



The Oak Tree in the Garden

Journal of the Hidden Valley Zen Center

Dai E Zenji's Vow for Awakening

At the end of the formal sitting each night of sesshin we chant *Dai E Zenji's Vow for Awakening*. It goes like this:

Our only prayer is to be firm in our determination to give ourselves completely to the Buddha's Way so that no doubts arise however long the road seems to be.

To be light and easy in the four parts of the body, to be strong and undismayed in body and in mind, to be free from illness and drive out both depressed feelings and distractions, to be free from calamity, misfortune, harmful influences and obstructions, not to seek the truth outside of ourselves so we may instantly enter the right way, to be unattached to all thoughts, that we may reach the perfectly clear, bright mind of prajna and have immediate enlightenment on the Great Matter, thereby we receive the transmission of the deep wisdom of the Buddhas to save all sentient beings who suffer in the round of birth and death. In this way we offer our gratitude for the compassion of the Buddha and the patriarchs.

Our further prayer is not to be extremely ill or to be suffering at the time of departure, to know its coming seven days ahead so we can quiet the mind to abandon the body and be unattached to all things at the last moment wherein we return to the original Mind in the realm of no birth and no death and

merge infinitely into the whole universe to manifest as all things in their true nature and with the great wisdom of the Buddhas to awaken all beings to the Buddha Mind.

We offer this to all Buddhas and bodhisattva-mahasattvas of the past, present and future in the ten quarters and to the maha prajna paramita.

Although Daie Sōkō Zenji is what he is called in Japanese, he was actually a Chinese monk, Dahui Zonggao; in a different system of transliterating Chinese his name reads Ta-hui Tsung-kao. He lived nearly a millenia ago, having been born in the year 1089; he died in 1163. Some of his teachings have been translated by Christopher Cleary and are published in **Swampland Flowers**. He also appears in a number of koans in the Kattoushu collection of koans—the only koan collection compiled in Japan. Thomas Yuho Kirchner, a long-time Zen student living in Japan, has translated that important collection; it is available in English as **Entangling Vines**. (The Japanese name—“*Entangling Vines and Creepers*”—refers to how difficult these koans are to comprehend.)

Daie Zenji was ordained as a novice monk at the age of sixteen and received full ordination a year later. People seeking Zen instruction in China in those days generally found it through pilgrimage, making the rounds of teachers and monasteries in that vast country until perhaps they settled on one teacher. Daie is recorded as having gone to many Soto School masters, but eventually, inspired by the writings of the Rinzai master Yunmen Wenyan [Japanese: Ummon Bun'en], he began practice under a contempo-

rary master of the Rinzai School. By that time Zen—or Chan, as it was called in China—was widespread, having expanded rapidly from the time of the Sixth Patriarch. Daie settled down to train first with Zantang Wenzhun, and after the latter’s death, went to Yuanwu Kequin—Engo Kokugon in the Japanese pronunciation of the Chinese characters that spell his name. He eventually became a Dharma successor of Engo Kokugon, who is listed in the Sogen-ji lineage after Goso Hoen.

Daie Zenji early in his practice seems to have been quite a bit like many of us in the earlier days of our own Zen practice. An encounter with his first Rinzai Zen teacher, Tanzhou expresses it. His teacher speaks first:

“You can talk about Ch’an very well; you can quote the sayings of former masters and write commentaries on them. You are eloquent in giving sermons and quick with the exchanges during interviews. But there is one thing which you still do not know”.

Ta-hui asked what it was.

Tangzhou answered, “What you do not have is the awakening. Thus, when I talk with you in my room, you have Chan. But as soon as you leave the room, you lose it. When you are awake and attentive, you have Chan. But as soon as you fall asleep, you lose it. If you continue like this, how can you ever conquer life and death?”

—from **Swampland Flowers & Wikipedia**

To his credit, Daie’s response was, “This is precisely my point of doubt.”

