

From a *Zazen* Journal 3

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Santa Rosa

I

Sesshin, Sonoma Mountain

When I think about this sesshin what stands out are the dreamlike *makyo* which, ever since I began to practice at Sonoma Mountain, usually arrive after days of strenuous *zazen*. Though they're often considered delusionary, I know that they're not only metaphors from what Robert Aitken calls "the uncanny realm," but extensions of the deep-image instincts I cultivated in poems for years.

Now, in the most dramatic of these, linked to the God-sense of my childhood, I'm floating upward in rose light, carried by an angel of the Jewish Sabbath, one of the winged *Malach'ey elyon*, while a phrase like "Fear Not" resonates in waves of comprehension. Hours later the space before me becomes a multi-dimensional tent which suddenly shatters, dribbling thousands of smooth-edged words – like Frost's image in "After Apple Picking" of ice like a "pane of glass" through which a world melts before him as he falls toward exhausted sleep.

Caught, the candle flickering to my left, my inner voices stopped, I look into the presentness which probably underlies the Heart Sutra's radical negations, like Eliot's "heart of light, the silence" at "the turning point of the still world." Weeks after, this moment still seems pivotal, like a quick glimpse of something ordinarily hidden & abstract.

— 2/27/03



A striking talk this morning by Stan Lombardo, master in Korean Zen,

with its governing 'Only don't know.'

Some details: koans, which in all forms of zen are used to break down conceptual interpretation, can range from a simple "use this glass of water" to traditional narrative enigmas, like the fierce, impatient Nan-sen slaughtering a monastery cat, & thereby "taking all the bad karma on himself." In a koan system one trains to react instinctively, sizing up the situation in a instant of clarity, & intuiting an appropriate response: offering water to another first, or like Joshu, hearing about Nan-sen, putting his sandals on his head and walking off. This method puts pressure on awareness until each instant becomes a dharma gate. Hence, the Korean emphasis on ethical choice, a matter of teaching and inner growth alike. "The heart of Buddhism is to engage inner illumination, & apply it as external compassion," Lombardo says.

In contrast, in Soto zen, koans may help, but basically one plunges more or less directly through deep *samadhi* toward pure life-death, an implicit koan dominating everything.

— 5/17/03

"Dying well," Roshi says, is the heart of zen.

In general, rigid conceptions of self easily break down under tension in the mind-body core.

— 5/20/03

I whirl for 40 minutes of morning zazen, then, just before it ends, something flashes like a miniscule jewel. Year after year, the process of noticing a center is the same.

— 7/29/03

During Demian's *Shuso* ceremony last night I'm sharply aware of his profound quietness, & his evocation of "sun, moon, stars" as companions in practice. The ritual & his presence in it seem identical, & equally

strong.

— 7/31/03

Sesshin, Sonoma Mountain

I'm relaxed the first few days of Ango, but once the sesshin starts I've the usual trouble sleeping, sitting, & even walking in the dark, where I keep stumbling awkwardly. Advil helps with back & leg pain, but brings a flux of dream fragments & broken phrases that drag on.

Still, my *samadhi* slowly deepens. For days candle light fills the planked wall before me, & I focus on my breath until at one instant my mind empties & I enter the rose light of the last sesshin, hearing something like the *soothe, soothe* Whitman calls the sound of night, ocean, death. Later I'm sucked into a long muttering narrative of life-errors, but when I shift my gaze I see that the light constantly shining over my shoulder embodies the compassion common to all beings.

A night later, when I start again on *uinshu*, abandoning thoughts on each outbreath, I'm pulled into a waking *makyo*. I'm in a plane, sitting next to Lorna. Something happens somewhere, & in milliseconds there's an explosion, we turn earthward, hold hands, the ground rises instantly, & we blow up. Then I'm here, staring at the zendo wall, & at the same time I'm *on the other side*, thinking, *ok, it's over, a split-second life*.

The instant I hear that phrase I realize that the upper section of the wall is charged with a very different light, bulging as if before some kind of approaching force. *Wait, wait!* I both say to myself & hear echo from the other side. Then I'm wordless, drawn into a vast patience, suspended for an indefinite time in nameless light.

Then I'm back. It's an August evening, '03, we're doing *zazen*. Cars pass outside. Figures in dark robes sit around me. There's absolutely nothing to fear or cling to or define.

Later, when I loosely describe all this to Roshi, he calls it *Dai Jibi*, Great Mercy. I don't need to make an effort to maintain it, he says, since it's a gift, offered whenever I succeed in reaching past incapacitating dread.

— 8/18/03

II

France

Daily zazen in Nyons.

At the Molans retreat last month I tried to suggest in clumsy French to an acquaintance who was resenting the practice, that *samadhi* is a matter of touching the scenery of one's life generously, without excessive regret, though every day the margins on which one depends keep narrowing. He nodded vaguely & walked off, as if I'd said nothing (which I had).

— 11/4/03

Zazen was hours ago, in the *séjour* in the half dark, front shutters open. I stumble through urgent pressures, then end simply seeing the dark paneled 18th century farm-chest before me, & on top of it the flowered ceramic bowl into which Pedro's aquarelle *cascade* is falling.

— 11/5/03

This morning's zazen swirls with yesterday's visit from a friend jittery over current anti-semitism in France. This may be exaggerated, but it resonates with our last month's visit to Prague's haunting synagogue memorials, & Vienna's Musikverein, where there are few Jews in an orchestra & hall that earlier had many – in a mildly liberal empire which, once it splintered, exposed them & millions of others to death & scattering.

Living part of the year in post cold-war Europe, these facts are tangible. We may be self-possessed Americans but if systems collapse, we're no different from anyone. Being Jews implies among other things that history's cycles of safety & disaster are tied intimately to family narrative & personal fate. I can't get out of my head the depiction in a recent *NY Review* of the 44 year old Austrian novelist Joseph Roth in 1939, an exile in Paris, muttering that there's no escape, drinking himself to death.

Still, I think dharma practice can affect such stress. For me, Jewish history calls up a vast embracing weave of bonding, eloquence, wisdom, vision, horror, grief. But I also love Yeats' "three chinamen" carved in a small piece of lapis lazuli:

There on the tragic scene they stare.
Accomplished fingers begin to play

Their "ancient, glittering eyes" oppose the pre-war "hysteria" with which the poem opens. But beyond the idea of tragic response, for me they call up the "Ten Just Men" of Jewish legend or Sensei's "Hundred Sages," unnoticed but observant, embodying skills which can reknit a shattered culture at the right time. That their carved fingers "move upon silence," as Yeats says elsewhere, implies that, rather than rigid aloofness or crazed complaint, they enact alertness like a coiled spring, pressed toward a pulsing core.

I'm not just being literary. Practicing zazen means essentially this. Though most mornings here I easily first fall into confusion & dread, I often end up gazing at the ceramic bowl we've put under Pedro's waterfall that seems to be constantly approaching it, enacting an emptiness in which "all things" on any scale "fall & are built again," & a drop sounds like an exploding star.

That is, letting the mind truly cognizant of life-death "play" over one's karmic narrative means expecting little past the next pulse of energy, inhalation of air. Given such discipline, fears & flaws come & go without

provoking debilitation, & nothing has to be wholly avoided, abandoned, suppressed.

— 11/7/03

At dinner last night with Georges & Anne-Marie, the talk turns to politics. Lorna expresses her unease over Schwarzenegger running for Governor of California, I get impatient with what I think is her over-reaction, then we talk about Bush's war in Iraq, & about the way things feel in contemporary Europe. Georges puffs quietly on his pipe, then suddenly frames a question in the form of a long tale about the suppression of the Templars in the 12th century by Philip the Fair, an event, he says, for which there are documents stored in the Vatican which generations of historians have conspired to conceal. What's my opinion, he asks.

