

From a *Zazen* Journal 2

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For *Genjo-ji*

From a Zazen Journal 2

I

Indiana

Each fall in our local group I'm flustered by skittish newcomers. Last night, when I finally answered a guy's irritated questions about the aim of zen with a blunt "no purpose," he walked out indignantly.

Still, until I get more skillful, Manjusri & his knife will have to front for Avalokitesvara, who reassures. Bad, good cop, they're the same, though at first that's hard to see.

— 9/16/98

After rain it's luminous, unseasonably warm. Meditating early, I feel a startling rush of anger when I hear a couple of house-painters' loud chatter next door – as if zazen after a while exposes reflexes like obstructions visible only at low tide, which one has to learn to evade patiently.

— 9/21/98

Darker, cooler, hard to wake, until I notice that all I'm doing is tonguing my teeth & replaying my personal history. I think of my father who,

before he died, sat for months in his living room closet, gazing at a few last boxes of antiques.

The weight we give illusions may be a measure of how desperately we cling to them – in contrast to the Yom Kippur Yisgor service for the dead last week, with its “Lord I am as dust. What is my life?” Which, in the context of Judaism’s High Holy Days, is God’s gift of another year to the nearly depleted soul.

The meaning of Buddhist “emptiness” – in which life/death are a single, seamless event – probably also lies in the answer to this question. As for illusions, they may be everything, once we’re driven to the wall, we abandon on the way.

— 10/6/98

An almost flawless clarity of rain, sporadic bird sounds, & the young mother across the way shrieking ecstatically as her two-year old stomps along the curb in new boots .

That in Mayahana one practices for everyone is obvious in the apparently inflated Bodhisattva vow “to save all sentient beings” – just as the most ordinary things can fill with radiance during sustained zazen.

— 10/7/98

My head’s full of stress, which I catalogue into a conceptual tangle which, in turn, gets gradually drawn into my breathing, finally vanishing imperceptibly, in the same way hair, nails, skin renew themselves.

Still, occasionally in zazen I find myself assuming something’s watching me, perhaps like the God whose presence seemed so natural to my parents toward their deaths.

— 10/15/98

Weekend sitting at the Milwaukee Zen Center. As usual, when we ar-

rive Friday night, “Hopeless” Tozen (Akiyama)’s radical poverty of spirit comes across as comically naive. By Sunday morning, however, it seems a powerful simplicity, somewhat awkward but always sweetly attentive.

For hours I sit in Tozen’s victorian zendo-parlor, sensing an opportunity to trust a coherence I can feel everywhere – in the clean mid-October light filling the room, in memories of the generous teachers of the dharma I’ve met over the years.

— 10/19/98

A confused, wildly emotional exchange, after an exercise in “Zen Meditation” I agree to lead for a liberal *chavvarah* group from our synagogue. I try hard to use neutral language, but toward the end, when I choose what I remember as a bland chapter from Suzuki & hit lines about “Buddha” & “Buddha nature,” smoldering suspicions erupt, as if I’ve outraged the sensibilities around me.

At home, flipping thru Sawaki’s *Homeless Kodo*, I find Dogen’s comment that *zazen* must never be done for “fame or reputation.” Besides, though I love many of these people, there’s a gap between us I can’t easily bridge.

At night I dream I’m carrying a bomb that looks like a plastic answer-phone device (another, earlier, had gone off harmlessly elsewhere). I test the switch, put it in a briefcase & carry it to a car where my wife & kids are waiting. As I drive I wonder if I’ve deprogrammed it properly, half expecting I’ll be stopped by cruising police, or that it’ll explode. Nothing happens, however, except that I wake tension-filled, heart pounding.

— 10/27/98

Broad wet gold-leaved trunks loom toward the window. In *zazen* thoughts fade until I’m briefly in a quiet present, against the raucous outer world.

Last week a pompous deconstructionist lecture on “God’s Silence” in Lanzmann’s *Shoah*. All I can think is that the Holocaust is intelligible

as *avidya* on an immense scale, supplanting compassion with monstrous illusion. If “God” is silent it could be because only we respond articulately to voiced or unspeakable need.

— 10/30/98

Absurdly warm for November, rain-gusts flipping plastic bottles half a block, whipping scraps of papers over bushes, lawns. In *zazen* I keep surfacing into a bare *this this*, ☺ then, for long minutes, just breathe at inner/outer turbulence like an animal.

In this state, in the past, I would have written poems, suffused by the tension of creating in a vacuum, dancing on the darkness, floating the pieces out. No longer doing this is like climbing out of an ashy pit.

Near death, my grandfather turned to chassidism – I can still see the formidable, shabby, one-lunged rabbi he brought home before his last illness. My father said, “I talked with God.” My mother, despite a few panics, manifested an almost effortless sweetness right along.

— 11/19/98

I sit steadily through the noise across the street, where they’re taking down one of the old maples with intermittent saw screeches, muffled yelling, then huge thumps as chunks hit the ground.

Later, Roshi’s suddenly on the phone from California, lightly mocking – “we’ve trimmed back the redwoods, you won’t have to worry about branches hitting the roof.” All I can do is laugh.

— 11/30/98

A bleak ragged winter day. Two tiny woodpeckers ☺ a bright cardinal dot the backyard maple. In *zazen*, when I realize the transcendence I’m expecting is imaginary, the space around me goes vacant of everything except itself.

After group meditation last night, there's a volatile discussion about the essence of zen, which I avoid, so that one by one, often brilliantly, the group takes up the slack. As in teaching, keeping quiet is hard, but it fosters connectedness all around me – the sangha's intimate personality wonderfully at work.

— 12/2/98

I'm rereading *Zen In the Art of Archery*, which details vividly the dharma's approach to a focus that alone makes transformation feasible. What I notice now is that the archer/ practitioner, clinging to nothing, not even his craft, never abandons the reality of whirling & falling away, aiming intuitively only as he sees how he "fails." Suddenly all meaning, rooted in self-forgetting, is in the way he lets the arrow fly.

Yesterday, Toshu, speaking on Sekitou's *Sandokai*, was explaining Chinese calligraphic symbols, in which *Mu Shin*, No Mind, is a desert, dark & empty for a thousand miles. Which, I said, can at first seem utterly boring as well as dreadful. "Into which," Toshu countered, "a bird flies, leaving no trace." "One sees that with astonishment," I heard myself say.

— 12/13/98

Marvelous silvery fog, charged with skeletal shapes. I stare at ground, horizon, sky, while mind-chatter jibbers somewhere. After, I hear Suzuki-roshi's, "when we stand up, suddenly everything is created all over again!"

Soon we'll leave this house, where every vista carries an unexpected resonance – which, time-bound, cuts sharply, but at this instant only.

— 12/17/98

Always surprising, the way anger can be muted by patience in zazen. Once I accept as my own events that seemed intolerable seconds earlier, my Original Face appears as that which always carries the same, all-embracing continuity.

To indulge rage in any situation usually means ignoring the scale of karmic pain, so vast that the only significant response is generosity & trust. As for what we think of as “waste,” it represents illusion at its most riddling, as in the remark that there are no signs on the path because there isn’t even a path.

— 12/21/98

Terrific exhibit at the Japan Center in New York last week, of early 20th century calligraphy & drawings, largely by Rinzai masters, many of them in the tradition of the Kyoto school, evoking the aesthetic orientation I absorbed deeply from Sekiun. All those quick, articulate, seemingly improvised figures, letters, circles make up a sort of visionary cartooning, delineating intimately my own experiences in sesshins. I also hadn’t fully understood the Meiji effort to suppress Buddhism, which partly accounts for both Zen’s hermeticism & the irrepressible universality I’ve loved in Sekiun, Katagiri, Shohaku & Akiyama alike.

Other New York shows: at the Whitney, Duane Hanson’s mannikins trapped in banal physicality, articulated so meticulously it amounts to compassion. & at MOMA, Pollock’s great wall-filling paintings, stunning revelations of energy in Indira’s net, almost too fierce for his creative strength, which soon after breaks like a rubber band gone brittle.

— 1/14/99

Yesterday a superb lecture by Elliot Wolfson on *kabbalah*, for me full of teasing parallels with Zen, especially in the winding, hazardous self-transformation undertaken by adepts under experienced masters; the insights elicited through quirky, koanlike exercises, such as visualizing *Ha Shem’s* true name; the assumption that “God” is a vast indecipherability, which arbitrarily flows into familiar phases, languages, shapes, etc.

Still, Wolfson, like Sekiun, emphasizes that pan-mysticism doesn’t work, & that each particular practice should be viewed only in the context of its parent religion. Clearly there’s no useful discourse yet for

what they share.

— 1/29/99

For a week I've been tossing out loads of dry, curling manuscripts. Always, it's crucial not to cling.

The regulars in our small local sangha last night: one person's sheer presentness, week after week; another's adolescent luminosity; a third's nunlike simplicity, self-motivated & gentle but sharp-edged – & a fourth who, hearing I'll be leaving for a year, abruptly quotes long passages from the *Four Quartets*. Wonderful to be practicing alongside them.

— 2/4/99

Sonoma Mountain

For the first few days of this winter's Sesshin/Ango I try for a releasing vision, but I'm constantly thrown back to the same place, until one night I get an image of a wall with a sign, "This isn't for you to know." It's as if I've hit the observation in the *Sandokai* that "encountering the absolute is not yet enlightenment." & when Roshi later remarks offhandedly that I can't hang on to the past, I recognize that the exhilaration of earlier sesshins is over, & that I need to attend to whatever muddle I'm experiencing now.

Feeling uncertain, I struggle to maintain posture & breathing on my zafu. At the end of two weeks I'm too choked up to reply when the Rinzai-trained guy next to me – who in the final circle has just mentioned his surprise at the impact of Soto gentleness – says simply, "Thank you for your strength."

For me, however, the sense of being forced back to superficiality is overwhelming. At one point, during dokusan, I talk to Roshi about how years ago I stumbled onto a method of rigorously excluding past &

future, in favor of an instant continuum. “You found Dogen’s Time-Being,” he says, but adds that now it’s a crutch to be tossed aside. I’m puzzled, but eventually I remember how unstable & narrow the formula actually was. Now I sense that, though time is a merely continuous present, our consciousness drenches it in the raw whirl where suffering originates, ie, in past & future. I need to concentrate on that rawness now, negotiating a knife-edge immediacy against a grid of underlying stress.

Basically I really can’t sustain a strong *samadhi* this sesshin. Again & again I notice that zen-mind is oriented **both** toward dynamic clarity – the “jewel that illumines only itself” – & ordinary stress, with its detritus of ignorance, humiliation, rage. Later, asking about my daughter’s surgery (actually minor, it turns out), Roshi suggests that my deep feeling (like Buddha Mind itself) involves “two arrowpoints meeting,” & is “the result of a force much larger than your own.” I’m speechless, but I see again how visceral emotion touches irreducible fact, releasing energy so strong it’s impersonal, extending everywhere. “Samsara is Nirvana” because *prajna* wisdom is drawn arduously from a ground of frailty, suffering, uncertainty. This is obvious, but startling when intimately felt.

