Adapting to Change

While Zen practice and day-to-day conditions are not two, they can sometimes feel like they are, especially when we find ourselves struggling to adapt to new circumstances or balance demanding responsibilities. Your mother becomes ill, you’re promoted to a managerial position, you commit to a couple of years of therapy, you decide to train for a marathon, you fall in love, you lose your job—these are just a few examples of life events or circumstances that have the potential to throw us off-kilter. The next issue of Zen Bow will explore how practitioners balance practice with life events.
Zen Bow: Faith in Dharma

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The Responsive Communion Between Buddhas and Sentient Beings by Hakuun Yasutani Roshi 3

Reflections on the Four Bodhisattvic Vows by Roshi Sunya Kjolhede 7

Right Livelihood: The Thousand Arms of Kannon by Randy Baker 9

Kyogen’s Man Up a Tree by Roshi Philip Kapleau 13

Letters to Roshi Philip Kapleau 17

Bowing: An Unsolicited Contribution from One Who Cares for the Way by John Blofeld 21

Bodhisattva of Infinite Love and Compassion by Toni Packer 23

Cold Butter on Soft Bread, and Other Anguish by Roshi Bodhin Kjolhede 25

Grace by Sensei Amala Wrightson 28

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From the Editors

In anticipation of the Rochester Zen Center’s 50th anniversary celebration in 2016, this retrospective Zen Bow issue features a selection of essays from past issues on the theme of ‘Faith in Dharma.’ Together, these essays reflect the Center’s teaching traditions and the transformative power of faith.

—Donna Kowal & Brenda Reeb

The Responsive Communion Between Buddhas and Sentient Beings

ROSHI HAKUUN YASUTANI

Editor’s note: The teachings of Hakuun Yasutani-roshi (1885-1973) were introduced to American students largely through the work of his disciples, including Roshi Philip Kapleau’s The Three Pillars of Zen. The following article is adapted from the booklet Eight Bases of Belief in Buddhism by Yasutani-roshi. It originally appeared in Zen Bow in 1969 (vol. II, no. 2), and, in response to popular demand, it was reprinted in 1977 (vol. X, no. 2). We decided to share it ‘for the third time.’

Radio and television, as we all know, make it possible for us to hear and see things happening far away. The responsive communion between buddhas and sentient beings is of this kind of long-distance communication on a spiritual plane. That is to say, the reciprocity can be invisible and take place regardless of distance.

You have already heard me say that Buddha-nature is indigenous to all, and that buddhas of the past even now are engaged in the task of wiping away defiling dusts from their Buddha-nature. Still, if there were no mutual attraction or sympathy between buddhas and sentient beings, none of us could ever become a buddha. Just as a seed will not sprout without sunlight or heat or water or soil, so our Buddha-nature seed without the light of the buddhas’ wisdom and the waters of their compassion will not grow and flourish.

Chin-k’ai, founder of the T’ien-t’ai sect of Buddhism in China, describes four types of responsive communion between buddhas and other forms of consciousness.

1. Latent motivation and indiscernible response

Our deep-rooted desire is not apparent to us, yet in our subconscious mind we are already seeking the Buddha’s Way, which is likewise indiscernible but is nonetheless guiding us at all times. It is like the seed of the plant which has not been exposed to the sun’s light or heat directly but which responds to the indirect stimuli of temperature and humidity. Of the four kinds of responsive communion, this is the most fundamental. Though one may not be consciously aware of seeking the Buddha’s teachings, at a
subconscious level one may well be searching. The Buddha’s invisible response is this subconscious yearning.

The main source of this unapparent response is monks who do zazen by themselves in small mountain temples or solitary retreats. Isolated from intruders and visitors, they devote themselves to zazen, to chanting sutras (the teachings of the Buddha), and to reciting the Great Vows to save all living beings. The response also comes from the many great masters who spend their lives in mountain retreats doing zazen and engaging in other devotions to feed this invisible response. Those of shallow understanding protest that such endeavors contribute nothing of social value and are no more than a selfish concern with one’s own well-being. Actually, such work is altruism of the highest order.

2. Latent motivation and discernible response

Now the Buddha’s teaching is evident. Lectures on the Buddha’s Way are being given in many places and many zazen meditation groups are active. Although it may seem that most people are not interested in such activities, in their subconscious minds they are being influenced in greater ways than is realized. We should not be discouraged if large numbers of persons do not attend lectures on Buddhism or engage in zazen. Such efforts are not in vain. Much more is being accomplished than we realize, and on many levels. It is like the seed under the soil which is ready to sprout but only needs light and water to bring it forth. Therefore it is good to commit oneself to these unspectacular exertions with strong faith and joy. Our efforts are bound to be effective.

3. Discernible motivation and latent response

We are becoming eager and are aware of it. We look for a leader but can’t find one. Despite delays and disappointments, we will not be put off. So long as we continue to study and practice devotedly, our understanding of the Buddha’s Way
becomes clearer and deeper, and eventually this ardor brings forth a good teacher.

4. Discernible motivation and discernible response

The greater one’s devotion to the Buddha’s Way, the greater the guidance from the Buddha and the sooner the opening of the Mind’s eye. Like a plant, which because it is properly nourished and cared for blooms earlier and more beautifully, our awakening also is quicker and more complete.

Let me give you a concrete example of the working of responsive communion between buddhas and living beings. What I am about to tell you happens to be a true story, which was told to me by one of the parties. This gentleman, who had no particular interest in Buddhism, took his convalescing child one summer to sunny Kamakura, a city famous in Japan for its many Buddhist temple and shrines. On a certain day he and his daughter visited Kencho-ji, a well-known temple in Kamakura, for no other reason than that the temple and grounds were so serene and attractive. Since he had no intention of doing zazen or of engaging in any devotions, it would appear that what led him there was nothing more than this pleasant atmosphere. But we must not overlook latent motivation and indiscernible response.

Before returning to Tokyo, late in the summer, this gentleman decided to call on the abbot of Kencho-ji. During the visit the abbot spoke nothing of Zen but simply served his visitor tea, exchanged pleasantries with him, and gave him as a present a small sutra book containing the Buddha’s sermons and dialogues. Believing the gift to be no more than a routine gesture, the man didn’t even open it. Still, when he returned home he put the little book in the family Buddhist altar-shrine. Notice: latent motivation and discernible response.

A few years passed. One day after a nap in a reclining chair near the altar-shrine, he spied the little book. Out of idle curiosity and to pass the time, he took it down and began thumbing through it. This particular sutra talked about the love of parents for their children and the good karma that flowed from it. This man was so impressed by the contents of the book that he immediately dispatched a servant to a Buddhist bookstore to buy him a commentary on the sutra. This he read thoroughly and became convinced of the profundity and applicability of the sutra to his daily life. He was still without direct guidance, but the fact of his having received the book from the abbot was surely indirect guidance. So we now have discernible motivation and unapparent response.

It soon became evident to this man how easily one can go astray studying alone, so he decided to visit the master of a nearby Zen temple for monthly instruction. Now his karma was ripe and he commenced zazen under the guidance of the abbot whose temple he had first visited in Kamakura. Discernible motive and discernible response.

Mencius, the Chinese sage, said, ‘Whatever is accomplished in one day is not accomplished in that day alone; it is accomplished by (previous) causes.’ Nothing, then, is done in one day or night, and of course nothing happens of itself.

Now, even as there are many buddhas, so are there many bodhisattvas, and between them and ourselves there is also a responsive communion. Given this sympathetic attraction between buddhas and bodhisattvas on the one hand and ourselves on the other, can we not become buddhas even without practice and discipline? Unfortunately, it is not so simple and this is why: The attraction is not merely between them and us; it exists between us and all other forms of existence. Thus we respond to devils as much as to buddhas, to bad friends as well as to good, to both selfish and altruistic causes. We admire the man who works hard, but we also envy the fellow who gets by without lifting a finger.

Just as we can choose which TV channel to watch, so we can attune ourselves to the Buddha’s teaching and improve our lives, or tune in to those who would persuade us to do evil. One who likes alcohol inevitably finds himself in the
company of drunkards. The gambler associates with other gamblers. Those who practice zazen are attracted to people similarly inclined.

This mutual sympathy also extends to animals. Dogs take kindly to a person who likes them, and so do cats. In a certain sense, this type of attraction is even more sensitive than that between human beings since animals, having less complex minds, are naturally more intuitive. As an example, when cattle are led into the slaughterhouse they sense their fate and protest in their own fashion, even with tears in their eyes. Buddhists stress vegetarianism because of this empathy between man and beast. Confucius said, ‘One who has heard the scream of an animal being killed could never bear to eat any animal’s flesh.’

In one of the Chinese scriptures there is recounted the incident of a boy who used to play with seagulls by the ocean. One day his father, who had observed his rapport with birds, said to him, ‘Tomorrow catch one of those birds for me, will you?’ ‘If you insist, father, I will,’ the boy replied. But the next day when the boy went down to the beach as usual, no seagulls were in sight. This story is believable if we accept the fact that the birds sensed the boy’s intention to snare one of them and for that reason never appeared.