Huh? I'm stymied. I've heard this dusty fable before, & though I can't right away fix its context, I sense a mindset in which any fabrication is possible. Things can't be explained by evoking archaic intrigue, I say. Most conspiratorial thinking, no matter how calmly expressed, is driven by deep resentment. But I don't want to scold. I love these people, they're gentle & gracious, though tonight they seem on edge, under pressures I only partly sense. So in my limited French I fumble out something apolitical like "There's probably no single conspiracy behind what's happening now, just as there's none behind an earthquake! Why clutter your head with bizarre plots & fantasies?"

Then Anne-Marie – a child of Holocaust survivors who became secularists wanting "nothing to do with a God that permits such things" – tells a story about a childhood classroom after the war, in Alsace, where she was humiliated by a dozen caricatures of her "big nose". Wasn't this a conspiracy, she asks. They made a *decision* to conspire, I finally stammer, singling you out as belonging to an alien caste. None of this was appropriate to anything except their cruelty, rooted in their homes, culture, past. In your innocence, you were already a victim. Such perversions can shock, humiliate, kill, but they're delusional nonetheless.

But I just can't work out the French for what I need to say, & though eventually we quiet down, for a while the fabric of our intimacy seems broken.

Zazen this morning is clotted by these exchanges. Georges' story reminds me that the French left (like the right) is drawn to paranoid visions, probably to dramatize some impenetrable region of their lives. The result can be a world seen as a *bande dessin *, seductive as any easy tale but in the long run ruinous. Anne-Marie's story, on the other hand, brings up other outrages & depths.

— 11/9/03

Armistice Day, for the French, is moving, as we hear it in this morning's editorials read on *France Musique*. A million four hundred thousand dead. Someone has put all their names on a website, listed alphabetically.

But I wonder about the Maghrebian kids on our street, slightly less strident this year but still full of adolescent glare. Do they make anything of this? History seems to sweep through France in a clattering rage, so close that if you don't inherit it, there's just a tangle of rituals, memorials, dates.

— 11/11/03

III

Santa Rosa

Morning zazen brings numbing exhaustion, & an urge to fussily rework all sorts of assumptions & plans. Elbowing through this toward wordless quiet seems to briefly brush against every sensation I've ever felt of

inner awkwardness and grief.

— 12/01/03

Last week an all-night sitting for *Robatsu*. I'm reluctant at first, but after a reminder I wind up at zen center, sleeping in the office from 9 to 11 pm, then meditating with everyone until dawn. This creates an exposure that, as Demian says, allows no room for governance to ego which, after a while, just dribbles into my *hara* beside ache & paralyzing drowse, while I keep breathing until consciousness itself seems just another term.

Several times during recent sesshins I've seen sudden *makyo's*, in which the husk of a brittle figure crumbles to the floor, like a Duane Hanson epoxy sculpture hit by a thousand pound weight.

Unlike Dogen's fish that never comes to the end of the water, the hungry ghost that lives purely in a casing has only tiny holes to breathe, swallow, squeak. Tap it hard enough in *zazen* & it'll crack into jagged bits.

— 12/14/03

At a discussion at *Shomrei Torah* last night about civil-rights for Israeli Arabs, questions come mostly from congregants who sound suspicious of any flexibility. A few hours later, there's a Sonoma State radical on a public affairs channel reciting raw anti-semitic clichés about the zionist conspiracy hood-winking the US media for years, etc.

In *zazen* this morning, I keep turning these simplifications over until they fade, as they also eventually do in the world, though often leaving trails of catastrophic waste. Against such obtuse mindsets, the dharma's advice to "depend on nothing" probably comes across as misty evasiveness. But there's also Arnold's "force 'til right is ready," implying strength enough to keep deep vision intact until it's possible once more to see things generously.

Such *force* endures because – Yeats again – actual tragedy "cannot grow

by an inch or an ounce.” In Buddhist terms it’s “nothing” since it’s wholly empty, as final as the meditator’s inner “radiance” or “jewel,” or three small sages carved on a miniature mountain on some collector’s shelf.

— 12/16/03

A shock, losing my journal entries for the past month, with their mix of comprehension & soul-shaking rage.

Roshi yesterday quoted Hakuin on the way predictable strategies of thought are like “a snail trying to plow a stony field.”

Stories of Hakuin’s severity suggest that the deep calm of zen must first take root even in the shame of one’s most intimate blunders & the baffled, thunderous rage they usually bring.

— 1/11/04

For long minutes consciousness is leafy debris dribbling to the ground. Occasional moments of stillness are followed by harsh disintegration – both stages belonging to a single turbulent whole.

— 1/13/04

A dream just before waking: a child gets lost while its aloof, well-intentioned family wanders off, traveling toward safety. It’s night, he’s caught somewhere, treated as a transgressor, roped up, put in a rowboat, & howling, is about to be killed by soldiers firing at him when there’s some sort of pause. Then a huge ancient Panama Clipper is about to take off on the water, but with agonizing slowness, after which the family is being hounded by some sort of inspector, who warns the father to reveal what he’s hidden in the closet, something resembling a small, black, wrapped, CD player. This he won’t do. There’s a tense standoff. I wake up.

Fifteen minutes later, I’m sitting in zazen, aiming toward quietness. Per-

haps there's "No Origin," no enduring form to my residue of panic, but the child drowning in worry needs something not easily revealed but luminously *real*.

— 1/15/04

Daily now a sense of the fragility of the life and people I've loved. This carries immense tenderness, through which flashes the principle that, because our ground is *dukkha*, it makes sense to wholly claim this moment, anguish, place.

— 1/17/04

After a while my concentration strengthens, then opens into low-keyed nervousness, & so on for 40 minutes of intricately mingled loss-return-loss. Meanwhile my inner voices feel like a dance of bees, triggered by an urge to taste, signal, flee.

Buzz words: *Filter. Dance of skulls. A squirrel's constant darting, nuzzling, glancing, leaping, freezing, hiding, "eye bright with purpose" to seize whatever it needs to comprehend.*

— 1/20/04

Fumbling toward non-thinking until, on an outbreath, silence appears a few seconds before the period ends.

— 1/22/04

Morning news of Mel Gibson's implicitly anti-semitic film on the crucifixion, framed in fierce identification with a divine victim:

Odor of blood when Christ was slain
Made all Platonic tolerance vain
And vain all Doric discipline

Yeats again. Sacramental murder as spectacle, igniting vengeful reflexes that continue for centuries, unquenchably.

For the dharma practitioner contemplating life-death, however, what's "slain" is the illusion-hungry ego, & what's reborn is our common ground, seen with enormously heightened generosity.

— 1/30/04

Sitting in the cold at 5 am, I sense an impulse to wall things off & close up every chink.

A recent *New Yorker* talks about the "learned helplessness" behind the current passion for SUV's – a near paranoid assumption that since most roads are dangerous, it's safest in the most fearsome vehicle in sight.

In meditations I often encounter similar defensive rage. Like a toreador letting the bull – goaded out of passiveness & pressed into an alien rite – charge what it thinks is his shape, while he leans aside, his vulnerability a source of grace. Another cliché carrying a grave truth.

— 2/9/04

Sesshin, Sonoma Mountain

a) *No Origin.*

When I casually mention to Roshi my unease over violence everywhere, he tells me to "go toward what you fear the most." Behind this is his signature conviction that most fears have "no origin," that they're less substantial than the calm of deep *samadhi*. & this in turn means that no mindedness, *mu shin*, isn't just another label, especially in contrast with what he calls "a perfect delusional practice," trapped in self-protective greed. *Mu shin* involves trusting one's essential innocence, whatever hazards loom ahead.

— 3/14/04

b) *From notes written in my cabin:*

This time I start off aiming deliberately at Dogen's "only drop off mind & body," breathing persistently from deep within my *hara*. Later, however, my stamina yields to a maddening flow of mental babble, which by early evening begins to sound worn & tedious.

