



The Oak Tree in the Garden

Journal of the Hidden Valley Zen Center

“For the last week to ten days he’s been going downhill fast; the cancer has returned and his liver is filled with it. He can’t even keep yogurt down so it’s in his GI system as well. He has only days to live.”

The call came from my sister. It was completely unexpected. Our brother had had two rounds of chemo pre-surgery then four rounds post-surgery. When they checked some lymph nodes during the surgery they found only dead cancer cells. How could it have come back so quickly and so intensely that suddenly he was so near death? *“More chemo is not an option,”* he answered the colleague who suggested Sloan-Kettering. Being a doctor he could read clearly the handwriting on the wall: More chemo would only bring more suffering and in the end be of no use. *“I’ve had a good life; I have no regrets”*—and he was clear and open about it. We discussed it, my sister and I: That he is so clear and accepting of his imminent death is a source of peace to the rest of us. Still, there have been tears...

Helen Keller said,

Although the world is full of suffering, it is full also of the overcoming of it.

The Buddhist poet Kobayashi Issa wrote this haiku upon the death of his infant daughter. He had already lost an infant son to death:

*This dewdrop world --
Is a dewdrop world,
And yet, and yet . . .*



A Brand New Year!

At the end of the old year it is a common practice in some countries to put everything in order, pay all bills, and get ready to make a fresh start in the new year. With this brand new year comes the chance for a brand new beginning, and traditionally we are inspired to make New Year’s Resolutions.

It is the darkest time of the year, and with that darkness comes a natural urge to turn inward. What is life all about? What are we here for? Moving in concert with this natural urge toward introspection, we can deepen our practice immensely and there are profound benefits not only to us but to all beings.

So take full advantage of it! Why, really are we here? What, really, is life all about? Who, really, are we? Bring all those questions in wordless search through the extension of the outbreath! If you persist, as the great Zen Master Hakuin said, you cannot fail to find It!

Of course, along the way you’ll open to things you’d rather not see, but how else can you become free of whatever is hidden in your subconscious mind yet still driving your reactions? But as someone wisely said upon experiencing a kensho:

This practice is truly bodhisattvic! First it shows us where we’re caught—and then it sets us free!

...If we’re willing to do the work!

Beyond all that, what is this “And yet..” that the

poet Issa spoke of? What is this “It” that is referred to in the scroll in the dining hall at HVZC which reads: “Though the Eight Winds may blow, It is not disturbed.” The Eight Winds are the challenging situations we experience. Traditionally they are listed as prosperity, decline, disgrace, honour, praise, censure, suffering and pleasure. In the writings of Nichiren Daishonin, founder of Nichiren Buddhism, they are referred to as follows:

Worthy persons deserve to be called so because they are not carried away by the eight winds: prosperity, decline, disgrace, honour, praise, censure, suffering and pleasure. They are neither elated by prosperity nor grieved by decline.

This does not mean that we don’t have feelings! When in the midst of these challenges, feelings arise; we are not caught by them but are, right in the midst of them, free from them. An ancient teaching by Longchenpa, a Tibetan Buddhist master, tells us how to work with such challenging feelings:

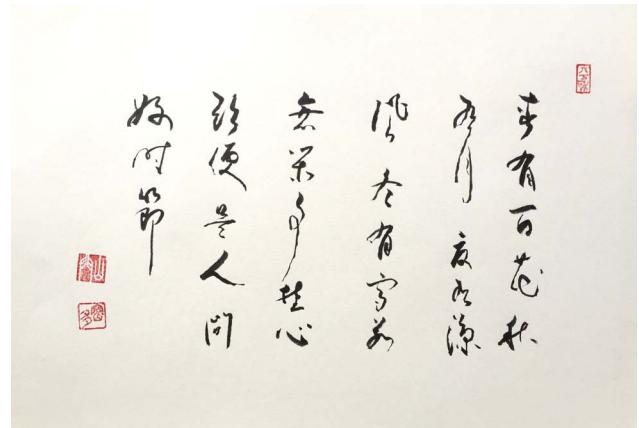
“Though attachment, aversion, dullness, pride, and envy may arise, fully understand their inner energy; recognize them in the very first moment, before karma has been accumulated. In the second moment look nakedly at this state and relax in its presence. Then whichever of the five passions [lust, anger, stupidity, arrogance, and jealousy] arise becomes a pure presence, freed in its own place, without being eliminated. It emerges as the pristine awareness that is pure, pleasurable, and not conditioned by thought.”

