



The Oak Tree in the Garden

Journal of the Hidden Valley Zen Center

What Is It?

"We each have an innate, bright, shyness of mind. We have no word for it so we call it 'Buddha nature'."

—Harada Shodo-roshi

"Once you stop clinging and let things be, you'll be free, even of birth and death. You'll transform everything. You'll possess spiritual powers that can't be obstructed. And you'll be at peace wherever you are."

—Bodhidharma, in his **Bloodstream Sermon**,
found in **The Zen Teaching of Bodhidharma**,
tr. Red Pine

Dear Roshi,

Had a really interesting experience last evening. Interesting because it was so unlike my habitual reaction. I work in the kitchen here at the apartment building on Saturdays. The woman (will call her Jane) who used to be in charge of the kitchen said she couldn't get anyone to help her and then her mom developed cancer and is on hospice. She is the primary caregiver during this time.

The woman (will call her Cathy) who took over the position and I get along fairly well together. Our meals are not going over as well as we had hoped. Last night, Jane came down as we were finishing up the dinner. She showed us a picture of the beautiful triple strawberry cupcakes that she had made. Cathy said, "They won't go for them here. They like chocolate or vanilla". Jane said, "No, they ate everything I made. They just like my desserts better."

She said this all matter-of-factly without any hesitation or even a glimmer of embarrassment. After she left, Cathy apologized to me and said, "I couldn't believe how rude Jane was to you!" You see, I have been the one making the desserts.

I just laughed and said, "I really don't care if people prefer her desserts or not. Everyone likes to be good at something and she obviously takes a lot of satisfaction in being a good cook and baker."

We both agreed that after Jane's mother dies (she's in hospice), if she wants to take back the kitchen, we have no objection. I even said that I would work for her.

This is just such a huge change in my normal reaction. My ego normally would have been right there front and center, saying, "How dare she say that to me! How rude!--etc., etc, etc,...." Nothing. Of course, my ego is pretty tickled about the whole thing now! Actually, the whole incident both amuses me and makes me sad for Jane at the same time. I can't help wondering if similar remarks might have made others quit working for her in the kitchen. I am often clueless about the impact of my words until I get a reaction from someone, but even I know that you don't say this!!!

Anyway, what fun to see my ego NOT come to the plate.

The person who wrote this has been practicing for quite awhile—and it shows. The more we dive into our practice, the freer we become. As part of that process, however, it's important to recognize that, as someone very perceptive-

ly reported after having a kensho experience: “First it shows you where you’re caught—and then it sets you free!”

So when those moments of clarity arise in which you have a sudden insight into something you’ve said or done, something you’re not very proud of, it’s not that zazen is making you a worse person; it’s that it’s beginning to set you free. There’s something about the clarity with which we begin to see our own behavior with the help of zazen, and the remorse that that recognition brings up, that is a good part of the work toward letting whatever dysfunctional behavior pattern that was, weaken and eventually—if we are careful and aware—drop away. Some things can take a long time: Yasutani roshi reported that it took a good ten years POST-kensho before he was able to drop his habit pattern of reacting in anger.

As we do our practice and begin to see where we need to work, and commit to doing that vital work—the Long Maturation—our life begins to change. While it’s tough work, the results are worth it! And this is but one gift of practice...



Poison Blossoms From a Thicket of Thorn

Norman Waddell is the premier translator of the writings of Hakuin, having spent a career becoming intimate with the old sage. His translations, to go by the comments of people who have read Hakuin’s works in Japanese, truly catch the flavor of that vibrant personality.

Here comes the latest in a series of translations by Professor Waddell: Hakuin’s seminal collection of his own teachings, **Poison Blossoms From a Thicket of Thorn**. In the days of Chan teachings in China a tradition was established of recording the sayings and doings of eminent masters, for the benefit of generations to come. This was still the case in Japan in Hakuin’s day, but being the iconoclast he was, he had one of his students edit his collections of teachings and then proceeded to have them

published as the contents of this volume—with a few parts left out and others separately published. It was certainly a monumental effort on the part of Norman Waddell, and of Professor Yoshizawa, whose translation from Hakuin’s era Japanese into modern Japanese was an essential prerequisite, to gather all the background information and choose which of the annotated copies to translate. What results is an excellent resource on the teachings of a great Japanese Zen master who singlehandedly resurrected Rinzai Zen, and a wonderful expression of the dynamic personality that Hakuin Ekaku appears to have been. What follows in the next article is a teisho given on one of the writings in the book.