That night a storm starts, wind blows through my cabin; rain & twigs rattle on walls & tin roof; the heater's too hot but when I lower it the room's too cold, etc. Zazen the following day is restless. By the third night, exasperated, I steal out, drive downhill, sleep five hours at home, & return before dawn along the debris-ridden road, big branches scattered everywhere.

In the zendo that morning I'm fresh enough to take pleasure in the pre-meditation routine: Roshi's & the *jisha's* bare feet before me, pausing to light the candle to my left at Suzuki-Roshi's altar; after a few seconds the big gong sounding behind me for Roshi's prostrations; then almost immediately his footsteps at our backs while we raise our hands in *gassho*; & finally the soft swish of his robes as he settles back onto his zafu, followed by three small bells & the resonant silence of formal zazen.

Afterwards, I'm able to push determinedly for hours on what seems an impassable door – until I fall into a splintery waking *makyo*, & suddenly notice a figure kneeling to my right, composed of brightly flecked styro-foam like a dashboard version of Spiderman – as if, I sense later, whatever's behind it has had to improvise this silly form. The next second, as I try to clear my head, I sense its arm around my shoulder, & it saying wordlessly before it vanishes, *things'll be all right, don't cling*.

Instantly my mind gathers & goes still. I check a lower panel of the wall & am startled to find what I recognize as *Mu Shin*, empty mind, somehow tangibly there. There's intense luminosity around it, & though I realize I'm gazing in a kind of trance at some sort of simulacrum, I also understand that it's *real*, a possession offered by something inconceivably *else* – the "force bigger than yourself" that suddenly overcame me

when Roshi mentioned it years ago, responding to my anguish over my daughter's impending facial surgery.

That afternoon the boards before me fill with a different light, like the gleam Dogen describes the enlightened mind seeing on "walls, fences, grass & trees." Seconds after, I'm startled at what seems the quick flash of a red lamp, which I identify with those hanging before arks in synagogues. At the same time I remember Roshi's saying in a talk last month that "awareness is the eternal light" – "holy light," as if, despite my father's anger years back, Buddhist illumination & Hebrew *li-fau-ne'chau* come from a single ungraspable source, which is now briefly before me.

The following day I'm utterly exhausted, and for a long time give way to an explosive, rushing irritation with whatever's nearby, including the particulars of dharma practice, the zendo rituals, & even Roshi's unending strength. This triggers a startling rage that builds for hours until I determine to confront it by wiping from my *zazen* *all* mental modes whenever they occur. To my astonishment, I can do this, & the result is an enthralling wave of confidence. I'm Alexander, standing, sword out, about to cut the Gordian Knot. I'm entirely focused, with *nothing else* in my head.

At night, in a second *dokusan*, I tentatively tell Roshi that I've decided to use my *zazen* to abandon verbal content entirely. He listens quietly, then warns me that language is part of my nature, & that any effort to abolish it will lead to unnecessary conflict. I absorb this with a shock. Oh! Yeah! *Moderation*, I remember, *the middle path!* After a long time I look up, take a long breath & speculate that maybe the problem is my lifelong passion for eloquence. You've always emphasized words, he says. I have, since childhood, I agree. So now, he replies, in a sense you're a child again, practically before speech. No wonder I'm confused, I say. Be easy with all this, he adds, & I leave.

As I walk back to my seat, I remember Sekiu's comment that Zen is "very dangerous." I think of Moses' averting his eyes when God passes, or Plato suggesting that we can't see truth naked & still live. I may have been over-dramatizing earlier, but I don't think I'm inflating now.

Continuous Zen practice makes clear that it can take sustained balance to face the void in any form – as birth-death, as the mundane texture of our lives.

Later, squinting at the wall that goes on changing before me, I see that what I really should abandon isn't "words" but the desire to excise them from their intimate origin in the self. At this I experience an emptying of consciousness so drastic that it seems almost another distraction. Then I float effortlessly free of *that* too, & I realize that the point isn't attaining some gradation of *mu shin* so much as continuing the actual *practice*, its enactment of formal rituals, & the profound spiritual focus it imparts. This is what's behind Dogen's axiom that "to sit down is already enlightenment," & the rest implicitly a matter of letting it unfold (ie, acknowledging grace).

Seeing this brings relief. The empty mind I've been seeking is *already* embedded in this zendo space, today so closed in from the cold rain outside that, as I gaze straight ahead, I'm aware largely of the hiss & whistle of blood in my own ears, the nurturing quiet of the sesshin on all sides, & the presence of so many voices, tragedies, histories within.

c) *Liberation:*

In my second *dokusan*, when I discuss the dread I brought to this sesshin, Roshi refers to it as ego's "resistance," its readiness to "marshall armies against you, do anything to prevent liberation from taking place."

Liberation. I can grasp what this means when I get quiet enough to create distance from constant self-dramatization. In deep *samadhi* it's clear that my life-games involve plots that seem to last forever, but more often than not are game-plans for one imagined crisis or another rather than for the banal anguish of ongoing death-life.

Delusions, "quiet desperation," vengeful fury probably start here. These scenarios can absorb lifetimes & dominate whole societies but behind them are usually just selves bewildered by conditions largely like my own. "Liberation" then is primarily a matter of discovering how to act

“with no hindrance” so “no fear exists.” That’s why all dharma practices teach, dance, mean. In the harshest situations, one is also upheld by myriad things.

— 3/21/04



A bright morning suffused with coastal light, alongside quick dartings into worn corners of memory.

Like the presence in human embryos of archaic gills, neurons, tails, the polarities of *mu shin* & “distraction” are really a single thing – an identity enacted in the mudras we make in zazen with both hands, to carry whatever we experience as “real.”

— 4/3/04

Roshi, in *No Beginning, No End*: “Dogen explains that ‘there is no opposition between our initial awakening of mind, supreme enlightenment, & the act of renouncing the world.’ No opposition at all. They are one.” (p 48).

What complicates this for me is that, in Buddhist terms, I’m a “householder,” seeing things as impermanent yet facing samsaric urgencies every day. In that case, “renouncing the world” can only mean abandoning the possibility of any final renunciation itself.

Cf the familiar Vedanta parable of someone chased by tigers over a cliff, where, clinging to a loose branch over a cobra below, he pulls a berry growing alongside & shouts, “how sweet!” – an outcry not of horror but of encompassing taste.

— 5/10/04

A deep presentness mingled with foreboding – like noticing the calm

beauty of light bent in water while standing on Trungpa's island in the river of hell.

Dharma practice is a refuge because it's where *dukkha* passes through the filter where healing runs as well. Cf Roshi's comment that there's a Buddha in each circuit of hungry ghosts. Plus this, from *No Beginning, No End*:

We are actively participating in loss. Actively means that we are willing, committed, not giving up, and that we have the courage to die while being alive. The word loss refers to death and all the things we usually don't want to talk about. It also implies failure and impermanence. It's about suffering, fear, surrender, and letting go – all those things we believe to be negative despite the fact that they actually serve as the impetus for most of us to practice. Loss in life brings us to practice. Impermanence brings us to practice. These are the perfect antidotes to a self-centered, gaining life....

(pp128-9)

What precedes deep change can be radical grief & dread – demons one must assuage, with infinite caution, first.

— 5/17/04

A powerful four day sesshin with Shodo Harada-Roshi, whose talks, translated by a lanky, laid back American student, range from Ch'an dialogues to advice about handling the mind in *zazen*. There's a feeling of no-nonsense energy about Harada, especially when *dokusan* is announced & his followers leap up & stampede down the corridor to line up for an interview. I just stay in my chair, vaguely annoyed.

From the beginning, Harada insists that the aim of *zazen* is to be "transparent," to see without conceptual interference. Although we embody

Empty Mind, he suggests, it transcends personal egos but doesn't isolate us from the ephemerality of our lives. To illustrate this, he refers frequently to the *Sandokai*, which, like the Heart Sutra, posits a dualism resolved only through sustained dharma practice.

