one else can do it for us, it's something we have to find out on our own. I have learned from being in the student position that no matter how clearly anyone explained it to me, it was like fuzzy distant sounds that didn't quite resolve, and I had to work my way through and figure it out for myself. Part of me thought this was because I'm just kind of different from other people, but I've found out that this

is actually true for everybody. I can explain it as clearly as I can, and people look at me like, huh? What it comes right down to is that people have to work it through with their own body, and experience it with their own mind.

This paradox of sangha practice is yet another manifestation of the great paradox, of which all others are expressions: the paradox between difference and sameness, which is the subject of our first chant in morning service. This is called the harmony of difference and sameness, or we can also call it the relationship between the one and the many. My teacher used to say that to see that all is one *and* all is different, at the same time, is to be enlightened. Understanding that paradox and breaking through it is what our practice is all about.

One of the big issues for Americans is the paradox between our individuality and our collective nature - the paradox between that which we do alone, and that which we rely on others for. Connection versus individuality. There's a very solitary component in this practice, but the other part is that although we do it by ourselves, it finds completion in connection, through community and relationship. We don't really understand it all except in connection with others. I've come to understand that there is no way to do this by yourself. Even if we are in isolation, even if we decide to be a hermit and live on top of a mountain, that's in connection. "Hermit" is an expression of our relationship to everybody else. There is no such thing as complete isolation or independence. It does not exist. We are always in community in some way, so be conscious about it and make good use of it.

Buddha and dharma, those two treasures, find their completion in sangha, or to put it another way, there is no buddha and dharma without sangha. Sangha is the key. There's a saying that without sentient beings, there are no buddhas. Without buddhas there are no sentient beings. This is true because they are in relationship. It may sound true on kind of an abstract level, but what I'm saying is that it's very tangible, and this is what our own personal experience is about. Right here, right now, this is true.

One of the vows of the bodhisattva Samantabhadra is to rejoice in the happiness of others, which is a wonderful, wonderful vow, an expression of something deeply important. This is not just about

rejoicing in the happiness of others, but in the *awakening* of others, to rejoice in the dharma experience of others. When I went into the monastery, I went in thinking, “Well, I just want to get some zazen instruction and I don’t really care what anyone else is doing.” That was true for about six months. Then this whole thing around comparison and rank came up. When we see others progress and receive recognition and go forward in rank, eventually what it does is raise comparing mind and jealousy. We have to go through that phase, there’s no way around it, but when we’re at this long enough we really see how irrelevant it all is. In the monastery it took me time to learn to just have my own experience and not resent anybody else’s, but eventually I realized that people awaken in ways that I cannot do – and in fact I don’t *want* to do it their way. But I don’t have to resent their way or their progress or anything. When I simply do my own training and have no opposition to others, the way they awaken and the way they practice suddenly becomes part of my own experience.

This principle was illustrated clearly to me when, still at the monastery, I encountered a person in sanzen I could just not understand at all. However, I had an idea about who would be the right person for that woman to talk to. Later I asked the person I suggested she see, and they said, “Oh yeah, we hit it off, I understood her perfectly.” I thought, “Wow. I’m glad you were there, because it made no sense to me!” The very next time I was on call for sanzen, a person came in and asked me some questions and I could see exactly what was going on. We had a good conversation, and he told me, “You must be a really accomplished person. I’ve asked this question all over the place and you’re the only one who’s been able to answer it.” I thought to myself, “Well, you should have been here last week!” What we come to understand is that collectively there is great wisdom - we only can possess a certain part of it. Still, I had gained the wisdom to know who to send that person to the week before by having access to this other woman in the monastery - her experience, I could see, was a match. So it was *my* experience too.

There’s a phrase in the sutras and some of the Zen writings, particularly by Dogen: *annuttara samyak sambodhi*. It is sanskrit and means “unsurpassed, complete, perfect enlightenment.” Enlightenment’s a pretty big word, and then you put these three

superlatives on it! Unsurpassed is the highest, complete is the widest, and perfect is without blemish; it's a way of saying buddhahood. I've come to understand that annuttara samyak sambodhi is not an experience of awakening - it's not a moment of realization, and it's not obtained. Rather, it is non-opposition to the joy, enlightenment, skillful means and awakening of all *being* throughout space and time. It's not something we can possess, but it's something we can have access to.