— 3/3/99

Indiana

Window wide, new bird sounds. I throw off layer after layer of self-regard.

I keep thinking of Kwong-roshi’s comment that in deep *samadhi* one sees with the mental acuity of death.

There’s also the elemental evocation of letting go at the end of Jim Wright’s “Lying in a Hammock. . .,”

The droppings of last year’s horses

Blaze up into golden stones.
I lean back, as evening darkens ☯ comes on.
A chicken hawk floats over, looking for home.
I have wasted my life.

Dusk, horse-turds, hawk, outcry of loss all signal something akin to Dogen's "myriad things . . . without an abiding self" – an emptiness that's the final material of our lives.

Sekiun talked often about the aesthetic virtue of "withering," the haikuist's *wabi*, an impoverishment so profound it draws everything else toward it. Nothing's actually "wasted," though it may be abandoned, or lost.

— 3/31/99

More poems: Yeats' superb *The Man ☯ the Echo*, in which a dying self makes a terminal effort toward "one clear view,"

Then stands in judgement on his soul,
And, all work done, dismisses all
Out of intellect and sight
And sinks at last into the night.

At this juncture of awareness ☯ annihilation, Buddhism offers "letting go," a gesture less dramatic than western "judgement," but in an environment more variegated ☯ constantly re-forming itself (cf. Dogen's, "enlightenment does not divide you, just as the reflection of the moon does not break the water").

Yeats' final "night," of course, is another mystery.

— 4/1/99

Bright, fresh, slowly greening morning. Kids bounce a basketball, someone's hammering slowly. In zazen I pass through foggy misgivings to a

wordlessness that includes them. After, I focus on light wind, a bird's 3-pronged nesting whistle, the neighbors' quick chatter.

Shinko's advice of last summer – “be in the middle of your suffering” – must mean not complaining but witnessing until the space in which stress orbits appears filled with surprising valences, & possible healing:

Just understand that birth-and-death is itself nirvana.
There is nothing such as birth and death to be avoided;
there is nothing such as nirvana to be sought. Only when
you realize this are you free from birth and death.

(Dogen, “Birth & Death”)

— 4/12/99

Uncle Mal's passing at 92, day before yesterday, opens a hole in the fabric of my life. As at my father's funeral, *The Lord giveth & taketh away, Praised be the name of The Lord*. Otherwise, misdirection & drift.

— 4/27/99

Dreadful news of school shootings in Colorado. So easy to access technology to gratify brief tantrums. That Hungry Ghosts desperately need to encounter healing patience is a harsh contemporary riddle.

— 4/28/99

Wind picks up, the suddenly full-leaved yard tree & towering shrubs heave & plunge, then a low crack, & a big branch is lying in the street. Distracted, I keep losing focus until I remember that *samadhi* isn't a target, cross-haired in the front-center of my brain, but a matter of staying wholly in mind/body while everything rattles incessantly.

— 5/6/99

At one point during zazen there's an angry whirr, & I look up at a huge

bumble-bee fumbling at the partly open window, big black compass legs angling furiously. Then I notice that every half minute or so other insects are striking the glass with dull whaps & flipping off like pebbles.

The distance from blind rage to reasoning compassion can be huge, but one still has to trust the connection. In Buddhism, this – like Buber’s view of good as what is done with the whole rather than half of the soul – adumbrates a role of *Avalokitesvara*.

— 5/18/99

Meditation fills with my own capricious disquiet, birds pulsing in the green shadows outside, & a neighbor’s giggling, “we’re late!” while her kids bubble & screech until it’s quiet again.

The conviction that most things are innately “wrong” is like a body twisted habitually out of shape, convinced that it has a perpetual limp. Hence Katagiri’s advice to practice in your delusion, attending to “the stinky human body,” your samsaric fate.

— 5/19/99

Again, a ragged, difficult *zazen*, everything sideslipping, losing focus against the *weeper weeper whew* of a cardinal out front (*nothing’s ready, wing it wing*).

The quiet seems to carry a mix of energy & incoherence in which all expectations stop, so that one senses beginningless sound, aching knees, pounding pulse. Then a plastic bag, unwrinkling in a corner, booms like a homily.

Starting in such attentiveness, creative distance – like the Heart Sutra’s premise that “no fear exists” – eventually touches everything on any scale, close or farther away.

— 5/24/99

II

France

Provençal heat, brightness, flowers, mountains, sky, plus a clutch of tough looking adolescents on the stoop when we return after shopping today.

In the little courtyard out back, one small red begonia bends & bobs in a corner, against five skinny cypresses, strands of lavender, angles of stones. Early evening summer, half shadow edged by westering sun.

— 7/2/99

We walk early among olive groves in sharp morning light, dark mountains, coolness ripening into heat. In town, there's wild energy everywhere. During zazen in the front bedroom, a long stretch of cars, vans, trucks spew & cough fumes, along with doors banging, canned music rising & lowering, then steel drums, and haphazard shouting.

— 7/4/99

Last night, a loud car radio almost directly below, so that we shut the front windows until the room turned stagnant. Now, soft brick-red tiles just outside, coolness off the balcony, a hum of low-keyed French nearby.

— 7/12/99

Bastille Day. Alone in the house, I can see the terrace garden, a few flowers in sudden sunlight just under the iron balcony. Consciousness briefly seems poised on the lip of time, as in Annie Dillard's description of a physicist's vision, in which "things approach as waves, & leave as particles."

— 7/14/99

Hot, bright. I'm on my beach-ball zafu & two shaggy blankets. Gradually afternoon traffic returns to the square below, disturbing until I notice that the racket doesn't stay at a single pitch, but roars, coughs, spits, then stops or drives off. Behind these sounds are cicadas in the plane trees, scraps of low-keyed voices, distant radios. Each has its privileged interval.

— 7/15/99

During zazen inchoate flute-like music, which at this remove seems haunting. Past it, workmen talking over a whiny, intermittent drill. I drift but at the same time there's an impersonal luminosity in which thing after thing drops away.

— 7/16/99

Sunday – Mid-afternoon. I'm drowsy, vague. With my awkward French I feel like a kid in a new classroom. Earlier, a sharply defined pre-waking dream. I'm an acolyte in some sort of nomadic zen group, whose leader tells me, as I put on a denim meal-serving robe (buttoned around back like a hospital gown), that Gotama was implicitly defined as a Buddha when he "first thought about the needs of everyone else."

— 7/26/99

Zazen begins in quiet concentration, until I hear intermittent explosions of a blowtorch, followed by scraping, wiping, & guttural chatter. Light & heat come directly at me. Nothing's still.

— 7/27/99

In overcast semi-dark, rain on leaves, a hoo hoo of doves. I sit absorbed by yesterday's encounter in Carpentras with a dour, contemptuous medical couple from NJ who ate next to us in a cafe – both of them it turned out rigidly Orthodox, she a Holocaust survivor from camps in Italy, he a child of German-Jewish refugees.

— 7/28/99

Shopping alongside Lorna in the huge Thursday market outside our door, I'm tired, tight, ashy, until I realize I need to act only in terms of presentness.

After, we hike in the hills. The day is windy, sky clear; on the roadsides olive stems rise luminously out of the platforms of old trunks. Lots of walkers are on the roads now, Parisians on vacation, Lorna explains – first an elegant middle aged woman with a small fluffy dog, then more with black, sheepy-shaggy, tiny-puggy animals. When we say *Bonjour*, several of them tell us what a fine morning it is, & wish us *Bonne Promenade*. At the top of the road we hear buzz saws among the suddenly unmarketable apricot trees. By the time we get home we're exhilarated, cleansed.

— 8/1/99

A storm last night, thunder booming in the mountains, then a brief savage rain. I see again that rather than predictable uplift, I need merely lay claim to my life's experience like someone acknowledging a shabby coat at a checkout.

The self can't be isolated from the passing spume on which it feeds.

I keep seeing our neighbors, gathered nervously in the street after the meeting at the Mairie the other night, anxious about problems of noise, drunkenness, vandalism, drugs, not knowing who to trust.

There's also the clarity, historical awareness, & quick wit of our new acquaintance, 75 year old Madame Mercier, who seems to embody a rock-like Huguenot autonomy, & who, during the war, had connections with Chambon-sur-Lignon, not far from here, where a handful of French Protestants defied the Holocaust.

— 8/14/99

I hit an emptiness that in turn fills with blessing whose edge I barely touch. After, I just stare at the young cypresses in the garden. Such fullness, in Indira's net.

Illusions clearly are forms of energy – ie, of generosity – hampered by impatience or grief. Again, what I seek is probably linked to what I've been defending myself against.

— 8/18/99

This morning, in *Moon in a Dewdrop*, a passage by Dogen I've never read before:

Buddha said, 'If you are to practice giving to yourself, how much more so to your parents, wife & children.' Therefore you should know that to give to yourself is a part of giving. To give to your family is also giving. Even when you give a particle of dust, you should rejoice in your own act, because you correctly transmit the merits of all buddhas, and for the first time practice an act of a bodhisattva.

Ie, if consciousness is beyond measure, so are things given. "The mind of a sentient being is difficult to change. You should keep on changing the minds of sentient beings..." by giving, in which mind transforms gift and gift transforms mind.

— 8/21/99

Samadhi, impending life/death, compulsive distraction, doubt. Slowly the pink blue rose of morning suffuses this place,

Again it draws itself out tho the weave is frozen
the voice crumples nothing moves only here
apples the bruised soul picks up
after a deep summer rain

— 8/27/99

Sitting in the dark, hearing pigeons fussing in the tree out back, feeling the cool morning wind. Though I'm on the edge of sheer fatigue, there's a stillness just beyond that merges with the blind rustling against the grate, & footsteps in the kitchen below.

Like the curled-up dimensions of current physics, emptiness, ordinary as fingernail dirt, is spread-out everywhere. Hui-Neng, "it's your mind that's moving."

— 8/31/99

The self at any moment is the life-narrative it carries. To go past it requires a coherence literally torn from karmic confusion, again & again.

A fine gloss on all this, in a James Wood review of a new Coleridge biography in *The New Republic*:

Yet the self never stops wanting to negotiate these paradoxes, precisely because these paradoxes, which are paradoxes of self limitation, are all it has; they are the self. So it is, that in both the secular and the religious realms, the path to success resembles the path to failure, and self-knowledge resembles self-ignorance, and redemption resembles sacrifice. 'At the decisive moment,' writes Simone Weil, 'the difference between the soul which is saved and that which is lost is but infinitesimal compared with the whole psychological content of the soul.'

— 9/14/99

With its austere beauty, deserted mountainscapes, & intricate web of historical memory, this region often seems to embody the chaotic face of emptiness. Scratch the surface & there's savagery: 14th century anti-semitism, 16th century religious warfare, & more recently, Occupation & Holocaust. The thousands who were shipped away reappear in a local "rue des Déportées," or on a dusty wall plaque in the Avignon station.

