



The Oak Tree in the Garden

Journal of the Hidden Valley Zen Center

On Term Intensives

Many, many years ago, the Rochester Zen Center initiated a program whereby a person could add extra Zen practice to their daily life for a specific, short, period of engagement. The term “Term Intensive” conveys the opportunity well: a chance to add more practice than you normally do, for a specific period of time. In this way it is possible to really give yourself a “shot in the arm” and take your life clarifying, Truth uncovering, deeper. The practice has spread, at least among the RZC Dharma successors, and at both Mountain Gate and Hidden Valley Zen Center this program is offered.

There are several advantages to doing a Term Intensive, among them:

1. It's a short-term commitment, and each person doing a Term Intensive decides, with approval from the teacher, on the length of time for a specific TI.
2. It's a chance to take your practice to a deeper level. Even though the commitment is short term, the benefits can accrue and be ongoing even after the end of the Term Intensive.
3. Each Term Intensive is personal: You decide in what way or ways you'll ramp up the intensity of your daily practice for that period of time. It can be with an extra half hour or hour of zazen a day, and/or with the addition of daily *metta* (lovingkindness) practice, prostrations, chanting, a specified number of “Just One Breath” *susokkan* [extended outbreaths during which one concentrates on both the physical experience of breathing out while maintaining a sense of opportunity, curiosity, openness-to-possibility]

breaths during each day—or even, as one person has committed to, limiting time on the internet. Another person has committed to more mindful eating at a specific daily meal. There are many ways in which we can enhance and deepen our life-practice with this extra level of commitment.

4. It's a chance to add something into your practice regimen that ordinarily you don't do.
5. It adds significant support to your regular, ongoing practice.
6. It can help build your practice if you can't get to sesshin as often as you'd would like to—or if our health prevents us getting there at all.
7. One of the requirements of a Term Intensive is that the person committing to it email daily updates to Roshi (and Sensei, if you're at HVZC), receiving support and feedback in response. This adds a significant depth to your Term Intensive.

Term Intensives are meant specifically to **add** additional Zen practice—whatever the format that might consist of—to our regular practice. The commitment is to do whatever we have decided upon for the period of a given Term Intensive ***in addition to what we normally do in our Zen practice.***

Here is one current Term Intensive participant's story:

I'm nearing the end of a term intensive as I write this — my sixth term intensive of this year in which I've committed to do one each month. And if I may, I'd like to share a few observations

on my experiences so far.

I have a full time job and I am a husband and a father — these last two are actually more time-consuming (and more important) than the full time job. To find space in my schedule to do these intensives has been challenging to say the least. But in the mornings before work and during the lunch hour I've carved out the time to sit one to one-and-a-half hours of extra zazen each term intensive day; throughout the day I've committed to do 20 full sussokan breaths; and before sleep I've pledged a full cycle of metta practice.

The term intensives have had their challenges. In one, I spent five days in bed, down with pneumonia. In another, my energy level and external circumstances all seemed to move with a kind of soupy lethargy, conspiring to prevent any energetic deepening from taking place. And despite the wonder of added cushion time, in the midst of a busy layman's life, anger still expresses itself easily — sometimes even more easily during the intensives because emotions are also more free. But I am able to handle it differently. When anger arises, I feel its energy intensely for a while, and then it eventually passes on. I don't have to act it out.

Not all intensives were as challenging however. In one intensive, everything went absolutely smoothly, culminating with finding myself in the city of the Sixth Patriarch's mummified remains, and four hours of free time to see his temple — a truly inspiring experience! The external circumstances of each have been different, but with each have also come the ability to go just a little bit deeper into my zazen, and this added zazen has been the key to it all. Despite taking more of my practical time, I feel as though I have become more effective in my professional and personal life. The added zazen naturally brings focus to that which is most important. While working on big projects or large events, it has allowed space to arise in the midst of charged stressful situations — a kind of flow takes over — in which stress and tension co-exist with a Big Clarity from which answers spontaneously arise, and which my

body and mind naturally express. Earlier I said emotions are more free during the intensives; let me clarify: part of what I mean by this is that I am also more free of these emotions. In that instance of anger I discussed, it expressed itself fully, and then just as fully dissolved without hooking me or those around me.