There's a phrase in the parinirvana sutra which became really important in many schools of Buddhism, which says all beings have buddha-nature. There's a whole set of buddha-nature teachings, and a school of Buddhism built around them. This teaching was fundamental to Mahayana Buddhism. Then the Japanese Zen master Dogen got hold of the phrase, and he had a way of playing with words and language. The meaning of the Chinese characters in the phrase are very clear, but when Dogen translated it he changed the characters around so that it's pronounced exactly the same way but says *all being is buddha-nature*. All being: this universe, the sky, rocks, tables and human beings. Annuttara samyak sambodhi is great, big, awakened, universal mind. It is not something we can attain, but we can start to connect with it and touch it by simply letting it in. That's what I'm talking about as sangha as karma relationship, as a practice, a way into annuttara samyak sambodhi.

[1] - The pervasive and sometimes subtle dissatisfactoriness of life.

(From a Dharma Talk given 4/18/99)

Teacher and Student

Sallie Jiko Tisdale

(This is the transcript of a Dharma talk given by Sallie Jiko Tisdale in November, 1997, shortly after her transmission ceremony and the beginning of her move into the role of lay teacher.)

I want to make the point that I am always going to be sitting in the student's seat – that's what being a teacher really looks like to me now. Learning how to sit in the student's seat is how I learned to sit in *this* seat. It was a long, hard road, and I didn't find it that simple. But our whole lives are like this; our practice is always about switching places. We are a parent one moment and a child the next, a boss one moment and an employee the next. Here, we are always being junior, senior, then junior again. Learning to flow through those changes is key to a maturing practice.

We talk a lot about the teacher-student relationship. This relationship is central in our tradition and central in my practice. Years ago, I heard the saying that the teacher arises when the student steps forward, and I puzzled over that. I looked and I saw a teacher, but I didn't know how to step forward. For a long time, I struggled with how to get this teacher to come to *me*, before I figured out that it didn't happen that way. *I* had to step forward, because student and teacher make each other. This is a lot like question and answer – there's no question without an answer; no answer without a question. There is no student without a teacher; no teacher without a student. This is why we say that you and your teacher are “not-two.” Not one – but not two.

This is true in all our relationships, with all the many objects and people who teach us, as well as in the particular relationship of teacher and student. It's always crucial that the student move forward, and a lot of what the teacher does is watch this process – this stepping forward. For me, it was a process of moving forward and stepping back, stepping sideways and moving forward. My teacher watched and sometimes guided and made suggestions. Sometimes I found his guidance put me on a rocky and painful path, and I didn't understand what kind of teacher would do that to me. I

didn't understand then that teachers are still moving forward, too, and walking paths that are sometimes painful ones, and know from experience some of the rocks along the way.

Kyogen is my teacher, but only to the extent that I step forward as his student, and invite him to be so. Taking responsibility for my own mess is a big part of it. I don't know how many times I went into *sanzen* in a glib way, because I had a cool question. That's such a waste of time, of course. I always knew better and he always knew better. Until you go to the teacher and speak honestly, Zen is not a very painful practice. But honesty can be painful and it takes courage. I invite Kyogen to be my teacher by my behavior, by my deportment, but also by raising my own questions, by holding what is called the "doubt mass," and being able to come forward willingly with whatever I am holding, whether I think it is attractive or not.

Human teachers are an example of what is called the flawed vessel, like a nice big bowl with a few cracks. How can such an imperfect vessel hold the perfect Dharma? But this leaking bowl is the only bowl we've got. It can still hold water, but there's a long phase of disappointment about these cracks. We're unhappy and we may keep looking for perfect bowls elsewhere. There just aren't any around! All human vessels are flawed vessels. Eventually, miraculously, the flaws become beautiful additions to the unique and precious bowl we do have.

Then it can be a great relief to realize that you don't have to follow a perfect example. Your guide is an ordinary human being making mistakes, and we can learn by watching each other make mistakes, by seeing someone get up when he falls down. We can see the perfection that is in all of us manifest itself in a human being's actions, and this is greatly reassuring. But there's another way to see it, and that is to see that a cracked vessel isn't flawed at all. We delude ourselves by thinking we know what perfection looks like – and it's always elsewhere. Katagiri says, talking about our birth and death, that "the china bowl is beautiful because it will break."

