



# The Oak Tree in the Garden

Journal of the Hidden Valley Zen Center

## Spiritual Bypassing

Today is Day 1 of this short weekend sesshin here at Hidden Valley Zen Center in June 2014. The teisho today is on a subject rarely considered in Zen training, yet the issue was pointed out thirty-some years ago by a man named John Welwood. Welwood is both a clinical psychologist and a Buddhist practitioner. He started doing Zen practice about the same time he was in university beginning his training in psychology, and he continues both his clinical and his Buddhist practice. His unique background has given him insight into certain psychological challenges in practice. Though they are rarely addressed in Buddhist practice centers and temples, dealing with these challenges is very, very important, even critical.

For Jack Kornfield it was brought up when he returned from living in a Thai forest monastery. He had spent several years practicing Buddhism in the jungle under a highly regarded master, Achaan Chah. Forest monastery practice is a relatively isolated practice. Kornfield was out in the jungle with a number of other monks, to be sure, and with a master. But each of the monks had their own private *kuti*—a tiny hut—and their practice was essentially solitary. They ate together in silence, they listened to Dharma talks together in silence and otherwise just went about their practice alone, in and around their isolated little hut.

At the end of his five years of intensive meditation, Kornfield felt that his practice was deep, and he returned to New York City. But there in the midst of family and friends and the vast population of that city, he suddenly realized that he had not dealt with some psychological bag-

gage but had simply avoided it. It hadn't come up in the monastery because he had interacted only minimally with other people during his time there and so had had no opportunity for those issues to arise. The realization that he still had stuff to work on struck him so clearly that he went back to school and became a clinical psychologist in hopes of being able to do that work and help others do so as well.

We all have issues to one degree or another; that's the nature of being human. Growing up we become conditioned by our experiences. As well, we grow up with parents and other family members who are more or less enlightened in their behavior and in their outlook on the world. We interact with others who have their own conditioning, assumptions, and ideas about things and we naturally adopt many of the same attitudes, assumptions and prejudices. Being accepted is extremely important to human beings; some cultural anthropologists feel it's even genetically based. "The nail that sticks up gets pounded down" doesn't fit only in Japan. There's pressure in all cultures to conform. So pretty much everybody has their "stuff," their attachments to attitudes and assumptions, the results of their experiences and their conditioning. Seeing that he was no exception is what moved Jack Kornfield to become a psychologist. He also became a Theravadan Buddhist teacher, and an excellent one.

John Welwood is not a Buddhist teacher but he's a long-time Buddhist practitioner and has the insight of his psychological training as well. Years ago he wrote a book called **A Psychology of Awakening**, and in it he spoke of what he called "spiritual bypassing." He had seen as a psychologist that people in spiritual prac-

tice often did what he called “a spiritual end run” around their issues, using the practice to avoid dealing with their stuff. “Form is emptiness, emptiness is form” is a core teaching of the Buddha as expressed succinctly in the Prajna Paramita Sutra. It’s all too easy to take this emptiness aspect, the absolute aspect of life, as an excuse to bypass our stuff. Unfortunately even some Buddhist teachers have gone that route, misappropriating emptiness in saying that there is nobody to be hurt and therefore there is nobody being hurt despite the fact that they are behaving in ways that clearly are hurting people.

What follows are some words from an interview with John Welwood called, “Human Nature, Buddha Nature on Spiritual Bypassing Relationship in the Dharma.” The interviewer is Tina Fosella, and the article appeared in a 2011 issue of Tricycle magazine. It expresses what we’re talking about here and offers some insight into it.

Tina asks: “*You introduced the term “spiritual bypassing” 30 years ago now. For those who are unfamiliar with the concept, could you define and explain what it is?*”

*Spiritual bypassing is a term I coined to describe a process I saw happening in the Buddhist community I was in, and also in myself. Although most of us were sincerely trying to work on ourselves, I noticed a widespread tendency to use spiritual ideas and practices to sidestep or avoid facing unresolved emotional issues, psychological wounds, and unfinished developmental tasks.*

There have recently been two public confrontations of major teachers who have been teaching Zen in America for decades, both foreigners. It had come to public notice through articles in The New York Times and other venues, that all through those years they were abusing some of their students, usually sexually, but sometimes as well in other ways. After years of attempts to bring to notice this behavior and find some resolution it’s finally happened and one of

these teachers has been dethroned. The other one clung tightly to his position and has since died. Over the decades, various people came and went to these monasteries; some of them left in despair, some left in anger, some really destroyed by what had happened to them. It is not enlightened behavior when through your personal dysfunction you cause pain and suffering to people. This kind of thing can happen when people don’t face their stuff. Yes, we have these glaring examples of teachers supposedly enlightened. But we also have our own stuff that we ourselves are usually unaware of and that serious practice will begin to bring to light. When our practice begins to reveal these challenges, it’s important to not make that end run that John Welwood speaks of.