In this connection there’s a remarkable anecdote involving a Zen master in ancient China who had no head monk in his monastery. When asked by his monks why he did not appoint one he replied, ‘My head monk has not yet been born.’ The monks were perplexed by this cryptic answer. Sometime later the Master informed them, ‘My head monk has been born.’ This statement left them no less bewildered, but they did not press him for an explanation. Again, many years later, the Master announced, ‘My head monk has become a novitiate and is undergoing training on a pilgrimage.’ The monks found this answer no more enlightening than the others. Then one day the Master told his monks, ‘Inasmuch as my head monk is coming today, please clean his room.’ Telling them exactly when the head monk would arrive, he added, ‘You must go to the main gate to welcome him.’

With mixed feelings the monks cleaned the room, and at the proper time went to the main gate. A traveling monk had indeed arrived. After the visitor had gone to the Master’s room to extend his formal greetings, the Master inquired, ‘When did you decide to come to this monastery?’ ‘A few months ago, I heard of you. I wanted to meet you and practice under you,’ the traveling monk replied. To this the master said, ‘I knew before you were born that you would come here. That is why I did not appoint a head monk until today. Although you are new, from now on you are the head monk.’

The master then spoke to him as follows: ‘You and I were born in India at the time of the Buddha Shakyamuni and became his disciples. We worked very hard and developed a mysterious power. Naturally we were good friends. Subsequently, for three lifetimes, you were an emperor, and because you reveled in a worldly life you lost this power. I, on the other hand, having continued to perfect myself, still retain that power. That is why I was able, even before you were born, to predict that you would come here.’ (This monk, I might say, in time became one of the most distinguished masters in the history of Zen. In Japan he is known as Um-mon.)

When my own teacher, Harada-Roshi, related this story, he stated that its import could not be understood on the level of our puny intellect.

Lastly, there is also mutual sympathy and response between teacher and student. A teacher who is a strict disciplinarian will attract many ardent disciples, whereas one who is lax will find himself surrounded by lukewarm students. A competent teacher can help a student make his mind a clean slate. The harder the student strives, the stricter the teacher’s guidance. Eventually this brings about enlightenment.
Reflections on the Four Bodhisattvic Vows

ROSHI SUNYA KJOLHEDE

Editor’s note: Roshi Sunya Kjolhede is a Dharma heir of Roshi Philip Kapleau and the sister of Roshi Bodhin Kjolhede. She teaches at the Windhorse Zen Community in Alexander, North Carolina, which she co-founded with Roshi Lawson Sachter. The following article appeared in Zen Bow in 1997 (vol. XIX, no. 3).

All beings, without number, I vow to liberate.

Endless blind passions I vow to uproot.

Dharma gates, beyond measure, I vow to penetrate.

The great way of Buddha I vow to attain.

For centuries, the monastics have chanted these Four Bodhisattvic Vows several times a day, always three times in succession. We do this at the Rochester Zen Center, and other Zen practitioners throughout this country and the world do the same. Versions of these vows may vary slightly from one center to another—in Rochester, for example, we opted for ‘liberate’ over the loaded verb ‘save.’ But we are all making the same essential declaration: that we will strive endlessly to realize complete and perfect enlightenment not for ourself alone, but for the benefit of all beings. And we will continue this work until every living being—down to each single blade of grass—has attained full Buddhahood.

A tall order! How are we to relate to such colossal vows? Now and then someone, usually someone new to practice, comes to dokusan and asks, ‘How can I, with all my defilements and limitations, presume to take this vow when it is obviously so completely beyond me to fulfill?’ Such uneasiness with the Four Vows, although
grounded in a distorted view, reveals a kind of honest engagement. At least such people are hearing the vows and not just repeating them in a merely mechanical way.

When this question about the vows comes up, it is usually in sesshin. Not only do we chant the vows more frequently during sesshin, but in these deep, extended periods of zazen we inevitably run smack into our ego—and find ourselves face-to-face with our own very unbo-dhisattvic motivations for spiritual practice: our craving for approval, the need to be special, to be admired, to get something that will ensure our permanent personal ease and success. Our habitual posturing, half-heartedness, heaviness, pride, and competitiveness may all come into painfully sharp focus, along with so many other permutations of our ingrained self-partiality. Not a pretty sight—no wonder doubts arise in the mind about our ability to liberate ‘all beings without number’!

Clearly, as long as we identify the ‘I’ of the Four Vows with this mass of delusion, we cannot accomplish the task of the Bodhisattva. It remains light-years beyond us. But all this greed, hostility, and ignorance is just flotsam tossing about on top of the waves, debris that has only now been churned up and brought to the surface through zazen. These afflictions begin to lose their strong grip on us as soon as we recognize them—as long as we neither act on them, nor allow ourselves to be paralyzed by self-loathing and doubts. As we continue to dive into the silent depths of our being, beyond thought, we eventually discover treasure: genuine compassion and love growing out of direct experience of our boundless connectedness with all life.

This experience and the force of compassion it releases is known as bodhicitta, translated as the ‘Bodhi-heart’ or the ‘Will to Enlightenment for the sake of all beings.’ Nagarjuna, one of the most prominent figures in the history of Buddhism, declared that bodhicitta is not included in the five skhandas of form, sensation, thought, volition, and consciousness. Since the Buddha taught that all phenomena could be broken down into these five primary constituents, Nagarjuna’s statement is profoundly radical. His assertion clearly points to the transcendent nature of bodhicitta.

This Will to Enlightenment, latent in all living beings but easily drowned out by the noise of our everyday consciousness, needs constant nurturing to be brought to awareness. Doing zazen, as well as reciting the Four Vows, chanting sutras, and performing prostrations, can all help to open this Bodhi-heart. By giving ourselves fully to these activities—and to the changing circumstances of our daily lives, without retreating from them—we arouse and give expression to the Mind that seeks the Way, establishing it firmly in our own body-mind.

Here, in the bodhicitta, we find the true well-spring of our being—and the source and substance of the Four Vows. Here we contact the warm beating heart of the Bodhisattva, the archetypal hero of Mahayana Buddhism. Is there anything as uplifting, as sublimely ennobling as the Bodhisattva Ideal? When we are moved, sometimes to tears, by stories of humans and animals who risk or sacrifice their lives to save others, by scenes of self-transcendence in films, even by someone simply going out of his or her way to help another—this ineffable upsurge of feeling is the Bodhi-heart both recognizing and rejoicing in itself.

The Buddha himself never explicitly formulated a teaching of the Bodhisattva Ideal. This is part of the Mahayana sutras, which were born several centuries after the Buddha’s Parinirvāna. But the archetype of the Bodhisattva is unmistakably clear in the Jataka tales, which comprise some of the earliest teachings of classical Buddhism. And, of course, we have the vivid example of Shakyamuni himself. He was no cool, detached arhat, standing alone and aloof on the highest mountain peak, serenely surveying the saha world, and passing blissfully into Nirvana. He might have chosen to live out the remainder of his life, after his Great Awakening, in this way. According to the story, he very nearly did. Instead, he took the next crucial step.

With clear eyes and a heart and mind wide open, the Buddha walked down the mountain
and plunged into the marketplace. And here he spent the rest of his life, shirt sleeves rolled up, ‘mingling with snakes and dragons,’ teaching, responding, totally involved. With unlimited wisdom and skillful means, he embraced whatever or whomever came before him: mothers stricken with grief, serial killers, murderous cousins and charging elephants, armies and prostitutes and troublesome monks. Like the ultimate country doctor, the Buddha walked throughout India, working tirelessly to heal the sicknesses and uproot the sufferings of countless beings, exhorting his awakened disciples to do the same.

Even if the story of the Buddha were to be disproved as historical fact, what would it matter? As Black Elk put it, ‘I cannot tell you whether this actually happened, but if you think about it, you will know that it is true.’ The Bodhisattva Ideal, so beautifully demonstrated in the life of Shakyamuni, only mirrors our own essential nature. It is an ideal that has been actually experienced and lived by countless people since the Buddha’s time. In Zen, this ‘entering the marketplace with helping hands,’ depicted in the last frame of the Ten Oxherding Pictures, is upheld as the highest level of human functioning. And it is exactly this heart of boundless wisdom and compassion that the Four Vows, in the vastness of their scope, challenge us to live up to. In reciting these vows, not with our mouths but with our tissues and bones, we pledge ourselves to accomplish the seemingly impossible. To prevail, we must leap beyond the narrow constraints of conceptual thought and self-absorption, let go of doubts and fears rooted in our supposed identity with this finite body-mind, and allow this ‘I’ to return to its natural, all-embracing condition. The Four Vows call on us to realize and live up to the actual truth of our being—to be the Great Way of the Buddha. When this true self ‘covers and permeates the sky and the earth,’ what Dharma gates are not penetrated? What blind passions are not uprooted? And where do we find any beings outside ourselves to liberate?