Though I'm reluctant to expose my zazen to his scrutiny, I'm impressed by Harada's insistence that, whether we're following the breath or doing *shikan taza*, we should treat every interruption as "delusion". Not "illusion," which sounds passive, but concentration-shattering delusion. Whether one's zazen is good or bad, pleasurable or filled with futile pain, what's important is to treat distractions of any kind as beside the point. Anything less is "weak concentration."

Hearing these talks, I think of my zen beginnings 40 years ago, when I went to Sensei at a moment of harrowing self-doubt, & he barked out, "strong concentration!" – which I now think implies both reductive vigor & a generosity sufficient to absorb the anguish underlying any life. Beyond this, Harada emphasizes that in Buddhism every metaphor, narrative persona, traditional *Bodhisattva* is an embodiment of the practicing self. As if only a single consciousness exists, individuated & time-worn, universal & endless at once.

As for ego, even if it seems shattered one day, it'll go on squirming & taking root the next. Hence Harada's formula for dealing with apparent anomaly: "grind it in." Force it toward the core.

— 5/25/04

Rereading Roshi's '01 talk on "Stone in Emptiness," I'm struck by his examples: Hoitsu Suzuki struggling with life-threatening asthma; & the Polish sangha's sneaking a Tibetan "Treasure Vase" ("to heal the earth in places of violation") for burial in the courtyard of Auschwitz-Birkenau a few years back.

One person choking out, "I just go through with it." A few others in a bleak enclosure at night, bending over a small bundle they consider

totemic. Hard, furtive effort through which a practice persists.

— 6/25/04

Another pre-waking dream:

I've been in a shocking auto accident, rear-ended by a flashy car steered backwards by an indifferent driver I barely know. My own car is a smoking shell. After a third vehicle races off to get help, I reach out to reassure everyone crowded around me. At that moment I sense that I'm indescribably present, in a way that includes almost intolerable awkwardness & pain – almost the direct contrary of Jim Wright's, "Suddenly I realize / That if I stepped out of my body I would break / Into blossom."

— 6/27/04

A gritty, fumbling meditation, debris & fury whirling at the edge. When I look up at the end I see on the dresser the buckeye-nut like a wood-carved kidney Peg Fischang gave me two years ago, an object so innocent of other meaning that against it confusion falls away.

Similarly, for Dogen, as Hee-Ji Kim suggests, any comparison can turn into a powerfully clarifying metaphor. As in the *Genjo-koan's* observation that enlightenment "is like the moon reflected on the water [because] the moon does not get wet, nor is the water broken," etc., which articulates flawlessly the elemental perspective of life-death.

— 7/12/04

"It's a loop," I remember saying to Roshi in a shared teisho when I was *shuso* a while ago. We were talking about how the mind in deep *samadhi* seems constantly to reach outward to gather externals within.

Basically, by embracing *samsara* with its anguish & waste, one merges with it, dissolving opinions about what is or isn't valuable, illusory, etc.. From this point of view, the longings that surface as one weakens – my

father after a stroke sitting for long days staring into his closet of cherished antiques, my handicapped sister & her hopelessly rag-tag memories, even my brother's fits of fierce rage – come from an unappeasable thirst to finally anchor oneself truly in this world. Like children's fumbling attempts at coherent grammar or judgement, still linked to something larger, central, blessed.

— 7/26/04

Against this morning's news of the latest violence, the most I can do is let my mind empty in strong *zazen*. Cf again the legendary hundred sages Sensei mentioned during his last visit – anonymous hermits keeping old wisdom intact, emerging only when general “misery” is at an end, & coherence is possible again. Or Roshi's vision of his proposed *zendo* as a “sanctuary” to last 500 years, across the darkness surely on the way.

— 8/2/04

Sitting with Lorna in the SMZC *zendo* at dusk, for the opening of summer *Ango*. With birds & crickets in the distance, we barely hear the hesitant *shuso*.

Katagiri, again: “All we have to do is make our life stable, be present in the endless repetition of life and death, and just live from moment to moment.” & Dogen's “boat” which “you ride” so intimately that “your riding makes the boat what it is.”

— 8/5/04

Sesshin, Sonoma Mountain

a) *Overview*

This *sesshin* sets up old patterns of resistance. My mood is bleak, & when I finally hit the turning point after days of effort, I notice that I

haven't gone past my discomfort so much as become quietly open to my lungs pumping away, the weight in my *hara*, my mind turned toward the "Only This!" Roshi sometimes utters as he hits the floor with a stick or his fist. Eventually, by the week's end, world & no mindedness seem one, like Yeats' holding "reality & justice in the same hand," separately immovable, but conjoined lighter than air.

Summarizing the week afterwards in the talk circle, I mention both my physical fatigue & what I've loved despite it – the small, intimate sangha, the superb discussions of Yasutani & Dogen, the insights I've been offered. To my surprise, others' reactions are similarly split, & I sense again that sesshins often work in ways I don't fully understand.

b) *From notes written after:*

A cold wind leaking into the cabin at night, & increasingly violent muscle spasms, making sleep difficult. During the day, long narcoleptic fits during periods of zazen.

I confront all this with rapid *uinsbu* breathing, but still feel the same underlying stress, I tell Roshi in an early *dokusan*. When he asks about it, I mention the constant news of war, intolerance, terrorism, etc. "No Origin," he reminds me again. There's no time to explain more personal issues, but later I also decide that, on this gentle dharma site, the stone of anxiety may be palpably washing away. Go with the flow, I think: Dogen's advice that if you do one thing thoroughly, you do everything else.

Back in zazen I gaze toward the panelled wall, this time wanting to go beyond merely letting mental chatter fade. What we literally face on our cushions in this zendo, Roshi said the first day, is a wall & nothing else. Ie, the wall may be where during past sesshins I've seen inner states take the form of startling dreamlike images, but now I also see it as embodying an absence of judgement, concept or thought – ie, no-mindedness, so total that "with no hindrance, no fear exists." Dealing with dread, then, is a matter of understanding emptiness at the depth of the psalmist's trust that even in the valley of the shadow, "thou art with

me.”

But what is “with me”? Perhaps it’s the realization that, in “looking at a wall & nothing else,” “form” literally is “emptiness” & “emptiness” “form,” as the Heart Sutra insists. That is, if every thing appears & vanishes, then what remains is my life seen without interpretation.... as in Meister Eckhart’s “the eye with which I see God is the eye with which God sees me,” which both Masao Abe and Sekiun Koretsune (following the Kyoto School) quoted constantly.

Just before this, however, my focus gives me a gift. During a long period of lowered energy I stare into a frame made by two whorled vertical panels illuminated by the nearby candle. Within seconds two phrases in English seem to emerge from it: first a line from Psalm 96 in the Jewish Sabbath Evening prayers, “the world is so established it cannot be shaken,” then my father’s statement during his last illness that he had “talked with God” about the date of his death. It’s as if the dharma had briefly opened onto the birthrite spirituality I also continue to live.

When I summarize much of this to Roshi in a second *dokusan*, he says it’s “as it should be” – that complex understandings in *samadhi* often come this way, seemingly casually & indirectly though after exhausting effort, in the looping heart of light.

— 8/18/04

IV

France

Driving back from Bordeaux last Sunday afternoon, we stop in Moissac, which 30 years was a provincial Romanesque sanctuary, but where the disneyed square before the abbey church now is apparently a gathering place for gangs of adolescents, spitting & yelling.

In Nyons, I still hear that anger echoing. Maybe it comes to this: that in energy working moment to moment there's also a clarity that appears if, while one rages blindly, another waits attentively.

— 10/23/04

In morning zazen I reach toward moments when I'm just here, this side of the bass of a car radio beating & kids yelling downstairs, sitting on the steps near our glass door. I think of the Korean meditation retreat Roshi sponsors every fall, featuring a two day cacophony of cymbals, horns, drums etc.. Whatever triggers my hunger for quiet is still my property.

