



The Oak Tree in the Garden

Journal of the Hidden Valley Zen Center

The Fruits of Practice

The following was written by a senior student after a sesshin in which—and this is a very unusual situation—this student had to do some work on the internet during the sesshin.

Ultimately the purpose of everyone's practice is to bring the fruits of that practice into daily life—whether in or out of sesshin. So often we think that practice is necessarily limited to our time on the cushion, but true practice must ultimately result in the ability to bring forth that Clear Mind whatever circumstances we find ourselves in. The importance of The Long Maturation (spoken of by Torei Enji, Hakuin's Dharma successor), in which we integrate the fruits of our practice into our daily life, cannot be over-emphasized!

One of the most difficult aspects of integrating my Zen practice into everyday life involves using ideas and words. Whenever I have had to have a long, complicated conversation or work on the Internet during sesshin, I have noticed that my attention energy swirls around in my head and I feel trapped, unable to really focus as deeply from my hara as I had prior to the distracting work assignment. I usually became quite anxious that I was wasting precious sesshin time being so in my head. In the past it has taken what felt like a long time to return to deep awareness after being in my head for significant periods of time, but this sesshin I saw something different: I recognized that my energy was high and superficial, but instead of buying into the mind-state and worrying about it, I relaxed into the hara, accepted the “full catastrophe” of the mind-state as it appeared to be, and then sought, questioningly, for the truth of the

moment. Within seconds, a much deeper clarity arose from which I could see various mind-states arising and falling away as I continued to question the truth of the moment while fully tasting the flavor of each mind-state. I discovered that I could see the craving desire-mind that was actually at the root of each of these mind-states, and fairly soon was able to choose not to create any particular mind-state at all but to simply rest in the vibrant alive clarity that is always here, even when my head appears to be too full of ideas, images and to-do lists.



Walking The Path

PART ONE:

When I was a child around 2 years old, my birth father had a schizophrenic breakdown, leaving my 20-year-old mother alone to raise my 4-year-old older sister and me. My mother worked as a waitress, trying to keep things together the best she could. After work we would walk along the freeways picking up aluminum cans to buy essentials like bread, cheese and milk. I still remember crawling under the freeway overpasses and yelling up at my mom: “We’ve found a gold mine.”

Finding a babysitter was difficult and she was grateful for whoever was willing to watch my sister and me. Whoever was our apartment neighbor ended up being the babysitter. I remember my mother dropping us off at the babysitter's home on her way to work one morning when we found the sitter on the floor with blue skin; she had overdosed on heroin. My mother was late to work that day.

While working as a waitress at a Mexican food restaurant, my mother met the cook who would eventually become my stepfather. Soon after their marriage, my stepfather made the decision to move the entire family down to his ranch in the jungles of Mexico. Our home in the jungle had a dirt floor and was made from the branches and leaves of palm trees. When the house became infested with scorpions, we would simply burn it down and build a new one. Our goat provided milk, and baths happened in a nearby stream. Because our immune system was not adapted to that environment, I remember having plenty of boils and parasites such as intestinal worms. There was even a time when my mother became very sick with a fever that caused her to be unconscious for days. When my mother became pregnant with my younger sister, we made the decision to move back to the United States. I remember being overwhelmed with joy at the sight of the McDonald's golden arches as we drove across the Mexican border. My parents allowed us to stop and splurge and order a hamburger and fries.

Then life would happen, we would move from place to place and I would grow older until eventually I was told we were moving to Washington State where we could live for free in a picker's cabin, a simple one room wood structure with a wood burning stove, in exchange for working on the orchard. After seeing how we lived and worked on the orchard, I was given the migrant worker child status at school. What was great about this was that I was provided free health checkups and free lunches. What was not great was being singled out as being the "poor kid", being dismissed from class for migrant health examinations, and having the dreaded pink "free" lunch card when the rest of the kids had yellow cards.

In a society that puts so much importance on wealth and having things, I began to feel worthless and turned inward to hide. I had no self-confidence and felt the world did not accept me. To cope with these feelings, I would act out and get into all kinds of mischief that made me even more of an outsider. I remember

having feelings of pride when I told the school secretary that I was in "juvie" [juvenile detention] when asked why I missed school. I would be scolded at home for crying and learned the only acceptable emotion for a young man was anger. As time passed this hurt inside of me grew and the only way for me to deal with this pain was to become "harder." I wanted to become so hard and numb that nothing could touch me, nothing could hurt me, and I wouldn't need anyone. The problem is it didn't work. As hard as I tried to keep it all together, I would find it hard to stay in any meaningful relationship and I found myself cycling between the two poles of anger and depression.