—from **You Are the Eyes of the World**,
a translation of a profound teaching
written by the 14th century Tibetan Buddhist
master Longchenpa

We could add a few more emotions to that list: grief, frustration, boredom, irritation, self-pity... Following Longchenpa’s teaching is far more

easily done when we do regular, ongoing, committed zazen! As the New Year dawns there is renewed energy, soon it will be Spring! Give yourself so completely to that practice that when Spring arrives, it will truly be a season beyond all measure!

*Hundreds of flowers in Spring,
The moon in Autumn,
A cool breeze in Summer,
Snow in Winter—
But when the mind is unburdened by
things, that is the best season!*



Practice in the Midst of Activity

Zen master Hakuin is famous for saying, “Zazen in the midst of activity is worth 10,000 times that of seated zazen.” So how do we really go about it? (It’s not by no longer sitting!)

“Mindfulness” is a ready catch phrase these days; it seems that everywhere we look it’s being extolled as the solution to PTSD, to physical ailments, to a dead-feeling life. Recently Anderson Cooper did a **60 Minutes** special on Jon Kabat-Zinn’s mindfulness teaching and his own experience with that practice following his introduction to meditation when he attended a Kabat-Zinn meditation retreat. He was impressed.

But what, really, does it mean to be “mindful”? We’re exhorted to pay attention, and we usually feel like we do so—at least most (much?) of the time. But are we really being mindful, are we

really paying the kind of attention we're capable of? Are we really able to set aside the computer and the smart phone and the iPad and TRULY pay attention? There are some pretty funny videos of people walking off docks into the water or doing other such distracted things while absorbed in their texting or their telephone calls. But even if we're not on the phone or texting, even if we're just having a conversation with someone are we paying attention? Or are we—as they're talking—going over the response that we'll make or the story we'll tell or the concern we have?

As we move about in our day, "paying attention" means to be utterly, completely aware of all the nuances of our moment-by-moment experience: the sensations in our body as we walk or sit or stand—or are in conversation with someone; the thoughts that flit in and out of our heads; the quality of the air we are in the midst of; the gross and subtle sounds around us. When in conversation with someone are we truly, deeply aware of their energy, of their movement, of what they are saying—both overtly and covertly? Or are we multi-tasking, walking upstairs to make the beds in the morning and forgetting what we went up there for, lost in thoughts of various concerns of the past, present and future?

We can truly advance our practice-in-action—and on the cushion as well, as a result—by working toward paying this level of absolute attention to our moment-by-moment experience. When we can do so, our days are filled with a richness no matter what happens, even if it is difficult or painful.

A byproduct of our lack of attention to the moment at hand is our ruminating mind. Do we drag along concerns that may have nothing to do with that particular moment? If we do, we're unwittingly adding stress to our lives, and unnecessarily so. If the concern we're caught up in is not something that can be solved or dealt with in that moment—whether it be writing down a solution to be acted on later or whether there is simply not anything we CAN do at that moment—then we are doing so and it is tiring us

out carrying that heavy concern. Letting it go gives us space to enjoy the moment just as it is without the extra baggage, the extra weight, and allows us to go through the day with greater energy and a more positive mind state.

And then there are the yada-yada thoughts—fragments of speech, bits of music, etc., that seem to stream endlessly through our mind. When treated as background noise—we're aware that they're happening but we have more important things to focus on—it can make a big difference. We don't need to get rid of them. On the other hand, when we're REALLY paying attention to something, they seem to disappear, don't they!

These are very simple things, so simple we don't normally pay much attention to them. But if we choose to take these ways of enhancing our awareness, our mindfulness, into our day-to-day living—into our practice!—we'll be the richer for it—and our practice will significantly benefit!



AT THE HEART of Zen practice there is a kind of radically intimate attention. This absolutely firsthand quality of experience characterizes the beginning of our lives and, if we are not drugged, the end. No "other" mediates between us and the intimate aloneness of birth. No memories, no thoughts, no plans invade this pure innerness with their shadowing images. So, too, in the spare simplicity of our deaths.

—Flora Courtois, in **The Door to Infinity**, published in **Parabola**, Vol. 15 No.2 Summer.1990, Pp.17-19



I feel when I have sat in the morning that I can face the day much better. It makes a world of difference in how the day unfolds.