Right Livelihood: The Thousand Arms of Kannon

RANDY BAKER

Editor’s note: Randy Baker is a former student of Roshi Philip Kapleau who trained at the Rochester Zen Center. After twenty years of Zen practice, he took up the practice of Vipassana Buddhism. He is currently a teacher at Satipañña Insight Meditation in Toronto, Canada. The following article appeared in Zen Bow in 1990 (vol. XI, no. 4).

Subject to decay are all composite things.
Strive diligently for liberation.

These words, the Buddha’s last, cleanly sum up both the difficulty and the promise of Buddhist teaching from his time down to our own. Required of us is unceasing arousal of ‘the Mind that seeks the Way,’ the effort to penetrate beyond the veil of illusory thought. The inherent promise is that thoroughgoing commitment to this exertion will unerringly result in the awakening of our True Mind.

Throughout the earlier centuries of Buddhist history, the path of the monastic was often understood as the sole mode of life truly conducive to enlightenment. In modern times, the Mahayana conception of liberation as available to anyone willing to seek it assiduously is coming to the fore as lay people from all walks of life seek to integrate practice and realization into their lives. In this context, the fifth item of the Eightfold Path, Right Livelihood, gains tremendous
significance for people concerned with the establishment of the Buddhadharma in the West. The Dharma is said to be ‘incomparably profound and minutely subtle.’ Buddhist doctrine, the outward form given to express this mind, reveals new and deeper levels as practice continues, and Right Livelihood may be seen from many aspects. From one crucial standpoint, Right Livelihood is approached through the Precepts. Thus certain occupations are undesirable due to their contributing to pain or degradation in the lives of others. Any work involving killing, the sale of weapons, sexual impropriety, or the purveying of substances that impair the mind is a breach of the Precepts bearing on these matters.

Needless to say, consideration of one’s livelihood in light of the Precepts may be very complex in today’s endlessly interwoven civilization. For example, people involved in marketing or sales might consider the ecological and social effects of the products or services they promote. Actually, if one is even a little sensitive, one will be aware of compromises—ethical or otherwise, however slight—that one makes in work no matter what the nature of the work may be (this point will be addressed in more detail later). However, there are some jobs or vocations that seem more than others to live up to the standards of the Precepts due to their obvious benefits to sentient beings. Among these might be working for the preservation of the environment, as a doctor or a nurse, or on staff at a Zen center. Most types of work might seem to live between the two extremes, more or less in a kind of ‘karmic neutral zone.’ However, while the negativity of those occupations which clearly violate the Precepts is undeniable, the relative ‘goodness’ of other types of work really depends not on what the work is so much as on how one performs it.

This matter of how we work is an essential one, one that is often overlooked; unless we acknowledge its importance and seek to practice it, there are at least two mistakes, opposites of each other, that we can fall into. The first is an
all-too-common feeling that one’s work is insignificant or of indifferent value in the larger picture. Yet the Dharma teaches that, from the absolute standpoint, the whole universe is present in each and every thing, and all time in a moment. Thus our own ideas of limitation are the only limits on the significance of our every action. The more we succeed in shedding these ideas, the more we live and act out of the truth. How can we work in this way?

A master said: Do not be attached to the events of your daily life, but never separate yourself from them.

All practices in Zen are in essence the practice of attention. Koan practice, too, in its utter questioning, is simply a means to free the mind of its intense ego-involvement, thereby to open it to what is. This questioning is in fact the essence of attention: if attention to things is total, their ineffability—their actual nature—is revealed. In giving ourselves fully to each moment, each activity, we are cultivating samadhi, just as when we sit. In The Wheel of Life and Death, Roshi Kapleau defines ‘limited, or positive, samadhi’ as ‘partial unity with an object or action.’ Moreover, he says, ‘The more you cultivate oneness in your life, the easier it becomes to achieve positive samadhi.’ The effort to live in this manner is inseparable from the concentrative work one does on the mat and from the deeper states one may attain there.

Attention in the midst of activity must be inner as well as outer. States of mind and body, as they arise, can be experienced fully and, to one degree or another, transcended. What better environment for working on these things than that of our jobs? There is no individual, and no workplace, that is without difficulty and challenge. Yet when we face others, we are presented only with ourselves. Speaking from the relative standpoint, when attention is removed from consideration of the ego-self, from the sense of self-and-other, responses to all situations become clean and forthright, fitting naturally to circumstances and the people involved in them. When the mind is clarified the direct result is compassion and the most effectual execution of the work at hand.

It may be difficult to find the faith to act on the above truths, to begin taking the steps necessary to shatter the ego’s iron hold on our consciousness. Similarly, people new to practice often feel doubts about their ability to ‘live up to’ some of the new things they are learning. For example, they may feel ‘How can I “liberate all beings without number’”? As always, one is encouraged to simply put oneself as fully as possible into the chanting of the Four Vows—time and time again. Doing so, one gradually learns in the best way possible—through one’s own deepening experience—that one is actually unlimited. ‘My body is so big I don’t know where to put it,’ in Zen master Mumon’s phrase. More and more one realizes that benefit flows outward at the deepest levels from such no-minded activity, benefit that embraces ‘all sentient beings and inanimate things,’ as we chant in the Repentance Ceremony.

But it is relatively easy to do this in special situations such as chanting, ceremonies, and sesshin. It may be harder to practice in the more mundane circumstances of work, but we can act out of the awareness that in our True Nature there is no ‘hierarchy of activities.’ If we focus our minds as thoroughly in all our activities, the same benefit flows as fully. And it is precisely due to its greater difficulty that mindfulness in activity can be even more strengthening. Every activity, every motion, imperceptibly becomes the healing work of Kannon.

But if every activity may foster practice and realization, there is no activity or type of work that does so inherently: the work of arousing the Mind must be present. The danger opposite that of downgrading one’s work is thinking that, because one works in a certain environment, one is automatically engaged in Right Livelihood. One may work for a peace organization, but Solzhenitsyn’s point that ‘the line between good and evil runs down the middle of every human heart’ demonstrates that, if such a person is not working on himself or herself, the cause of
peace is not served. Again, working as a doctor or at a Zen center, does not, of itself, guarantee that one is working for the welfare of others, or even for one's own welfare. The key is self-cultivation. Or its absence.

Another aspect of Right Livelihood involves the effort to find work for which one is suited (which may be different from work which suits oneself). It is, of course, appropriate to seek work that accords with one's talents and affinities. But here, as always, one must seek the Middle Way. If one hopes for an ideal work situation, one will find only barriers. Moreover, there may be times in our lives when we feel compelled to accept the work that is available for financial or other reasons. In any case, one must realize that ultimately there is no such thing as an alienating situation—or a boring one, for that matter. There are only alienated, or bored, people; and both of these mind-states arise, again, from insufficient attention to inner and outer circumstances. Where the mind is fully honed, there is no difficulty. Of course, this line of reasoning could easily be misused to harmful ends by those seeking to exploit others. It should be used rather as a reminder to ourselves of the potential for awakening in every situation. Each person alone must find this balance.

Having said this, we can again touch upon a point mentioned earlier. In the present world, it is probably inevitable that one's work, and one's life generally, involve many compromises. As any sensitive person will be aware, few if any of our choices are without repercussions somewhere in the vast and complex ecological, social, and political networks in which we live. Even those directly working for environmental causes must use electricity and automobiles, and create some level of waste to be effective. To act responsibly in the midst of this means to be thoroughly but unselfishly involved, as informed as possible about the effects of one's actions, and seeking to minimize their negative impact. This is really to find a 'middle way.' But to bring out fully the compassion and wisdom that is the highest potential of our lives, even a further step is needed.

Our teachers point out that internal and external conflicts will arise as long as there are traces of self-and-other in our perceptions. As long as we live even partially through this delusion—for example, thinking 'I must be environmentally responsible'—we act out of ego, augmenting separation. Moreover, still bound by judgments, we perceive actions and beings through this lens of separation, even as our True Nature is beyond all distinctions. Until we understand this last point fully, the struggle to act and live rightly continues: it is in this very struggle that liberation is uncovered.

The mind of actualized practice at work is beyond ideas of Right Livelihood, and beyond all other ideas as well. It is aptly summed up by a true story, here paraphrased, in Zen: Merging of East and West. In the 1950's, a young Philip Kapleau met a Japanese doctor who was also a member of Yasutani-Roshi’s zazen group. The man had begun practicing medicine during WW11, his first patients victims of the unimaginable sufferings of war. After the war he had almost given up medicine in despair: 'Why should I practice medicine when people are all going to suffer and die anyway?' After having devoted himself to zazen, seated and active, for some years, he came to kensho and found the answer to his question: 'Because you're a doctor!'
Kyogen’s Man Up a Tree

ROSHI PHILIP KAPLEAU

Editor’s note: This article is based on a teisho given by Roshi Philip Kapleau during a seven-day sesshin in October 1972. The teisho also appeared in Zen Bow in 1972 (vol. V, no. 4).

Our koan today, case number 5 in the Mumonkan, is titled ‘Kyogen’s Man Up a Tree.’ It reads: ‘Kyogen said, “It [meaning Zen] is like a man up a tree hanging from a branch with his mouth. His hands can’t grasp a bough, his feet won’t reach one. Under the tree there is another man who asks him the meaning of Bodhidharma’s coming from the West. If he doesn’t answer, he evades his duty. If he does answer, he may lose his life. What should he do?”’