Hakuin’s Reply to Priest Rempō of Keirin-ji

This is a letter written in answer to one from Rempō, a student of Hakuin’s. One of the reasons this book of translations is so excellent is due to the extensive and detailed work of the translator, Norman Waddell, in introducing the material he has translated, as well as his inclusion of notes handwritten in the text by Hakuin’s own students. He also, according to other translators, seems to truly capture the essence of Hakuin’s personality, which is clear and right up front in this translation. Here is Waddell’s introduction to this letter:

Rempō Chishō (d.1770) a Dharma heir of Ranshitsu Tōiku (d.1743), was the head priest of Keirin-ji in Kai province, a temple Hakuin visited frequently to conduct practice meetings. An annotation tells us that Rempō “studied with the master for many years, even after becoming head priest at Keirin-ji.” He was thus one of a number of Zen teachers in Suruga and the surrounding provinces of Kai, Tōtōmi, and Izu who continued their post-satori training under Hakuin while training students in their own temples. According to Tōrei, Rempō applied himself to koan study

under Hakuin “with the greatest determination” (Draft Biography).

This is one of the hallmarks of the Rinzai Sect—and of dedicated Zen students regardless of Zen sect: the ongoing post-satori training. The Jataka Tales are the stories of the purported previous lives of the Buddha, remembered during the seven nights and eight days of the deep meditation that culminated in his great enlightenment. (It is not uncommon for Zen folk who do many sesshin to have insights into not only our behavior but also our past; while this is neither sought after nor celebrated, it is a natural result of the level of attention and awareness that can be developed with committed, concentrated, ongoing zazen.) During each of these lives the Buddha recalled, he appeared to have been working toward living an increasingly awakened life. This ongoing effort is what Tōrei Enji, Hakuin’s first Dharma successor, termed “The Long Maturation.” By all accounts, Tōrei himself exemplified this ethic—that vital aspect of practice in which we work to integrate into our thought, speech and action what we have realized in our kensho experiences and insights born of the ongoing zazen we do.

This work is true bodhisattva work. The more clear and awake and free of conditioning we ourselves are, the more clear and awake and free of conditioning is the possibility for everyone; while we appear as discreet individuals, neuroscience in particular is beginning to realize that the internal signals produced in “my” body can be picked up by others “outside” me. When babies are born, of premium importance is the communication, unspoken and spoken, between caregiver and child; it’s known that the presence and quality of this attunement is a significant determinant in the child’s quality of growth and development.

It is to Hakuin’s credit that so many priests who were already teaching were committed to continuing to deepen their own practice under a teacher at all, and one of Hakuin’s level in particular. This no doubt benefited the students of

those priests as well, and is an excellent model for Zen practice as it unfolds in the West.

Since it is known that Rempō succeeded Ranshitsu at Keirin-ji on the latter’s death, this letter can date no earlier than Hakuin’s late fifties, and given Hakuin’s reference to “enjoying the years left to him” possibly even a decade or so later.

The Letter:

Your letter of the twelfth of the fourth month reached my desk on the twelfth of the fifth month. Reading it over several times, I felt as though you were actually here conversing with me. Wonderful. Wonderful.

I was concerned that you may have wondered why I had not replied to your letter. It was not due to conscious neglect on my part. The letter you sent took an entire month to reach me.

I fear that I didn’t treat you with proper hospitality when you visited Shōin-ji at the end of the third month. Now whenever I sit in my room and think about how impolite I was, the shame makes beads of perspiration trickle down my spine.

I was very glad to hear that your health has been good since your return. For myself, I am still enjoying the years left to me, living like a simpleton, without care or trouble. I potter around the temple gardens to check how my eggplants are doing. I am happy to be able to tell you that you need not be concerned about me.

You said you are boring into the impassable koan I gave you day and night, putting it right down inside you and attacking it as relentlessly as you would a mortal enemy, not even stopping to eat. Splendid! Bravo! This is the incomparable joy of the Zen

Dharma!