I prepared for this shift in my practice for quite some time, and part of that for me was to read a lot of Dogen. I want to read a quote from *Raihai-tokuzui*, which can be translated several ways: "paying homage and acquiring the essence," "making a prostration and

attaining the marrow,” or “honoring that which has got the Truth.” This means to recognize the Truth wherever it appears, but I like the word “attaining” because that is our delusion. We have to ask: What is there to attain? What is doing this attaining? What is it that’s “got” the Truth? We may practice for many years with the belief that something out there has the Truth, and somewhere there is a method or person that will give it to us.

Raihai-tokuzui simply means to be *student*, completely, ready to move forward instantly to meet this teacher arising *everywhere* – because what has “got the Truth” is everywhere, and moving forward without hesitation is the only way we can meet it. Dogen wrote:

“The teacher is neither a young person nor an old person, and even if the teacher is the apparition of a wild fox he will be a good teacher... He may be ‘you,’ ‘me,’ or ‘him’ for the true teacher is completely empty... That is to say, if the mind treasures the Dharma, then one’s helper may be a pillar, a lantern, all the Buddhas, a fox, a demon, male or female... Therefore, you should entreat trees and rocks to preach the Dharma, and you should ask rice fields and gardens for the truth. Ask pillars for the Dharma, and learn from hedges and walls.”

At the same time, if we really enter into this method, we must come face to face with another human being. Hedges and walls are great teachers up to a point, but we can turn away from people in turning towards hedges and walls. We also have to turn back towards people. Kyogen tells a story about a salesman who walks down a block and knocks on every door, and every door is slammed in his face. When he gets to the end of the block, he says, “I’ll try again.” So he goes down the block again. We all do that, trying the same thing over and over. I had to get thoroughly sick of where I was, so sick that I *had* to try going down another block. I love to give this next quote to people, because when it was given to me, I really needed to hear it and didn’t want to hear it: “The Way is found by doing that which is hardest to do and bearing that which is hardest to bear.” You are the only one who knows what that is.

I once had so many ideas of what a teacher-student relationship was like, and I had to let go of those ideas and learn to meet the Dharma just as it appears – naked, and not knowing. Until then, a lot of my relationship with Kyogen consisted of him sitting there watching me race around, afraid of his disapproval, trying to be a

good little student. I wanted him to give me happiness, peace, truth, knowledge – everything. “Make it right.” “Fix me.” Then it just became, “Tell me what you want me to do.” He told me at one point that there is a place where neither approval or disapproval can slow you in your progress. Nothing can throw you off the path; everything spurs you forward towards the challenge. You stop turning away from disapproval, and just say, “Oh,” and wonder, “What does this mean and what is this about?”

A teacher-student relationship that just provides approval and reassurance would be a pretty stagnant one, and full of pitfalls. Yes, we are perfect just as we are, but it doesn't do us much good to be told only that – then we think we don't really have any practice to do and can just go home. A key image in Buddhism is that of planting seeds in the dark soil. A lot of the witnessing a good teacher does is just that – patiently watching those shoots come up.

This morning I had an image of walking along the beach and coming upon a strange artifact that was unlike anything I'd ever seen before. Imagine an alien artifact of a strange substance, with a shape and a design that is completely unknown to you. How do you pick that object up? There is an attitude we call “don't-know mind” – curious, without preconceived notions. Confronted with this alien artifact, preconceived notions don't work. This fresh, matter-of-fact, not-knowing can come forward in every moment. In every relationship, every conversation. It totally transforms the experience of conflict to bring forward this mind and say, “I have no idea what this person is talking about. I have no idea what this language is. What do these words mean to this person? I want to understand.” You can bring not-knowing to every moment of your life. It's not easy – in fact, it's very difficult. It might happen one second a month, but it's a great second.

Buddhism is really about freedom. There really nothing more to this freedom than this flow, this moving moment to moment without hesitation or resistance – instantaneous, completely present. In a sense, this is freedom from your karma because it is the freedom not to be driven by your karma. It is the freedom to embrace your karma,

dance with it. This is the freedom not to be elsewhere, not to live in opposition to reality.

Part of the preparation for my ceremony has been sewing, and I *love* sewing (laughing). Small motor skills are not my strong point. I was sewing between soccer practices and telephone calls, during conversations, through work deadlines. Sometimes I was sewing what seemed like three stitches at a time before having to move on to something else. This gave me a chance to think about lay practice. What does sewing practice mean when you can only stay at the sewing machine for ten minutes at a time?