— 10/24/04

Zazen begins in pre-dawn gloom. Below the usual struggle there's the city of the dead that's lately dominated my dreams.

Gradually, sensations of fight-or-flight surface, & I'm carried toward raw immediacy, in which noises of cars, buses, voices vocalizing are *as it is*.

Though I'm caught by stupor, I'm also light as a leaf. That such moments happen unpredictably seems woven into the ropey banality of my life.

— 10/29/04

As in Cavafy's "Waiting for the Barbarians," there's really little to say about the various menaces upon us. Though this morning they seem quite visible, indifferent to subtlety, looming in the haze.

Later, after reading Yasutani on Dogen: think of the self as without foundation in any other persona, world, or external deity. Call it, No God, No Self. Only an abiding presence, fated to fail but before that sustained in a dynamic of aloneness alongside equally powerful connectedness.

Yasutani emphasizes the raw, elemental character of this. No evasions, no conceptualized “else,” nowhere to hide. He quotes:

The body of existence
& nonexistence
are both this body.
In emptiness
There aren't two tastes.

Here's Ken Wilbur's “one taste,” which I now think means *just being here, in this perpetual vanishing*.

— 11/3/04

After a flu, zazen is saturated by urgent thoughts, determinations, conclusions, until I sense that, rather than get them behind me, I just want to avoid being overrun, a very different thing.

This afternoon, a couple of juveniles try to steal our car, one of whom threaten Lorna with a knife. I react with sudden fury which could easily trigger something dangerous, but she yanks me back in time. We phone from a nearby store: the gendarmes are there in minutes, & later, at the station, they return with two scared scrawny kids in custody.

— 11/21/04

In zazen, to my surprise, I find myself breathing so naturally into what I see as emptiness that for an instant I feel I can toss aside my entire samsaric history.

That this is illusory comes across in the tide of grief it triggers. The more difficult effort to acknowledge one's past compassionately & patiently is all that lets ego dissipate at its own pace, sending its gathered energy elsewhere.

Here's the issue from zen's earliest period in China: is enlightenment

gradual or sudden? & of course the consensus, as in the *Sandokai*, was that such distinctions are superficial. The dharma can't be readily labeled & portioned out because it belongs to a reality in which truth & density, center & periphery, are hopelessly entwined.

— 12/2/04

Sitting before sunrise I focus on letting go of the weave of thoughts as they show, shimmer & leave. For long minutes, nothing's inimical or even very well known, beyond this many-layered calm. When the school buses roar up later, strident voices yelling & smaller ones rising on the stairs below, it's a wave, building, threatening, wandering away.

— 12/4/04

A *repas* last night with Pedro & Klara, Georges & Anne-Marie. They speak of their two-week retreat with "Shin," a Swiss teacher they've known for a long time. What they describe isn't far from what might happen in a sesshin, including morning meditations when, though most of them are struggling to stay awake, Shin talks about comparative religions, visions, mythologies, obviously trying to establish spiritual gravity.

When I ask what was striking about the experience, Klara talks shyly about the daily exercises of mind-body, & breaking through to a coherent comprehension of her own inner light. Pedro, in his awkward way speaks movingly of noticing his own deep "blocsages," sensing their cause & letting them go. Later, toward the end, Georges & Anne-Marie describe an afternoon "theater of dance," in which one enters a flowing movement until Shin yells out "*Arrete!*" & asks what one was just feeling, etc. Klara speaks beautifully of a kind of shrinkage, in which she experiences herself as smaller than she expects, but also sees the *noyau*, the kernel under layers of sorrows & defeats. Georges describes this more conceptually as a healing of dualism, exposing in his art a self beyond scale, & sensing light as a physical possession.

When they bring it up, I start a rough discussion of Buddhism (whose rejection of soul as well as god & creation myth surprises them). The

conversation reminds me that the easiest way to describe zazen is through its effort to abandon mental habits in order to make entry into the core self possible.

Again, we discovered after a few years that Anne-Marie & Pedro are both children of Holocaust survivors – in Pedro’s case, in the harsh absence of any nurturing parent; in Anne-Marie’s, in an otherwise warm but scarred family, drawn toward suppression & denial. These friends are among the scattered remnants of the Holocaust who turn up occasionally here, & often seem to be moving, without realizing it, in a kind of hobbled sleep.

— 12/7/04

The other night Georges suddenly asks me what the Buddha saw on his awakening, & I respond quickly that it’s the identity of inner & outer, self & world. Among other things, I could have added not only that “I” & world are the same stuff, but that the true self literally *is* the depth & breadth of the universe – an idea not easily summarized.

If reality is always changing, what’s knowable is Masao Abe’s “boundless openness,” a phrase he uttered slowly whenever asked what enlightenment was about. I felt something like this in Klara’s comment that “we are at once smaller than we think, yet far more meaningful.”

— 12/11/04

Out the window the day dark, cold, lovely. A crown of consciousness wound with tiny thorns.

A center hollow as a straw. Dank wind blowing through the ventricles.

Deep *samadhi* is in no way mere escape. One becomes a pebble, or an old man lying awake.

— 12/13/04

I remember Harada Roshi's advice last spring to clear the mind of thought-content, & for anything urgent, "just grind it in."

This may work much of the time, but I also think of a piece in a recent *NY Review*, on an effort in contemporary Spain to erase memories of fascist atrocity. Can anyone – individuals or cultures – treat the past as if nothing happened? Surely the only way to respond to trauma is to pass so closely between it & the possibility of release that one draws intimately on the contingency of each. Maybe that's what "grinding it in" really implies.

— 1/4/05

V

Santa Rosa

Saturday morning back at Sonoma Mountain. The speaker is Lee Lozowic, unimpressive a few years ago, but who now forcefully insists that we ignore the political-social fragility evident everywhere, & concentrate on the concrete suffering & joy present in commonplace events.

After, I keep thinking of his advice to a rock musician struggling with addiction to "be without judgement" because – if I understand him – the awareness that "everything is real" implies that delusion lives primarily in the mind where it's tangible, approachable.

— 1/29/05

Last night, at the SMZC *shuso* ritual, the sense of sanctuary, the zendo wood shining everywhere in the evening lights, & the simplicity & depth of Shinko's face & shaven head.

— 2/1/05

In a sense, dharma “transparency” resembles what one sees when focusing various levels of a microscope: heart-lungs pumping, complex rhythms of mind-body unfolding, innumerable similar consciousnesses extending in all directions.

I feel myself very slowly casting a net repeatedly into these depths.

— 2/05/05

Shinko suggested yesterday that others caught in grocery lines & traffic jams may be instinctive *bodhisattvas* too, working selflessly, caring for families, practicing generosity within the scattering & alienation of samsaric whirling.

Whirling: we can choose at any moment to be at the core or the dizzying periphery, & still touch the mystery of our being.

— 2/06/05

Sesshin, Sonoma Mountain

As always, I start with the prospect of sleeplessness & fatigue. Sunday night, after just two zazen, I awake to a knifelike jab of sciatic pain that goes on for long minutes. The next morning early meditations are ponderous, but by midday I’m seeing without interpreting, refusing the clusters of thoughts constantly gathering at the edge. After a while more openings appear, periods of relaxation when breathing slows to a few times a minute.

Monday night I’m jolted awake again, this time by a paralyzing cramp in my right leg. Afterwards, heart pounding, I decide to tell Roshi I’m out of here, but once the day begins I calm down, & before the first meditation I talk to Shinko, who says to omit a few zazen, rest, bathe, etc.. With small doses of ibuprofen, the harshness slackens. A night later, while we meditate, Shinko herself falls over with a dull thud & has to be taken to the Emergency Room in Santa Rosa— after, she tells

us that in dealing with others' stress she's neglected her own (later we learn the problem was gall stones). Roshi vividly describes the chaotic night scene in the ER; there's obviously crisis everywhere.