The bold type of this last paragraph was added to emphasize how important the ongoing, focused and committed work on the koan is for anyone who is working on koan practice.

A Rinzai Zen teacher will first work with a student on the extremely effective breath practice known as *susok'kan*—we call it the Extended Outbreath. This practice alone can take a person quite far, even to kensho, if it is done correctly, and by “correctly” is meant with that same level of commitment and focus one would use in working on a koan. *Susok'kan* as it is taught by Mitra-roshi includes not only the total focus on the physical sensations of breathing out and extending that outbreath, but also whatever sense of curiosity, yearning, need to know, that brings a person to Zen practice to begin with. Of course we will be tempted to work with varying degrees of focus, not to mention encountering that Buddhist “devil,” Mara. Even the Buddha was tempted by Mara, with visions of beautiful women, with pain, and finally, with accusations expressing insecurity: “You don’t have what it takes to come to awakening! Who do you think you are?!” Have you ever known a Zen student who hasn’t had to deal with some such *makyo* at one time or another? In doing our practice we are made painfully aware of the subtle workings of our mind: our slide into boredom, judgment, frustration, anger, grief, sadness, euphoria—we’re likely to become intimately familiar with a host of them, as *zazen*, done deeply and consistently enough, will reveal wherever we are caught. But it is through awareness of these very habit patterns of mind we go a long way toward dropping them!

These days, people in temples throughout the country have submerged themselves in the dead, stagnant water of quiescent, silent illumination Zen. They make no headway whatever, achieve nothing at all. They just dilly-dally their lives away in that half-alive half-dead state. They reject the essential matter of koan study, shoving it aside without

a thought, having no more use for it than a merchant would for a mattock or plow. One of their teachers says things like this: “Don’t look at the koan stories; that is a muddy quagmire that will only suck your self-nature under. Don’t look at words or letters; that is a dense thicket filled with entangling vines that will strangle the life from your Zen spirit. Your self-nature has no love for words and letters. It has no fondness for koans. It wants simply to retain an easy tranquility, a free and unrestricted state of mind. That is the true and authentic meaning of Zen’s direct pointing. The self-nature that is inborn in each and every person is originally perfectly clear, free, and unrestricted. It doesn’t mistake a heron for a crow. It doesn’t mistake the sky for the earth. It feels fire as hot and water as cold. It works perfectly well, with no lack whatsoever, without recourse to Shakyamuni’s teachings, without borrowings from Bodhidharma’s Zen. Why would you want to go seeing anything beyond that?”

*He certainly sounds plausible, all too plausible. **The trouble is, following such a path means you are mistaking the workings of your mind for ultimate truth** and turning yourself into a piddling little imp. The patriarchs characterized such a person as “the Great King Stuck-in-the-Mud, slumbering away all by himself at the rear of a deserted old shrine.” The ancients—people who rejected fame and profit and without a thought to their own well-being devoted themselves single-mindedly to the pursuit of the Way—are as different from such priests as cloud is from mud.*

But at some future date a monk will come along, so bold and shameless he won’t even acknowledge his own teacher. He will grab one of those koans, the kind that resembles a stick of

flaming hot steel or a deadly poisonous chestnut burr, and thrust it under this fellow's nose, demanding, "What is the principle of this?! It will be like a dauntless warrior rushing headlong at him flourishing an enormous sword over his head, intent on cleaving his head in two. At that moment, not a word or phrase will issue from his lips. He won't be able to grunt even a simple sound like "gu." There is nowhere he can escape. The slightest hesitation means certain death. This is something he can't swallow down and can't spit out either. He won't have the strength to muster any anger or summon up any tears. He'll just stand there with glazed and goggling eyes, his mouth turned down in a frown. There won't be even a spark of life. He won't be able to raise his head. All that talk, all the big sermons he'd been making to people in the hinterlands won't do him a bit of good now. He'll be like a sick horse under a heavy load stumbling down an endless road on a scorching day—his whole body will be bathed in heavy, shame-induced sweat. Can someone like that be called a descendent of the Zen patriarchs? Later on, when he is charged with training a group of monks, heroes who have come to him from all over the land, how can he possibly deal with them and provide the guidance they need?