As a result, zazen here can feel knife-edged, necessary.

Toward noon, a tiny bird, bright yellow with dark beak & a few black stripes, pipes sharply from the bushes overhead, then flips into the larger tree to the left. Since there are few other birds, the sound is long & arresting. A fall migrant, a warbler, fragile & adept.

— 9/17/99

I keep reciting snappy slogans to myself, much like Polonius' moralizing, which, though reasonable, never touches Hamlet's anguish. To truly act without rancor, one has to abandon such anodynes & let the old guy go with thanks, while Claudius, Gertrude, ghost hang on in the background, their defects quietly considered & dismissed.

Little heroic or even tragic here, mainly persistent work.

— 9/18/99

Cold wind rattling branches & windows, hara & head. Yesterday, in the last hours of autumn sun, we drove onto the plateau near Vinso-bres, along rolling vineyards with immense vistas, then twisting down through scrub oak forests back to Nyons, where a clutch of adolescents were drinking & shouting on our steps.

I carry this mix into morning zazen, knowing the only viable response is Katagiri's scouring "eat the cold" (Natalie Goldberg).

— 9/19/99

Some ideas from reading Ken Wilber: for deep understanding it's essential to take distress seriously, giving karmic suffering its due. Here the crucial skill may be playfulness. Hence Buddhist logic, its "neither X nor not-X, but non-X," which carries an overtone of conundrum – ie, "you'll find out for yourself" – as if life-death, body-mind, loss-gain belong to an ungraspable present in which all contradictions are alike.

— 9/21/99

A damp dawn chill enters thru the rear window. Gradually, as the light grows, I remember the sharp impression I had yesterday, reading Philip Hailie's *Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed*, of France during the occupation, with its mood of paralyzing caution & mistrust. In such a context *Aval-okitesvara* – connectedness governed by compassion – seems the life-source everything shares, aware of it or no. Pastor Trocme's ability to act on this insight is rare however, immensely difficult, hence powerful.
— 9/22/99

Just before day I'm pulled out of a dark dream: after a minor accident I have to file reports, & am hounded by an aloof, beefy cop who sees me secretively signing a frayed form & begins questioning me, as if I've concealed other violations for much of my life.

Later, in zazen, I suddenly think I understand Joshu's *Mu*, as absence that includes my limbs, sensations, pulse, self, but whose formal identity often has to be reconstructed by frantic recall & summary. *Mu!* acknowledges that I'm desperate to leave large traces, but in the long run all I find are splinters of clarity, compassion, grace.

Suffering grounds one on this earth. It's stuff to work, like the small warbler's tiny, piping peep out the window, birdspeak among fall leaves, near the prying neighborhood kittens & cat.

Mu! of course, also conveys an urgency like Dogen's, "You've been given the gift of human form, don't waste it away." Plus the phrase I stumbled on in classes, when I wanted to suggest the mystery of being: *you didn't make yourself up*.

— 9/23/99

Last night, as we meditated with Jean-Marc & Marie-Paule, I kept hearing through the closed windows the rowdy adolescents regularly downstairs.

This morning I seem to be watching this with double vision – through

one eye, anger; through the other, *samadhi's* empathetic calm, a gift to be carried without worrying that my hands might shake or the vessel crack.

— 9/29/99

“Letting go” (Uchiyama) doesn’t involve arriving at some blank slate or fresh start. I “open the hand of thought” to let everything in it lie there as it will, since it belongs to a single consciousness, like a worn face seen in a mirror.

Haunting, the bruised, shadowy Jewish presence that turns up everywhere here. Now it turns out that our friend Anne-Marie is a child of Holocaust evaders who fled Germany for France just before the war, & after became furiously secular, as her father said, wanting “nothing to do with a God who permits this.”

— 10/3/99

Trip last week to central & western France, to look at worn romanesque churches in isolated abbeys, pastoral villages, cities dense with traffic – as if the culture had long ago uttered something luminous & unchangeable, despite relentless urbanization.

In the stunning painted capitals at Chauvigny, surreal creatures – part bull, scaly eagle, chomping lion – so similar to the images that pop up before the mind clears in sesshins. Such passion for playful horror .

For me, these bestiaries, interspersed with scenes of common plowing, harvesting, etc., also suggest a deep need to comprehend the flux that harrasses all feeling being. Detached from their origins, & now merely echoing museums, these churches still articulate the self’s passage through monstrous fear toward a vision of interwoven life – in which the greatest of these is still charity, no matter how hard the struggle to make that clear.

— 10/12/99

Weekend sesshin of the Avignon group, 30 kilometers to the north, in a 17th century farm compound rimmed by wooded mountains where the maquis hid during the war, & where one afternoon half the sangha vanishes, looking for wild mushrooms. Full moon, cold nights, owls hooting nearby. A fire constantly going in the meal room. Zazen in an unheated stone barn still smelling slightly of dried grass.

Deshimaru years ago deliberately established a mix of French passions & basic Soto zen. This sangha's style, with its good humored talk, food, sociability, is striking. Silence is expected only in the zendo; chatter erupts the instant people walk out the door. When asked about this, Guy Mercier, the retreat leader, says simply that *samadhi* has got to function in common social contexts as well.

Despite my doubt my French improves modestly, & with plenty of people eager to try out their English, I'm comfortable. In some ways, the matrix of courtesy, sensuous pleasure & spiritual warmth seems rooted in older catholic traditions. The confusion I associate with the first days of American sesshins falls away, & despite frequent missteps, I'm part of the overall flow.

Zendo etiquette is exacting. Kinhin requires arms at chest height, elbows straight out, right fist in left over chest, focused steps, slow breath. The first afternoon the leader, Guy Mercier, tells me to relax my tense zazen posture, easing my lower-back pain noticeably. With his piercing stare & incisive speech, he conveys a lean, clear monastic energy. His teishos, given during zazen, often bring me to tears, though what he says is merely that past & future are extrapolations out of the blinding energy of the present, which once truly *seen* can burn normal verbal consciousness away. *Abandonner, le passé, le futur... tous les concepts.* he keeps repeating. Here's an excerpt (translation mine):

Sosan says, "The cloudless light illuminates itself." So it's not necessary to wage war against the mental. It's a matter of *Ji Ju Yu Za Mei, Hshiryō*.

If you want to find what's permanent in yourself, plunge

deeply inward, watch what within yourself is real, and let the rest pass. Let pass thoughts, desires, scenarios of all kinds. Whatever you do, whatever you think, “That” is beyond words, thoughts, emotions, sensations, your individual consciousness. “That” is within you. Nowhere else. You yourself find the Way of your own being. No other search has any value, compared to this....

Observe and observe again how thoughts, emotions, doubts, bitterness appear and disappear. If you stay vigilant in every circumstance, you’ll discover that you are neither body (a very sophisticated psychosomatic system) nor thoughts, clouds that pass, but universal consciousness without limit that contains everything and shines by itself. Consciousness in you, consciousness in me: two in appearance, One in reality.

“The cloudless light illuminates itself . So there’s no need to wage a mental war.” And Menzan, some centuries after Sosan, explains: “To not wage a mental war means not adding any category to reality.”

Kodo Sawaki reminds us: “don’t cast a shadow between you and reality and the light of zazen.” The shadow is our categories, our schemes, our beliefs, our judgements, our avidity, our egoism. Not casting a shadow means simply perceiving instantly the truth in our posture, in the instant itself. That’s zazen. It’s no more complicated than this.

During zazen you see dreams as dreams, thoughts as thoughts, illusions as illusions. When you turn yourself toward the light, shadow and illusions disappear. Then there’s nothing more between you and the light.

And that nothing is You.

Given in lucid French during zazen several times daily, these teishos bring me closer to the meditative skill I need. Here, anywhere, the

dharma's the same.

— 10/18/99

An early morning dream: we're driving through southeastern Europe, intending to move west, but we take a wrong road, & end up in Alexandria, which is much like my memories of Montpellier in 1980. There, we keep asking for directions. Still, I know that, though we're safe here, we have to pass through Libya & into Algeria, where we could be harassed by local police or terrorists. So when I see Lorna emerge in a crowd from the large ornate building where we've been checking out travel prospects, I call anxiously to her. She's just said goodbye to a porter pushing a huge wheeled hand cart with two handsome children – much like our girls when young – who he's going to deliver to their families.

Previously, I'd been looking around at gigantic statues of Hellenistic gods. At first I think these are the ancient port & lighthouse, but they turn out to be a sort of disneyesque backdrop. Since I'm nervous about continuing the trip, I suggest we stay for a while to think things over (“*on doit réfléchir*”). To my relief, Lorna agrees; she's had the same idea.

— 10/19/99

Old circuits keep flickering. At times I'm the 10 year old who'd have been caught in the Holocaust if my grandparents had stayed in Russia – or even if they'd wound up here in France.

Out back, a wind-tossed fretwork of red vines covers the stone wall, a few leaves jiggling at the edge. So many folds, wrinkles, dessications, in which nirvana is just an eye flicking to clear itself.

— 10/20/99

Across an torrent of inner chatter, I repeat Mercier's “*abandonner*” like a mantra, until I notice a miniscule insect floating near my face. For an instant, nothing's left.

After, as I enter the kitchen I see my brother, who's visiting, luminous in a pure present, looking for breakfast eggs.

Odd to insist, as Toshu does, that zen has no connection with "psychology." Especially if there's little guidance in zazen, one first usually faces a resistance that has to be taken seriously, by confronting habitual suffering until the reflexes behind it loosen, & ego takes on a transparency in which self & churning outer world are the same.

— 11/2/99

In *Le Moine et le Philosophe*, Matthieu Ricard apparently dismisses evil as illusory, to be brushed aside once one awakens to inherent "perfection." If evil is seen as the refusal to acknowledge *dukkha*, however, then it's as pivotal in Buddhism as Original Sin in Christianity. Ie, only the individual driven into an intimate realization of life/death experiences a liberation that, like Job's whirlwind, is never still, but charges with meaning everything around it. "Perfection" then implies the ability to constantly transform the anger, ignorance, greed that threaten our being again, again.

— 11/10/99

After 5 days in Paris, down with a heavy cold, meditation is dazed, full of blinding tensions.

Still, such a fragile sweetness, from the aged, English-speaking, altogether luminous Sister "Edith," who befriended us on the Montelimar-Nyons bus yesterday.

— 11/16/99

Daniel Matt's *Essential Kabbalah* has a wonderful quote from the Mishnah that, "as the Messiah approaches, insolence will increase." *Insolence!* a superb term for ego-indulgence, that ranges from occasional hooliganism to the sweeping distortions of genocidal rage.

Essentially zazen & kabbalah both posit a coherence strong enough to allow the unintelligibility always pressing on us to eventually pass through. This means that mind, hungry for significance as well as order, has got to remain radically *open* – though what it faces can be at times almost too ferocious to endure.