During this time I had discovered the book titled *Siddhartha* by Hermann Hesse, and later I read *The Teaching of Buddha*. The material in these books felt so exotic and introduced me to a new way of looking at the world. What these books described sounded so liberating. Could it be possible for me not live a life of pain? That question, that thought was a HUGE shift for me. My previous assumption was life is hell and you had to "toughen up" or get "swallowed up."

As time passed, I continued to suffer from depression and anger. I could shake them for a time but not for long and they were affecting my marriage in a negative way. I was barely keeping things together when a close friend told me he started going to a meditation group and suggested I check it out. I knew I was looking for something, anything to end this mental pain I lived with. And so I typed the words "Zen Center" into Google. I was surprised to find that the Hidden Valley Zen Center that popped up was only 15 minutes away. I will never forget the day I sat down in front of Mitra-roshi and she asked me, "Why do you want to study Zen?" The answer was so clear to me, "I want to end my suffering." She smiled, that Mitra-roshi smile, filled with peace and warmth. Instantly she had my trust, and that day back in 2009 I took my very first steps in walking the path of Zen.

PART TWO:

Intuitively I knew that if this was going to work I couldn't lie to myself, I had to be honest with myself and with my new teacher. When I would be consumed by anger and jump out of the car in road rage to start a fight, I would go home and email Roshi to tell her what had happened. It was a way for me to start taking responsibility for my actions. Of course, I would prefer not tell Roshi. I didn't want to tell anyone what an awful person I was but it was the truth. Later I would learn that I was not an awful person, but it was just old habit patterns; it was how I had lived in the past and it was possible to learn new habit patterns. I'm still not sure why zazen is so powerful or why it has the ability to free us, but I'm sure it has to do with its ability to get us out of our negative self talk; negative self talk is the same as giving ourselves a negative operating system. What I discovered is that zazen helped me to remove the past negative programming and reinstall a new more positive operating system.

But the mind is tricky and my mind will think ANYTHING! It's really infinite; name any good or bad and I've thought it. I would notice I was filled with negative thoughts or dark thoughts and be filled with guilt and shame because I was identifying with those thoughts. I was confused. I thought that I was a "negative" person because of those thoughts. How silly! This is where trust is so important. During sanzen I'd bow my head full of shame as if going to confession, and say to Roshi: "I think this...." I was ready for her to kick me out of the zendo or say, "You really are quite a nasty little person." But instead, to my surprise, she laughed and said: "This is normal; everyone has thoughts like this." Wow, that was really huge for me, and I began to shift my thinking to maybe I'm not such a "bad guy" after all. I would keep showing up for sittings through all my life's ups and downs. Loose a job, gain a job, loose my house during the recession. And at times I'd even doubt if this "Zen" thing was even working. But through it all I just kept showing up and sitting. After all, at the end of the day I really had no other choice. Deep down I had to walk the Path and that is just what I did. I continued to sit and I continue to discover the love

and joy inside of me. I realized that I had the key to this the entire time and just didn't know it. However, that was only revealed to me by walking the Path and I can't thank Mitra-roshi enough for being there when I was lost in darkness and out of her pure compassion helped me turn on a light.



And the day came when the risk to remain tight in a bud was more painful than the risk it took to blossom.

—Anais Nin



Have you ever ridden a bicycle? The bicycle does not run on its own. The bicycle only runs when somebody is pedaling it. The moment we stop pedaling the bicycle, it falls over. Unenlightened consciousness works in the same way. It doesn't perpetuate itself. The moment we stop perpetuating it, it dies. Like everything else, it dies on its own. Meditation is not so much like doing something or going somewhere or acquiring this and that. Meditation is actually a way to stop feeding this unenlightened consciousness.

—from **No Self, No Problem**

by Anam Thubten,

edited by Sharon Roe,

published by Snow Lion Publications



Violence, Confusion & Liberation

This past year has been a year unusually full of aggression, confusion and violence in the memory of many people—not only because of the ongoing war in the Middle East and the aggressive moves of Russia into former Soviet colonies in Eastern Europe as well as with regard to Syria, but also because of the unusual level of negativity, bias and aggression expressed in the recent Presidential campaign, culminating in the election of the exemplar

of that negativity, bias and aggression. This, in direct contrast to the true teachings of the major religions which teach compassion, radical acceptance, and the honoring one another.