After each intensive, a subtle teaching has always been revealed. A few days ago I found myself inflicting an unhealthy habit pattern on a loved one. Being deep into the term intensive allowed me to see the action for what it was, apologize sincerely and without lingering guilt, and then resolve not to repeat it. That discussion and process led to lightness and peace of mind for both of us. This ability to see through, and then let go of an unhealthy perception of self really does ease my suffering and the suffering of those around me. That's why I continue to do these intensives, to sit through hours of zazen: because the benefits are tangible, and extend exponentially beyond me. May all those who practice continue to be inspired to go deeper.

And from another student who has also done a number of TI's. Her physical condition prevents her from attending sesshin. Doing Term Intensives is a way she can keep her practice deepening despite her life situation.

In her writing she speaks of "Personal Term Intensives"—a term we originated since the original format of Term Intensives was as group practice and word was thus needed to describe a solo Term Intensive. These days for students of Mountain Gate and HVZC, TI's are usually not group TI's, though often one or more students will do simultaneous TI's in different parts of the country, making it easy for mutual support for each others' efforts through email communication. And when Fugen had expressed the intention to do a TI beginning the Monday he never saw because he died of a heart attack the Friday evening before, another student, who had done a simultaneous Term Intensive with Fugen prior to the time, took up his banner and, dedicating her efforts to easing his passage, did the TI he never got to do. What follows are her

comments about the role of Term Intensives in her life:

When Roshi asked me to write something on Term Intensives for this edition of Oak Tree in the Garden, the mind went blank for a moment. I have done a handful of them, but none since late in 2015. It is one of those paradoxes that when I could most use the benefits of a Term Intensive, my lifestyle or body doesn't cooperate.

Although I am sure it can be different for each individual, I find that I need to start preparing for a Term Intensive before I actually do one. I wonder if maybe I am going about this all wrong. This could be something to discuss with Roshi.

Roshi's comment: Preparing for a Term Intensive can actually be very helpful. At the least, it helps get us into the mind state of deeper commitment and a willingness to let go of any obvious obstacles to that additional practice. That preparation can entail a gradual ramping up to the level of practice we committed to for the TI.

When our actual time on the mat has been less than usual, when our bodies do not cooperate, when our lives seem hectic and uncertain is this still a good time to do a Term Intensive?

Roshi: Absolutely! It can be especially valuable. A TI at that time can help bring our practice back into the mainstream of our daily life; it can bring it to life again.

Perhaps it is a case where we don't want to admit how our practice has gotten away from us, not as strong or as regular as we would like. Would more modest goals be what we should do? Would even a modest Term Intensive help get us back on track? I am hoping that Roshi will answer these questions for us in this issue!

Roshi: Don't sell yourself short! Sometimes we can reach much farther and deeper than we think we can! Push that personal glass ceiling! Someone recently sent me a link to an internet article, complete with photographs, about a fe-

male scientist on the northern shores of Russia who swims naked in sub-zero waters. She is swimming with Beluga whales as part of an ongoing experiment both to connect with them and to familiarize them with human contact prior to being shipped off to aquariums all over the world. To be in water that cold would normally kill a human being within five minutes, yet this woman is able to be in that arctic water much longer than that. Moreover, she reportedly has trained herself through yoga to hold her breath a total of ten minutes and forty seconds in that icy water. (BTW, she swims naked because she feels clothing creates a barrier to communication with the whales.)

We don't have to swim in frigid waters but we can add a bit more to our commitment than it's easy to do and so reach deeper with great benefit as a result!

After saying all of this, I can highly recommend doing a Term Intensive. There is something about making a commitment in writing and trying, as best as we can, to keep that commitment that is so helpful. Our practice becomes more regular and deeper. Our connection to Sangha, even when doing a personal Term Intensive, increases.

Often, I plan a Term Intensive to coincide with sesshins. I can feel the energy of a strong sesshin from thousands of miles away and I hope in some small way, that my extra practice will be felt by sesshin participants. Even though health issues keep me from attending a sesshin, I have to believe that doing a Term Intensive before sesshin would make one go deeper during the sesshin.

Roshi: It can be of great benefit to do a term intensive coinciding with any sesshin we are unable to get to. We have the model of Canada Geese, which fly hundreds of miles without coming down to rest. How is it that even the younger or weaker geese can make those extended exertions? Scientifically, the wave action created by the formation they fly in, combined by the fact that no single bird is in the lead the entire time, make for a physically sup-

portive flight pattern. The same is true in an energetic way for sesshin: the energy of each person's zazen combined with others' is synergistic, and for sensitive people that energy can be felt from great distances—and can be added to by our own deeper, committed practice. Even if it can't be obviously felt, it is there and can be made use of subconsciously to add concentration and depth to our practice.