—Louise Junjou Duguid, in a Term Intensive update

Important Advice from the Masters

Most Zen Students today are able to reach a state of serenity in which their minds and bodies are no longer troubled by afflicting passions, and their attachment to past and future is cut away so that each moment contains all time. There they stop and abide contently like censors lying useless and forgotten in an ancient cemetery, cold and lifeless with nothing to break the silence but the sobbing of the dead spirits. Assuming this to be the ultimate Zen has to offer them, they are unaware that what they consider an unsurpassed realm is in fact obstructing their true self so that true knowing and seeing cannot appear and the radiant light of extraordinary spiritual power (jinzu) cannot shine free.

—The Essential Teachings
of Zen Master Hakuin

Hakuin—the eighteenth-century Japanese Zen master who singlehandedly brought about a regeneration and resurgence of Rinzai Zen, was not a man to mince words when it came to “the cave of dead sitting” and other deadend backwaters he heard were being espoused as true Zen practice in the Japan of his time. The lure of that “dead sitting” continues today, despite his warnings, however. How many times have we heard someone report with rapture the mind state described in Hakuin’s quote above! Anyone seeking true enlightenment needs to be aware becoming bewitched by such a mind state, which some in their delusion even take to be enlightenment.

What does true practice demand?

In order to conquer the high ground of the uncreated nature of mind, we must go to the source and recognize the origin of our thoughts. Otherwise, one thought gives rise to a second thought, the second thought to a third, and so on forever. We are constantly assailed by memories of the past and carried away

by expectations for the future, and lose all awareness of the present.

It is our own mind that leads us astray into the cycle of existences. Blind to the mind’s true nature, we hold fast to our thoughts...

—Dilgo Khentse Rinpoche, quoted in
Shambhala Sun, Jan 09 issue

As we go about our practice, we move through a plethora of thoughts and a variety of mind states, especially in the earlier years of our practice. Some of these thoughts and mind states are quite beguiling and can lead us astray, as expressed in that quote of Hakuin’s. Others can cause us to shrink back from full presence with our practice, yet full presence within our zazen is absolutely essential to come to awakening. The second article in this issue of *The Oak Tree* speaks to that.

What also can come up are memories of the past, replete with emotions, dreams of the future (ditto), and sudden clarity into our heretofore subconscious and pain-producing behavior, complete with remorse, embarrassment, and at first a resistance to acknowledging it. Fears, thoughts, and all manner of other distractions abound as well. If it’s buried in there, sooner or later the light of zazen’s power to clarify the mind allows it to rise into consciousness. Unfortunately, it’s easy to get discouraged at that point, and some people go so far as to leave practice altogether as a result. Hakuin himself briefly left practice when he heard that the famous Chinese Zen master Ganto had screamed when he was murdered, and came to the conclusion that his Zen practice wouldn’t save him from hell after all. Fortunately for us, he realized he’d be no success as a calligrapher so he might as well go back to being a Zen monk and doing Zen practice.

But it can indeed be a discouraging time. So can practicing and practicing and going to sesshin after sesshin and still not getting passed on our breakthrough koan. It’s important to realize that, as a Dharma brother who had shortly before experienced a kensho point-

ed out to me when I expressed to him exactly that discouragement, “Don’t worry, it’s all cumulative.” At the time, I didn’t realize what he meant, but experience taught me that the work that is being done—despite our assumption that not getting passed on our koan really means we’re NOT working—is actually vital preparatory work for making the kensho, when it does arrive, “stick” and become part of our life. When a person has kensho too soon, that important work has not been done. Among other things, it can throw a person off balance to a point where they will essentially waste the insight because they haven’t had time to build the ground to support it on. There’s a certain practice maturity that is crucial to being able to use kensho and integrate it with everyday life.

Going through whatever our karma brings forth in the midst of our practice is important work; to practice radical acceptance whatever mind state comes up, as was also expressed in that second article, is how to work with whatever it is. Of course it also needs to be said that if, for example, memories of abuse or trauma arise, it can help to work through it with a qualified and skilled therapist, preferably one who does Zen or Vipassana or Tibetan Buddhist practice themselves. Short of that level of intensity, however, it’s usually possible to process whatever mind state that comes up through practicing that radical acceptance. It’s amazing how powerful it is to allow oneself to truly pay attention. Radical acceptance is truly paying attention, not trying to get rid of a mind state but accepting that whatever the mind state seems to be is the way it seems to be in that moment. And while it may seem that the mind state will be there eternally, particularly if it’s a difficult one, as they say in Colorado, “If you don’t like the weather, stick around for a minute; it will change.”