The reason he finds himself in this predicament is simply because he has mistaken the unmoving stillness of the storehouse consciousness for his original face. If he had genuinely clarified the heart and mind of the Buddha-patriarchs, how could he fear the old koans that transmit their sayings and doings? In the past, a Zen teacher of the true stripe did not trouble students with the ramifications of Buddhist doctrine or with the study of words and phrases. He just gave them a short and venomous koan and had them bore steadily into it. **If a student**

commits himself to authentic Zen practice, throwing his entire being into a koan with single-minded focus that does not allow previous notions, views, or emotions to intrude, and he keeps boring into it—gnawing from the top, gnawing from the bottom, and from the sides—he will reach a point when words and logic are totally exhausted. All at once, everything will suddenly fall away and he will then have "words and letters" truly in his grasp. Strutting through the world with the complete and utter freedom of the lion king, whenever he encounters someone he responds with the speed and force of lightning. This is a level of attainment those idle, disembodied spirits [of silent illumination Zen], lying open-eyed like zombies in their coffins, could not even glimpse in their dreams.

Hakuin is famous for blasting away at the "dead cave sitting" prevalent in his day among at least some—and to read Hakuin, many—of the Zen teachers in Japan. But there is a point, highlighted in the bold in the paragraphs above, and that is that all too easily, even in our modern day, is a quiet and still mind state—or one of euphoria—assumed to be kensho. (This is one reason why it is so important to work with a teacher who is known to have been sanctioned in a lineage where kensho is considered at least one of the prerequisites to being given permission to teach.)

Later on in this paragraph Hakuin gives us detailed instructions on working with koans. In our Rinzai tradition, when the teacher deems the student is ready to work on a koan, a koan is assigned after some discussion to determine whether the student has a "natural" koan, i.e., has come to practice through an abiding life question such as "Where did I come from?" "What will happen to me when I die?" "What is life all about?" "What is REAL?"—in which case that may be assigned as the breakthrough koan. Or if there is no concentrated concern such as that, then the teacher determines

which of the breakthrough koans would most grip the student, and that is the one that would be assigned. There are a number of breakthrough koans, of which Mu is the most widely known. Hakuin felt that The Sound of One Hand was more effective for his students. There is also the koan of My Face Before My Parents Were Born, and its modern corollary: Who Am I? Another breakthrough koan is What Is This?

Having received the breakthrough koan it is then up to the student to chew on it day and night, as Hakuin urges—even if it seems like one is chewing on a dry bone, even if it seems like the koan has vanished from consciousness, i.e., no matter what comes up to seem to dissuade us from pursuing it, to chew on it relentlessly. This is where the koan does its most excellent work! Persist! Persist! Persist! It is no accident that one of the Practices of Perfections is Patient Endurance, which translates as working on that koan from the top and the bottom and the left and the right, even if it tastes like dry sawdust and you wonder whether you've lost your senses in working on it or can't possibly solve it. RESIST the temptation to adjust the koan or to drop it temporarily to pick up a different practice; it will SEEM like it freshens things up, but it is really a ploy to distract yourself from doing the essential work of probing and probing and probing and probing that assigned koan. It is that persistent probing that will eventually bring results.

After hearing only a single word, worthy teachers of the past would set out on a journey of ten thousand leagues in order to pay respects to the person who uttered it, prostrating themselves before him and offering incense to him. Students thought nothing of traveling a thousand leagues and enduring untold hardships to visit a true teacher. Hence the saying, "The single phrase, 'Together with it' made a Zen monk walk through a thousand mountains." Yet the sightless shave pates of today regard the old koan stories as no more than needless words, unnecessary

entanglements. What runs through those minds of theirs? How sad that the groves of Zen have been reduced to such unprecedented decay.

Rempō Oshō, how truly praiseworthy that in the midst of this sorry situation you alone have girded up your spirit, set your jaw, and vowed to penetrate the great matter that furrows such deep creases in Zen monks' brows. Ahh! It is as rare as an Udumbara flower blooming amid the flames! Your effort is certain to be rewarded with a marvelous result. Your attainment of the claws and fangs of the Dharma cave is near at hand. This is my earnest prayer, my earnest prayer.

This is the earnest prayer of every Zen teacher for their students!