By Wednesday I'm sharply aware of Shinko's sesshin theme, zen & the everyday – implicitly the relation of silence to speech, *Nirvana* to *Samsara*. Her opening talks on the *Genjo-koan* are puzzling, however, because they seem to bluntly dismiss “language” & anything other than concentrated *samadhi*. Finally, when she invites comments, I say something about the necessity of words, even for Dogen, though one also has to be responsive to the limits in which they're embedded. I try quickly to address the weave of directness & opacity in Dogen, which creates the poetry of his work. I drop a comment about Theolonious Monk playing the “pauses” as well as the notes....then, looking around, realize I'd better shut up.

I'm edgy, however. Clearly, if zen is rooted in the experience of ego-based confusion & pain, it has to accept that as crucial to its being. Then I realize that Shinko, as sesshin leader, is focused solely on our practicing “deep *prajna paramita*” so exhaustively that the kind of qualifications I'm making must seem merely fussy.

During my afternoon *zazen*, *shikan taza* slowly unfolds further. At one point I notice that though my monitoring voice is still hanging over the sliver of pure concentration I've achieved, all I need do is observe it, since it's without tangible meaning other than its presence now.

At this a weight lifts. Sensations from early childhood appear, moments before language when toys, open window, backyard trees, familiar faces glowed with inner meaning. These seem templates rather than obsessive images. It's as if I can reach them with the same hands that touched them years earlier. As for the perfectly concrete space before me (candle, side-door, paneled wall & floor), I enfold it, & it enfolds me. Language bobs up for what I'm feeling – compassion not as the banal buzzword of easy moralizing but as Buddhist *jibi*, the bond that holds world & myself in place. Abandoning my inner monitor (still yakking in the background) is like letting go of a balloon & noticing the empty space where

it rises.

The next evening, when I'm called to *dokusan*, Roshi asks how the sesshin is going. A mixed bag, I tell him. How? Going back to the beginning, I mention my struggle with sciatic pain, then get to *shikan taza*, based on Harada Roshi's advice about "transparency" & seeing all thoughts as "delusions." I describe letting go of the intrusive inner monitor, & seeing compassion (*jibi*) as the bond that holds mind & world in an inexhaustible whole. Then I add that I want to distance the monitoring voice more & more, since it's essentially in my way. You can't do that alone, he tells me: Neil can't do it, but – "what's your zen name?" – "Sekiku" – "Sekiku can." Clearly, in the context of deep *samadhi*, my dharma self is the reality, my ego-name the shadow.

— 3/2/05



Birds spin garlands, freshness, clear early light. Meanwhile I keep hitting patches of muddle, as if they're part of the road surface rather than my self behind the wheel.

— 5/23/05

A harsh dream just before waking: scenes of external attack & murder after which my young brother & I jump into a lake, pretending we're swimming but forcing ourselves below the surface in order to drown.

In zazen a holocaust-tinged horror seems to underlie everything.

— 5/24/05

I stay home from today's coastal hike, & read in Jisho Warner's superb new edition of Uchiyama's *Opening the Hand of Thought*. Then, at one point I flash on a moment at 14. I'm scared, almost failing at school, experiencing a suffocating desolation without end. My father keeps saying

that I don't have to carry the weight of the world on my shoulders, & though I say nothing I can only think that's the last thing I want to do. Now, half a century later, I sense how disturbing my anguish must have been for him, & I want to reach toward that child & him alike, in spite of everything.

Any profound gesture of generosity can redeem in a way that feels miraculous. Like Jim Moore's description of the instant of resurrection in the painting by Piero della Francesca, the past no longer self-repeating, burial garments falling away.

— 5/25/05

A haunting talk by Julie Hwa Kwong this morning, on her early life, adoption out of a Korean orphanage at 7 into a Danish family, moving in the US from good job to good job, but nothing ever satisfying, subject to constant restlessness – until, returning to Korea in a fruitless search for her birth parents, she casually encounters a poem by Zen Master Seung Sahn Am, with the lines, “When you are born, where do you come from?/ When you die, where do you go?/ Life is like a floating cloud that appears./ Death is like a floating cloud that disappears.”

One's life is the supreme koan, beginning with nothing, taking nothing away.

— 6/19/05

So many raw, glaring remnants of ego in zen soup. One begins in delusion & never ends, Uchiyama & Shohaku say.

— 7/1/05

I look up after zazen at Bunny Goldstein's two lovely, nearly identical Japanese bowls on the shelf before me, that her husband Sandy gave me after she died. Two bowls – one might hold samsaric dread, the other the clear-mind of dharma practice.

Dread isn't an end in itself. But I can still feel its unyielding presence in the memory of deep traumas, like a three year old brutalizing a smaller brother, ☯ for years after facing a bleak maze of isolating incomprehension.

— 7/15/05

Any assumption that zazen has a goal is misleading. Reality obviously resists any specific “aim”— as in Dogen’s *jin*, the “whole works,” a wordless present in which words, systems ☯ errors, past ☯ future, all energy, blossoming, loss are embedded as well.

How does one respond to this incessantly looming whole? As in Basho’s haunting death poem, “this lonely autumn road/ Where no one goes”?

“It’s so vast,” Demian said recently, as we wiped dishes in the Sangha House kitchen, ☯ talked about the innumerable minds supporting the cognizable universe exactly now.

— 7/17/05

Sesshin, Sonoma Mountain

What I bring to this sesshin is more bleakness – which, Roshi says in *dokusan*, is what zen consciousness needs in order to reflect the alternations of dark ☯ light intimate to the universe. Call it *zenki*, zen energy, embodying the powerful coherence of all things.

So I meditate for days, opening to a gloom that seems to eat away at memory ☯ routine identity. During a first sit before dawn I find myself wondering what, if I have no fixed self, my name might be. When the walking (*kinhin*) interval begins I leave the zendo ☯ wobble on my hiking stick, barely able to see the hazardous tree-roots ☯ gullies on the gravel path to the Sangha House. I use the john, tie my robes, ☯ feeling my way gingerly back uphill I glimpse a rose-blue wedge of sky, low ☯ off to my left, behind the shadowy redwoods. Instantly I know that my

“name” is the sheer momentum of this brightening world, that I’m the dawn & the dawn is me, a simple koan I hold all that day, in a kind of wonder, hour after hour.

At the same time what seems equally meaningful is Roshi’s urging me again to go toward what I fear the most. I return to a darkness in which I just sit quietly for an indeterminate time. Then the bell rings, & as we stand in rows to bow & chant I notice the sun falling from the panels in the upper roof, over these familiar figures who have been here all the time. Clearly, I see again, what I seek is just this moment, in this place. Simple. Nothing is dreadful, whatever discomfort I brought with me here.

— 8/14/05



The impact of the last sesshin still seems huge. Gradually my dominant awareness of the suffocating clatter of things gave way to a sensation of sheer banality, which I stared at for hours, mindless, restless & profoundly bored, until I saw abruptly that I resembled a mosquito probing the skin of a luminous truth: self holding world, world holding self.

As Mark Adams, the *shuso*, kept insisting, words are deceptive. But this, I thought, is only because they’re samsaric tools that become inadequate as one approaches presentness, where nearly unreachable subtleties exist.

So words are useful even if they crudely present essentials, like home-made signs, the letters dripping with paint:

A whole life
Scattered hand to hand
I let it go

(At an edge where breath passes & attachments fray, what's left is generosity of spirit, blood pulsing in the ears, mere space.)

— 8/24/05

France

O distraction.

Yesterday afternoon kids on stairs, indifferent, contemptuous, backs to glass door.

A dream last night: my old Plymouth, still in gear, has taken off by itself & goes on mile after mile while I stand there, apprehensive about whatever damage it might do, though no one seems ready to blame me.