I realized midway through the first kesa I made that the seams were about as straight as anything else I have ever done in my practice. I found myself thinking, midway through the second kesa, “Well, I hope nobody gets too close, because I don’t want anybody to look at these seams.” One thing this transmission means, to me and the sangha, is that I am now inviting you to look closely at my seams, even though I know how crooked they are.

I was surprised to discover an upwelling of sadness, of loss. This is an opening, but it’s also a closing. We counsel, “no dwelling place.” This doesn’t mean there’s no rest; I have found ease and rest in myself, where I least expected it. “No dwelling place” means that whenever we get comfortable, we have to move forward. After many years of struggle, resistance and confusion about what it meant to be a lay disciple, I’d become happy in those robes and in that relationship. I learned to become a disciple by learning about bowing, about not-knowing, about being willing. But that comfortable place is dangerous, and usually something comes along and pushes you forward.

“Transmission” is a tricky word. Nothing is given and nothing is received – it is more a matter of identification with or a recognition of each other’s essence, and it must happen, in Dogen’s words, “face to face and eye to eye.” This is important to me personally, but it also feels like nothing special. We say, “the golden bell rings but once.” When the bell rings, the sound of the bell goes out and out and out

into the world, never stopping. We stop hearing it, but those waves go out and out and we're surrounded by them always.

A couple of years ago, Kyogen told me that I had become transparent to him. By then, I'd known him for fifteen years and been his disciple for nine years, but my first reaction was, "I don't *like* being transparent to you." It took a lot of work to put this armor on and gather these shields around myself, and here's this person saying he can see right through it! I asked him, "Well, what do you see?" He said, "I see you." This did not satisfy me at all, and was a mystery for a time. Gradually, I came to see that when a person is transparent to you, what you see when you look through him or her is absolutely nothing. Our true nature is as clear and flowing as water. There are obscurations in the water, there is pain in there, and strange little behaviors, but really, it's all just clear and flowing. When you see all the way through, the only possible reaction is love, because we naturally love that clear, flowing nature.

Kyogen has been really kind to me – I can't tell you how kind. For a long time, I shoved my pain at him and he just held it. Sometimes he gave me his full attention at a moment's notice, but he was also kind enough *not* to give me attention every time I asked for it. He was kind enough not to say what I wanted to hear, kind enough to sometimes say exactly what I didn't want to hear. He was kind enough not to give me what I thought I wanted. Most of all, he was kind enough to sit nearby and let me sew the kesa of my own understanding all these years.

The tenth precept is, "Do not defame the Three Treasures." Part of the commentary we use says, "In the realm of the One, holding no concept of ordinary beings and sages is the Precept of Not Defaming the Three Treasures. To do something by ourselves, without copying others, is to become an example to the world." Kyogen showed me what it was like to not copy another's practice or understanding, and it is probably the greatest gift he has given me.

Here, in front of us, is a teacher. If we confront another human being very clearly for awhile, out of this human being a Buddha steps forward. We look at this other person, and we still see their habits, their personality, their limitations and little quirks – but out of this humanity, their Absolute nature steps forward. One day, I looked at

Kyogen and saw a Buddha step forward, and lo and behold, he was holding up this brightly polished mirror. When I looked in that mirror, I saw my habits and personality, my limitations and quirks, all that I had projected on him and everything around me, all that had arisen in my life, reflected back. But not that long ago, I stepped forward as a student in a new way, a more complete way, and our relationship was no longer about that or my arguments. Then, I was looking at and enjoying the Buddha in him, and a human being stepped forward. And that human being held up a mirror, and in it I could see a Buddha. When I looked more closely, I could see reflected back every human being with me.

Dogen's koan was exactly that: If we have this perfect Buddha nature, why do we need to practice? His answer came with the understanding that we are always awakening, awakening, awakening. We may be "sleepy, stupid Buddhas," but we *are* Buddhas. Still, every moment is brand new and requires our complete practice, but fortunately, that's what Buddhas do. The sun is shining behind the clouds, but that's so easy to forget. Sometimes I see myself standing in a beautiful field on a sunny day, and there's one little, tiny cloud in the sky and I'm standing under it. If I can take just one step to the side, the shadow dissolves. A lot of my own struggle had to do with fear, and part of the fear was that if I didn't work so hard, if I stopped struggling, I would die. My way through that struggle was partly about accepting this moment-to-moment awakening. Going on. Right now, I'm enjoying a time when I sense how clear and simple our relationships really are. They're clear skies, and what we mostly do with them is make clouds. We make big gray clouds and little white clouds, but they're all clouds in a clear sky. Even in the clouds, I try to remember that the sky is always clear.