— 11/19/99

Startling, the similarities of Buddhist & kabbalistic texts:

The depth of primordial being is called Boundless. Because of its concealment from all creatures above & below, it is also called Nothingness. If one asks, ‘What is it?’ the answer is, ‘Nothing,’ meaning: No one can understand anything about it. It is negated of every conception. No one can know anything about it – except the belief that it exists. Its existence cannot be grasped by anything other than it. Therefore its name is ‘I am becoming.’ (Matt, 69-70)

Still, kabbalism is passionately theistic, eager to be swept up by an incomprehensible yet miraculously accessible force. In some ways zen works in a lower-key: ignorant or aware, one is always just another inhabitant of an unoriginated world, in which compassion is a deep reflex of the awakened self, & obsession with the past a distortion.

— 11/20/99

Against deep currents of dread, I can only continue to sit, & let them pass intact. At the end, I allow Eliot’s quote (from Juliana of Norwich) that “all will be well, & all manner of things well”: a haunting reassurance, a fragile, well-worn wish.

Katagiri:

Because we all face life & death – & not just once, but every day – it is vital that we meditate on the problem they

present. Don't be frightened. Just face it directly. This is our practice. There is no other choice.

☯ elsewhere:

Total freedom is found in realizing that there is nothing to satisfy. And this realization is found in the flow of life itself.

— 12/1/99

III

Santa Rosa, CA.

Another transition. Strange house, ☯ community. Much beauty, but I feel like a fly in autumn, ☯ keep thinking of that huge, stunning meteor crater near Flagstaff we saw a few weeks ago, all clods, towering walls, tossed rocks the size of houses, banal shrubs.

— 1/10/00

Some striking parallels with zen in Paul Tillich's suggestion in *The Courage To Be*, that the way to deal with "neurotic" (existential, seemingly mundane) difficulties, is to empty the mind until anxiety, constantly generating illusions, is drawn toward a larger intuition of life/death.

Tillich's austere view of faith as able to embrace doubt ☯ guilt, brings to mind Kwong-roshi's lecture last Saturday about Dogen's "Painting of a Rice Cake": essentially about the teasing ordinariness of all our experience, whether conceptual ("painted") or tangible ("real").

Carried far enough, this implies the identity of apparent opposites: transcendent / banal, clear / muddled, liberating / unattainable. So for

Tillich, the act of “accepting your own acceptance” eventually leads to a grace which is “the power of being itself,” accessible in floors to be swept, dishes washed, conflicts resolved. Rice-cakes.

— 1/17/00

A slow drift among bits & pieces of memory like rusted wire. Tempering will come when it's ready.

How much time spent every day rediscovering this! Shinko spoke beautifully last Saturday on how one can know the most abstruse truths & still not understand them inwardly.

— 1/31/00

Rain approaching, pressuring sinus cavity & chest. For a while I'm caught among toxins culled from recent news. When distancing finally comes, I stare out over a vast inanity.

— 2/5/00

Sonoma Mountain

The usual winter storms billow incessantly across the mountains, over a bristling logjam of personal complexities. Some nights I can barely see as I stumble toward my cabin, water pooling at the door, often leaking in. For days I'm irritated at everything, until Roshi asks to see me in *dokusan*. When I tell him tersely that my mind feels like a leaf in the wind, he gently describes his efforts to deal with toxins in his own life. Clearly I need to confront things as they are.

The next morning, as I watch Roshi's & the jisha's bare feet pass on their way to the side altar, I see a dawn-lit river-bank where monks are seeking a ferry – as in the Heart Sutra's “gone, gone to the other shore.” After, I'm caught in harsh, whirling confusion, until that afternoon Roshi recalls how Shunryu Suzuki's son Hoitsu, a “stone in

emptiness,” deals with paralyzing chronic asthma attacks by “just going ahead through them.” Suddenly I hear the Sutra’s familiar “no eyes, ears, nose smell, taste, touch,...” then literally see Eliot’s “heart of light, the silence.” *Prajna* wisdom on which “the Bodhisattva relies alone,” appears as sun flooding the room. For a split second, Buddha, Dharma & Sangha merge with self beyond the ego. Wherever I want to be, I’m momentarily there.

Then a shade drops over my inner eye, turning the light a distant blue – as if I have to learn that I can’t really accommodate such understanding in a single transfiguring gesture. What I’ve just seen may point to something I haven’t really grasped. As in this Ango’s theme of “giving yourself to yourself” by opening to “all sentient beings,” the explanation may start in an explosion of light, but evolves into a sustained ability to *act* compassionately, generously, as well as ecstatically *see*.

I ponder this for hours, then decide to ask Roshi about it in an improvised *dokusan*. He’s distracted, however, & I’m wildly inarticulate, until he finally stops me, suggesting that I’m dealing with attractive but ultimately distracting *makyo* fantasies. He reminds me of Suzuki-roshi’s non-judgemental view of *samadhi* insights, which can range from the grandiose – “Mountain” – to the indifferent – “Absolute Zero.” I’m startled. These polarities, in the form of Katagiri’s *Yama*(mountain) & Seikun’s *Mu* (nothingness) are the calligraphic gifts brushed onto brown paper towels, which for years I’ve kept pinned up in my study. Another reminder that now I need to learn how to see the world as “nothing special,” cultivating *zazen*’s quiet “jewel that illumines only itself.”

I also talk to Shinko, who suggests that I’m dealing with two kinds of Bodhisattva emblems: one that’s just appeared as the sun; the other my continuing life as it’s evolved for years. That is, I’m facing an intimate issue of ideal & real. *Be open to what is*, she says, which I take partly to mean, be selfless, receptive, kind. Again, I’ve ended at Roshi’s rice-cakes, commonplace as french fries but if approached properly, food for mind/ body. “Thus, a painted rice-cake, made of rice flour, is neither born nor unborn,” he quoted from Dogen weeks ago. “Since this is so,

it is the moment of realization of the way.”

— 3/12/00

Today Roshi refers to the simple “Two Moons” koan (master tells disciple, who sees just one moon, that there are two), which assumes that the world we normally inhabit is both filled with a single radiance, ☯ irretrievably split. Then he develops a further take on dualism: how, though everything is constantly changing, at the point where *Ji*, “the foreground or the relative,” crosses *Ri*, “the background, or the absolute,” all things are basically *intimate*.

If this is the case, the argument goes, then realization involves seeing that what one thinks external is also within, that the “independent” world is in fact one’s self in its entirety. Thus Tozen’s enlightenment happens after being dismissed by his master, when he crosses a waist-high stream, glimpses his reflection, ☯ knows that body, grass, rocks, water are his own mind, his original face.

Nothing outside us, then, happens apart from our subjective experiences within. In lab experiments, Roshi says, even an infant panda observed through a 24 hour tv monitor seemed to know it was being watched. Only when we totally *see* the world in profound intimacy does it, at the same time, truly see us. That is, *Ji* crosses *Ri* the instant *seeing* becomes identical with *being seen*. In the context of Buddha Mind, anything apparently “independent” is also “co-dependent,” part an indivisible living whole.

Then, to my surprise, I hear Roshi casually giving a version of a “Jewish tale,” in which a father orders his son to climb a tree ☯ jump, catching him twice, but the third time letting him hit the ground. Roshi obviously interprets this as warning, in Buddhist terms, about viewing the world exclusively as *Ji*. Later, however, I tell him that during my childhood this was my father’s signature narrative, emphasizing the boy’s injuries, ☯ a punch line that went, “Let that be a lesson for you – don’t trust anyone, not even your own father!”

At this shaggy-dog version of the Abraham/ Isaac myth, conflating a child's belief with pain & betrayal, Roshi catches his breath, then uncharacteristically grasps my hand. That must have been a karmic narrative for my father, he says, his own father telling him that, back & back.

— 3/19/00

Minneapolis

After his catastrophic accident, Andre Dubus describes how he waits without hope, for either desolate repetition or grace given for no reason, from virtually nothing. I sense a parallel with what Diane Martin (at the Minnesota Zen Center recently) calls the “corpse one carries” – a dry, almost imperceptible neutrality that can be quickened only by alert, whole-hearted practice, day by day.

— 4/10/00

Suprisingly, for 40 minutes the chain of flaky questions & responses recedes, & instead there's the white wall of this messy room, suffused with the peculiar openness of a Minnesota late-winter sky.

Diane Martin again, at City Center yesterday, on “three minds”: “ad-vertant,” or avoiding; “preferring,” or discriminating; & “threshold,” at the border of understanding, where the deepest currents of one's life, past & immediate, act on the inner self.

— 4/16/00

Last night, David Schulner's stunning *Isaac*, a variation on Genesis' un-narrative of violence averted by faith just before rescue occurs. Refuse this hazard, the tale suggests, & you're out of the sacred loop, condemned to perpetual exposure, like Hagar, Ishmael, Cain.

In Schulner's version, however, Abraham's trust becomes a toxic rigidity,

so that when the plot suddenly shifts to our era, God seems a murderous archaism for whoever claimed Him originally.

Obviously a God who fails to be present enough to turn aside the Holocaust may not be there to redeem a father's passion. It's hard to see how traditional Judaism can be rebuilt on such a figure. In my childhood Judaism seemed to conflate the human father, whatever his flaws, with *Avenu Malkenu*, "Our Father Our King." But if *Ha Shem* exists in history mainly because that's what belief in Him means, & if the divine face turned toward us is actually empty, it may be contiguous with Buddhist *sunyata* – essentially approachable in wordless silence rather than communal pleading & praise.

Perhaps all I can tell my father's spirit is that it's impossible to annihilate anything truly living anyway.

— 4/17/00

Yesterday, a leap across a storm of apprehensions, touching something beyond thinking but still on track. Stevens, "it's not happiness or unhappiness, That makes the bird's feathers shine."

Today, the first sun in weeks. I'm light-filled; a sense of time without answers or grid, though tugged at the edges by various crises, buzzes in my head.

— 4/21/00

A haunting PBS talk on "boy-pain," in which an adolescent replies to a father's exasperated, "what do you *want* from me?" with "Say, 'This is my only begotten son, in whom I am well-pleased.'"

Still processing Schulner's play, for an instant I'm Jacob who can wrestle an angel in a desert, or witness flights of them ascending & descending. Moments later I understand that my name isn't Jacob, & that the angel is the familiar contingent world, pressing hard alongside someone

merely struggling to get his act together.

— 5/1/00

I sit through a long stretch of discomfort that gathered during the night, until, to my surprise, I notice something like my father's withdrawal after his strokes, when he fled to his closet for hours, gazing at his antiques as the only reminders of his life.

Then I just follow bird & neighbor sounds until other considerations drift away.