The great matter is achieved in the same way that a red-finned carp butts its way upstream, plunging through the hundred leagues of black-cloud barriers blocking off the Dragon Gate to become a dragon; in the same way that the gold garuda plummets into the vast sea to seize its dragon prey beneath the waves. It is an altogether formidable undertaking, possible only for someone of genuinely great stature. Students of middling talent cannot hope even to attempt it.

Long ago, Chen of Ts'ui-yen and Supervisor Monk Hsuan-tse contracted difficult maladies similar to the one we see in today's priests. Finding themselves unable either to die or to stay alive, they visited the great priests Fa-yen and Tz'u-ming. When those teachers pointed out their errors, they were like sick monkeys breaking free of their golden chains. Su-shan was another monk who toppled back down into the comfortable old nest he had created for himself. He remained lodged inside it for a long time, rising and falling like

a drowning man, until Lan-an's old wisteria vines encircled him, squeezed the life from him, and freed him of all his shackles.

At the beginning of his career, Master Kao of Mount Ching, "the Reviler of Heaven" was content to remain within an initial, rudimentary understanding. He later engaged in extremely difficult practice for several years, until one morning he was bowled over by a lethal wind sweeping in from the south and all obstructing and impeding spikes and wedges finally vanished.

These are all examples of monks who were for awhile satisfied with minimal results from their practice, but returned to practice on meeting true teachers and broke free of their limited understanding. Hakuin holds up these stories as examples to inspire our own practice!

At the beginning of Hsu-t'ang Dhih-yu's career, when he was a monk in the assembly under Zen master Yun-an, he was given the story Nan-ch'uan Kills the Cat. He offered the turning words, "Not even the great earth could hold it." Yun-an acknowledge the words with a faint smile. Hsu-t'ang was still not satisfied, howedver, and spent the next four years working on the story of Su-shan's Memorial Tower. One day he blundered into a poisonous flame that issued from the old Buddha of Ta-ling, and he lost both home and country. Now when he reexamined the koan stories he had penetrated before, he found his understanding of them was altogether different.

Hsu-t'ang's example is an invaluable one. He went on to serve as the head priest of ten leading Zen temples, although while residing in them he comported himself as though he were dwelling alone in a small grass hut. The last syllable that spilled from his lips was like the deadly milk of the lion king, the tail feathers of the Chen bird.

Driving off students with his deafening roars, he was like a ferocious tiger eyeing a lame sheep, like a starving falcon drawing a bead on a limping hare. But if he had stopped and remained like a dead man, fastened to the words, "Even the great earth cannot hold it," none of these remarkable achievements would have been possible. How grateful we should be that our Zen school is possessed of these marvelous prescriptions [koans] that can transform your very bone and marrow. At the same time, there were also among the followers of Zen those who were never able to cure themselves completely until the day they died—examples are Master Tun of Lung-ya and Master I of T'ien-p'ing.

Hakuin then writes that it would not be fair or appropriate to give Rempō koan answers; it would rob him of the joy of true comprehension—and he'd never forgive Hakuin for it! And he finally signs off with his best wishes for Rempō's good health.



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.

November 1 Half-day Introduction to Zen Meditation, 9 a.m. - noon; please see www.hvzc.org to download application form. *Further half-day workshops will no longer be announced in The Oak Tree but will continue to be listed in the online calendar at hvzc.org*

November 15 All-Day Sitting; exact schedule to be announced

November 19-26 7-Day Sesshin at Mountain Gate; application deadline November 2.

November 30-December 8 Rohatsu Sesshin at Mountain Gate; applications due by Nov. 18

December 14 All-Day Sitting; exact schedule to be announced

2015 Calendar

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

January 27-February 1 5-Day Sesshin; *February 2nd is a Free Day with no formal sittings that day.* Roshi expects to be at HVZC Jan 27-Feb 3.

March 7-14 7-Day Sesshin at Turtleback Zendo; 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 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 and ground 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.

The Oak Tree in the Garden is published bimonthly by Hidden Valley Zen Center, P. O. Box 1355, San Marcos CA 92079-1355; subscriptions are \$20 per year for hard copy or \$16 per year via email. For information about our Center, log onto our website at www.hvzc.org, or call 760-591-9893.

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!”