Because her daughter had been a victim of an abusing Zen teacher and had developed severe psychological problems as a result, an American Zen teacher years ago asked Harada Roshi how a teacher (this one was American) could sexually abuse his students. How could someone who is supposedly enlightened, or certainly has done many, many years of practice and has been authorized by his teacher to take over the reins of the center, do such a thing? Harada Roshi’s response was, “They didn’t spend enough time in the monastery.” Their training was insufficient.

In the case of these teachers it’s painfully clear that they didn’t train long enough. While they may have been able to inspire others to practice, they themselves were still not yet “fully cooked.” They didn’t go as far as they needed to go in order to become truly enlightened teachers. And here is something that is very important to realize: We are all “works in progress” whether we are officially sanctioned to teach or not. If a teacher is not continuing to practice, actively practice—if possible with another teacher—then we have to ask, Why not? Does that teacher think they’re already home free? It took the Buddha lifetimes to refine himself and six years further training in that last lifetime—not to mention ongoing moment-by-moment absolute awareness—before coming to that final profound awakening where his be-

havior truly matched his understanding. Who knows how many lifetimes the rest of us have got ahead of us to reach that point? As for your two teachers here at Hidden Valley Zen Center, you can bet that we are actively continuing our training. Is there an end to training? Dogen himself said, “No beginning to enlightenment. No end to training.” Several of you have commented that our Sangha here are transforming in positive ways through the practice—and that is exactly how it should be: ongoing transformation, ongoing letting go.

*When we are spiritually bypassing we often use the goal of awakening or liberation to rationalize what I call premature transcendence: trying to rise above the raw and messy side of our humanness before we have fully faced and made peace with it. And then we tend to use absolute truth to disparage or dismiss relative human needs, feelings, psychological problems, relational difficulties, and developmental deficits. I see this as an ‘occupational hazard’ of the spiritual path, in that spirituality does involve a vision of going beyond our current karmic situation.*

Many of the women who were sexually abused by (more than one!) Zen teacher in New Mexico apparently asked senior women in that Zen group about it—and were often dismissed with, “He’s just trying to teach you not to be attached.” There are many teaching methods, and many things that happen to us can be used by us as a teaching experience if we choose to. But a true teacher of Zen will never use abuse as a teaching tool.

Continuing the interview, the questioner asks, “*What kind of a hazard does this present?*”

*Trying to move beyond our psychological and emotional issues by sidestepping them is dangerous. It sets up a debilitating split between the buddha and the human within us. And it leads to a conceptual, one-sided kind of spirituality where one pole of life is elevated at the expense of its opposite:*

*Absolute truth is favored over relative truth, the impersonal over the personal, emptiness over form, transcendence over embodiment, and detachment over feeling. One might, for example, try to practice nonattachment by dismissing one’s need for love, but this only drives the need underground so that it often becomes unconsciously acted out in covert and possibly harmful ways instead.*

Questioner: “*Might this account for some of the messiness in our sangha communities?*”

*Definitely. It is easy to use the truth of emptiness in this one-sided way: ‘Thoughts and feelings are empty, a mere play of samsaric appearances, so pay them no heed. See their nature as emptiness, and simply cut through them on the spot.’*

In the traditional teaching in Japanese Zen, if anything comes up other than the deep questioning of our koan or the deep immersion in our practice if it’s not a koan—if anything other than that comes up we’re told to “cut it.” Asian culture, particularly Japanese culture, is very different from Western culture. Japanese children are brought up to view the group as most important and themselves less important than the group. Their role in the group is to keep harmony and to make everyone else feel welcomed and included. We find that, for example, if we go to a meal at someone’s house in Japan that both Japanese hosts and Japanese guests will naturally include everyone in the experience. They don’t get into one-on-ones which we as Westerners will do if we’re in a party, where we engage in a lot of private conversations in the midst of the group. In Japan everybody works to make everyone feel comfortable and included, a lovely aspect of their culture. Many years ago, scientists searched for whether or not there was a genetic basis for such cultural differences between East and West. They took three-day-old infants—who presumably were not yet acculturated—and laid a handkerchief on each of their faces. The Asian babies simply turned their faces aside so that they could

breathe more easily. Instead, the Western babies fought the handkerchief, trying to get it out of their way so they could breathe, expressing a different personality. It can be dangerous to too literally translate Japanese Zen teachings.