A Person of Practice: Carrying Out and Learning from the “Forms”

Gyokuko Carlson

What is a “person of practice?” How do you become a person of practice?

A “person of practice” carries out the forms of practice with their body naturally and smoothly, paying attention without drawing attention, without appearing to do anything special, while letting the deeper dharma of the forms inform them.

We have many “forms” of practice. Paying attention to how you leave your shoes is one of them. When I came in the doors this morning, I passed thirty pairs of shoes. Almost every pair was put side by side in straight rows, and I could walk down the hall and not trip over anything. It did my heart good to see thirty pairs of shoes straight.

The complexity of practice forms goes all the way from there up to learning to do oryoki meals, which involve elaborate ritual. One of the parts of oryoki meals I really love is right at the end, when you’ve finished your meal, cleaned up your bowls, and everything is done. You then bow to your bowls, put your hand over the top, put one-half of the napkin through your fingers this way and the other half through your fingers that way, pull, and your bowls are tied in a neat little package. It feels *finished*. The body tells you, “Ha. It’s finished.” It’s very satisfying. It’s not just the food that is satisfying; the physical movements that go with the eating are satisfying.

When we encounter forms, we may complain, saying, “Why?” Or, “Why this way? I prefer it another way. I don’t like to pay attention to how I put my shoes straight. I don’t care how I put my shoes.” And in a sense none of it matters. Absolutely none of it matters. But, on the other side of the ledger, everything matters. Every teensy little dust mote matters. The joyful part is when you put your attention into the little things that matter, resting your heart in knowing it doesn’t matter, but still putting your attention into the little things. You discover along the way there is something these

little things have to teach you. The forms of practice are dharma teachers.

Another example of a form of practice is making gassho. There are pages and pages of writings about making gassho. About how this finger represents something and this other finger represents something, and when I put this finger with this other finger it means something, until I get my fingers just exactly so and there's no gap between them and this means some metaphysical ya da ya da. It's just a concept. Until one day when you're grumbling and griping about some person or some thing that you feel isn't right, it's too much work, but out of habit you bring your hands together and the heart goes calm. That's metaphysical. That's not a concept. That's the body learning the dharma, or teaching, of gassho. The forms are not magic. They don't do all the work for you. But the mind will follow if you can get the body in line.

You come closer to the real truth in the Dharma when you discover it with your body, when you discover it with your experience, than when you discover it as a concept. I can tell you that there is a teaching in putting your shoes straight. I can tell you that it has to do with harmony, and it has to do with integration with the universe. I can tell you things like that, but it remains just a concept for you until you go through the process day after day of putting your shoes straight because the Chief Junior tells you to and she's going to nag you if they're askew. Then one day you put your shoes straight and you feel something about straightening your shoes that teaches you the dharma of putting your shoes straight. It's not a concept any more, it's something you know in your bones. You may not even be able to explain it to your head. You probably don't have the words for it, but you know in your bones there is a good reason why you want to do it this way.

The dharma that is contained in the forms of practice goes to a place where the particulars of this form versus that form don't matter. The forms that we practice with in this temple are going to be different than the forms used elsewhere. They are going to be different wherever you go. But when you learn the dharma of the forms with your body, you can go to another place and practice with

different forms and still be seen as a person of practice because the dharma goes deep.

You can't let the head lead in this business. When I was first learning this Zen business, I found chanting the ancestral line extremely boring, repetitive and stupid. Practicing with it over the years, I discovered that it is not cold, distant or repetitive. The ancestors are personalities, and while they aren't always with me when I chant those names, sometimes I do feel their presence *because* of the chanting. There have been times I felt like the ancestors reached out and saved me from my own despair. That, for me, was the teaching of the ancestral line. I wouldn't have decided to do that practice ahead of time, on my own, but it was part of the forms of practice. I did it because I wanted to go where this train was headed, and I didn't realize beforehand that this form would be a significant part of the means for me.

If you try to decide ahead of time which of these forms is going to be your dharma teacher, you're not going to make it off the train platform. You have to put your body into the position of *zazen* before the *zazen* can start to teach you about equanimity, about peace, about quieting the mind, and about the other thousand-and-one teachings that exist in the position of doing *zazen*. The same is true with putting your shoes straight, closing a door using both hands, picking up a cup with two hands, cleaning every grain of oatmeal out of a breakfast bowl, and other silly little forms of practice. When you do them and pay attention, there's tremendous depth of teaching, but it almost never starts with your head. Later on you figure out, "Oh, I got something back there."