I have added different practices during a Term Intensive, more sitting time, chanting, listening to teishos, exercise, and metta meditation. Sometimes, I ponder what would be the best focus besides the obvious zazen. Do others also struggle with what to focus on or to add for their Term Intensives? Roshi encourages me during the difficult times and has me keep almost daily contact during my Term Intensives which can last as long as six weeks or be as short as a week or two. Just writing this makes me want to do another one. I have been contemplating one for awhile, but feel I lost ground during some of my last operations and illnesses. What do you think, Roshi?

Roshi: Absolutely! There's no better time than right now to do it!

How to do it, for those who've not yet done a Term Intensive? Go to the website—www.hvzc.org or www.sanmonjizen.org—and download the Term Intensive form. Fill it in and return it to Roshi; if you're a member of Hidden Valley Zen Center it's also helpful to copy it to Sensei. Then get to work on that extra practice, emailing daily your challenges and successes and a daily log of your TI committed practice. Roshi and Sensei will support you in your efforts, which sometimes means challenging you if you start to fall back, but always encouraging your work.

Here are some actual communications between students working on a Term Intensive and Roshi

OK! I fit in those 2 1/2 hours. I was so sleepy and exhausted when I begin the sitting and 45 minutes into it I didn't think I would make it, but then after an hour my head cleared and the rest

of the sitting was actually pretty exhilarating. Right now I feel a genuine sense of pride in myself for pushing through the resistance at the beginning of my sitting. And for showing respect to myself by keeping up my goal of 1 1/2 hours daily sitting so far, which I know is so important to me.

Roshi: Way to go! And you've learned something from practice: that if you just persevere, whatever cloudy-seeming or resistant mind state will eventually clear and reveal a deeper zazen! This is a vital lesson and as long as you keep remembering it and acting on it, it will serve you very, very well!!!

I went golfing this morning. When I started playing I felt like I was in a very uncentered headspace, and my play was pretty bad. I realized I had to dive straight into the middle of my feeling lousy in order to be able to focus when I hit the ball. That realization made me uncomfortable and anxious but I resolved to face whatever came up instead of pushing it away, and within minutes my head completely cleared. I went on to play the best game of my life...I beat my previous best score by 10 strokes! That sense of focus carried through the rest of the day and I felt very focused, attentive, and sympathetic toward my students. Today felt like a day well-lived.



Reflections on a Year of Practice - II

An earlier issue of The Oak Tree in the Garden shared the account of one student's first year of practice. Asked to write an update following completion of his second year of practice, he wrote the following:

Last month marked the anniversary of my second year of sitting zazen. In the past year, I completed my first seven-day sesshin, as well as sitting in several shorter meditation retreats. I also continued to sit at the Hidden Valley Zen Center in San Marcos weekly. Sitting for an hour a day, whether I am at home or travelling, has now become habitual for me. When I don't

sit, it feels as if something is missing. When I discuss this with friends, they often ask me “How can you just sit there for an hour?” My answer is “How can I NOT sit there for an hour each day?” So much of my life has been taken up with talking — to others, to myself through my thoughts. But zazen is listening, really listening, for that daily hour, and just being open to what is really going on.

I have discovered that so much of my experience of zazen over this past year can't be captured by words. The words are only rough approximations of the profound experience of 'sitting quietly, doing nothing.' Nevertheless, I will attempt to put into words a rough outline of my experiences over the past year, in the hope that it may deepen my own practice, as well as possibly being of some service to others.

The first observation I would like to share with you is that of my continuing discovery of the nature of experience. My mind wants to put all experience into categories that can be easily classified, and retrieved at will. This is the nature of the mind. The mind is also lazy, in that it turns all my experience into black or white/binary propositions (good/bad, beautiful/ugly, desirable/repulsive, etc.) But through meditation, I have come to realize my experience is determined by my conditioning. And my conditioning is like a pair of glasses through which the ego experiences reality. If my conditioning gives me a pair of red glasses, then everything I see (experience) will be red. If my conditioning gives me a pair of blue glasses, then everything I see (experience) will be blue. Sitting zazen is like taking off the 'conditioning glasses' and seeing directly into reality.

Here's a quote from Henry James that captures something of the nature of our conditioned view of experience:

Experience is never limited, and it is never complete; it is an immense sensibility, a kind of huge spider-web of the finest silken threads suspended in the chambers of consciousness and catching every air-borne particle in its

tissue.