The more we try to fight, prevent, or hold at bay a difficult mind state or a thought, the stronger we are making it simply by dint of our intense engagement in trying to make it different. Practicing radical acceptance makes a difference. As a pair of psychologists has written:

Paradoxically, the more we try to change

ourselves, the more we prevent change from occurring. On the other hand, the more we allow ourselves to fully experience who we are, the greater the possibility of change.

—Healing Developmental Trauma:
How Early Trauma Affects Our Lives,
by Laurence Heller, Ph.D., and Aline Lapierre,
Psy.D., p. 31

Moreover, the more we practice that radical acceptance and discover its power, the more we realize how important and freeing it is to have those moments of clarity regarding our past not-so-swift behavior. If we can’t see it we can’t let it go!

Albert Camus wrote,

If there is a sin against life, it consists perhaps not so much in despairing of life as in hoping for another life and in eluding the implacable grandeur of this life

And then there’s fear:

“I wonder,” he wrote in the January/February 2013 issue of the [Psychotherapy] Networker, “whether anxiety might ultimately result from a kind of existential fear of the self—fear of who we are and how we really feel as human beings. Perhaps these phobias and fears serve the purpose of safely isolating us from uncontrollable urges, feelings, desires, and impulses that we dislike and that contradict our idealized notions of who we think we are or should be.”

—David Burns, Ph.D.

As we get closer to kensho, it’s quite common for fear to come up. One Zen student said about the sesshin in which she did have an insight strong enough to be passed on her breakthrough koan, that she actually thought she was dying. For some reason, though part of us wants very much to become free, another part of us, it seems, is afraid to go beyond the status

quo, to metaphorically sail out of sight of land. Yet for kensho to occur, we have to leave our comfortable assumptions about ourself, about life, about everything. This is why it is so important to dive into our practice with the greatest degree of commitment possible in any given moment, and truly give ourselves to that practice, to absorb ourselves so completely in that practice that “we” disappear.

We can do this reading a gripping novel or watching an engaging movie, so why not zazen? Any number of factors can come into play, but the biggest one perhaps is our resistance to seeing clearly. We all have an image of ourself, and even if it’s a negative one, we are quite invested in it. After all, if we’re not that, then who are we? Invisible seems the obvious possibility, and to be invisible, to disappear, seems a terrifying prospect.



“Change”

We would also rather not see any holes in our image, any black marks, any indications that we are anything but excellent models of humanity. And if we were not honored as children, if we’ve been ignored or abandoned, then being somebody is even more important, even if it’s being a negative somebody. The only way to let that go seems to be to somehow bravely “face the

music” and see it clearly, practice radical acceptance, and as Dilgo Khenyts Rinpoche says, search for the source of that view.

Engage that bravery and march steadfastly through the swamps and it makes an enormous difference in our life! At the risk of repeating yet again what you’ve heard so many times, still, as that Zen student decades ago said, “This practice is truly bodhisattvic: First it shows us where we’re caught—and then it sets us free!”

The living self has one purpose only: to come into its own fullness of being, as a tree comes into full blossom, or a bird into spring beauty, or a tiger into lustre.

—D.H.Lawrence



Mountain Gate’s Construction

As of the 18th of December, the site is almost ready for the pouring of the concrete slab that will become the floor of the kitchen and dining area and subfloor of the entry, office and handicap-accessible bathroom, which will have brick or tile on top of the slab. The pre-pour inspections for both slab reinforcing and plumbing heating have been accomplished and approval has been given to go ahead with the pour. Now it will depend upon the weather! Here’s a recent photograph of the site so you can see why. This time of year up in these northern New Mexico mountains, the weather can be unpredictable. And it IS winter, after all!





A few days earlier, this was the view. Here, the underslab preparation has been completed. You can see the pipes sticking up of the plumbing rough-in. In the photo below, the plumber and his helper are unrolling the heating piping that will be laid down on top of this. The heat in this part of the building, as in the existing building, will come from warm water in the floor, so that piping has to be put into place before the slab is poured.