Suzuki, on the *Sandokai*:

To find the oneness of *ji* and *ri*, the oneness of joy and suffering, the oneness of the joy of enlightenment within difficulty, is our practice..... Where there is suffering, there is the joy of suffering, or nirvana. Even in nirvana, you cannot get out of suffering.... That is zazen. You are sitting upright. You are not leaning over to the side of nirvana or leaning over to the side of suffering. You are right here.

— 5/3/00

Formal zazen robes just arrived in the mail, dark billowing cloth that promises to hide small gestures like idiosyncratic tics. I put them on & for a while I'm a wrapped rock.

Later an anonymous, metallic pounding begin down the street: long minutes of quick strikes, pausing, starting again. For a few minutes this is wildly irritating, then it leads to something blank as the mind of a hare.

— 5/8/00

A brief inference from Leon Wieseltier's *Kaddish*: that Judaism involves

a multilayered communion among parents, children, rabbis, scholars et al, loyal to the Father who saved Abraham from murder by committing him & his progeny to a vast architecture of prayers, obligations, & the now fiercely counter-intuitive sense of His presence in history.

In zazen I force myself toward an uneasy presentness again, until, when a kid screeches rhythmically down the street over the early jets roaring overhead, I'm one of Basho's *inoshsbi*, "Wild boars & all/ blown thru the woods -/ storm winds of fall"(though it's spring!).

— 5/14/00

The pages Kwong-roshi sent on taking Buddhist precepts stipulate a clear link between *samadhi* & morality, since emptying the mind releases a generosity potential right along.

Zen ethics don't involve keeping rules so much as responding alertly to surges of blind ego-rage & greed. As in the meal-chant's "purity like a lotus with its roots in muddy waters," true meditation is nurtured by the poisons it touches intimately, lifelong.

— 5/15/00

Yesterday another fine lecture by Diane Martin at MZMC, about how the deeper layers of the psyche lie just below defenses developed in childhood, often in the form of an angry psuedo-coherence that posits a single, easily identifiable path & a single, easily identifiable enemy. Once this scenario cracks, it gives way to a vibrant, multifaceted weave. What one learns in zazen, then, is essentially a habit of arrival.

Martin also comments on how, when Dogen wants to refer to change, he chooses tokens of transparency, especially wind & water, as in the *Genjo-Koan's* naive boatsman who misjudges the apparent roundness of the ocean or motion of the shore, while the current carries him relentlessly ahead.

— 5/22/00

Quiet mid-morning sun. I'm a seal bobbing on a rock. In zazen, I'm consumed for a long time by memories of childhood fury when I sensed my parents' incomprehension. Suddenly I hear, *I Am That I Am*, & *kadosh, kadosh* (holy, holy), as if an absent blessing had been there all along.

— 5/29/00

IV

Indiana

Zazen once more in this worn, lovely, sun-charged, wood-lined house – a living thing I've got to abandon now.

For a long time I sweep away word-clusters, frantic to clear my head until I remember that if mind carries chaos, self is a central, nearly anonymous praxis within it.

As for my own inner chatter, I can acknowledge it as it is, grounded in the intimate *in-out, in-out* always behind.

Memories of my father. His comment (in my mother's words) on his last illness: "I talked with God. He said until September."

Someone's remark that the soul seen by God is always naked & vulnerable but for that instant redeemed.

Annie Dillard, "I don't know beans about God."

— 5/16/00

A stormy, humid morning, the table fan masking the swell of a nearby dove. I keep hearing Kwong-roshi's comment that we only borrow this mind/body. Always, the key isn't suppression of inner turmoil, but let-

ting awareness flow like a stream starting far up that's noticed only below.

All these boxes frayed notes, drafts, journals I'm about to toss. Years of running in place have brought me to where I sometimes sense how to act more generously.

Hamlet, "I could be a king of infinite space, except that I have bad dreams." Though bad dreams are common, if I'm king so's anyone, & infinite space is only here-now.

— 7/10/00

In zazen details rain like gravel, & I grope inside a skinbag vacant as an oversized glove. Then I'm just *here*, damp, ragged but looking into an unexpected brightness.

Kwong-roshi says that *samadhi* & *prajna* alike embody a strong, calm alertness. Essentially in *samadhi*, I think, one just lets whirling mortality settle by itself, while *prajna* implies such buoyancy there's no need to be anywhere different, or crave anything else.

— 7/17/00

Sonoma Mountain

Acorns, redwood cones boom on the rooves; a slender, hyper-alert doe & three spotted fawns go by on schedule; strings of gawky wild turkeys swish regularly through the dry grass. I'm jumpy, but as always time here unfolds seamlessly, with moments of astonishing depth. The first week ends with *jukai*, a ritual of accepting the Buddhist moral precepts, after which Roshi hands me a *rakusu*, & whispers my zen name, "Stone-in-Emptiness" (*Seki-ku*) – a phrase so unexpected I brood over it for days.

Right along, routine tasks keep me watchful. I'm a *bonsho* ringer, &

at first I hit the huge bell glancingly, then more vigorously, & when on the last day I strike it to start the ceremonial *mondo*, which ends the retreat, we're the same. The *mondo* itself involves our asking Chris, the summer's *shuso* (Roshi's assistant) a question that "reveals our true selves." As retreat theme he's chosen a Sung poem quoted by Dogen:

Using words (one, seven, three times five),
though you investigate all forms,
you can depend on nothing.
Now as night approaches, a full moon lifts over the sea.
In each wave the dragon's jewels gleam,
here, there, endlessly.

When it's my turn, I give a counter-poem I've reworked for days:

The rising moon,
the oncoming dark,
the mind that conceives of dragon's jewels & unhindered
space, & the mind that does not –
are these a single thing,
a web of illusions,
a second dragon's breath?

The words seem to float apart from my own struggle to evoke them. "All the above," Chris says, reasonably enough.

In zazen, especially the first week, I grope for a stillness that seems to form then vanish seconds later. Last winter, when asked about a similar problem, Roshi suggested I be less demanding. Now he says that while my *prajna* understanding is competent, I need to work on *samadhi* to "protect" my mind as I approach the core of my being. When he adds that this could trigger something profoundly healing, I hear again the *though I walk thru the valley of the shadow* we recited at my father's grave, (my mother tiny & hunched, repeating the rabbi's prompts). Roshi repeats gently that only resolute *samadhi* lets him process toxins in his own

work, particularly during yearly visits to Poland, where wartime devastation & holocaust cast large shadows. As an afterthought he comments that though he originally assumed his teacher Shunryu Suzuki entered the present only after twitching his robes to begin zazen, he now thinks Suzuki actually sustained presentness at every moment, right along.

A few nights later, while frogs start in the pond below, Chris repeats the retreat poem, its “dragon’s jewels gleaming in each wave, / here, there, endlessly.” Instantly I see the moonlit ocean of childhood vacations, waves splintering light as far as the horizon, my ego-narratives shrunk to hang-nails. Then, for an whole day, I feel immense strain. I request another dokusan, & when I get one Roshi says forcefully that, even if my mind “raises armies” against me, full *samadhi* must include absolutely *everything* I meet. I’m moved & grateful – then, instead of bowing & leaving, I try to describe an earlier, more nebulous insight. Minutes pass, & suddenly my words sound like tinny chatter. Finally Roshi gives me a gentle, chiding “Ohhh, Neil!” I don’t get it, but I’m clearly being dismissed.

Later I decide to apologize, & request a third dokusan, but I’m rebuffed. No problem, I say, but soon I’m brimming with indignation, as if I’ve briefly become another Hungry Ghost. Slowly I come back to my senses. The next day I realize that others were waiting for dokusan, & that most zen masters avoid tying your shoelaces for you if you can tie them yourself.

The following afternoon, as I sit immersed, Roshi whispers in my ear that he can see me briefly. Now I enter the dokusan room calmly, apologize, then turn to my apparent inability to be both steady & inclusive in meditation. Roshi studies my face, then describes my obsession with defeat – & implicitly, I think, my flashes of rage – as rooted in ego. & ego, I see once more, is actually the *fragile self I’ve lived with all my life*, scared of the unknown, bored by its own repetitiveness. In strong *samadhi*, on the other hand, whatever enters consciousness as dangerously *other* instantly becomes “*my own*.” Perhaps that’s how the dragon’s jewel shines wherever one looks. Again, my task is to stay open to whatever meets me as I sit.

Throughout this retreat, Roshi keeps using the word *inclusive*, and emphasizing the idea of embracing all experiences. I notice this the first week, at *jukai*, when I feel my usual irony melt away. At one stage in the ceremony we each hand Roshi a folded blank, for innumerable “acts of shame,” to be burned in a brazier. Then we say,

All the evil karma committed by me since of old
Because of my beginningless greed, anger & ignorance
Born of my body, mouth & thought –
now I atone for it all!

As I repeat this, I remember how often, from childhood on I was startled to find evil emerging in my own roiling “body, mouth & thought.” Years later I see how to respond with patience more often than not, & let beginningless greed, anger & ignorance pass through me as they recur. I know that if I refuse to put words to rage it usually dissipates, reforms, vanishes again. & since I & *dukkha* clearly exist in the same world’s body, then probably I can both embrace ego’s endless illusions, & let them go as well.

— 9/4/00

V

France

Restless zazen this morning. I think again of Roshi’s description of dealing with the “toxins” of yearly work in Poland – & of the swallows he watched for hours from the barn turned zendo, & the pregnant horse that came to the window whenever he gave a talk.

— 9/7/00

When Uchiyama points out, in his commentary on *Bendowa*, that “Dogen Zenji’s *zazen* is not that of making delusion into enlightenment, but...of transcending enlightenment and delusion” alike (p.141), he also denies the possibility of any kind of “transformation” in zen itself. His argument, however, seems to me to blur a few complexities.

Certainly, if “transformation” is taken as “making delusion into enlightenment,” then it misconstrues *satori* as an external goal. On the other hand, enlightenment may be best seen as a process that tolerates but at the same time also distances itself from delusion, which diminishes on its own. Enlightenment then implies a capacity to reach *through* delusion toward Dogen’s “wisdom [that] runs through everything.”

In deep *samadhi*, then, “transcending enlightenment and delusion” occurs *only after encountering each as part of a single whole*. ☸ since (as Uchiyama insists elsewhere) delusion doesn’t just pop ☸ vanish even after *satori*, the Bodhisattva has to repeat such strenuous “transcending” constantly, whenever he/she sits down again to practice, day after day.

— 9/29/00

Cool, bright sunlight floods the *sejour* ; *zazen* resonates with the lumpy soup of dread.

Perhaps reality resembles the loam of dirt, stones, roots in a beaver’s dam, the current passing above, ☸ ego is a mask remolded daily out of this glop, whose terror somehow is partly delusional too.

Or ego’s a bag whose marbles get traded away during the course of a life, so that what scares it is its own vacuity.

— 10/1/00

Zazen in quiet clarity, exemplified in the lovely mottled 18th century cabinet before me. Stretches of thwarting pain, within a larger pattern. There’s immediate past ☸ future, then a broader scattering like small waves on a quiet shore, then simply pipes rattling. a motor starting, kids

savagely screaming farther off.