Eventually he did achieve a breakthrough, and then another. (You can read the account of one of these in Case #32 of the Kattoushu collection of koans, found on page 32 of Kirchner’s revised (2013) edition of *Entangling Vines*.) And as you’ve read so many times in these pages, one kensho is not sufficient, nor are any number of kensho sufficient; you must break

through and break through and break through again, and all along the way work day and night to integrate those realizations into your behavior, thought, and speech. If not, kensho is of no value.

Daie continued deep, persistent training and eventually he was authorized to teach. His initial struggle with his intellect in trying to come to awakening apparently made a deep impression on him, for many of his teachings make a point of urging his students not to try to think their way to awakening, but to search from a deeper place:

*...you have taken to memorizing the words of the ancients, accumulating them in your breast, making this your task, depending on them for something to take hold of in conversation. You are far from knowing the intent of the sages in expounding the teachings. This is what is called counting the treasure of others all day long without having half a cent of your own. Likewise in reading the Buddhist scriptures: **you must see the moon and forget the fingers. Don’t develop an understanding based on the words.** [emphasis mine]*

—p. 14, **Swampland Flowers**,
tr. **Christopher Cleary**

Daie is recorded as speaking out against what has been called “silent illumination,” which he saw as a practice of the Soto School. Centuries later Hakuin as well railed against it, calling it the “cave of dead sitting.” Both these men were proponents of the dynamic practice of the Rinzai School as the most effective way to reach enlightenment. It is vital in our Zen practice that we not attach to **any** mind state—difficult to practice in the beginning as we attempt to swim uphill against long years of habitual thought patterns!

When Daie became known as a supporter of an official who attempted unsuccessfully to overthrow the government, he was stripped of his ordination and teaching certificates and exiled to a part of China known for its prevalence of fa-

tal illness. (China had long maintained control over Buddhism, with government approval required for ordination and for teaching positions.) He continued his teaching there against great odds; it is said that as many as 50 of his monks died of plague. He was finally pardoned and allowed to return to his original monastery, where he eventually died.

His death verse? Cleary reports that as he lay dying his attendant monk asked him to compose a death verse, handing him brush and ink. Daie wrote the following, threw down the brush, and died:

Birth is thus

Death is thus

Verse or no verse

What's the fuss?

—p. xx, **Swampland Flowers**
tr. Christopher Cleary

And now to his *Vow for Awakening*:

*Our only prayer is to be firm in our
determination to give ourselves
completely to the Buddha's Way so that
no doubts arise however long the road
seems to be.*

Everyone who has practiced long enough has encountered doubts, and some people when encountering them get so discouraged they give up practice. This is a sad mistake—though it has also been seen that some who do so eventually do return to Zen practice—and with renewed determination and commitment, which allows them to plow deep and move beyond their former doubts and resistance. When chanting this vow it's important to do so as a *vow*—not as a prayer of hope, but as an *intention*. Intentions are quite powerful, and when entered into will make every difference in your life and practice. You may be familiar with the words of W.H.Murray:

*Until one is committed, there is
hesitancy, the chance to draw back,
always ineffectiveness.*

Concerning all acts of initiative (and

*creation), there is one elementary truth
the ignorance of which kills countless
ideas and splendid plans: **that the
moment one definitely commits
oneself, then providence moves too.***

*A whole stream of events issues from
the decision, raising in one's favor
all manner of unforeseen incidents,
meetings and material assistance, which
no man could have dreamt would have
come his way.*

*I learned a deep respect for one of
Goethe's couplets:*

***Whatever you can do
or dream you can, begin it.
Boldness has genius, power
and magic in it!***

—W. H. Murray,
from **The Scottish Himalayan Expedition
(1951)**

If you find yourself with resistance or discouragement, then **taste** it! Take out your iPad or you Kindle Fire, get one of the free art apps, and start “painting” those sensations! You will be amazed at what can happen when you truly become one with that feeling. If you need more instruction or want to try this with paper and paint, Google “practice of immediacy.” There are videos giving specific instructions for this process on that site. It was established by our Dharma sister Jikyo Roshi—Nicolee McMahan, who developed the process through years of her own experience in Zen practice and with guiding her Zen students.