When I sit, I open myself to the possibility of becoming aware of this 'immense sensibility' and of going beyond the 'spider-web suspended in the chambers of consciousness.'

There is, of course, always the risk of mistaking meditation for escape. Liberation from the 'spider-web' does not mean escape from thought, nor escape from the body, or what the body feels. In fact, my second year of zazen has taught me to go even deeper into the reaches of my body's experience, and to listen very carefully to how the body feels. This is the most subtle of arts, one that starts and ends with the breath. When I meditate, I open up a space in my body for feelings to manifest themselves. Sometimes the feelings are raw, painful waves of emotion ripping through my body. At other times, the feelings have been much more delicate — non-verbal but nonetheless real.

We use our minds not to discover facts, but to hide them. One of the things the screen [mind] hides most effectively is the body, our own body, by which I mean the ins and outs of it, its interiors. Like a veil thrown over the skin to secure its modesty, the screen partially removes from the mind [awareness] of the inner states of the body, those that constitute the flow of life as it wanders in the journey of each day.

—Antonio Damasio,

The Feeling of What Happens

Here is one of the gifts of zazen — I remove the 'mind's veil, thrown over the body', and fully, truly experience what I am experiencing — and sometimes it is to 'fully, truly experience' something for the first time. This process, through meditation, of 'seeing directly' opens up the possibility of having a complete experience, one that is not veiled by the mind's multi-colored glasses. And if that happens, I can also open up to the possibility of letting go of experiences from the past, often extremely painful memories, that lodge in the body like a stone, a

heavy weight. I have noticed a feeling of lightness and fluidity in my day-to-day living that is the result, I believe, of sitting zazen in order to 'completely experience.'

One of the feelings that was most persistent, and the most subtle, was the feeling of restlessness. This experience manifested itself in both thought patterns — how much longer till this meditation session is over? — and in the body — a desire to move on, to get it over with, a kind of impatience in the body. This impatience was echoed by my thoughts — I should be doing this or that, this needs to be done next, I'll never get caught up with my work if I just sit here — endless variations on the restless theme. Gradually, I came to the awareness that I was resisting the experience of being fully present, both on the cushion and in my life. How many times had I been listening to someone, while at the same time thinking of the next thing to say to that person, or the next thing I 'should be doing' instead of listening? How many of life's beauties had flown by me because I was thinking of the next thing, and the next thing, and the next thing? Sitting on the cushion is like putting a magnifying glass to this feeling of restlessness and allowing the full experience of discomfort, the 'itchiness' of wanting to be elsewhere, to arise and dissipate, and arise and dissipate, over and over again, each time recognizing the feeling in my body and returning to the breath. To do this is to have, however fleetingly, the experience of being liberated from time, of going beneath time in a way that allows me to see restlessness for what it is — a temporary phenomenon, a habitual thought-form, a resistance to the present experience.

I began, this past year, to perceive more and more clearly the true nature of my 'thinking.' I put this word, 'thinking,' in quotation marks, because I want to distinguish what I had previously taken for 'thinking' from the true nature of thought. That is to say, what I had previously taken to be 'thinking' was actually just a set series of mental patterns — fantasies, ruminations, obsessions — that repeated themselves in an endless chain, sort of like an

old fashioned juke-box with not 100 selections of 45's to choose from, but only 3 or 4. My mind would loop through these limited choices, 'thinking' them, and then discard one to go back for another. I began to grasp what was meant by the observation that most people (including myself) walk around in a dream. And when something happens that doesn't fit my limited picture of reality (my dream) my 'thinking,' I experience panic, fear and frequently anger — 'Why doesn't reality fit my image (dream) of what it should be?' To let go of this habitual mental rumination, to clear the consciousness of this 'fog of pseudo-thought' is to experience a new kind of liberation. It also allows me to create a mental space for true thinking — a creative, intuitive response to situations that is not limited to those 3 or 4 mental loops I have habitually been boxing myself into.