Jiddu Krishnamurti, one of the foremost contemporary (he died in 1986) spiritual teachers, said the following:

Being human, I feel profoundly the necessity of putting an end to violence, and I will make sure to put an end to it in myself.

It is from this point of view that there is hope. If we put an end to violence, hatred, and greed within ourselves, if we bring our behavior more and more in line with the Precepts and the spiritual teachings of all the great religions, it cannot help but influence in a positive way the rampant negativity prevalent in the world today.

Zazen, entered into with commitment and dedication, can make an enormous difference; the potential of zazen is truly transformative. It takes work—and as you saw in the Path article, it takes a willingness to face up to the negativity, aggression and greed that live in our own mind.

It is quite tempting, as our zazen deepens and we begin to see the “mind weeds” that Shunryu Suzuki speaks of in his book, ***Zen Mind, Beginners Mind***, to look the other way, to shove this more clear seeing of our dysfunctional habit patterns under the rug, into the back of the closet, or otherwise attempt to ignore them. But here is a critical pivot point in our practice, a watershed where we can either turn back and reinforce those habit patterns or practice radical acceptance—face up to them, feel the dismay and regret, and allow them to “die on the vine” through our full awareness and our commitment initiated by that regret. And the irony of trying to pretend these negative habit patterns don’t exist is that everyone else can see them regardless of whether they are within our own field of vision or not.

To truly let go of the conditioning that has spawned less-than-optimal habit patterns of

behavior, thought, and speech, we need to keep that practice going., facing it with what Hakuin called “straightforward bravery.” That means that with whatever mind state appears, we practice radical acceptance, tune in, and seek wordlessly to understand its source, no matter how pleasant or unpleasant, how depressing or blissful, no matter how boring or frustrating that mind state seems to be. (When we speak of “source” what is meant is not only the psychological basis out of which the mind state arises, but a deeper comprehension: Who is it that is experiencing this mind state? *What is the Fundamental Source of my very being?*) As our practice deepens we begin recognizing, as the senior student in the first article in this issue saw, what “flowers in the air” they are, and we are no longer caught in them; we have “seen through” the seeming reality of the mind state.. To reach this deeper letting go, we need to do ongoing, committed practice, and that necessarily requires working with an authentic teacher, one who has been down that very Path far enough ahead of us that we can trust their guidance.

An adjunct practice to our fundamental zazen—and one that is also effective in helping us live more compassionately—is *metta bhavana*, the practice of lovingkindness. [You can listen to guided metta practice at <http://www.sanmon-jizen.org/teishos.html#>] The first stage of this practice, which consists of six stages, is to offer intentions of lovingkindness toward yourself. Though it may seem selfish to do so, in actuality it is anything but, for several reasons. Although we appear to be separate individuals, actually we are not, and not only because of this, but also as a result of the mirror neurons in the brains of human beings and other animals and even birds, *what we feel can be felt by others*.

Using functional brain imaging, neuroscientists have located brain areas with similar mirror function [to those in the rhesus monkeys where they were first discovered] in humans. They believe that these neural structures may help us understand the intentions of another, to imitate and empathize with others,

and perhaps even to process language. Additional evidence suggests that mirror neurons are not exclusive to primates or even mammals. Researchers have found dedicated mirror neurons in the brain of songbirds that fire both when the animal sings a particular tune and when it hears another songbird crooning a similar melody.

—from **“Do Dogs Have Mirror Neurons”**,
by Adam Miklosi,
published in **Scientific American**

Anyone who has practiced lovingkindness meditation for awhile has experienced a positive transformation in him/herself that influences a wider set of experiences, including our interactions with other human beings as well as animals and other creatures. Now more than ever is it essential for anyone concerned with the level of negativity in the world to take Krishnamurti’s words to heart and work toward that end within him- or herself! We cannot truly change the world unless we let go the negative habit patterns we unwittingly have ourselves.

There is also a third practice that can be helpful in bringing about a more positive outlook. Though it is not a spiritual practice it can go a long way toward helping us feel more happy in our daily lives. Rick Hanson, neuropsychologist and author of ***The Buddha Brain*** and other books, has discovered that our brains have what he calls a “negativity bias.” In other words, we are programmed, in a sense, to remember the negative and gloss over the positive. Evolutionarily this is vital to the survival of the human race: If we encounter danger and are harmed, survive but don’t remember the qualities, the warning signs of that danger, we are likely to walk right into it again, and not survive next time. The result is that these negative experiences take up more brain real estate than do the positive ones.. In order to counteract this—and if you want more details, Google Rick Hanson and check out his books—it’s important to focus as well and for a sufficient period of time to pull it into long term memory, the positive experiences in our lives. So when you find yourself truly enjoying a situation or a scene

or a piece of music or some particularly heart-warming moment, allow yourself to truly experience, to savor, to feel deeply that felt sense for several moments. (In his books, Dr. Hanson has discovered exactly how many seconds/minutes it takes to anchor the positive experience in your memory.) When you do this on a regular basis, you will find that your outlook will tend more toward the positive and you will feel more joy in your life.