We are speaking here of *physical feeling*, now—*sensation*—not emotion, and that is very important. Resist the urge to escape into thought; instead, express that sensation through color and form, or describe those sensations in a kind of stream-of-consciousness journaling. If you're doing it correctly you will find the feeling dissolving and either a deeper, different feeling taking its place or a feeling of freedom rising—right in the midst of it. If it's a different feeling, then pursue oneness with it in the same way as

with the first feeling. It's a very effective way to process feelings and dissolve attachments!

To be light and easy in the four parts of the body,

The body is an expression of mind, and if the body is tense, the mind is as well; in fact, most likely it is the mind creating tension in the body. If you feel tension, you can do a body scan and focus on the area of tension, allowing it to relax. If it doesn't do so after a time, then try tensing it up and then relaxing it. If that still doesn't work, check out your mind state and work with any discomfort or rigidity as outlined in the paragraphs above.

to be strong and undismayed in body and in mind,

Intention plays an important role here. But if you find yourself dismayed, tune in!

to be free from illness and drive out both depressed feelings and distractions,

That part about driving out depressed feelings and distractions has to be done carefully, and "driving out" is perhaps not the ideal wording. If there are depressed feelings, then go to work with them as outlined in the earlier paragraphs in this writing. If they are particularly sticky or ongoing you may find it helpful to engage the assistance of a trained therapist—or even, if necessary, take appropriately prescribed medication if therapy and other avenues such as engaging in regular, ongoing, aerobic exercise don't produce positive results. (That regular, ongoing, aerobic exercise, by the way, has been shown to be as effective for mild or medium depression as medication—and its side effects are only positive if it's done correctly!) It's important that we don't suppress negative feelings—yet we don't wallow in them either.

There is the story of an old Zen teacher who developed a very painful tumor on his back. His doctor came regularly to treat the tumor, an apparently excruciating experience for the teacher as it was cauterized repeatedly and the medi-

cine used on it was searing. As it turns out, this particular teacher, assuming his Zen practice had reached completion, had quit doing zazen. But the tumor was so painful he had no choice but to return deeply into practice and to become one with the pain. Finally after many weeks the doctor's ministrations had a positive effect and the tumor resolved. Opening his eyes, the old teacher said with profound humility, "I had thought my practice was sufficient before this tumor took hold in my back. But this tumor has been my greatest friend, forcing me inward, deeper and deeper into zazen. I could not have realized what I have today without its help."

In another account of sickness in the old stories is this one: A venerable teacher became quite ill, and painfully so. One day one of his senior students came to visit him and asked, "Where is the one who is sick?" to which the old man replied, moaning, "Oooooooh! Owwww! Owwww!" Completely one with the pain, he held no attachment to any "someone" who was sick.

As for distractions, it's a habit pattern most people are caught in much of the time, especially since our modern lifestyle pulls us in so many directions, with the constant ping of social media postings, texting, email, and the omnipresent cell phone. We find ourselves on call 24/7, unable to turn off our felt need to respond to the constant demands for our attention. But as recent advances in brain imaging have shown us, habit patterns can be changed—although it requires persistent work. Whenever we find ourselves distracted, when we bring that mind back to the practice or the moment at hand; it's as simple as that. Each time we do this it weakens the distraction habit and reinforces the focus habit, the mindfulness habit. Keep working on it and one day you'll realize you're much less distracted, can focus more completely—and that life feels much more rich! When we allow ourselves to be totally present with each moment's unfolding, life unfolds in technicolor; but multitasking, allowing ourselves to be distracted, pulled this way and that, dulls it down to greys. Stephen Levine, in one of his books, shares the comment of a woman who was in his Death and Dying workshops and then went into remission

from her cancer: *"I was never so alive as when I was dying!"* Why? Because the very real immediacy of her own death kept her totally present; each moment was infinitely precious because it was clear she had very few of them left. Once she went into remission, however, that immediacy vanished and all the enticing distractions of life returned, her lack of focus on each minute robbing her of that joy of *truly* living.