All of the above leads, sometimes slowly, sometimes suddenly, to a dissolution of my old sense of self. I frequently said 'I don't know who I am anymore.' This doesn't mean that I acted in erratic or shocking ways, but it does mean that the 'I' that used to be a fixed, rigid identity began to dissolve. Instead of the 'me' being defined by a thick black line of paint, it began to feel as if the line between 'me' and 'not-me' was growing thinner and thinner — the thick black line was being replaced by a thin little wisp of ink barely outlining the 'me' that was there. And sometimes, even this line disappeared. This leads to a feeling of lightness — not 'airy-fairy, high woo-woo' lightness, but a transparency grounded deeply in reality. I am at once free of my 'self' and connected to everything. This is not a special state, and not something that once reached, disappears and needs to be sought after and reproduced. It is, as Brad Warner states *"being quiet enough to stop chasing after extraordinary states and simply notice who and what you are right now."*

This past year I came upon this passage in a book titled **Zen-Brain Reflections**, by James Austin. It lists some characteristics that are nurtured by meditation. Here's the list:

- confronting the reality of death, and making out one's will

- letting go of longings and loathing and renouncing negative habits

- focusing attention on 'just this' present moment

- softening biased opinions and idealistic notions of perfection

- extending ongoing patience and forgiveness to self and to others

- realizing immanence: the quality in simple, ordinary, everyday things

- relying more on insights and introspective truths than on doctrines

- radiating a playful flexibility and openness from a base of stability

- accepting and reconciling life's opposites

- expressing a sense of responsibility for others with kindness and selfless compassion

- expressing a deep sense of gratitude for the gift of life and for all those who have eased its burdens

I've noticed all of these being nurtured in my own practice. I want to make it clear: This is not a 'check-list' of steps toward some kind of enlightenment. But sensing a resonance with the above list was, I found, useful in marking my own travels along the path this past year. And a list like this is not the 'goal' of zazen. While it may be useful in marking progress along the Path, it is not the point of being on the Path. There is something much deeper beneath a list like this, something that, to paraphrase George Eliot, 'may be accurately observed by us although we are incapable of explaining it.'

None of the above could have been possible without the support and encouragement of the sangha (group of meditators) at the Hidden Valley Zen Center in San Marcos. Mitra Roshi, Sozui Sensei and all the members of the sangha created a place for sitting that embraces and nurtures the practice of meditation, the

path of Zen. I express in closing my profound gratitude for their presence and support.

One moon appears everywhere in all bodies of water; the moons in all bodies of water are contained in one moon. This is a metaphor for one mind producing myriad things, and myriad things producing one mind.

—Hsueh-Jen



*Coming and going, life and death:
A thousand hamlets, a million houses.
Don't you get the point?
Moon in the water, blossom in the sky.*

—Gizan, 1802-1878



In our lives we engage in countless activities and receive huge sensory input from the world around us. We tend to see all these activities and the phenomena that surround us as absolutely true. In other words, we are deceived into thinking that things exist in the way they appear to us. This discrepancy between how things appear and how they really exist is the source of much of our trouble.

—H.H. the Dalai Lama, pp. 173-4,
The Joy of Living and Dying in Peace



The important thing is not to stop questioning; curiosity has its own reason for existing.

—Albert Einstein



The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes.

—Marcel Proust

July 8-15 7-Day Sesshin at Mountain Gate. Deadline for applications is June 25.

July 10 All-Day Sitting led by Sozui-sensei; this all-day sitting coincides with Day 2 of the sesshin at Mountain Gate, and offers HVZC members a chance to take advantage of the sesshin energy to deepen the practice at HVZC.

August 6-13 7-Day Sesshin Although HVZC members are welcome to apply to longer sesshin at Mountain Gate in New Mexico, this is our only 7-day sesshin at HVZC. *Because of the sesshin there will be no Half-Day Introduction to Zen Meditation on August 6th.*

September 24 All-Day Sitting led by Sozui-sensei.

September 28-October 5 7-Day Sesshin at Mountain Gate. Deadline: Sept 16.

October 14-16 2-Day Sesshin; Mitra-roshi expects to be at HVZC October 13-20.

October 26-30 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. These retreats are offered free to the women they serve; if you would like to help support this effort, please send your check to Mountain Gate, HC 65 Box 78, Ojo Sarco NM 87521-9604; donations are tax-deductible and most gratefully received! And if you know of any women veterans who might benefit from attending a Regaining Balance Retreat, please let them know about these retreats. For more information: www.regainingbalance.org

November 4-6 2-Day Sesshin; Mitra-roshi expects to be at HVZC November 1-8.

November 19 All-Day Sitting led by Sozui-sensei.

November 15-22 7-Day Sesshin at Mountain Gate; Application deadline: November 9

November 30-December 8 Rohatsu Sesshin at Mountain Gate; deadline: Nov 9.

2017 Schedule:

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

January 24-29 5-Day Sesshin at HVZC; Application deadline: January 20. Roshi expects to be at HVZC January 23-31.

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

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

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.

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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!"