As I am more familiar with the Japanese pronunciation of the Chinese masters’ names, I will refer to them in that manner throughout.

Kyogen, who is eleventh in the line of Zen after Bodhidharma, was a disciple of Zen master Isan. He is said to have been seven feet tall, very clever and learned, and that this stood in the way of his enlightenment.

When he came before his teacher Isan for the first time, Isan, recognizing his innate capabilities—that is, capability of grasping the truth—said to him, ‘I do not ask you concerning the learning and book-knowledge you have accumulated during your life. Before you came out of your mother’s womb, before you knew this from that, give me an original word from the bottom of your mind showing the genuine realization of Truth. Tell me, what is it?’ Kyogen stood there stupidly, unable to answer. Then after remaining silent for some time he began to explain, in many words, his view of the matter.
But Isan wouldn’t listen. At last Kyogen said, ‘Please explain to me.’ Isan said, ‘My explanation would express my own realization. Of what use would it be to you?’ So Kyogen went back to his room and searched among his books and lecture notes for some sentence, some passage, to use as an answer. But not one could he find. So he said, ‘You can’t fill an empty stomach with a picture of food,’ and burned up all his books and notebooks and decided, ‘In this life it will be impossible for me to come to a knowledge of Truth, so I will spend the rest of my days as a rice-gruel monk and avoid troubling my peace of mind.’ (A rice-gruel monk is one who’s not good for anything except eating.) And with tears he left Isan and settled down in Nanyang. Here he simply gave up all his intellectual work and just took care of his small place. One day as he was clearing the undergrowth and sweeping, a stone struck a bamboo. Bursting into a loud shout of joy at the sound, he suddenly became enlightened. Returning to his hut he made prostrations, offered incense, and then, prostrating himself in the direction of Isan’s temple, said, ‘Thanks to the deep kindness of the Master, I have returned to my parents. If at that time he had explained things to me, this would never have happened.’

My teacher Harada-Roshi used to say that because scholars and intellectuals are always trafficking in ideas, it is more difficult for them to reach Awakening than for those not so burdened. He would also say that women usually come to enlightenment quicker than men mainly because their minds do not harbor and play with concepts the way men’s do. But then he would add—after all, Harada-Roshi had been a college professor himself for fourteen years—‘When the highly intellectual person does break through, usually it’s a very thorough breakthrough.’ Furthermore, the individual with the keen mind, the sort who loves to engage in subtle arguments and close reasoning, when he does open his Mind’s eye can more effectively teach than one whose mind is not so subtle. The point is that no one, neither the dull nor the bright, need feel discouraged. Since this enlightened Mind is common to all existence, each of us has the capability of awakening to it. Concerning this Mind we can say what a mystic in another tradition said of God: ‘Of all things it is impossible to seek God without having already found Him.’ This, in fact, is the impetus toward zazen.

To return to the case: ‘Under the tree there is another man who asks him, “What is the meaning of Bodhidharma’s coming from the West?”’—that is, from India to China. When I was training in Japan, ordinary Japanese were constantly asking me, ‘Why did you come to Japan to study and practice Zen? Why did you leave the comforts of your American way of life for the austerities of a Japanese monastery?’ Why indeed? Why did Bodhidharma, who is said to have been a prince, leave his royal life of ease in India and, at an advanced age, risk the dangers of the hazardous journey to China in the sixth century? What meaning did his coming, his doing zazen for nine years facing the wall, have for the Chinese? What meaning has it for us? Had he realized something profound and mysterious and wonderful which he wanted to communicate? And how did he convey it? Don’t imagine this koan is just a teaser having nothing to do with the realities of your life. If you truly understand, you know it does nothing less than point to your all-embracing True Mind.

So here is this hapless monk holding on with all his might to a branch with his teeth—obviously those teeth are not false ones. What a dilemma! Zen Master Dogen says, ‘When a man gives you the Truth from your right shoulder, it is your duty to pass it on to someone who asks for it on your left. If you hear the Truth from a man in front, you are obliged to pass it on to someone back of you.’ And if you are up a tree hanging by your teeth and someone below sincerely asks for the truth, you must respond! Just look at that tree-hanger—grrrr, swinging and trying to hold on! And yet, and yet—might he somehow be answering that momentous question? If so, in what way?
Before enlightenment we are all up a tree hanging on by the skin of our teeth. Whenever we open our mouths to explain or complain, we fall from grace into a painful world of fear and suspicion, loneliness and grief. ‘Fools will give you reasons, wise men never try,’ as the old song had it. Then what to do? What to do?

Are we to remain forever silent? After all, our ability to think and speak is what distinguishes us from animals. So it is not silence or speech but the understanding, the egolessness, infusing our stillness or talking that matters. When we are being abused do we argue and fight back or do we stand humbly mute? When we see evil and violence being perpetrated, do we remain silent or do we speak out against it? Silence may be golden but it can also be yellow.

What would you say if someone asked about the innermost truth of Zen—for that is the problem the koan is posing. Would you eloquently discourse on the Buddha’s Dharma? Or would you shout ‘Kwatz!’? Of course, up a tree hanging by your teeth you could make that mistake only once. Or in another situation would you make like a ‘liberated’ Zen man and slam the table with your fist? Don’t be a phony! Be a man ‘without rank,’ as Zen Master Rinzai puts it, a man who denies ‘I’ and rises above his fellow man, free from all airs. A man who at every moment, whether walking or sitting, eating or excreting, blends in, blends with every situation. A man whose mind is not captive to thoughts of past glories and failures or present worries and future hopes. A man without opinions or ideals. Sounds bleak, does it? ‘Opinion,’ says Voltaire, ‘has caused more suffering then all the epidemics put together.’ As for ideals, be a real man, not an ideal one, for the real man is all right, the ideal one all wrong. Train yourself through zazen to feel and act instead of merely to think and talk.

Another thing: people are forever asking, ‘What is the meaning of life?’ If you, a Zen practitioner, were asked that question, how would you respond? Would you explain in a few dozen well-chosen words or would you, your face wreathed in an archaic smile, remain silent? Would that last really be an answer? What is the meaning of the sun’s shining? What is the meaning of rain or thunder? What is the meaning of a squirrel having a bushy tail, a dog a straight one? What is the meaning of Bodhidharma’s coming from the West?

The story is told of a famous concert pianist who once played a dissonant contemporary piece at a private gathering. After he had finished, an old lady came up to him and said, ‘I just don’t understand that piece. What does it mean?’ Without a word the pianist played it again. Then turning to the old lady, he said sweetly, ‘That’s what it means!’

Now Mumon’s verse: ‘Though your eloquence flows like a river, it is all of no avail. Even if you can explain the whole body of the Buddha’s sutras, that also is useless. If you can answer the problem properly, you can kill the living, bring the dead to life. But if you can’t answer, you must ask Maitreya when he comes.’

The sutras are the entombed words which once issued from the realized Mind of the Buddha. They tilt in the direction of Truth but must not be mistaken for it. Zen, mind you, does not put down or discard the sutras; it simply warns that they are the finger pointing to the Moon, but not the Moon (Mind) itself. This is why Zen alone of all the Buddhist sects does not base itself on one or more sutras.

The truth is more than anything that can be said about it. The dead word is the explanatory word, devoid of flesh and blood and marrow. All explanations and descriptions are a peephole on a limitless universe. Says Zen Master Hakuin:

The measure of words
is like the seas and the mountains—
nothing but an overflow of delusions.

‘If you can answer the problem properly you can kill the living, bring the dead to life.’ Those who live in their egos are already as good as dead, their enormous potential for love and
creativity throttled. They dig their graves with their heads, with their weighing and analyzing, their reasoning and explaining, their likes and dislikes. Others with maddeningly active egos live scattered, hustling lives, always on the go, like a stirring spoon. Outwardly they seem brimful of energy and purpose, yet inwardly they are confused and uncertain, dominated by drives and corroding fears. When they cease judging and weighing, arguing and game playing, and become quiet and centered, they experience a world new to them in peace and wonder. That is, once they slay this cancerous self called ‘I,’ the product of ignorance and fear, and bring to life in themselves their true, unblemished Mind, they experience a living ‘we’ instead of a dead ‘me.’ This is killing the living, bringing the dead to life. This is the miracle of zazen.

‘But if you can’t answer, you must ask Maitreya when he comes.’ Maitreya—Miroku in Japanese—is the Bodhisattva who will become the Buddha of the next world cycle. He is now said to be in the Tushita Heaven, where he will remain for some 5,000 years until his Buddhahood has matured. So here’s the message: If you think you can come to Enlightenment riding on the back of explanations and conceptions—forget it! You’ve got about as much chance as a snowflake in hell!