We assume, understandably, that to “cut it” means to get rid of it. Push it out of the picture. That’s a misunderstanding of the term “cut,” and a kind of cultural misinterpretation. “Cutting” really means not getting rid of, but cutting our **attachment** to whatever it is that is sticky—which means if it’s something strong we don’t try to push it out of sight. If something unusually sticky and challenging comes up in our zazen it may be time to explore it—not from an intellectual point of view, not through thought, but through bodily experience. It may take some work, but when we can truly become one with those uncomfortable sensations, often a lightness will arise as the issue dissolves and lets go. This is very different from trying to bypass it or shove it under to carpet. If it’s overwhelming, then it’s time to work on it separately with a therapist. You might also check out a book called **Focusing**, by Eugene Gendlin.

In my early years at Rochester, Roshi Kapleau embodied Yasutani Roshi in his teaching. You could literally hear Yasutani’s voice in how he taught, what he emphasized, and it was exactly the Japanese view: Cut everything! Cut anything that’s not directly involved with your practice—your focus on your koan. Only mu! Only mu! Only mu! And this is still an important teaching. However, if some significant blockage comes up because something has happened in your past and it’s beginning to come to the surface through working on that mu—as things will—then it’s important to deal with it. Traditionally in Zen practice you’re supposed to just cut it, ignore it, and go directly to the mu. But if that block is truly in the way, it may be something that really needs to be worked with or we’ll spiritually bypass it and the issue will drive our behavior even if it’s not conscious.

It’s important to recognize here that we’re talking about significant stickiness. Because we are not necessarily 100% committed to our Zen

practice, that part of us that’s wary of it can throw up a lot of tempting alternatives. In the story of the Buddha’s enlightenment these are expressed in metaphor as Mara bring forth first, his beautiful daughters (seductive thoughts) who danced beguilingly before the Buddha-to-be in an attempt to distract him from his practice, and when that didn’t work, bringing out his armies of demons to hurl boiling mud and throw lances and spears (pain) at the Siddhartha—and when that didn’t work either, taunting him with, “You don’t have what it takes to come to awakening.” There’s a place in our practice to turn the light of our awareness onto these briefly, then resume our practice with greater intensity. But if we have a history of abuse, for example, then practice can take the lid off the experience and without dealing with that our practice can be stopped in its tracks or else we will force the demon back into its cave in an act of spiritual bypassing. That’s when it’s important to work with a qualified therapist who hopefully has done zazen or vipassana/shamatha practice.

The interviewer asks, “*What interests you most about spiritual bypassing these days?*”

*“I’m interested in how it plays out in relationships, where spiritual bypassing often wreaks its worst havoc. If you were a yogi in a cave doing years of solo retreat, your psychological wounding might not show up so much because your focus would be entirely on your practice, in an environment that may not aggravate your relational wounds.*”

*“It’s in relationships that our unresolved psychological issues tend to show up most intensely. That’s because psychological wounds are always relational—they form in and through our relationships with our early caretakers.”*

The importance of what is known as “attunement” between an infant and his/her caretaker is beginning to be recognized as essential to proper brain development. **The Boy Who was Raised as a Dog** was written by a psychologist who works with children who have overwhelming wounds from childhood. In one of the cases

featured in the book and from which it takes its name, a baby was born to a teenage mother who had no interest in her child. The grandmother took care of the baby for a year, nurturing the infant. But then she died and her boyfriend went to social services and said, "There's this baby, can you please take it." Social services lost the message and didn't take in the child. The boyfriend raised dogs, and that is what he knew: how to raise a dog. So when social services didn't respond, he did the only thing he could come up with: he put the one-year-old in a dog cage and raised him as a dog for seven years. During that time this child had dog brothers and sisters but almost no human contact. By the time he was seven years old he could not speak human speech, and he behaved, no surprise, like a dog. Again the man went to social services, who finally came and got the child. Though the child had a very challenging beginning, his is a heartening story in the end because the psychologist who wrote the book was able to work with him in a way that brought him into a place of being humanly nurtured. He was able to grow up a relatively normal human being, most likely because of the early nurturing at the hands of his grandmother, and perhaps by the dogs as well.

However, in the book the author describes a different case, one in which he was called by the courts to make a decision about a young teenager, who, only thirteen years old, had murdered two twelve-year-old girls in his apartment building. The court wanted to know whether he would respond in any way to treatment or whether he really needed to be locked up for life. In investigating the boy's story, the author discovered that his mother and father had, when his older brother was born, been part of an immigrant community of family and friends, an extended family. The mother was a little bit simple and easily stressed by the arrival of an infant. But whenever the baby was too much for her she was able to hand the child off to a loving relative—an aunt, a grandmother, somebody else who would nurture the child as well. So that attunement that is so important in infants happened with this child.