And there is one more practice that can make a difference in a person’s outlook. None of these last two practices will bring you to awakening, but they will nonetheless bring about more peace and joy into your life—and into your interactions with others. The same can be said of this third practice. It’s one you’ve probably heard about, and it consists of remembering each day the things that have taken place that day for which you feel grateful. One manifestation of this practice is to write down before you go to bed five things that happened that day for which you feel gratitude. People who do this practice find they feel happier, more relaxed—and more grateful—for doing it. This, too, can greatly increase the quality of your life! But the bottom line is this: If you want to be truly free, while these last three practices can help bring more peace and happiness into your life, you will still remain caught in a certain amount of your conditioning and creating more suffering unless you work diligently in your Zen practice. The meditation aspect of practice as well as the advanced practice and the Long Maturation spoken of by Torei Enji are essential for the progress of coming to awakening. And it is only that true, deep Awakening that will give us ongoing peace.



Meditation is to be aware of every thought and every feeling, never to say it is right or wrong, but just to watch it and move with it. In that watching you begin to understand the whole movement of thought and feeling. And out of this awareness comes silence.

—Krishnamurti



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,
p. 31



The truth is that our finest moments are most likely to occur when we are feeling deeply uncomfortable, unhappy, or unfulfilled. For it is only in such moments, propelled by our discomfort, that we are likely to step out of our ruts and start searching for different ways or truer answers.

—M. Scott Peck



Wisdom tends to grow in proportion to one's awareness of one's ignorance.

—Anthony de Mello



But now I want you to understand that although in the beginning I told you to forget everything save the blind awareness of your naked being, I intended all along to lead you eventually to the point where you would forget even this, so as to experience only the being of God, It was with an eye to this ultimate experience that I said in the beginning: God is your being.

—Chapter 12, pp 171
The Book of Privy Counseling

HVZC Update

Many thanks to all of you who wrote letters to the United States Citizenship & Immigration Services supporting Sozui-sensei's position at Hidden Valley Zen Center! Although we have received nothing further regarding their stated plan to revoke her R-1 visa, our lawyers have forwarded the documentation and the letters of support to the USCIS, and we hope it will change the determination to one in which Sozui-sensei can remain in the United States and continue to serve Hidden Valley Zen Center's Sangha



Mountain Gate Update

We are deeply grateful for the support that has been making it possible for us to continue moving forward in the construction of the vital addition to our main building. Of course there is still a long way to go before the construction is completed and we can actually use that part of the building; when that will happen depends entirely on ongoing donations.



The photo above was taken only a few days ago. The actual building only goes as far to the right as the beginning of the last roof; that roof belongs to our garage. Before the garage was built a staggering amount of money had to be spent dealing with rodent damage inside the vehicles—in the case of the car, one neighbor's dogs even ate their way into the engine trying to get at a squirrel that had taken refuge in there! It became clear that a garage could make a big difference not only with varmint infestations but would also protect the vehicle windshields from being sand-blasted by the fierce winds that

come up during certain seasons, and the tires from rapid degradation by the intense, high altitude sun.



Resistance to Practice?

We hear lots of stories about old Zen masters who practiced with deep determination from the tender ages of 12 or 13, came to deep awakening and transmitted their authentic Zen to generations of eager students. And here and there we learn of another Zen master—Hogen, for example, or Rinzai—who became terribly discouraged with their practice, felt unworthy as a result, and left the monastery. Hakuin—who eventually, singlehandedly brought Rinzai Zen back to life in Japan—became so discouraged with the practice he had begun at age 14 to avoid falling into hell that he actually quit completely and apprenticed himself to a master calligrapher.

But something brought them back.

We in the West have very complicated lives, and our modern society provides tantalizing temptations to distract ourselves from Zen practice. It is not at all easy—as Hakuin himself said—to do Zen practice as a householder. (He also said that householder practice could bring people deeper than monastic practice, exactly because those temptations along with the responsibilities householders have would necessitate that they had to work harder, focus more deeply than monastics, whose very environment was optimized for practice.)