Dogen: “Furthermore, words that express the vastness are even more abundant than all the myriad things, but also the turning of the great dharma wheel is contained in one speck of dust”(*Bendowa*).

— 10/10/00

Another weekend sesshin with the Avignon group at Molans.

During the retreat, despite French zen’s unhibited chatter outside the zendo, especially at meals, I’m again aware of how warmly supportive this sangha is. Traveling “monk” Guy Mercier, humble, superbly experienced, utterly focused, functions easily within it. As last year, his teishos, given during *zazen*, center on abandoning mental structures that apparently make things coherent, but are in fact “smoke.” *Jijiyu zammai*, Mercier says at one point, resembles the vacancy between two thoughts, that reveals “the world of Buddha, of instant after instant.” As in all *zazen*, we need only come back to what we’ve already recognized, but don’t realize we know.

So, despite a sinus headache, unceasing storms, & at first almost total paralysis of speech, I just sit there letting Mercier’s voice, with its familiar “doing nothing...letting be,” pull me to the brink. In the end even my initial anxiety & clumsiness turn out to be good practice. Sitting in that thick-walled 17th century barn, looking up at an uneven, thickly white-washed ledge probably used for hay, is deeply comforting. When the doors are closed, there’s quietness & warmth from the wood-stove; when they open for *kinhin*, I can see rain plummeting & vines shaking in the misty air, as if framing the no-mindedness Mercier’s been articulating so precisely.

Afternoons I walk alone on the road, though everyone else stays inside. Fields & orchards stretch on the plain below, beside a fortified farm with its warm brown stone. The farther mountains are bordered by a highway full of tiny hissing cars. Clouds & mist hang in from the south, strips constantly separating & vanishing.

At night I'm fatigued, & sleep deeply. Even my clumsy French improves slightly the last day. It's pleasing also to be wearing my rakusu. When Miriam, the sweet "zen nun" from Nice shows it to the others, who seem briefly curious, I suddenly feel as if I've earned a place there. On the whole I admire this practice, so gently oriented to the culture. After, Guy Mercier asks how I feel, then remarks that I must have done a good deal of practice during the year...as I have.

— 10/16/00

Violence everywhere. I remember Deshimaru's narrative of how, during the war, he did zazen on the deck of an ammo-loaded freighter under attack. I also think of *The Last of the Just's* "we don't give up our books," & the Dalai Lama's refusal to hate the Chinese, driven by karma accrued for centuries.

Whatever "faith" Buddhism involves is partly in our ability to reach wholly confident, generous levels of mind/body. Chogyam Trungpa, in *Crazy Wisdom*, puts this not "in moralistic terms of good and bad" but as a matter of "living in vividness." For Trungpa dread is a kind of radar revealing our true external situation, & enlightenment involves "not regarding the world as an enemy, not feeling that the world is going to attack us if we do not take care of ourselves. Instead there is tremendous delight in exploring the razor's edge."

From Trungpa's standpoint confronting the world's rage means "connecting with fear without hope" until "the situation automatically intensifies or becomes clear." Though we're usually "more aware of the intensity of the darkness than of the brilliance of the light," the act of "unlearning...layers and layers of phenomenal covering" can be joyful, as if encompassing an energy that essentially doesn't die.

— 11/6/00

Right through zazen next door at Jean-Marc's at night, the local adolescent pack is yelling down below.

When we're finished, Jean-Marc reads in French that superb chapter

from Shunryu Suzuki on *l'ordinaire*, where Buddha nature alone lives...
i.e., in spasmodic fury & discord too.

— 11/28/00

At lunch we talk about the dark period of the occupation with old, stooped, luminous Sœur Edith who we met last year. Saintly & child-like, she describes her obviously distinguished Parisian Catholic family, some Petainiste but many in the Resistance, including her father who helped rescue Jews, & at one point barely escaped a party of arresting Germans (who decided he was “trop vieux”). An Uncle, who sponsored an underground paper, “La France Suivre,” was imprisoned in Cologne & in her words, “beheaded by an axe” when news came that Paris had been freed.

She gives us her own history – war years apart from her family in Algeria, a serious bicycle accident at 16, weeks in a coma (from which we speculate she emerged slightly brain-damaged), 30 years in a convent where she was “abused” by a harsh Mother Superior, & now La Maison de Retraite in Nyons. Once she discovers we’re Jewish she’s clearly excited, though her idealizing seems mixed with a guilt that leaves me moved but uneasy.

How passionate, Sœur Edith’s vision of Catholicism & its relations with Judaism, in reality so tortuous despite its current sympathy. Like the Pope she loves, her spirituality is instantly attractive. At the same time, there’s something parochial about the labeling that comes up so easily in Europe: such an intricate patchwork of origins, allegiances, resentments, loyalties to protect, litanies of misperception & pain. By birth I suppose I’m irretrievably rooted in all that.

Maybe I need to go to Auschwitz with Bernie Glassman. Still, waiting in the grimy old Avignon station beside the plaque commemorating wartime deportations, hearing about the occupation from older friends – even seeing the sites of medieval massacres of Jewish settlements in Nyons & nearby – makes the darkness vivid enough.

That doesn't mean that my Buddhist perspective is naive – only that illusions aren't toys, karma isn't a game.

— 11/30/00

The *bardo* Trungpa describes, of floating between readily identifiable mind-states, is essentially a skill deliberately acquired in strong *samadhi*.

An odd reflection of this is my father's angry, 'What are you? You're nothing!' years ago, when I foolishly spurned his offer of a Menorah as a badge of ethnic identity.

— 12/5/00

In *Transcending Madness*, Trungpa describes "hell" as a river in which "the turbulent quality purely happens on the surface... you are not rushing to try to solve the problem of turbulence, but you are diving in" – an act that requires absolute "fearlessness," a "trust in confusion" so "complete that it becomes "no longer threatening."

Hence one remains calm even in "hell," because "these particular states of turbulence...also have positive qualities," which "one has to learn to transmute....If you try to work against them, it's possible that you will be thrown back constantly, because fundamentally you're running against your own energy, your own nature."

For Trungpa ego is basically "a kind of continual... philosophy of survival...the will power of not dying, not being hurt." In that case, the turmoil I feel at the start of each meditation can be penetrated only through not expecting "an immediate answer" to pain," but waiting in order to see things "properly and clearly. When we are completely wrapped up in situations without patience, we become blind." (*TM*, 134)

— 12/10/00

Zazen again, after a week in Paris. Again, how wildly the mind first cowers & scurries, until inner quietness starts its work, & each apparent

contradiction folds into the next.

— 12/21/00

VI

Minneapolis

Turmoil crumbles like old plaster on a wall. Though ache & grief remain, I'm "looking into" Trungpa's "wide and wholly open ground of every situation, open space...."

— 2/10/01

Sonoma Mountain

Ango/ Sesshin. Winter rains, harsh cold, crows yakking, pond-frogs after dark. I sleep in a room behind the zendo, where the sliding doors let in wind. The week is built around four Soto guest teachers (three of them, Jisho, Shohaku, & Taiken, old friends).

& as always, at first I hurt all over, staggering when I stand, clinging to my stick on the paths at night. The crazy weather seems to be trying to push everything somewhere else. Just before a storm that kills the power I hear frantic scratching, & glance up at someone shoving the neighborhood dog by the rump out the zendo door. Still, by Tuesday I feel nearly anonymous, a ghostly riddle in my robes. For hours, I keep breaking through the instability in & around me, to return to simple breathing, posture, life/death.

"Every day is a good day," the first lecturer, Gendo Akiba, quotes from the dying Buddha's advice to limit desires & cultivate inner peace. I see again that, since I'm not a monk but a householder exposed to tumult

☪ muddle, I have to continue abandoning distractions of every kind. Gradually I relax, ☪ to my surprise, find myself entering a nearly wordless *samadhi* consistently.

Shohaku's talk begins with the Chinese written character Dogen uses for the Buddha's deathbed advice to "avoid crowds" – "crowds" pictured as a marketplace dominated by the banners of two warring kings. ☪ yet, though we need "to be a lamp unto ourselves" in quiet isolation, we also need to deal with discord in our common environment ☪ lives. The real test of achieved tranquility then is *within* the perpetually conflicted world, through the powerful equilibrium developed in *mu shin*.

On Friday, after describing the Buddha's insistence on poverty of desire, Kwong-roshi also mentions a technique learned from Yamada-roshi: *uinsbu*, exhaling regularly with an almost inaudible "huhhhhhh." I hear this with a mild shock. I've always emphasized *inhaling*, vigorously forcing air into my lungs, then loosely letting it go – possibly giving way to chatter I then have to abandon in favor of an idealized "emptiness." In contrast, *uinsbu* is simply "breath sweeping mind," like an inner white noise masking mental static which, as the outbreath dies, gradually loses force.

Practicing *uinsbu* the day the sesshin ends, I find myself for hours in a remarkable selflessness. Roshi commented the first week, after thieves had earlier stolen art from the sangha house altar, that we should maintain our calm, since the work "wasn't anyone's to keep in the first place." In addition, for days each speaker had emphasized that, given the impermanence of all things, the only stability is in sustained *mu shin*. Now, though cramps flutter in my legs ☪ rain blankets the metal roof, there's nothing to transcend ☪ no agenda to grasp.

In a sense I've grounded on what I've witnessed all week: the Buddha's last testament, Shohaku's intimate, lucid authenticity, Roshi's rocklike gentleness. I see that the universe in which I'll die is the familiar, measurable, wood-paneled one where I sit. Or maybe, I'm the familiarity while it's also me, briefly unconcerned about future-past. My last breath could be more pressured but otherwise no different from any out-breath

now. Nothing else to expect.

After, when my turn comes in our usual post-sesshin talk-circle, I give the lines of Yeats I associate with the han's command to "clarify the matter of birth & death" :

Death and life were not
Till man made up the whole,
Made lock, stock & barrel
Out of his bitter soul...

That passage has always seemed mysterious, I say; now maybe I'm starting to get it. I bow & turn to listen to whoever is left.

— 3/7/01

Minneapolis

In my own daily practice I'm finding that *uinsbu* makes the flood of mental chatter less strident, & when I can manage it, lets me enter presentness quickly, without manic struggle. & yet, focused on a tangible emptiness, at moments I'm a ghost in Odysseus' underworld, vaguely aware of selfhood but insubstantial & exposed.

Hence the relevance of Roshi's powerful calligraphic art, with titles like "Breath Sweeps Mind," & "Empty Moon Illumines Everything," in which awareness touches the density of things-as-they-are. In this context, *myself* is the cluster of karmic obligations I use to patch up an always fraying identity – beyond which I can sense a constantly open, luminously "empty" core.

— 3/15/01

A fine surprise to see Shohaku again yesterday, at Zen Center. He talks about Yokan, who, with his naive "I don't disparage you or anyone" was

considered an imbecile – though before his death he was recognized as a Bodhisattva.