Now Mumon’s verse: ‘Kyogen really has bad taste. He is endlessly malicious. He stops up the monks’ mouths and then watches them intensely with the black, piercing eyes of a devil.’ This praise-by-slander is characteristic of Zen. The masters abhor what Harada-Roshi used to call ‘powder-and-rouge’ expressions, endearing terms which lead to bedeviling attachments. If we habitually speak of our True-mind as the ‘Treasure Gem of Freewill,’ for example, or if we idolize the Buddha as the ‘Savior of the World,’ or if we eulogize Bodhidharma as our ‘Glorious Founder,’ we gild the lily, defiling our mind. Elsewhere Mumon says of Bodhidharma: ‘That broken-toothed old foreigner who importantly crossed the sea from 100,000 miles away ... He had only one disciple and even he was a cripple. Well, well!’ Isn’t that marvelous? Where but in Zen can you find such ‘respectful disrespect’ and such ‘disrespectful respect’?

Actually Mumon is praising Kyogen in reverse for his compassion and wisdom, for his courage to dramatically cut from under his disciples their ego props of endless verbalizing, of clinging to names and forms and concepts. Having done that, Kyogen, concerned master that he is, intently watches them for the telltale signs of awakened Understanding.

Roshi Bodhin Kjolhede’s note: During the Zen Center’s early years, it was a common practice for Zen Bow to feature letters written to Roshi Kapleau about sesshin experiences. The experiences recounted in the following letters, all published in 1971 (vol. IV, no. 6), are not unique to that time. They are also the experiences of sesshin participants before then and since then. If not common, they are timeless. But the fact that so many appeared in Zen Bow at that time does reflect something particular to the Center’s earlier years. Sesshin was still somewhat new to the West, and Roshi Kapleau evidently felt that, just as the enlightenment accounts in The Three Pillars of Zen had led so many of us to practice Zen, these later letters could lead Center members to venture into this most concentrated form of Zen practice. Though meant for inspiration, letters like these, which have appeared since ancient times in the texts of our tradition, regrettably can leave readers without similar experiences feeling diminished by comparison. We can only hope that far more people will derive sustenance from these accounts. After all, what one person has done, anyone can do.

January 12, 1970

Dear Roshi:

Here are a few lines that emerged after the last sesshin.

In the beginning, when hearing of Zen masters saying: ‘You are that mass of yellow flowers,’ or ‘You must become that sound of the bell,’ we regard this as utterly fantastic, mysterious, and unfathomable. Mistakenly we think that we, as we know ourselves right then and there, in our most everyday aspects, will at some time experience a sudden transformation into sounds or flowers that are essentially outside of ourselves. This is not so. In Zen practice, while in contact with sense objects, like forms, sounds, physical pain, or mental anguish, we slowly learn to become ever increasingly quiet and motionless in the face of these, until, eventually, we reach such a degree of inner silence and stillness, that we merely experience ourselves as the most infinitesimally minute vibration. Strangely enough, this very pinpoint existence flows directly out of monumental, convulsive, back, heart, and mind-breaking exertion during Zen sitting. When, at some instant, we have vanished entirely, the sound of the gong drowns the entire universe, flowers leap out of the vase, and every footstep radiates throughout the ten quarters.

On this Path, all sense objects, all sufferings and all pains, can be used as the most welcome, helpful tools. We use them tirelessly to learn to become ever increasingly noiseless, still, and motionless in their very presence. Only when utterly diminished ourselves can we thoroughly penetrate and understand them. At this moment of oneness they are clearly realized for what they are: entirely without substance, entirely without threat and without harm. This is the meaning of the Buddha’s Noble Eightfold Path and the end of all suffering. All there remains is an overwhelming outflow of bliss, vigor, gratitude, and infinite, all-embracing love.

This is inexpressibly marvelous. Infinite thanks for the last sesshin.

Lovingly,

___

January 11, 1971

Dear Roshi:

How can one help but write to you after this past sesshin and say thank you, to you and all buddhas and bodhisattvas everywhere.
These last four days of sesshin have been somewhat like a miracle, and because of the effort of all these people, the Buddha-seed has sprouted above the dark, damp earth and grown in leaps and bounds.

Never again could I possibly doubt the sustaining power that one’s zazen has on all sentient beings everywhere. It is completely amazing to me how, during this past sesshin, my practice deepened and deepened—but not through my own efforts, only through the efforts of everyone working hard at the sesshin!

How all the buddhas must sing praises as loud and clear as they can as they feel us clearing our minds and purifying our hearts! And how wonderful that our efforts are the life-giving nutrients which sustain all buddhas! How wonderful indeed!

With every sesshin, like the one just past, 10, or 100, or 10,000 buddhas are born in all the ten directions. I say thank you again and again! It is so hard to contain this joy, except to offer it back to the earth and sky and countless universes from where it came.

Never before have I seen so clearly the importance of the continued deepening and strengthening of one’s practice and realized the appalling short-sightedness of my aspiration to be a teacher.

What a wonderful gift have been these last four days.

Thank you! Thank you everyone!

—

May 5, 1971

Dear Roshi:

Please forgive the rather confused letter I sent to you right after the January sesshin. I was still so excited when I wrote it that I am afraid it didn’t
make much sense. There is no doubt, however, that the sesshin had a tremendous impact. Something happened at the end that defies description, but that felt like an explosion of joy. Since then many things have been different. I am beginning to discover the true meaning of ‘attention’ and can at times stay in the present for appreciable periods of time.

Some attachments have dropped away already, others have nearly gone. You predicted correctly that I would not even be aware of them when they left, but would later miss them. The most important ones that have gone are the attachments to mother, father, and sex. Their disappearance has created a new horizon of freedom. Almost gone is an old pattern of behavior that has always been self-defeating.

Sitting in zazen is now quite different. It feels perfectly natural to sit 35 to 45 minutes without strain … . I discovered recently that I am no longer frantically striving for enlightenment, but am content to become wholly absorbed in my practice … .

My gratitude knows no limits. I have received so much more than I have been able to give, that the only way I can repay you is to help others. The vow of the Bodhisattva seems very compelling and the only path to follow … .

Gassho,
___

May 11, 1971

Dear Mr. Kapleau:

I’m sorry we didn’t have an opportunity to say goodbye at the end of sesshin. I was too near tears to be able to speak to you immediately after sesshin (being still much too egotistical to cry in public) and after dinner we went to ___’s house … so I missed any chance later to talk to you.

I just want to thank you for the most wonderful experience of my life. Even though my only accomplishment was learning to count to ten, I really feel renewed—more buoyant and awake and full of energy and determination to do zazen more faithfully, to keep random thoughts at a minimum, and to live more closely by the Zen precepts.

Your always inspiring words, the beautiful rituals, and the whole way of life at the Center all work together to create an atmosphere where the smallest thing can move one to tears of wonder, appreciation, love or compassion—you’re not sure which, exactly. I kept my tears bottled up, however, not realizing until near the end that one is just supposed to let them flow. Next time I’ll probably produce a junior Niagara!

I thank you again for opening my eyes to new ways of thinking, and providing my life with a greater sense of purpose and direction.

Sincerely,
___

November 4, 1971

Dear Roshi:

Such a great sesshin! (Not that I could imagine any that would be otherwise!)

One of the highlights occurred for me when I was in a moment of utter despair. I was so desperate to get rid of my proud, selfish, and complaining, niggling ego for once and for all, and to free my mind finally from the anguish of its torturing concepts. I could smell that ‘cheese’ you mentioned so very close, yet I couldn’t seem to do the thing that would get me through that wall. Was it an act of grace, I wondered, that I was waiting for? But grace from where? I felt the awful bind of man: frozen in time and place, he knows nothing, can do nothing! Then loomed the devastating possibility of having to return home and continue my practice without any discernible signs of progress whatsoever. Yet I must persist. But how? I was desperate for all the help I could get, so I kept asking for the kyosaku. For
most of the sesshin it seemed like a mere mosquito bite compared to the excruciating pain in my legs, and neither seemed enough (although the monitors’ presence was sustaining). In the last few hours the stick was laid on with a heavier hand. But finally I reached a point where I felt too physically shattered to be able to ask for it anymore. Anyhow, I thought, in utter (blind) despair, even if they broke my collarbone, it still wouldn’t be any use. No one can help me to get through that wall. Suddenly I felt the touch of your compassionate hands very gently adjusting my posture. I was so grateful I cried.

It seems that each sesshin provides the insight necessary to one at that particularly needful moment of his practice. The first sesshin gave me the awakening jolt necessary to show me the path I must take in the way of life possible to one through Zen. The great lesson I learned from this most recent sesshin … was that ‘last month’s effort was not true effort,’ and I see how much harder I will have to exert myself in the future. If you recall, you said to me at one dokusan as I sat before you without a cushion, that my legs must be stronger than I thought. When I was back down in the zendo doing zazen again—and not lying down as I had hoped you would suggest when I complained of nausea—not even with a chair, as you advised me to use one only as an extreme last resort—I decided that you must mean for me to stop babying myself and that my endurance too was greater than I had believed. This acted as a spur to enable me to discover a depth of strength I didn’t know existed.

Even though life’s meaningfulness to me is in the act of trying, the concept of ‘trying’ has now taken on new dimensions!