In this morning's zazen, there's this fear of being suddenly out of control, alongside the pleasure of sensing each moment take shape in the dark. From time to time I look up at Pedro's cascade, motionless above the broad bowl on the altar-like chest below...

weakness
sun lighting doorways
fragile shell

— 9/17/05

After zazen, glancing casually at Ken Wilbur, I find a passage on the strength of theism in its openness to intimacy with divinity – aka, the life-force – as in an early sufi's dumbfounded (& at the time fatal) outcry, "I am God!"

Wilbur also warns that one can be spiritually adept but still need conventional social, economic, psychological skills. This is an old story:

even if guided by strong *samadhi*, we share a dense, resistant universe, where we practice as if whirling on one of Saturn's rings.

All things are as they were before I lived & will soon be.

— 9/25/05

Last night, back from a hectic, exhilarating trip to Italy, I talked to my sister, handicapped from birth, who bravely keeps up her gift for impulsive joy, alongside her shattered health & the unending desolation of her days. "Poor thing!" my frequently exasperated mother used to say, out of her hearing.

— 10/11/05

As we approach our door last night, one of the loitering kids, slouching on our wall, snaps angry phrases into a cell phone without looking up.

— 10/11/05

A dream before waking. We're on a bicycle tour, riding behind Wally & Joyce, who are manouvering over a pitted moonscape. Lorna & I cycle cautiously behind them, watching in horror as Wally charges toward a dangerous depression, then drops totally out of view. We have to follow & I shout angrily, then am overwhelmed by the sinking feeling that I've uttered something that will threaten a long friendship. Soon Joyce shows up, alone but smiling as always, & trying to reassure us though my heart pounds with grief. I try to explain myself but wake up, knocking over my water glass as I grope for the clock.

Behind this is Wally's near death-struggle a few months ago, which he managed with unforgettable dignity, plus my fear of impulsively alienating friends (my sister Linda's lifelong fate).

— 10/12/05

Sitting, I hear the Thursday market gearing up in the dark below, &

finally, as it brightens, the squeals & chatter of schoolkids on our steps. Still, I stare into an effortless present that carries through the whole day, making restlessness as evanescent as anything else.

— 10/13/05

A backwash of uncertainty after yesterday's clarity. I reach for *Crazy Wisdom*, & find, "The realisation of the confusion is the teaching, so it is a constantly living situation, constantly lived in & always applicable" (p 69).

— 10/14/05

Passage this morning from dream-dense stupor toward "clear mind" on every outbreath. At first I feel as if I'm laboring with half a lung, but after a while my earlier mood seems surreal, capable of sucking me back but less coherent than this quiet aloofness to any surges of flight-or-fight.

This is a gift from my inner "treasure-store" which in zazen, Dogen says, "will open by itself." It's as if I've been rubbing the belly of some Boschian beast – the reptile brain? – until it sleeps.

— 10/16/05

The usual morning schoolchildren hoot on our steps while, a floor above them in the *séjour*, I breathe patiently until stress & clarity seamlessly merge.

— 10/18/05

A dark, wet, gloomy morning, low clouds hanging over the *Garde Grosse*, first rain after a long long drought here. I'm stupified as I sit down, as if all my ballast has dropped into my *hara*, but I just let my daze press me toward something that feels true. After, in the lessening dark, while the kids continue below, I'm surprised that I'm aching & out of breath.

— 10/19/05

Katagiri's "great joy" comes largely from, where possible, reaching out with gentleness & a deep acceptance of life-death. To truly see how one is already wrapped in *dukkha* also exposes time as a moral condition. Once more, as at my father's funeral, I hear the rabbi's, "the Lord giveth & taketh away: blessed is the name of the Lord" – all that.

— 10/21/05

Every November here, against the austere beauty everywhere, I feel a constant alternation of deep stress & comprehension when the kids, fleeing the *lycée* up the hill to their little ghetto in the corridor downstairs, howl furiously.

Suddenly there's little at stake. I'm receptive & just sit, breathing regularly, letting thoughts pass, facing the lessening dark.

At Georges' marvelous *vernissage* fete last night we listened for hours to vibrant ongoing French, & fumbled occasionally toward companionable speech as if briefly cracking open a door.

— 11/22/05

In zazen late this morning, an indifference that feels almost ethical, tho it could seem offputting to others around me.

To hold all within the cosmos of the self is a stretch. Things that should be intimate are actually often so far from each other. But meaning arises exactly there.

— 11/24/05

Today impudent graffiti tags suddenly show up near our door, & later for an hour after noon, kids ring our bell downstairs & race away. Though we calm down, I'm nearly speechless with anger. This small scale insolence obviously has lots of causes that have nothing to do with us, & but it easily triggers a sense of being attacked personally, since

we're here.

— 11/24/05

Absence of hope, like an empty shore a vast tide has exposed. All I can do is let confusion go by entering it wholly. What I find there today is tangible but somehow incomprehensible, like a nameless source.

Later I pick up Trungpa, *Crazy Wisdom*, & notice in the first chapter something that I hardly registered before:

When “question & answer...begin to rub each other too closely... they short-circuit each other in some way. At that point, we tend to give up hope of an answer, or anything whatsoever, for that matter. We have no more hope, none whatsoever. We are purely hopeless. We could call this transcending hope, if you would like to put it in more genteel terms.

This hopelessness is the essence of crazy wisdom. It is hopeless, utterly hopeless. It is beyond hopelessness. (Of course it would be possible, if we tried to turn that hopelessness itself into some kind of solution, to become confused again, to say the least).” (p.10)

As for fear, that I've never fully thrown it off may be the point. Ie, “nothing is lost” because, as in dreams, everything brings a gift.

— 11/25/05

The texture of life feels so particular now – cold, sunlight on the huge leaves in the back garden, the look of warm-climate things under winter conditions. Clear sky, space everywhere....

Crazy Wisdom is bewildering partly because, though it's written in hasty guru shorthand, it's absolutely on: as in the way Trungpa refers to “eter-

nity” as a matter of “being without judgement, simply being-by everything – pain, happiness, good, evil, past, future.... sheer openness, developed, or emergent, as if suddenly, from the inside, rather than externally, by gradual training.” In this clutch of exploding phrases everything’s there once you get the inner drift.

— 11/26/05

Trungpa describes even “poverty of means” as dualistic, as if, finally renounced, even such compelling formulas can release the inchoate energy trapped within them.

In early zazen this keeps recurring to me, but I’m swayed by strings of staccato observations, insights, scenarios of past & present, until I float wholly into this space – the big room, the dark chest looming before me – & glimpse the improbability of my being here, thrown up by “accidents” that in fact are the essence of karma, & come to fruition when one senses how to trust the pivot on which all awareness, enlightened or ignorant, finally turns.

Bling bling! All this comes, goes, comes....

— 11/28/05

Again, a shadowy movement outward, mixing the transient & the fiercely real. For a while I see mainly the barrenness on which this plays, then sense that even though the witnessing self is merely a point of gathering, it inhabits a larger single space far more cogently than it thinks.

— 12/5/05

A repetition of yesterday: morning zazen starting in a muddle, shards of self-doubt spinning at the edge. I work to clear them, then find myself in a blankness that feels sterile & threatening, but sheer momentum finally yields to a quiet in which self & world – hands in mudra, buses rumbling, urchins yelling in the *place* – are water brimming in a bowl,

noticed without expectation.

— 12/6/05

The most difficult thing these days is the rush of reflex classifying, explaining & identifying when I first sit down – but as that fades, I’m often surprised to find that I’m empty, without impulse to label or utter anything at all.

This sensation must be the site of Trungpa’s *dharmakaya*, entry into which requires both radical “hopelessness” & actual “experience,” since it’s our subjectivity that first intuits the world & what’s at stake. & “experience” in turn is the carrier of the self-awakening *sambhogakaya* alertness that must be what Katagiri had in mind when he told me “there is also great joy”.

— 12/7/05

Entering Trungpa’s *bardo*, a passage through radical uncertainty, must be like balancing on a web between fear & hopelessness, with the spider not far behind. Here, he suggests, you’re reduced to one-syllable utterances, *Om*, *Mu*, beyond all judgement, definition, indulgence.