So the first stage of becoming a person of practice is to *appear* to be a person of practice, to work on the external. Learn the forms so you can do them automatically. They eventually come naturally and smoothly, and stop appearing to be something special. In fact, just moving along with the flow of practice is one of the forms of practice. Not standing out, going with.

However, it's more than just doing it with the body. If a robot does these forms of practice, it is not going to get it. To really be a person of practice, you have to let the dharma that is in the forms inform you, and to do that you also have to keep the mind engaged.

Keep the mind engaged so that it just notices, just notices, over and over again. Let go of the part of the mind that is trying to edit, trying to compromise and weasel out of doing the forms completely, but you should notice even that. Pay attention to resistance and try not to club yourself over the head with the fact that there is resistance. I know sometimes it can be extreme. Just keep coming back, being gentle with yourself. There's also teaching in the resistance, so you don't want to dismiss it too quickly. However, you also don't want it to rule your life, so just pay attention and try to keep the form. If the form activates a resistance, then there may be opposite sides of the same teaching happening.

If practice starts to get totally robotic and monotonous and you find yourself going elsewhere, taking trips while you're doing the forms, try to come back. It's just zazen. Keep coming back to, "What is my hand doing? What is my mouth doing? What are my ears doing? How much noise do I make when I go down for a bow? How smoothly can I get up?" Keep paying attention to all the little nuances of it. The dharma of it will come through, and you will become a person of practice.

Q: I think that between the resistance and just doing the forms, there's a point of practice where one can embellish the forms. "I'm going to do this great bow! I'm going to put my shoes perfectly straight because I know that's the way they should be."

A: You are pointing to the transition between just doing the forms externally to taking them deeper. The way it feels during this transition is that you are simply going into it wholeheartedly. What you may realize after the fact is that the doing was a lot for show. There is a point where we really want to be seen as doing everything perfectly grandly. We're so *spiritual*. Really, it's just feeding ego and feeding self. It's fine. It's a stage. If you just keep training and don't get stuck there, you go a place beneath which is a lot gentler. Paying attention without drawing attention.

Q: I'm always struck by the resistance that following forms brings in the world around me. At home, raising my kids in a somewhat unmindful sort of way, if I start changing my expectation for myself, I might get a response like, "You've changed. Now you're doing

this.” Resentments and tensions arise just because I’m trying to pay attention to what I’m doing.

A: One thing that is really useful is to disconnect your interpretation reflex and go back to just noticing. When you make this statement, you get this reaction. When you do this activity, this happens. Don’t be too quick to judge why others are reacting. Just notice. There may be more to your action than you’re acknowledging, and you might be able to clarify your intention. You may find that you can just ask for a *certain* amount of space or a *certain* circumstance, without asking for approval or looking to fulfill some other little other agenda item that got tacked on there when you weren’t looking.

Q: Some of the things that you’ve mentioned seem, at first glance, pretty picky – like straightening shoes. Any suggestions to how a person can help a child to pay attention to the little things without coming off as a total jerk?

A: A child has a personality all unto herself. You may notice that she does pay attention to the details, and your challenge is not to get her to pay attention, but to channel the attention she is paying. You can reward her when her attention-paying has positive aspects, and when she gets crabby and nitpicky, try to talk her down to a more generous attitude.

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The Basic Elements of Zen Practice

Teachings from Dharma Rain Zen Center

Dharma Rain Zen Center is a Soto Zen temple located in Portland, Oregon, that emphasizes lay practice. The Center is thought of as a monastery without walls. The members come to the Center for practice in much the same way that monks gather at the meditation hall in a monastery. Members are encouraged to find ways to integrate practice into their own lives. Rather than adding Zen to already crowded, busy schedules, they learn to see their daily lives as an opportunity for Zen practice.

Originally founded as an affiliate of Mt. Shasta Abbey in California, the temple came under the guidance of Kyogen and Gyokuko Carlson, ordained Zen Buddhist priests, in 1982. In 1986 Dharma Rain Zen Center became an independent organization.

The teachings in this book come from Kyogen and Gyokuko Carlson and two of their students who are transmitted Zen teachers.