Then when the first child was three the parents had another baby. By this time the father had lost his original job and found a new job in another city far away from family and friends. The mom was alone now, without the extra resources of her extended family. Under those conditions, the second child was too much to deal with, and so this brand new baby was left alone in a crib, in a dark room, all day long, while mom went out to the park with the three-year-old. In essence, she abandoned this other child; because of this he never received the attunement that is essential for human beings to become human. As a result, when he was thirteen he was able to murder two girls in his apartment building without regret.

Attunement is essential. Sometimes we get a good dose of it and we feel embraced, we feel loved. We feel fulfilled and we are able to embrace ourselves and embrace others. And yes there are challenges in life but they are not insurmountable when we have that solid basis in being loved. But as was said at the beginning of metta practice this morning, if we've got any holes in our experience of being loved it's very difficult to love ourselves. And if we can't love ourselves and embrace ourselves, if we can't feel good about ourselves, it's impossible to do that fully with others, much as we would try.

These kinds of things come out in Zen practice, maybe not overtly, but they do come out covertly. They come out in our relationships—our relationships with ourselves, our relationships with others. Our life practice is inadequate if we don't address them along with the deepening opening of our minds through Zen practice. Many of you may know people who have done Zen practice for years, who have perhaps solved many, many koans, and yet their behavior has not changed. They still indulge in the same dysfunctional speech and actions they did before they ever started practice—because they never chose to or didn't realize the importance of work on those issues. In the earlier years of Zen in the United States there was still a stigma attached to going to a therapist for psychological work, which didn't help.

Yet Torei Enji, back in the 1700s in Japan, spoke the importance of what he called “the long maturation,” the concurrent practice of bringing into functioning everything we realize, so that eventually our body, speech and mind all accord with the understanding that we have awakened to through our insights and our kensho experiences. Only then can Zen practice be considered to be complete. In our Western culture this may entail not just work on our Zen practice with our teacher but also work with a therapist on psychological stuff as well. Some of our stuff we can untangle and resolve as a result of our Zen practice—if we don’t avoid that stuff—but some of it we may need expert help with. In my own experience it’s an ongoing exercise. Often through practice we open first to the more gross levels of our dysfunction, and then as we work through those we find—guess what!—there’s a more subtle layer beneath that. When we work through those, there can be another more subtle layer yet beneath that.

It’s vital to work a bit differently when we find ourselves getting tight in our practice, when we find ourselves unable to get that breath out past a certain point. How to work with it? As mentioned above, if there is, for example, some tension in our chest, if it feels like you’re blocked, if you can’t bring the breath out very far, then tune into that sense. Feel the experience, there can be sensations around that blockage, whether or not they have a name. Open to their nuances. Be curious. Get to know the experience intimately—as sensation, not through thought! Along the way, if you tune in deeply enough you may begin to find release. Then one day, suddenly, you’ll be able to give a breath that goes on and on and on, seemingly infinitely, with no anxiety, no tightening, no concern about running out of breath. No concern about dying—a true letting go. It’s not kensho, but it’s significant. And then, of course, you may end up with another tight place at some point, especially if you’ve had a challenging childhood.

One of the things that Welwood brings up is about trying to keep up appearances. We try to be the good Zen student and we try to behave like the good Zen student. We try to behave like

a decent human being. Of course! However, in this process, we can tend to brush aside stuff. We have to be careful about that. Tune in! Practice is about opening courageously to “the whole catastrophe.” Giving ourselves permission to walk in, experience, work with the issue, allowing it to be dissolved rather than be shoved out of the picture is important. In this work it’s vital that we not use our head because whatever the issue is, it cannot be processed through thought.

Bessel van der Kolk is these days the foremost expert on post traumatic stress. His interest and research into it began right out of graduate school when he was working for the Veterans Administration. At that time the VA did not recognize post traumatic stress (or battle fatigue as it was sometimes called, or shell shock). And yet he saw men and women coming back from combat severely disabled mentally and emotionally, caught in flashbacks, traumatized by what they had gone through and witnessed. Van der Kolk has made a career out of exploring, learning about, and developing effective tools to help work with PTSD. He’s written an article and also a book called, “The Body Keeps the Score,” in which he writes of how, when we have a traumatic experience, though we shut down mentally, emotionally, there’s still a record of it in our body. And until we work with that body record, we’re going to have a very hard time reaching a point where we’re not caught by it, where it’s not driving our outlook, our emotions, our reactivity, our behavior.