How relieved I was this sesshin to be able to eat the food! Was it possible, I continually wondered, that this was the same food that had made me ill during my first sesshin? Those apples and bananas tasted like pure ambrosia! I see now that it is just yet another aspect of one’s awakening mind. It was so wonderful to have that silence at meals, too, and thus the opportunity to fully experience the eating. No wonder that one has stomach complaints, no wonder the tendency to overeat—when one’s habit has been to blindly and irreverently gulp down one’s meal with scarcely a glance at what one is so busily shoveling in! The formality of the tea ceremony seemed such an excellent way to begin the sesshin. Somehow it seemed so much more satisfying, too, for us to share our first full meal together only after we have all been working together for some time.

Another insight came through the work period. For years that Biblical story about Martha and Mary has been perplexing me. If you recall, Martha bitterly complained that her sister Mary was talking with Christ instead of helping her in the kitchen. I always tended to sympathize with Martha. This sesshin my work assignment was in the kitchen, and while I was mindful of the great importance the kitchen has in Zen and a little nervous about being assigned there, I must confess that I was also somewhat resentful that the greater and more complicated work load depleted my rest periods, which I had so been counting on. I was peeved, too, when an anxiety about some complication of the work schedule would suddenly bother me during zazen. I felt I had already enough problems of my own to cope with! On one occasion, too, for some reason—possibly confusion due to fatigue—my attention wasn’t quite with the task I was doing and I unintentionally didn’t do it as carefully as it’s required. It was nothing that anyone would know about, or could possibly notice—but it bothered me so much as to seriously interfere with my practice. Suddenly then I realized that why, yes, of course—it is for ourselves that we are doing the work! I see, too, that I had been making a sort of idol of the zendo, regarding work done there as somehow more special. But now I see that the kitchen and zendo are one!

Now that I am back home again I panic. Suddenly I am aware that here there is no Roshi, no dokusan, no monitors with their kyosakus, no ideal sesshin conditions. How especially grateful I am now to have brought back with me this lesson of perseverance to sustain me during the difficult days I anticipate ahead. Yet others, I remind myself, must be returning to more difficult
and isolated circumstances. I, fortunately, have the zendo, and my friends in the Zen group here to encourage me. The excruciating pain persists, but I perceive it as really a blessing—the necessary prod for my self-indulgent nature. All distractions, I now see, must be used in this way to urge one to a deeper effort. Before this week I used to think that the ‘battle to the death’ occurred only at sesshins, but now I see it continues every second, every day! I am selfishly glad that you yourself went through a long and arduous trial before you reached enlightenment. How deeply comforting it is to see your footprints before me on the path!

Now to continue the work on myself in preparation for my next sesshin, which I am determined must be a seven-day one. But, of course, one works not just for another sesshin. Rather, as a friend said, ‘It is a way of life.’

It was such a privilege and joy to be able to participate with you and the other Center residence and members at this sesshin.

My warm wishes to all.

Gratefully,
Yours in gassho,

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**Bowing: An Unsolicited Contribution from One Who Cares for the Way**

**JOHN BLOFELD**


Since Buddhism arrived in the West, inevitably some people have felt, ‘Zazen is good, compassion is good, self-discipline is good, but why all this bowing and incense? To whom does one offer incense and flowers?’ To this all the Buddhists of the past and all Asian Buddhists today would answer with one voice: ‘Dear friends, a spirit of reverence is essential to successful practice. Without it, Enlightenment can never be attained!’

Prostrations and offerings are admittedly just forms—just a human way of expressing what cats express by rubbing themselves against a beloved person’s legs. If it were a natural for humans to stand on their heads or stick out their rumps to express reverence, then Buddhists would stand on their heads or stick out their rumps as a matter of course. Forms do not matter in themselves, but the attitude of mind symbolized by prostrations, etc. is of stupendous importance to followers of the Way.

My Tibetan lama told me at a very early stage of my training: ‘Ignorant people adopt the attitude of subject to king before a Buddha statue. Higher-level practice is performed wholly in the mind. Yet even if you attain the highest possible level—hard indeed to reach in one lifetime—you
must daily alternate formless, wordless, above-conceptual practice with bowing down and making offerings. Never fail in that.’ My Chinese Ch’an (Zen) teacher told me: ‘In between your rounds of meditation, practice bowing, offering incense, and making circumambulations. If you have no spirit of reverence, no feeling of awe for all that lies beyond the confines of that miserably circumscribed illusion you suppose to be your “me,” you will make no progress. Why? Because, when your practice improves you will reflect: ‘I did better in my meditation just now’ and by so thinking, fall back to the lowest level of ignorance owing to the consequent inflation of your devilish ‘I’!

Those Zen monks who said, ‘meet the Buddha, kill the Buddha’ or advocated using Buddha figures as firewood, etc. were not talking to Americans or to new Buddhists, but to Chinese or Japanese Zen followers who could be counted upon to understand the meaning of such instructions, which really amounted to: ‘Never for one moment suppose that veneration of sutras or images is of much use in itself; so don’t let it replace the rest of your practice, as it often does with ignorant people.’ I doubt if it ever entered their minds that one day there would be people in the world who would take these powerful (and humorous) injunctions literally!

If it is wrong to have and to symbolize attitudes of reverence, awe, and gratitude by prostrations and offerings, then all Buddhists have been wrong since the Dharma was first preached in this current kalpa 2500 and more years ago. Can it be possible that those hundreds of millions of people at all levels of dedication to the practice we so greatly value included no single man or woman until Buddhism reached America?

The Buddha is not a god and long ago passed into ultimate Nirvana. When we make prostrations and offer flowers, not only is there no one to demand, require, or relish our obeisances, but also no one but ourselves and possibly some onlookers to know that we have made them! Even so, they must be made if we are to attain Enlightenment. Why? Because our ghostly ‘I’ must be humbled to the point of extinction before Enlightenment is won; because that ghost is enormously powerful and positively thrives on such thoughts as ‘I have no need of outward forms’; because it is a simple and wholesome practice to show gratitude to our benefactors by outward forms (as is done at Arlington Cemetery and London’s Cenotaph to the Unknown Soldier, though he is not expected to be aware of the reverence so offered); and because statues of buddhas and bodhisattvas are symbols of exalted possibilities and ideals, so charged with power by the thoughts and aspirations of their creators and beholders, that the positive energies flow from them to us, imbuing us with joy; giving rise to higher levels of intuitive understanding; augmenting our realization of unity with all the millions of beings, past and present, who have trod or are now treading the selfsame Path toward the summit of Wisdom and Compassion; and thereby greatly strengthening our resolve to leap from the confines of illusory egohood into reality so vast that the entire universe is found to be no other than our true self.

Humbly I prostrate myself before the Blessed One, the Holy One, the Supremely Enlightened One, and thus express my admiration of, and true identity with, all sentient beings. May all of them win happiness!
**Bodhisattva of Infinite Love and Compassion**

_Toni Packer_

*Editor’s note: As a student of Roshi Kapleau, Toni Packer (1927-2013) was given permission to teach in 1979. She also served as director of the Zen Center for a brief period while Roshi Kapleau was in New Mexico. Toni eventually decided to depart from Zen Buddhism and founded the Springwater Center for Meditative Inquiry. Adapted from a teisho she gave in July 1980, this short piece appeared in *Zen Bow* in spring 1981 (vol. III, no. 2).*

Listening to teisho (reading these words), can one be all there, completely undivided? Not getting entangled in personal concerns, one’s favorite ideas and opinions, all the images one has about oneself and others? Not comparing what one hears with what one already knows from memory—not resisting in any way? Simply listening, wholeheartedly, without the ‘me’ occupying center stage? Listening carefully, attentively, not only to familiar words, but also seeing what is going on within oneself? When there is this total listening, then there is neither teacher nor student—no one who talks and no one who listens.

Two of the daily chants, the Kanzeon and the Prajna Paramita, are about the Bodhisattva of Compassion—Avalokiteśvara in Sanskrit, Kuan Yin in Chinese, and Kanzeon or Kannon in Japanese. And in English? No name—how wonderful! Just love and compassion. Infinite love and compassion. A wellspring of unceasing love and compassion. That is what the Bodhisattva stands for, sits for, lives for. Just lives—not for anything.

It is not any love for which one bargains. ‘I have done this for you and now, please, will you...”
do this for me?’ Is there love in making deals? Be a good boy or girl and then mommy and daddy will love you. If you do what I don’t like, I’ll get angry, disappointed, hurt. Or, if you do this to me, I’ll do the same thing back to you, grossly, or in subtle ways.

This sort of thing is not inexhaustible love which knows no reprisals, no reward and punishment, praise, blame, sentimentality or conventionality, no lavishing and withholding, no domination or submission.

Can human beings love without any strings attached, without wanting to get anything out of it for themselves, without fear of any kind—simply love?

We do confuse love with the pride and joy of possession. We love to possess, and we love our possessions—material, ideological, spiritual, and sentient. Underneath remains the nagging uncertainty that we may not keep what we believe we own. Fear of loss, insecurity, suspicion, and jealousy rack the possessive mind. Poets have assumed that great jealousy is proof of great love. Is it really? Can it possibly be? Jealousy is jealousy, and with it go hatred, cruelty, endless scheming, and suffering in oneself and others. Waves that touch countless others.