*to be free from calamity, misfortune,
harmful influences and obstructions,*

Karma will bring us whatever we've created the movement toward, but how we meet it is not necessarily fixed; we have a choice in how we deal with it. Our attitude towards whatever comes to us makes all the difference in the world between suffering and being free of suffering. The more zazen we do, the more we see this clearly—and the more readily we can experience freedom from being caught by whatever is happening. To practice becoming one with each moment before something negative might happen gives us a leg up on dealing with calamity and misfortune if and when it does arrive on our doorstep. Again, the same instructions: Stay truly focused on the moment's unfolding. If something uncomfortable arises, tune in to the sensations in lieu of the thoughts. Allow yourself to become one with those bodily sensations. Doing so will bring you space and time so that you can deal with whatever is happening from a place of centeredness rather than a place of reactivity. There are some capping phrases that speak to this:

*Clouds are not stopped
by the mountain peaks;
bamboo does not stop flowing water.*

Sometimes in the drive down the mountain from Ojo Sarco—which is located quite high in the Sangre de Cristo Mountains of northern New Mexico—the sky is clear until somewhere along the long hill below Truchas and at times one drives through low-hanging clouds. Driving down that long, steep, winding hill, eventually, somewhere down near Chimayo we can suddenly find ourselves below the cloud bank.

Years ago when Roshi Kapleau lived in the foothills outside of Santa Fe, which is also at high elevation, from the computer desk near the window some winter mornings I could watch the residue of clouds streaming down from the peaks, completely unhindered by the house or the trees or the peaks and the foothills themselves. Clouds, fog, water—they flow around obstacles rather than stubbornly trying to punch their way through. Novice Zen monks are called *unsui* in Japanese—"cloud-water"—emphasizing that the fruit of deep practice is flexibility rather than rigidity in body and in mind.

*not to seek the truth outside of ourselves
so we may instantly enter the right way,*

This comes out of Daie Zenji's own experience; as you read at the beginning, he struggled with trying to come to awakening through thought. The sooner we realize that path is impossible, the more rapidly we'll progress in our practice. Kensho can only be experienced when thought is gone beyond. It's a gross misunderstanding that we can solve things only through thought. The old master Hakuin urged his monks, "Work from your belly, not from your head!" He had learned that through painful experience.

*to be unattached to all thoughts, that
we may reach the perfectly clear, bright
mind of prajna and have immediate
enlightenment on the Great Matter,
thereby we receive the transmission of
the deep wisdom of the Buddha to save
all sentient beings who suffer in the
round of birth and death. In this way we
offer our gratitude to the Buddha and the
patriarchs.*

"Unattached to all thoughts" is the most important part of this, for as long as we cling to thinking, that *"clear, bright mind of prajna"* is just out of reach. Once we have realized this and come to awakening, the more we have integrated it into our lives, the more we find ourselves deeply moved to do whatever we can to relieve the suffering of everyone else, not in superficial ways but in ways that will truly free people from suffering no matter what happens to them.

Through this offering of ourselves we unwittingly offer our gratitude to all those who went before us, struggling in the earlier years of their own practice, overcoming obstacles, resistance, frustration, dry zones, and persevering all the way to where they themselves could be truly free—then taking on the “*hole-less iron cangue*” and teaching that Path to the next generation, who did the same and taught others, all the way from the time of the Buddha more than 2550 years ago, down to the ongoing present.

Our further prayer is not to be extremely ill or to be suffering at the time of departure, to know its coming seven days ahead so we can quiet the mind to abandon the body and be unattached to all things at the last moment wherein we return to the original Mind in the realm of no birth and no death and merge infinitely into the whole universe to manifest as all things in their true nature and with the great wisdom of the Buddhas to awaken all beings to the Buddha Mind.