But beyond that, something else is at work. For pretty much every person who does Zen practice, a part of us truly wants to be free in the way only Zen practice can bring us to. Early on in our practice we are involved simply in trying to master the basics of practice: posture, what to do with our mind, how to avoid the pain in our backs and our knees, boredom, and so on. But as we get deeper into our practice there is another part of us that begins to sit up and take notice. We have a deep investment in the self-image we carry

around and act from the perspective of without even realizing it. Practice begins to thin the veil of our delusion, and as we begin to see through aspects of that self-image, the part that is invested in maintaining it begins to throw up whatever obstacles we can dream of—and one of them is to develop a resistance to the very practice that has begun to get positive results. The Buddha himself experienced these kinds of things; they're spoken of in metaphor, as the temptations of Mara.

Moreover, Zen practice is challenging: through it we come face to face with our less than compassionate, less than wise behavior, not to mention the greed, anger and delusion we unwittingly embody. These are not pleasant experiences—until we begin to see that each time we do recognize our own unskillful actions it's a huge part of the battle to drop them. How fantastic! It's only when these things come to consciousness that we can begin to let them go! What an opportunity! At the same time, until we reach a certain watershed, facing these things can be frustrating and disappointing.

Often, too, the resistance that comes up in practice stems from resisting conscious awareness of one or another negative habit patterns that would distinctly tarnish that precious self-image. Resistance can rise up as well, cloaking a fear of disappearing as our self-image begins to dissolve. We can come up with all manner of convincing ideas not to do our practice when we ordinarily would.

That very moment is your most fertile ground for practice! Walk into that resistance! FEEL it, taste it, tune in! It may speak to you—or it may not. The important thing is to tune in to the felt sense of that resistance and stay present with that bodily experience, that energy, until it shifts. This in itself is practice—but practice that can bring huge benefits beyond your Zen practice, for its use is not limited to difficulties with that practice. It can be used with any difficult feeling on or off the cushion—so long as we stay out of the story. You'll know you've allowed yourself to become truly one with that felt sense when its shift reveals relief.

January 10-17 7-Day Sesshin at Mountain Gate; Application deadline: January 1st

January 23-30 7-Day Sesshin at HVZC; Application deadline: January 21st. This is a change from previously announced, and replaces the summer 7-day sesshin; the summer sesshin this year will be a 5-day sesshin.

February 5 Zazenkai 8:30-12:30 a.m. in Albuquerque NM. For more information please email monkzenshin@gmail.com

February 26 All-Day Sitting led by Sozui-sensei; schedule to be available later

Note: Until we know more about Sozui-sensei's status in the United States we cannot schedule further retreats guided by her. But as soon as we learn that she will be granted a Green Card or at least not have her R-1 visa status revoked, we will be scheduling more dates for her to teach.

March 3 - 10 7-Day Sesshin at Turtleback Zendo in Lawrenceburg NJ; www.turtleback-zendo.com for more information.

March 17-19 Weekend Sesshin led by Sozui-sensei

March 26, 2 pm Piano Concert with Peter Gach; Peter is a gifted pianist and he is offering this concert to help support Hidden Valley Zen Center. The concert, at HVZC, will feature J.S. Bach's Well Tempered Clavier, Vol. 2 (Complete); tickets to be announced.

March 19 - 26 7-Day Sesshin at Mountain Gate. Application deadline: March 8.

April 7 - 9 Vesak Ceremonies These ceremonies are the annual celebration of the

Buddha's birth, enlightenment, and parinirvana. More details will be available closer to the time. Mitra-roshi expects to be at HVZC April 4-11

April 18 - 25 7-Day Sesshin at Mountain Gate. Application deadline: April 2.

April 23 All-Day Sitting

May 20 All-Day Sitting

May 31-June 4 Regaining Balance Retreat for Women Veterans with Post-Traumatic Stress, at Mountain Gate; these retreats are only for women veterans diagnosed with post-traumatic stress. They are not Zen sesshin, but are part of a free, nonsectarian outreach program of Mountain Gate, as are the monthly **Day of Mindfulness: Meditation & Writing for Women Veterans, Active Duty, and Family Members.** For more information on this last offering please go to www.sanmonjizen.org

July 4-9 5-Day Sesshin; Mitra-roshi is only able to be at HVZC this time for the sesshin.

July 12-19 7-Day Sesshin at Mountain Gate; deadline for applications is July 1st.

July 28-August 3 Regaining Balance Weekend Retreat for Wives/Female Partners of Vets with PTSD, at Mountain Gate. For more info: www.RegainingBalance.org

NOTICE

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.

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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!”