*The basic human wound, which is prevalent in the modern world, forms around not feeling loved or intrinsically lovable as we are. Inadequate love or attunement is shocking and traumatic for a child’s developing and highly sensitive nervous system. And as we internalize how we were parented, our capacity to value ourselves, which is also the basis for valuing others, becomes damaged. I call this a ‘relational wound’ or the ‘wound of the heart.’*

*There is a whole body of study and research in Western psychology*

*showing how close bonding and loving attunement— what is known as ‘secure attachment’,” this is a technical term that is used by psychologists, “have powerful impacts on every aspect of human development. Secure attachment has a tremendous effect on many dimensions of our health, well-being, and capacity to function effectively in the world: how our brains form, how well our endocrine and immune systems function, how we handle emotions, how subject we are to depression, how our nervous system functions and handles stress, and how we relate to others.”*

*“In contrast to the indigenous cultures of traditional Asia, modern child-rearing leaves most people suffering from symptoms of insecure attachment: self-hatred, disembodiment, lack of grounding, chronic insecurity and anxiety, overactive minds, lack of basic trust, and a deep sense of inner deficiency. So most of us suffer from an extreme degree of alienation and disconnection that was unknown in earlier times— from society, community, family, older generations, nature, religion, tradition, our body, our feelings, and our humanity itself.”*

And in our wonderfully technological age, when you don’t even have to leave your house to exist—you can order your groceries online, you can commute via internet for your job, you don’t have to interact with another human being in person—it is a huge loss to humanity. A very isolating, very dangerous loss.

Tina: *“And how is this relevant for how we practice the Dharma?”*

*Many of us—and I include myself here—originally turn to the Dharma, at least in part, as a way of trying to overcome the pain of our psychological and relational wounding. Yet we are often in denial or unconscious about the nature or extent of this wounding. We*

*only know that something isn’t right and we want to be free from suffering.*

*“We turn to the Dharma to feel better, but then may unwittingly wind up using spiritual practice as a substitute for facing our psychological issues.*

Dealing with our issues is important, and practice is also important; both are essential. The subject of spiritual bypassing is brought before you because it is important to be aware that practice is not complete with just awakening. It is only complete when we have come to **complete** awakening **and** we have thoroughly processed and are no longer caught by any issues that we may have had, that we behave in healthy ways, that we are no longer reacting to life but are able to respond from an awakened mind state to whatever comes to us. This is the ultimate goal of practice. It’s not about some ideal where all our stuff seamlessly disappears with one kensho and we just go floating around on a lotus pad for the rest of our lives. It’s hard work to do true practice; it takes courage to do it. But each one of you has got everything necessary to do this vital work.

Fundamentally we are perfect, whole and complete just as we are. But we’ve got layers of conditioning, assumptions, ideas about ourselves and about the world and about others, in place as a result of our experiences growing up and our interactions with people that matter to us. This covers over that innate perfection and purity. Coming to deep awakening, sorting out all this stuff so that we can be totally free, truly free, not dragging anything in, not suppressing anything, but living fully in all our original magnificence, that’s what practice is really about.



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

- D.H. Lawrence

## 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.

**September 20 All-day Sitting** 6 a.m. - 9 p.m.

**September 27 All-Day Workshop on Rinzai Zen**, led by Mitra-roshi. Please go to [www.hvzc.org](http://www.hvzc.org) to download an application form. HVZC members may attend for free; it's a great opportunity for a refresher! Roshi will be at HVZC Sep 26-Oct 3.

### **HVZC ANNUAL MEETING**

**September 29, 7 pm**

*Please note! We need a quorum in order to cover business, so please put this important date on your calendars! It's the only time in the year where the whole sangha meets to make decisions about the Center!*

**October 4 Half-day Introduction to Zen Meditation**, 9 a.m. - noon; please see [www.hvzc.org](http://www.hvzc.org) to download application form.

**October 7-14 7-Day Sesshin at Mountain**

**Gate**; application deadline Oct. 1. *Please note: this is a change of dates from those previously announced.*

**October 24-26 Weekend Work Sesshin**; Roshi expects to be at HVZC October 23-30.

**Jukai (Receiving the Precepts) Ceremony 7 pm October 29**. The bodhisattva precepts are an important aspect of Zen training and can be taken many times—each time bringing us greater commitment to living these precepts.

**November 1 Half-day Introduction to Zen Meditation**, 9 a.m. - noon; please see [www.hvzc.org](http://www.hvzc.org) to download application form.

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

**November 31-December 8 Rohatsu Sesshin at Mountain Gate**; applications due by Nov. 18

## 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**; for info please contact [scott@tcnj.edu](mailto:scott@tcnj.edu)

**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.

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

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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!”*