We would hope to be “*unattached to all things at the last moment*” and be able to let go, but the time is now in which to work toward that. Without that ongoing practice, “*seven days ahead*” will not be sufficient! Yesterday during an all-day sitting in Albuquerque we held a memorial service for three people who had died recently: two Zen teachers and one young ultramarathon runner. More than one of us was personally acquainted with the Zen teachers. Steve Stucky had been co-abbot of the San Francisco Zen Center when only a few weeks ago he unexpectedly received the diagnosis of late-stage pancreatic cancer. Susan Jion Postal had struggled with her health for many years, and more recently cancer had been added to the list. She died only a few nights ago. And a friend of one of the participants in the all-day sitting—a woman seemingly in the peak of health in her 40’s—had suddenly dropped dead. We do not know when our time will come. Does it not seem appropriate, then, to practice deeply now so that we will indeed be able to:

“quiet the mind to abandon the body and be unattached to all things at the last moment wherein we return to the original Mind in the realm of no birth and no death and merge infinitely into the whole universe...”?

Yamada Mumon-roshi’s final poem was this:

*As for liberating all sentient beings
Just this left to do:
Letting go **everything**
in the whole universe!*

If we are truly to be free at the time of our last breath, this is what we need to be able to do—and in the meantime, pedal fast to reach that point. Every time we let that outbreath out fully and with total concentration, is a letting go. Every time we allow ourselves to become so absorbed in our koan that “me” disappears, is a letting go. If we do this in an ongoing manner—we find ourselves living a more joyful, more free life even before that last moment arrives. And in deep gratitude,

We offer this to all Buddhas and bodhisattva-mahasattvas of the past, present and future in the ten quarters and to the maha prajna paramita.



Death Is Knocking at My Door

My friend Polly called this morning; she had been at the Abbot of Zen Center’s funeral yesterday. At the same time I was sitting with a group here in NM and we had a memorial service for the Abbot and two other practitioners who died recently. Polly, who is in her 70’s, said wearily, “I guess it’s all about preparing to die from here on.” We’ve reached that place at Zen Center where the older students are beginning to die. It’s not just losing them personally but also losing our sangha little by little. It’s about learning how to practice with old age and death.

As a Buddhist I was taught to live in the moment, to be present. As a young student

everything about practice was new and bright and engaging, but before very long getting up at four in the morning and struggling with the pain in my legs was not all that bright and shiny any more. As I progressed I found places that were comfortable or familiar and as many of us do I could fool myself into thinking that I had arrived at a place where I could abide. Then a rough spot would appear, a conflict with a co-worker or being asked to do something that I had very little interest in doing but knew my job was to say “Hai!” and take up the task. After the rough patch was over there was usually some resolution or it was time to move onto another job and then I would find myself like so many others do, on a plateau looking out over a vast spaciousness with very little idea of where to go from there. I found that it was very important to have a teacher that I could go to who would help me find my way off those plateaus so that I could continue to move forward in my practice. Without this guidance I think I would have been tempted to stop practicing if it wasn't for realizing how much sangha meant to me and that I didn't want to let go of those connections.

I'm in my sixties now, and the practice situation that I was in for over thirty years of my life is not available to me here. Last summer I was critically ill and spent many months recovering. During that time I realized that while I thought I had created a Buddhist practice out of running a small business, I had actually put Buddhism in my back pocket for quite some time. In northern New Mexico we have desert mesas several thousand feet high. I see myself “up there” on one of those mesas wondering what I need to do to move on. Do I need a pick ax? Should I begin to try and dig deeper and see what comes to the surface? Should I figure out how I got here in the first place and back track? Or should I walk to the edge of that plateau and jump? I am still eager to explore the ways I can deepen my practice. While hearing of another death reminds me my turn is coming too, it may also be a wake up call, a reminder that I have a finite time in this life to wake up, to be free and yes be ready to jump off that cliff when the time comes!

Vesak - The Buddha's Birthday

In the coming month we'll be joining Buddhist temples and centers worldwide in the celebration of the Buddha's birthday. Traditionally the date is pegged at April 8, but since that's mid-week this year we'll be celebrating on the following weekend, beginning with Friday evening, April 11, with Temple Night. Those of you who have been present at Vesak in years past know that for Temple Night the zendo is transformed into a quiet and inspirational, candlelight venue for devotional practice. Additional altars are set up, and since there is no schedule beyond opening at 6 pm and closing at 9, one can sit quietly before any of the altars or in the background, do prostrations, make the rounds of the various altars, or whatever means most to you.