There is a Kannon room right off the zendo where you can sit anytime it is unoccupied. Is it possible just to sit there quietly for some moments, not asking for anything—asking for nothing? Kannon has nothing to give. Take a look at her—she has nothing to give. She is just standing there, utterly unassuming, empty, open—all embracing, all compassion. She is you. She is everyone. She is no one special. Do you see? She holds a little black clump in one of her hands—don’t really know what it is. It looks like something one could pick up anywhere on this earth.

Can one just sit there, not wanting anything? Not wanting! Not fearing! Not running away! Just sitting the way one happens to be at the moment—joyous, maybe, or sad, strong or weak, discouraged, anxious, in sorrow, pain, or in despair—it doesn’t really matter. No need to give a name to one’s ever-changing condition. Naming is ever-dividing. Can one just sit there, completely as one is, not judging how one is, or how one should be, or should not be, or how one would like to be or feel? Just sitting, not knowing? Not fearing? Not choosing? Not escaping?

In such sitting there may be an ending of everything that distorts, confuses, and isolates the human heart and mind, and a welling up of this ineffable love and compassion which knows no ‘me’ and no ‘other.’
Cold Butter on Soft Bread and Other Anguish

ROSHI BODHIN KJOLHEDE

Editor’s note: The following essay by Roshi (then Sensei) Bodhin Kjolhede appeared in Zen Bow in 1991 (vol. VIII, no. 4).

For the young Siddhartha Gautama it was seeing old age, disease, and death for the first time, concretely, before his eyes. For most of us, though, such sights seldom present themselves. It is true that homelessness is increasingly visible in urban areas, where poverty also glares. But chances are a practitioner of Zen will have been led to the recognition of dukkha (suffering) through sources of misery less dramatic, less universal than these. Instead of encountering for the first time a man or woman, as described in a sutra, ‘eighty, ninety, or a hundred years old, frail, crooked as a gable roof, bent down, supported on a staff … wrinkled … with blotched limbs,’ one is shocked one morning by the man in the mirror who has a new gray hair or two. Or by the woman there with the cellulite. Time steals over us, unnoticed, until we see the slip-page: in eyesight, short-term memory, muscle tone, resilience. Or, though removed from anyone ‘sick, afflicted, and grievously ill, and wallowing in one’s own filth,’ we notice our medicine cabinet filling with a wider array of pills, ointments, and other medicines as pesky ailments and pains become chronic, and injuries hang on.

Nor are we likely to confront, as did the Shakya prince, a human corpse ‘one or two or three days after death, swollen up, blue-black in color, and full of corruption.’ Instead, the truth of mortality may hit us as at an uncle’s funeral, or the death of the family dog, or even upon finding a squirrel flattened in the road.

Grasping the truth of dukkha, the unsatisfactory nature of existence, is the starting point of spiritual practice. But we need not be struck by the pathos of the human condition, the crushing inevitability of old age, disease, and death, to feel dissatisfied with our life. Some people seek the Dharma after suffering the break-up of a relationship, in hopes of assuaging the pain (or perhaps finding a new, spiritual lover). For some it is recognizing the psychosomatic aspect of common physical ailments such as headaches and stomach problems, and hoping to find in meditation their cure. It was ulcers and insomnia, in no small part, that drove the 41-year-old Philip Kapleau to Japan after having forced him to see that something was wrong with his life.

It may be that more people have been driven into Zen practice by emotional anxiety than spiritual angst. Not having found relief from loneliness, depression, fear, or general anxiety through other means, they turned to meditation. One man credits a high school tennis match with having set him on his path to Zen: he had eliminated his team from the state tournament by double-faulting away the deciding singles match in the quarter-finals, a loss that haunted him for years. Even the petty stresses of daily life can, when added together, mount into enough frustration to drive one into practice. One very senior member of the Zen Center, when asked what had got him into Zen, was only half-joking when he replied, ‘Cold butter on soft bread.’ One comes to know suffering in one’s own time, in one’s own way.

If the vexations and nuisances of life are the ‘sticks’ that propel one into practice, the carrot is often nothing more than a calmer, quieter mind. Never mind any exalted urge toward liberation from birth-and-death. If Zen practice is undertaken simply to soothe a mind tossing with psychological problems or other stress, it may well be discontinued once the inner turmoil has subsided. Each of us has our threshold of pain below which our motivation to work on ourselves disappears. But in prying open the mind, our
zazen may expose previously unconscious trauma or other unresolved issues, so that even after our original source of distress has been relieved, we continue to excavate new veins of toxic material that keep us sitting.

Those who do manage in their zazen to work through the psychological pain and confusion that propelled them into practice sometimes find that in the process their aspiration has changed. Despite having ground down the rough edges and sharp corners of their personalities, which had led them to practice, they are still wanting. What remains is a dissatisfaction that dwells at a deeper stratum than psychological or philosophical or physical disease, a bedrock of existential angst. This is what the Buddha meant by dukkha.

The root suffering of human beings arises from ignorance, seeing a self-identity in what has no self, mistaking what is impermanent for permanent. Some millennia of millennia ago we picked up a bifurcating intellect and split the world into self and other, and as long as we cling to this illusory perspective we feel insufficient. Incomplete. Unable to be enough, we can never get enough, and bind ourselves to misery through our desires and attachments. We want things to work for us, but they don’t. We have to do what we don’t want to do, or we can’t do what we want to do. We are separated from those we want to be with, or stuck with those we would rather not be with. Or if things do go our way for a while, sooner or later they change. Whatever we acquire will eventually be lost.

The recognition of this fundamental human predicament, dukkha, may be seen as a climatic point in an evolutionary spiritual process, for only when we become aware that we are caught
in this net can we consciously set about to free ourselves from it. But this most basic suffering need not have been preceded by one’s own psychological or physical pain. Someone endowed with health and happiness but also an especially sympathetic nature will, like the Buddha, come to see that life is indeed a bitter sea of suffering. In this age of almost instantaneous communication, unless one lives in strict isolation, it is all but impossible not to see and hear about the pitiable state of sentient beings. Although the ‘three poisons’ of greed, hatred, and delusion may be no more rife today than in the Buddha’s day or, say, the 14th century, surely their daily manifestations are brought to us now in far more vivid detail than in previous ages. To receive news via television, newspapers, or magazines is to be exposed to old age, disease, and death on a scale the Buddha-to-be could hardly have imagined in 500 BCE. We absorb on a daily basis the most graphic evidence of suffering: not only the uniquely human barbarisms of war, crime, cruelty, and other deprivities, but also floods, droughts, and earthquakes. It is a wonder that, with such widespread media exposure to the pitiable state of samsara and its multitudinous forms, so few people do grasp the First Noble Truth. But then our ongoing development of new diversions and escapes from suffering has kept pace with our exposure to life’s pathos. As suggested in the Lotus Sutra, we are like children playing with toys in a burning house.

In the Buddha’s early life we see that even without much pain of one’s own or the awareness of others, there are still those whose karma will bring them to the Truth of Suffering. Even the healthy, privileged, and admired, while still young enough to be unscarred by life’s blows, may recognize the ultimately unsatisfactory nature of existence. They may be helped along, like Siddhartha, by a youth steeped in comfort, ease, and pleasure, in which they are left with, as George Bernard Shaw put it, ‘the ennui of a crushing satiety.’ Even when we have ‘everything’—every thing—we want more. We lack Nothing, the realization of no-thing. Oscar Wilde recognized the pathos of human desire when he said, ‘In this world there are only two tragedies: one is not getting what you want, and the other is getting it.’

But it is not necessary always to have been saturated with either the happiness or the misery of life, to have experienced it as heaven or hell in this lifetime, to see through the ordinary world and seek out what lies beyond it. Sometimes the very absence of significant pain or joy can lead us to discover, in Shakespeare’s words, ‘how stale, flat, weary, and unprofitable … [are] the uses of this world.’ One may find anguish even in the apparent banality of life’s daily rhythms and routines. I clearly remember as an adolescent being struck, almost with despair, by the senselessness of making my bed each morning when it would only be used again that night, and dusting regularly when everything would only get dusty again, and having to get dressed and undressed for decades to come—and to what end? The questioning that underlies this tragicomic sense of alienation was later to emerge as spiritual searching, but only after more years of heedless living and needless pain.

There are, however, those rare individuals whose karma is already ripe for spiritual picking. One appears in Case 32 of the Mumonkan, a non-Buddhist who awakens when the Buddha responds to his question with silence. Ananda, flabbergasted at witnessing this, asks for an explanation, to which the Buddha replies, ‘A first-class horse moves at even the shadow of the whip.’ He is referring here to a fuller metaphor that later made it into a sutra:

The one who learns that someone in another village is about to die, and reflects on the transient nature of all life, is like a horse who runs when it sees the shadow of the whip.

The one who learns that someone in his own village is about to die, and reflects on the transient nature of all life, is like a horse who runs when it is whipped to the hair.