When Mountain Gate's main building was built we only had enough money to build the zendo, a bathroom (not handicap-accessible), teacher's quarters (a room, closet, and small bath), two rooms for sesshin participants to sleep in, a hallway, and a closet. We were able, thanks to the generosity of the Rochester Zen Center in giving us a mortgage, purchase the property next door when it came up for sale. On it is a small house trailer with a built-on addition, and that has served as our kitchen, dining hall, Kannon Room, and more sleeping space. But

house trailers are not built to last, and this one is far past its wear life. It's "an accident waiting to happen" according to a local expert who's repaired parts of it several times. Thus this addition to our main building becomes urgent. We did without a kitchen and dining hall for many years, cooking in a shed without running water; the teacher's room doubled as the dining hall as well as the sanzen room. (These days teacher's quarters is still also the sanzen room as is traditional.)

The addition is important for many reasons. Besides allowing us more space for sesshin participants as well as for our women veterans who attend the Regaining Balance retreats, we are with it able to have a handicap-accessible bathroom. And especially important is the fact that since the building will involve adding a second storey to our existing building in addition to extending the building and there will be a pitched roof over the whole structure, it will eliminate the very bad roof leak that is threatening to do away with a section of the wall in the teacher's quarters. (You don't want to see those pictures...)

Donations to Mountain Gate are tax deductible, essential, and are most gratefully received!

NOTICE

The morning following a weekend sesshin is a "sleep in" morning, i.e., there is no morning sitting that day; there will, however, continue to be an evening sitting the day following a weekend sesshin.

As usual, the day following a longer sesshin—one of four, five, or seven days—will be a "free day," i.e., there will be neither morning nor evening sittings that day. It's a day off.

Please help! There are a number of members who wish to attend sesshin as well as daily sittings but suffer from chemical sensitivity. If we could all refrain from using perfume, aftershave, cologne, and scented lotions, soaps, and shampoos prior to sittings and in sesshin it can make a difference between our Sangha brothers and sisters joining us for sitting—or not.

January 6-13 7-Day Sesshin at Mountain Gate; applications due by January 1st.

January 26-February 1 5-Day Sesshin; *February 2nd is a Free Day with no formal sittings that day.* Roshi expects to be at HVZC Jan 25-Feb 3.

March 7-14 7-Day Sesshin at Turtleback Zendo; for info please contact seritas@comcast.net

March 20-25 5-Day Elder Sesshin at Mountain Gate; deadline for applications: March 14.

March 28-April 4 7-Day Sesshin at Mountain Gate; deadline for applications: March 19. This together with the Elder Sesshin is a pair of sesshins at Mountain Gate specifically planned to offer the chance to greatly deepen your practice by doing two sesshin in quick succession. It offers the possibility of greater deepening than to come to two sesshin spread further apart. This practice is done at Sogen-ji with the 8-day Rohatsu sesshin followed within just a few days by the “second December osesshin”—it’s remarkably easy and effective.

April 10-12 Vesak Ceremonies; Mitra-roshi expects to be at HVZC April 7-14. More details will be available closer to the time.

May 6-10 Regaining Balance Retreat for Women Veterans with PTSD, at Mountain Gate. These are not sesshin, but specialized retreats for women veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress. During these retreats women veterans are taught tools that they can use to help center themselves.

May 30 All Day Workshop on Rinzai Zen; see www.hvzc.org for more info & to download an application form. Members attend for free. Roshi expects to be at HVZC May 28-June 4.

June 12-14 Regaining Balance Retreat for Women Partners/Spouses of Veterans with PTSD, at Mountain Gate. Please see www.RegainingBalance.org for further information.

July 7-14 7-Day Sesshin at Mountain Gate; deadline for applications: July 1.

July 25-August 1 7-Day Sesshin; this is our only 7-day sesshin this year at HVZC. *August 2nd is a Free Day with no formal sittings that day,* since it’s the day following a longer sesshin. Roshi expects to be here July 23-August 2.

August 19-23 Regaining Balance Retreat for Women Veterans with PTSD, at Mountain Gate. These are not sesshin, but specialized retreats for women veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress.

September 25-27 2-Day Work Sesshin Mitra-roshi expects to be here September 22-29.

October 3-10 7-Day Sesshin at Mountain Gate Deadline for applications: Sept 20

October 30-November 1 2-Day Sesshin Mitra-roshi expects to be here October 27 to November 3. **November 2** there will be a **Jukai [Precepts] Ceremony**, an opportunity for Sangha to recommit to their practice and to living the Precepts.

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A monk in all earnestness asked Joshu, “What is the meaning of Bodhidharma’s coming from the West? Joshu answered, “The oak tree in the garden!”