The next morning at 10 in the zendo there will be the Ceremony of Bathing the Baby Buddha. During the ceremony, each person has a chance to come before the special Baby Buddha altar and offer fruit or flowers, and “bathe” the Baby Buddha with sweet tea. Following the ceremony the story of the Buddha's birth will be told, and then we'll repair to the Dining Hall for the potluck meal. **Please bring a dish to share—something that will feed 8-10 people. It helps if you can call the Center a few days ahead of time and find out what food is needed, then let us know what you'll be bringing. Remember also to bring your fruit or flower offering for the Baby Buddha bathing ceremony.**

The next morning, Sunday morning, there will be the usual zazen and chanting, and Mitra-roshi will give teisho. Following that, we will join together to take down the special altars and restore the zendo to its normal appearance. *This weekend is a special time for family and friends, and all are welcome to come and take part in the festivities.*

Beforehand please come help set up for Temple Night on Friday morning, for the ceremonies on Saturday, and for the potluck meal. And then please help afterwards as well, to put things back to normal.

March 8 All-Day Workshop on Rinzai Zen;
PLEASE NOTE: THIS WAS ORIGINALLY
SCHEDULED AS A WEEKEND SESSHIN. Roshi
expects to be here Mar. 4-11; **Jukai Ceremony**
March 10!

March 18-23 Elder Sesshin at Mountain Gate; deadline for applications is March 12.

March 26-April 2 7-Day Sesshin at Mountain Gate; deadling for applications: March 17

April 11-13 Vesak Celebrations. Vesak is the world-wide celebration of the Buddha's birth, and for HVZC it is a full weekend of celebrations, beginning with **Temple Night from 6-9 pm on Friday, April 11**, continuing with the **Ceremony of Bathing the Baby Buddha at 10 am on Saturday, April 12**, following which we will enjoy a **Potluck Meal**. Family and friends are invited to this joyous annual celebration! The next morning, **Sunday, April 13, Roshi will give a teisho** as part of the regular Sunday morning program, then we'll take down the Temple Night altars and restore the zendo to its usual appearance. *Please see details in this Oak Tree.* Roshi expects to be at HVZC April 8-15.

April 22-29 7-Day Sesshin at Mountain Gate; application deadline April 14.

April 25-27 Weekend Sesshin taught by Sozui-sensei

May 14-18 Regaining Balance Retreat for Women Veterans with PTSD and Women Partners of Veterans with PTSD at Mountain Gate. These retreats are limited to the women described above. Regaining Balance is a non-religious outreach program of Mountain Gate. It is entirely free to the women it hosts, and except for airfare to New Mexico for facilitators living out of State, all facilitators are *pro*

bono. There are real expenses, however, and donations are most welcome. A check made to Mountain Gate is tax deductible to the full extent of the law, and when so specified, will be used to help underwrite these retreats.

May 30-June 3 4-Day Sesshin in Lawrenceville NJ; to apply, email scott@tcnj.edu.

June 6-13 7-Day Sesshin at Mountain Gate; application deadline is May 30.

June 20-22 Weekend Sesshin; Roshi expects to be at HVZC June 16-23.

July 8-15 7-Day Sesshin at Mountain Gate; application deadline is June 24.

July 26-August 2 7-Day Sesshin. This is our only 7-day sesshin of the year, the only chance without going to Mountain Gate to do a full seven days of deepening practice. Yasutani-roshi used to say that to do a 7-day sesshin was to deepen one's practice to the degree possible otherwise only in two to three years of daily practice. Application deadline: July 14.

PLEASE NOTE: the August 7-day sesshin at Mountain Gate has been cancelled due to its too-close proximity to the following:

August 22-24 Regaining Balance Weekend Retreat for Women Partners of Veterans with PTSD, at Mountain Gate.

September 17-21 Regaining Balance Retreat for Women Veterans with PTSD at Mountain Gate. (see information under May 14-18 entry)

September 27 All-Day Workshop on Rinzai Zen, led by Mitra-roshi. Please go to www.hvzc.org to download an application form. Roshi will be at HVZC Sep 26-Oct 3.

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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!"