The one who learns that someone in his family is about to die, and reflects on the transient nature of all life, is like a horse who runs when it is whipped to the flesh.
And finally, the one who learns that he himself is about to die, and reflects on the transient nature of all life, is like a horse who runs when it is whipped to the bone.

Why are some of us horses so slow to do anything about our pain? Because the prospect of living without it may appear even worse. We can grow so habituated to our suffering that we identify with it, weaving it into our ego structure. It serves to block out our terror of nothingness, a.k.a. The Void. What would I be, after all, without my pain? Such are the labyrinthine workings of the human mind.

As we go on in practice and our awareness deepens, we grow more sensitive to suffering. We discover previously unknown pain in our- selves, and feel the pain of others more keenly. This would be a disconcerting progression indeed were it not for a parallel development in our ability to transcend pain. We learn that pain is a condition of existence, and that if we reflexively try to remove ourselves from it wholesale, we pile ‘suffering on top of suffering,’ as it is sometimes said in Buddhism. If on the other hand we squarely face our spiritual, mental, or physical suffering, we move through it. Pain goes on, but our relationship to it changes, and it becomes a no-pain, a pain without roots. ‘Suffering,’ someone once said, ‘is like a match—light it and it will show you the way out of the darkness.’ Dukkha is then transmuted into opportunity, and our supreme human gift.

**Editor’s note:** Sensei Amala Wrightson (formerly Charlotte Wrightson) was given permission to teach by Roshi Bodhin Kjolhede in 2004 and sanctioned as a Dharma heir in 2012. She teaches at the Auckland Zen Center, which she founded with her husband Richard von Sturmer in 2004. This article appeared in Zen Bow in 1997 (vol. XIX, no. 3).

What it is
I know not,
But with gratitude
My tears fall.
—Saigyo

One day years ago I said to my father, ‘How can I ever hope to repay you and Mum for all that you have done for me?’ And he replied, ‘You’ll repay us when you have your own children.’ The simple words say so much. In them I hear not only how my father’s love was (and is) freely given to my brother and me, without expectation of reward; his own parents are there too, in the background. Even though I never met them (they both died before I was born), I am a beneficiary of their love. My father’s gratitude to them has been embodied in his giving to me, and so their giving lives on. Behind my grandparents and their parents, and theirs, and so on, endlessly. And in the picture appear not only my ancestors, but also generations of their caregivers, teachers, and mentors; the priests, poets, and artists who inspired them and made the culture that formed them; the animals who carried them; the bricks that sheltered them; the food that fed them—the list is boundless. All of this and more has contributed to my existence. And while I don’t have any children of my own, I
hope that through me this great stream of giving will continue to flow on to others.

It is no wonder that the first of the Paramitas (perfections of the Bodhisattva) is dana, or giving. There can be few more powerful or indestructible forces in the universe—or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that dana is one way of describing how the universe operates. My father understood, as the Bodhisattva does, that to give is to receive. And his words helped me to understand that to receive is both to give (an opportunity to the giver) and to be schooled in the art of giving. Giving and receiving arise together and depend on each other. Robert Aitken sums this up beautifully when he writes in his book The Practice of Perfection:

The English word gratitude is related to grace. It is the enjoyment of receiving as expressed in giving. It is a living, vivid mirror in which giving and receiving form a dynamic practice of interaction. For receiving, too, is a practice. Look at the word arigato, Japanese for ‘thank you.’ It means literally, ‘I have difficulty.’ In other words, ‘Your kindness makes it hard for me to respond with equal grace.’ … The word arigato expresses the practice of receiving.

In receiving we experience our dependence, which the ego, with its fantasy of separation, hates to acknowledge, but secretly believes in and finds disconcerting. When one holds tightly to notions of self and other, receiving gracefully can be extremely difficult; for some people it’s harder than giving (which at least offers some ego gratification). But when we do allow ourselves to feel genuine gratitude rather than anxiety, giving will grow naturally out of it, and it becomes a joy to be able to repay a debt or re-
turn a favor, directly or indirectly. Grace flows from gratitude.

The word ‘grace’ has rich associations in our culture, and can perhaps contribute to Westerners’ understanding of dana. One aspect of grace is its grounding in the physical. We use it to describe seemingly effortless beauty in the way a person moves or in a work of art. It is also everywhere in nature, from a squirrel scampering along a branch to the spirals of a falling leaf, but in human affairs grace is often the result of long and arduous cultivation. A renowned voice teacher, Cecily Berry, said that there was no right way to say a particular line of text, but one thousand wrong ways, and that voice training consisted simply in eliminating them. Training in any discipline moves from this kind of effort towards harmony and freedom from obstructions, and it is sustained throughout by love for the discipline itself—a love which is given form and communicated to others in the work of art that results.

The Latin gratus, from which both grace and gratitude are derived, means ‘pleasing’ and ‘beloved.’ Other related words are ‘agree’ and ‘bard’ (‘he who praises’). A work of art, which often deals with the direst sufferings and the darkest human impulses, still gives aesthetic pleasure because, through the beauty of its form, it acknowledges and brings clarity to those negative aspects of existence. Through our enjoyment we are brought into a kind of harmony with even the most hard-to-accept aspects of life (for artists with a revolutionary agenda this presents a thorny koan—can art give pleasure and galvanize into action at the same time?) Before I got into Zen, the most samadhi-like experiences I had had were while reading poetry—but at a certain point I realized I was depending on someone else’s affirmations. Poetry was fine for pointing me in the right direction, but I wanted to experience that kind of agreement in life itself, and so I was led to Zen practice. Zen trains us to live gracefully, to find poetry in the commonplace, to accept with good grace even disagreeable things.

Grace is related to the word for ‘thank you’ in several romance languages—a meaning that lingers in our use of the word to mean a prayer of thanks for a meal (more about that later)—but it can also mean the gift itself, as in the Christian concept of God’s grace. And while we may not believe in a personified supreme being who bestows favors upon us, more sophisticated understandings of grace accord with the way we experience change: the suddenness and ease of transformation when it comes (in its own time), its brilliance and beauty; the gratuitousness of a flower blooming, the appearance of a friend, or a cool breeze on a hot day; the way the most important things happen not because we will them to, but because … we know not. That is often how we experience an insight that occurs during sitting—as a gift and as a ‘given’—there all along, but up until that moment unnoticed because we weren’t ready to notice. Receptivity is the key.

One of the most primal ways in which we experience the mystery of transformation is in relation to food. In our grace we chant, ‘This meal is the labor of countless beings, let us remember their toil!’ We eat, and the toil of the sun, earthworms, farmers, truckers, road maintenance crews, oil companies, and supermarket check-out workers … of cooks, cabbages, and tax collectors, becomes our very cells. Thich Nhat Hahn describes this as the way in which the so-called self is made up entirely of ‘non-self elements.’ And so we continue our chant, ‘Our meal (that is, ourselves) is offered to Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. With teachers and family, with nations and all life let us equally share. To beings throughout the six worlds we offer this meal.’ No other response would be sufficient, and to be insensible to this endless process of transubstantiation is pathological. Josef Stalin is reported to have said, ‘Gratitude … is a sickness suffered by dogs.’
Discovery of the Dharma arouses in us the strongest gratitude of all, and the Sangha is built on it. Chanting the Ancestral Line gives expression to this foundation. It starts with our invoking the support of our ancestors:

O Awakened ones, may the power of your Samadhi sustain us!

and ends with a vow:

You who have handed down the light of Dharma, We shall repay your benevolence!

Dogen elaborates:

Quietly consider the fact that if this were a time when the true Law had not yet spread throughout the world, it would be impossible for us to come into contact with it, even if we were willing to sacrifice our lives to do so. How fortunate to have been born in the present day, when we are able to make this encounter! … If the Buddha and patriarchs had not directly transmitted the Law, how could it have come down to us today? We should be grateful for even a single phrase or portion of the Law, still more for the great benefits accruing from the highest supreme teaching—the Storehouse of the True Dharma Eye. … The true way of expressing this gratitude is not to be found in anything other than our daily Buddhist practice itself. … Each day’s life should be esteemed; the body should be respected. It is through our body and mind that we are able to practice the Way; this is why they should be loved and respected. It is through our own practice that the practice of the various Buddhas appears and their great Way reaches us. Therefore each day of our practice is the same as theirs, the seed of realizing Buddhahood.

Receiving and giving are one. Meister Eckhart has said, “If the only prayer you say in your whole life is “thank you,” that would suffice.” But in truth that prayer has to be our life. This is the life of the Bodhisattva.

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Adapting to Change

While Zen practice and day-to-day conditions are not two, they can sometimes feel like they are, especially when we find ourselves struggling to adapt to new circumstances or balance demanding responsibilities. Your mother becomes ill, you’re promoted to a managerial position, you commit to a couple of years of therapy, you decide to train for a marathon, you fall in love, you lose your job—these are just a few examples of life events or circumstances that have the potential to throw us off-kilter. The next issue of Zen Bow will explore how practitioners balance practice with life events.

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