For Shohaku, Yokan’s devotion to a poverty of spirit in which no discriminations are feasible is so scrupulous, that each being appears to him as a Buddha. Such uncompromising *samadhi* can turn one into a holy fool, while actually concealing unshakable comprehension & depth.

Shohaku ends, as always, with a sudden turn of thought, on the underlying purity & beauty of this universe. Such challenge, calmness, resonance!

— 3/20/01

VII

Sonoma Mountain

A powerful, pain-ridden, unpredictable *ango/sesshin*. Roshi’s nurturing imprint is obvious everywhere, though from the start my cramping legs & sore back interfere with continuous *uinsbu*. Hour after hour, I push toward deep focus, only to surface in a jagged present I have to acknowledge instantly.

Roshi helps when he comments on Baso’s, “if the wagon won’t go, which do you hit, the cart or the ox?” “Hit either,” Roshi says, echoing Dogen. If ox is will, & cart body, this suggests that in *zazen* intention alone, like an athlete’s doggedness, isn’t enough. & yet, though some modes are largely mental, some physical, ox & cart are *single*; neither can be touched without influencing the other. So my effort requires a complex balance, opening mind & body alike to deep silence.

Tuesday morning I enter a deep *samadhi*, though my head soon fills with stupefying chatter – into which Roshi’s talk that afternoon cuts like a wedge of light. Commenting on Suzuki-roshi’s reading of the

Heart Sutra, he speaks of the endless permutations of “form & emptiness,” & of *prajna* wisdom, the familiar “jewel that illumines only itself.” Suddenly I see that the act of finding clarity, then losing it in a hopeless muddle, are also part of a single thing, & happen in a context in which all alternatives are fundamentally the same. Once more, I remember that the Heart Sutra we recite daily, with its surreal litany of denials, states that *every* discrimination is expendable. What’s basic is unimpeded awareness, *Mu Shin*, driven not by mindplay but by the impact of suffering itself.

That night, in dokusan, I start to summarize this weird, complicated struggle, but Roshi interrupts quickly. “Let me show you your mind,” he says. I’m unsure: when we did this last February the result was unconvincing. Still, I shut my eyes & follow his voice, listening as he suggests to the usual crickets, fresh wind, a car on the road. Then, asked to imagine my consciousness, I see a dark, backlit chamber like the cramped interior of a walnut; then, tentatively, a low dawn-lit seascape like an utterly banal old painting. Dissolve the frame, Roshi tells me.

Suddenly my skepticism vanishes. Near tears, I enter & step down gingerly, as if over a waterfall, into a large dome, rosy with suffused light, an expanse of water directly before me, which I realize is expanding rapidly... like the Big Bang, I think, an idea that seems at once compelling & absurd. Seconds later I open my eyes & describe what I’ve seen. Roshi listens, then comments that *Dai Shin*, Big Mind, carries *prajna* wisdom beyond any particular birth & death. *Sunyata*, absolute emptiness, is as vast as the sky, but understood in the Mind it’s suffused with the most recognizable human feeling. & it’s accessible. Given right effort, I can enter it – as in this brief crude waking dream – whenever I wish.

Though I’m still uncertain about what’s happened, once I sit down again in the zendo, I can feel pain & confusion booming in the distance, along with something else that’s been there for a while. The worn, theatrical literalness of what I’ve just experienced is disconcerting, until I remember that I actually did experience something similar years ago, when I literally saw with a shock that my inner voices came from a large, dark,

normally hidden figure seated behind my consciousness, in a dome, over a pool into which it was dropping the phrases I was “thinking” one by one. How this mythopoetic figure got there, like *The Wizard of Oz’s* “man behind the curtain,” was a mystery. At the time I decided that, though it may have existed somewhere in my pre-conscious, behind it there was literally nothing.

After, for days, pain swells, falls away, returns, but I notice that I’m learning how to breathe into it without trying to influence it. Frequently I find myself reaching a sustained present, clearing away the chatter that usually fogs it. On the last day I’m sharply aware both of my own exhaustion, & of my heightened ability to penetrate to the universe before, around, within me. Obviously I need mainly to go on hitting my cart while my ox wanders off, & returns to pull me further when it’s good & ready – as apparently it always does. As for the pain, it never really leaves, but I’m there beside it as well. That’s what I tell the sesshin circle at the end. It’s obvious as they talk that in some odd way, most of us have been to the same place.

— 8/30/01

Santa Rosa

After two weeks in France we’re back, driven by last month’s catastrophe, which in a crowded SMZC Saturday talk Shinko addresses with piercing clarity.

On 9/11, the Kwongs were in a remote area of China; now, feeling “very small,” Shinko’s “hungry” to deal with the event’s “tragedy & sorrow” which have “taken away the inner peace of millions.” Basically, she points out, all zen can offer in response is its elemental attachment to “nothing” – along with what remains certain: our hearts still beating, breath coming & going in zazen.

After, in a startling break from routine, a long slow Gaelic chorus, “Deep Peace,” comes out of speakers set up in the zendo – a sound

at once so pop-banal & powerful that I surrender to it wholly.

— 10/01/01

I spend Wednesday up the road at a short Sonoma Mountain sesshin dedicated to “World Peace,” & “the disasters on the east coast.” Again, Shinko guides things deftly, during meditation occasionally reading from a Trich Nah Than poem of empathy with victim & terrorist alike. Hours pass, & while it’s terribly hard to get past my turmoil, I can also feel the sangha’s warmth around me like one of many embracing circles. Gradually I face my dread & let the everything else go, until mindlessness & compassion seem to emerge tangibly, as a single breath.

The day ends with a *Kan Roman* ceremony of feeding “hungry ghosts everywhere” through “raising Bodhi Mind” & offering the inner peace we’ve achieved. As always the ritual seems almost naive, but especially in this context its intention – applying *Mu Shin* to samsaric rage – is unforgettable.

From a letter by Bob Melson, that came to us in France:

Gail and I have only now returned from Brazil where we were visiting some of my cousins and an ailing aunt.

Like everyone we’re angry, stunned, and confused by the events; however, after years of studying mass violence I’ve learned not to start by blaming the victims. In this case it’s ourselves.

We’ve seen the kind of people who perpetrated the crime in New York before. They’re fanatics and true-believers for whom the ends justify all the means, even if these include the murder of innocent people, even if these include suicide.

Keep well. We’ll see this through.

I think of Milosz’s passion for unyielding vision against self-defined

“Necessity’s” armed brutality, & Frost’s “secret” that “sits in the center and *knows*.”

— 10/10/01

Roshi gives the Saturday morning talk. The zendo’s crowded & tense. The instant he begins a girl sitting directly before him starts sobbing uncontrollably, heaving back & forth, as he says quietly that for years we’ve been “living in a bubble,” whose breaking has exposed an instability suddenly menacing now. Behind our trauma, he repeats, is “nothing”: a silence in which minds can be at once appalled & touched (as the weeping girl is being touched), & in which it’s obvious that none of us lives very long. Seeing this, one can learn to encounter inevitable anguish with “refinement.”

If hungry ghosts spread devastation, *Mu Shin* persists. As at the end of Yeats’ *The Tower*, “A bird’s sleepy cry,/ Among the deepening shades.”

— 10/14/01

Commenting on passages of *Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind* in a Tuesday night lecture, Roshi uses the Heart Sutra to describe how zen views the fixed self & its naive dualism (“form is form, emptiness emptiness”); *sunyata* taken as an external goal (“form is emptiness”) or as pure serenity (“form is form, emptiness emptiness, I’ll stay in emptiness”); & the self accepting both its own volatility & its grounding in wordless truth (“form is emptiness, emptiness form”).

These phases cover both the permutations of *dukkha*, & liberation from them. The meditator, over time, encounters all of them.

At the end, to illustrate the last stage, Roshi has us do a brief exercise in which we imagine inhalation as drawing in the world’s energy, & exhalation sweeping the mind clean, revealing “one’s own presence at the absolute center of the universe.” This “outbreath”, in sanskrit literally *nirvana*, is an empty ground that nurtures, heals, sustains.

— 11/11/01

Roshi talks about humbling memories of Suzuki-roshi, walking the San Francisco streets as an anonymous beggar, the broad takahatsu hat covering his face to below his nose. Then he describes Suzuki's student Paul, a carpenter at Tassajara, now a master-builder. Sent to work in Japan with a "National Treasure" carpenter, he spent a year learning merely how to plane wood, & remembers vividly the transparent shavings rising to meet snow flakes falling in the high mountain air.

Each thing has its particular center, Roshi says, to be dealt with scrupulously. In Iceland, for example, there's a custom of asking permission before moving even a stone. Since every object in the universe shares the truth of no beginning, no end, to live permanently caged by the ego-self, without regard to larger rhythms & mysteries, is a living death. Hence the Genjo-koan's allusions to birds & fishes that, torn from their natural environments, immediately die.

— 1/12/02

On a bright wintry morning restless *uinsbu*, cutting off thoughts while at the same time, in a dark flick, dropping me into a backwash of depression, though touching something vast.

Again, to think one can merely walk away from the pain of karmic waste is an illusion, subtle & deep-rooted.

— 1/15/02

Sonoma Mountain

A powerful, often muddled Ango/Sesshin, particularly during the first week, when for hours I keep working at *uinsbu*, then once that goes rigid, just try to hover in *jijiyu zammai*. Using a chair leaves numbing pain in my left leg, which at night keeps me awake, so that in the morning consciousness is a Boschian inferno, & I stare interminably into ragged, fragmenting dreams. Finally, when I decide to just focus on external routine, my head clears, & eventually I realize that, though I'm still half-dazed, I'm seeing the world in which I'm nested "without hindrance":

the sangha absolutely still in black robes at the end of every *zazen*, hands in *gassho*, while a buzz saw stutters nearby, roosters cackle, a small plane drones.

This alternation between distress & vision, narrowness & breadth keeps recurring, as if one triggers the other. Once again I see that *Mu Shin* doesn't reside at the end of a *zazen* rainbow, but is grounded in the actual confusion I've been stumbling through, aching & dazed. Like the threadbare inner commands I'm constantly hearing, this is also *Dai Shin*, a consciousness so ample it gradually heals & redeems. Mind, at moments clouded to the point of paralysis, is always potentially clear. Once particular irritants fall away, the world is charged with meaning.

Here again is Hui-Neng's 7th century, "what need to keep the mirror bright/ where is there room for dust?" – a paradox understandable only through *zazen* so assured it lets clusters of mental static constantly reappear then vanish on their own. I've known this since I began to study *zen*. It's a useful skill that body/mind painstakingly learns to approximate & absorb.

I cross another threshold later during the second, *sesshin* week, when Roshi tells me he's noticed I'm "out of alignment," & to avoid a sciatic flare-up, urges me to leave for a few days. I'm doubtful, & I don't want to miss the exhilarating end of the *sesshin*. Still, I phone home for emergency therapy, & the next day at noon find myself in the rapid-fire give & take of Santa Rosa streets. & yet there's also a radiant two day intimacy with our visiting daughter's family: so much stable, nurturing grace. Clearly *prajna* wisdom isn't just a private gift. Dogen: the moon isn't shattered by being reflected in the waves. Its light is everywhere.

The day I return for the last week of *ango*, I take a spill on the rain-slick rear *zendo* steps, & bang up my tailbone. To avoid raw pain I have to sit bolt upright on my chair – which frees up breathing & concentration until one night the space before me opens like a rising wave, & I intuit innumerable beings, presences, things leaning toward me, at once separate & intimately interwoven. Roshi in *dokusan* calls this "the *dharmakaya*," which, he says, I can forget & then (as long as I don't

reach for words) return to “a million times a day.” It’s “like learning how to walk,” I tell him.

As at the end of a mass, “Thanks be to God,” I could say.

— 3/1/02

Most mornings begin in dread. Even the simple things before me – the dresser’s antique wood, my father’s bronze faun on top, milky sun filtering in from the downslatted blinds – seem fragile & expendable.

How to “trust in nothing,” day after day? Only through sustained concentration, zazen’s “jewel that illumines itself,” viable as a Hebrew blessing or an emptying God.

Though what I love may be instantly blown away, I can rest in what is present, intimate, unspeakable.

— 4/3/02

Meeting last night with a small group trying to access a Jewish meditative tradition, it’s obvious that most of these people have trouble getting past Judaism’s system of sacred eloquence, which essentially defines “God.”

On the other hand, according to the group leader it’s also possible to see “God” as something *other* than an external authority, over & beyond ourselves. Such a figure can take shape primarily *within* our naked consciousness, where words are no more useful than anything else. Hence the Rabbis’ traditional warning that kabbalah – as Sekiun said of zen – is “very dangerous.”

Basically, in joining this warm, liberal congregation, I’m acknowledging a karmic event, just as Shohaku frequently calls it an accident that he’s Japanese. & if most forms of meditation are grounded in emptying, then “God” may refer to a condition of mind apparent in the act of letting

VIII

Sonoma Mountain

When Roshi first asks if I'll be shuso for the summer angō, I assume it's on the basis of two talks earlier this year. I sense that if I work up three more strong presentations, I'll be able to explore & even embody a number of basic zen concepts. At first, however, I'm withdrawn & out of synch. My introductory talk is jittery, & urged a day later to "tell them about the schedule," I stammer something inept. Afterwards, Roshi takes me aside & shows me a Chinese character he's drawn: *Shu* as mouth, over *So*, two figures, speaker & listener: i.e., the Head Student "explaining things to people." Ah-ha! Clearly Roshi can maintain a sacramental distance only if the *shuso* handles details of daily routine as well as theory, guiding *ji* & *ri* alike. From then on I read each morning from Katagiri's powerful *You Have to Say Something*, then announce the day's agenda. Plainly I'm expected to learn on the job, like a new teacher facing a first class.

For a theme I choose Katagiri's teisho on a kind of koan, "What is Buddhism? Stepping off a hundred foot pole" – leading to a question, "What is life?" answerable by a silence so vast one can only "take one step" – i.e., either speak, or sit zazen. To step off the pole, then, is to leap & trust at once, since there's no other choice. So I ask for a silence generous & confident enough to last through the retreat, & I explain it as linked to the Heart Sutra's negation of all labels in order to encounter *prajna*, & Emptiness itself. & for most of the weeks that follow, a tangible quiet dominates the group. Into it, through readings & talks, I try to develop a range of zen explanations backed by personal anecdotes. I revise my scripts constantly, dropping whatever seems glib or self-serving.

Often I'm doubtful & tired, but gradually things work out.

To my surprise, once I start lecturing, I often have to fight back tears, as if I'm accessing a Self larger than I'd guessed. & yet, in contrast, my *samadhi* seems cramped. Sitting on a chair next to Roshi, I also face out toward the zendo, robed figures impassive on their zafus, simple rites of incense, bells, bowings occurring before me. My breathing is shallow, my legs cramp so that I tilt & stumble in kinhin, & several times each day my mental flow seems unmanageable, melting before the scene around me. Pulse beats, body aches, mind races, often tense & uncertain.

Still, during the last week of Ango I can finally recognize & embrace this condition. Suddenly it's clear that both my inner turmoil, & my environment – faces, bodies, smells, sounds, urgencies, comings & goings, like Dogen's "walls & fences, grasses & trees" – aren't merely material for subjective weaving. They're Shohaku's "scenery of your life," an autonomous, inescapable assertion of birth/death.

Now reality, whatever it is, appears as intimate to my being, something I've neither invented nor cut off. It's the world seen as absolutely independent & also the unique matter of my awareness & my needs. In terms of time, as in Katagiri's "moment actually *seen*," it's not an idea about a set of measureable "seconds" but a passage profoundly noticed & let go – which while it lasts, is an extension of eternity, though it's also merely "just us," or "*as it is*," made of expressive shadows, colors, smells, gestures, a lone mosquito flitting interminably near an ear, a layer of emotional discomfort still in my hara. It's as if the cries of the world, that Avalokitesvara hears without fail, come into wordless focus, along with everything else entering or vanishing from my view. It's a context I can walk in, leave, & return to when I want, as long as my focus is supported by my life. There's nowhere else to understand the double realization conveyed by the Mahayana axiom, *Samsara is Nirvana*, that *I'm it, I didn't make it up*.

I'll add here the post-Ango interview I did with Chris King, for the *Mountain Wind*, thhe SMZC newsletter:

Now that the practice period is over what are some of your impressions of having served as Shuso?

I was startled by how different things looked, from the standpoint of middle management. In zazen, for example, I'd always sat facing the wall like everyone else, more or less isolated, and focused mainly on the state of my own mind/body. Now, facing out alongside Roshi, I found myself noticing whatever went on in the zendo. As a result, mysterious ceremonies like Roshi's morning greeting suddenly became plain, and luminous; and the sustained stillness of all those black-robed individuals on their zabutons seemed to express the dharma directly. In the Sangha House, instead of standing passively before meals, I hurriedly lit incense, took the stick from Roshi, fixed it in the altar bowl, bowed twice, then wheeled around to blow out the candles before sitting down. I felt like a diver doing a double-roll before hitting the pool.

I guess I'm saying that I became more aware of the forms that give practice its aesthetic but intensely human shape. I began to see that zen is larger than the insights that occur in samadhi; that gestures within the practice in any place and on any scale, like folding a napkin or stepping over tree roots on the gravel path, carry the practice too. That these are what Katagiri means when he talks about acting "wholeheartedly ." There's a large lesson here that's still sinking in.

What things did you learn from the experience?

See above. Basically my sense of zen became humbler and more concrete, but more spacious too. I recognized how the practice extends into the "objective" world, moment by moment affecting the most ordinary interactions, judgements, decisions. And, as I said at one point, I also saw how many initiatives make up the intricate circuit of a single day – the doan quietly moving to his/her place before a service, the tenzo driving off to pick up staples, the gardener, flower arranger, makeshift electrician, pillow bell ringer, zendo organizer, soji, et al, each working calmly, "without trace". I'm also impressed by how luminously Roshi remains at the center of all this activity.

What things, if any, were especially challenging for you?

Hmm. At first, everything was challenging. I'd seen shusos in action be-

fore, but most details had escaped me. For example, I had a major “deer-in-the-headlights” moment at the end of lunch on the first Friday, when Roshi urged me to talk about the schedule, and for a few crucial seconds I went blank. After that, I thought hard about specific responsibilities. Once I grasped that the role was larger than my particular ego, I remembered Marian’s remarks on “Shuso space” after the winter sesshin, and deliberately went with the flow. Talks were also challenging, but basically I loved giving them, partly because there’s a wonderfully comedic side to zen, that seemed to want to bubble up as often as possible – ie, nearly all the time.

How was it for your wife, having you gone? Was she glad to have you out of the house for a month, or was she sad you weren’t around?

Well, she seemed to tolerate my absence quite adequately, especially with five days in Seattle to see our new grandson and family, and her many interests and friends. In fact, she remarked that the hardest time for her wasn’t the retreat but the month before, when apparently that’s all I could think about! Basically, I’m immensely grateful for her understanding and support. She was in my mind frequently.

Your theme mentions stepping from the 100 foot pole. This is from a classic koan. Can you say a little about how you came to understand this metaphor during Ango?

“A monk once asked his master, ‘What is the essence of Buddhism?’ The master said, ‘Step forward from the top of a hundred foot pole.’” As Katagiri presents this koan, it’s the central theme of his superb, *You Have to Say Something*, which helped prompt whatever I said during Ango. And as your question suggests, whenever I repeated it, it grew more resonant.

I think now that the problem this koan presents is both so surreal it’s almost cartoonlike, and apparently insurmountable. There’s no way to hang on to that pole – it’s absurd to be up there at all, holding desperately onto it – and no obvious way off except to “take one step” into the blue. What’s implicit here is the futility of clinging to routine habits; the terrifying audacity involved in abandoning them; and something like the viewpoint expressed elsewhere in the phrase, “Oh ye of little faith!” To let go, as happens in deep samadhi, is to kill something we assume cru-

cial to our identity, and thereby face the emptiness around and within us, which in fact will sustain us, *if we're skilled enough to allow it to do so*. As in the unforgettable half-sentence in Conrad's, *Lord Jim*: "in the destructive element immerse..." In other words, to truly surrender to *life/death* is to trust emptiness deeply enough that it will buoy us up. Stepping off the pole, then, implies an outwardly directed confidence which is the dharma itself.

I sensed this and more as the weeks went on. Clearly that koan continued to do its work, as Katagiri undoubtedly knew it would.

Finally, as for the ultimate test - What were your impressions of the closing Dharma Encounter or Mondo Ceremony? Were you apprehensive knowing that you would be facing a zendo full of important questions?

Sure, the hour before mondo I was jumping out of my skin. At the same time Roshi told me to take it easy, to have fun, which I took to mean, be playful. And playfulness, I knew, could be a sign of seriousness too. So that's what I did. After the initial questions, and one brief flourish of the Shuso staff, I realized that I could simply leap off the pole, and access what Katagiri calls the "first moment" of any awareness, which is "both the creation of samsara – the world of suffering and delusion – and the realization of nirvana." A lighter self seemed to well up, and responses came instantly with it. Some may have seemed evasive, but they were all calibrated to what the inner self sensed. In that way, I think I really saw what it means in zen "to trust." What I had to do was bow, gassho, listen and leap. As for "important questions," there weren't any, though I realized that's what others thought they were presenting. But in mondo and perhaps elsewhere, there are only pure *questions*, and *responses*. Bow and gassho, gassho and bow! Bow-wow!

— 9/1/02

Colophon

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