— 12/8/05

Responding further to Trungpa: even if confusion and pain as well as confidence are present from the start, in *zazen* the self first shrinks to a whirl of sensations before it gathers enough strength. Hopelessness means that once we “penetrate” to irreducible fears we also begin developing “resources” as if in mid-air.

In other words, to merely shift between panic & hope is to remain in duality. Once fears are recognized as immovable, however, there’s no need to abandon them, since “you & your fear are standing nakedly alone.” As with anger, once you neither “express” nor exclude fear, it “becomes vivid & directionless, &... diffuses into energy.”

Ie, once life-death is witnessed without opinion or desire, “energy” becomes, as Blake said, “eternal delight.”

Bardo: such sweet, almost dazzling light on the yellow walls & shapes of the *séjour*.

— 12/10/05

Not a speck of dust.

A *zazen* that begins strongly, then suddenly opens to an exquisite awareness of the screw-ups of my earlier life.

Maybe giving way to harsh memories also offers a “change of attitude” in which “instead of trying to become buddha, you suddenly realize that buddha is trying to become you” (Trungpa, p. 148)

Every spiritual practice posits something like this, but the way toward it is beyond any predictable formulas.

Trungpa, a few lines further, comments on how, in this kind of transformation, “you become an intense person...reduced to a capsule, a very concentrated sense of being yourself. You are just a grain of sand. It is not dissolving but being intensified into one dot.”

What drove me frequently in my childhood was raw resistance. Noticing once more how self-defeating that was is like perpetually hitting a rock & splitting into something else.

— 12/11/05

Consciousness this morning seems tied to the wintry landscape of the merely personal – did this, felt that – but that’s where all spiritual grounding begins. & to wholly penetrate to this center also affects one’s view of any part of the weave.

An astonishing rush of non-judgemental energy sometimes follows this

– a sensation of simply being in the world that comes from admitting the full range of individual experience, physical or mental, recalled or in the now, understood as part of me as I am of it. Much like Wanshi’s “jewel that illumines only itself,” which without being directed there, also illumines the whole.

— 12/12/05

Despite an underlying daze, the world around me comes together as *dharmakaya*, merely as it is. Slowly darkness gives way, cars & buses arrive, windows rattle, the *place de la Mairie* buzzes *au matin*. All this remains vaguely menacing, yet it’s like a blanket I draw up around me – as is my awareness of an entire life as it kept recurring to me recently.

Later, at what turns out to be a prank doorbell, I jump up to investigate, then give way to an always underlying edginess about our presence in this place. A primal negativity, suddenly tangible like the deep note of fear Katagiri said was always audible if you listened closely.

— 12/13/05

I stop *zazen* abruptly, since I can hardly bear the thought of the small bit of paint I’d thoughtlessly spilled down the old drain the night before. In the *cave*, I scrub & scrub the surface of the sink, until to my relief the worn enamel of the sink starts to reappear. Is this act *dharma* too?

— 12/14/05

Bardo. Mahgrebian adolescents chattering fiercely down below as I sit, bright sun on the deep yellow walls, working through a French study of American expatriates. Earlier the phone rings, some sort of oily scam, which at first I don’t remotely understand, then, once the guy starts talking in English, beg off – a simple encounter that feels humiliating, despite the light-filled calm of simply being here. This is *bardo*. Aging, inarticulateness, ache, plus so much tangible light.

Uncle Mal, my father’s schoolboy chum, a year or so before his death

at 95, utterly eloquent, announcing to me as my father's oldest son, "so much water under the bridge!"

— 12/15/05

The usual passage, floating in an indeterminate headache onto a ledge of projects & evaluations, until I actually focus on what's right before my chair, the water-color, the tan bowl resting on the luminous farm chest, while the high dark walls above me give way to the day. This in turn opens a larger space, which carries a constant scrim of early memories & a scent of personal death.

Here, again, is the "hopelessness" Trungpa says marks the *dharmakaya*: a non-judgemental "intelligence" of whatever's contingent, which also cuts through everything irrelevant to the necessary strength.

— 12/16/05

This zazen is dominated by a mundane teaching-anxiety dream, just before waking. It's opening day of classes on a vast Manhattanlike campus, where I've been called out of retirement to handle freshman comp again. I wander among high-rises & dense crowds, looking for my classroom, but though I'll soon be late, I can't find it. When I stop at an information center, a tired attendant tells me it's "four miles off, at Cleveland Point" or "Tip". I check my notes, adequate for a first-day discussion, & start off again, but a violent wind begins, virtually freezing me in place. Obviously I need to get word to my students, who could be walking out of the teacherless class right now. Then I wake.

After, I'm haunting by the dream's evocation of a bland underworld, where spirits are swept across simulacra of their old environments in a sort of Sisyphean crux, dazed by whatever they assume they have to do. Deciding to break out within such a fiction isn't an option, since that would wipe out the dreamwork itself, with its powerful gravity. Ghosts need narratives too.

A further twist: the only way to deal with entrapment is to recognize

that I'm dreaming, insistently conjuring up illusory scenarios. That is, I need to avoid acting as a ghost, & not contribute to the dream grid's urging me to seek an unreachable "point" or "tip". I need to wake up to a space where fantasies give way to truths they're trying to reshape.

Beyond that, this dream enacts the circuitousness that shows up regularly in at-home zazens. Morning after morning, I first confront clusters of stupor & regret, which slowly unclench until they open to wall, window, sunlight, pulse & breath. This transition usually happens only if I remain awake while passing through a valley of the shadow – patient & alert enough to constantly watch my step.

— 12/25/05

Zazen during end-of-year break. *Lycée* kids gone, for once it's quiet here, practically nothing beyond a few cars & one or two doves hooting from the bare plane trees. I can visualize living for long stretches in such tranquil light & space.

In zazen itself I swing into simple being as if afloat. Words, ideas, anxieties rush in, out. The core is elemental presence, carrying sweetness, bitterness, pain & pleasure alike. Banal awareness embracing everything contingent, *y compris ces petits sauvages*.

— 12/26/05

The usual morning daze, ripples of aging, innumerable bland anxieties & scenes, over a layer of quietness that gradually emerges too. Breathing steadily, keeping tenuous balance, nothing less or more.

— 12/27/05

VI

Santa Rosa

In Trungpa's "hopelessness" I also sense the "no-mindedness" my first teacher Sekiun Koretsune kept talking about 35 years ago, to unlock his often convoluted explanations, analyses, allusions, anecdotes. No-mindedness. Opaque & teasing as this phrase seemed, over the years it's helped my practice evolve while maintaining an essential mystery.

As a result, when grief dominates my zazen, I also sense something cleansing, past any particular need or aim, merely old air going out & new air coming in. Basically "no-mindedness" now implies patiently suspending the trembling ego before the overwhelming presence of life-death.

— 1/19/06

Spinal stenosis. I'm increasingly aware of debilitating faintness in lower limbs, & a counter effort to keep skin-bag coherent & warm in a profoundly physical world, against which everything else feels relatively small.

— 2/6/06

Yesterday afternoon I breathed through what seemed an immovable weight, into a deep tranquility that lasted the rest of the day. This morning, however, the weight is back, & as in Camus, I expect to be free only when it rolls to the bottom. All this may be describable in banal myth, but it perfectly adumbrates "the scenery of my life" right now.

Being named Sekiku implies that I literally am a stone: implying that Sisyphus' burden is my actual self. Cf Suzuki-Roshi's, "suffering is how we live & how we extend our lives."

— 2/7/06

A complex but coherent passage through anxieties looming closer until to my surprise I hit a childlike conviction that since I'm rarely fully heard, most efforts at articulation mean that I'm talking to myself. If this is accurate, it may also be how my karma masks true emptiness,

since past it there often seem just objects & air, as if ego's been wiped out with a snort.

All those words, those thousand visions & revisions – pages after brittle page of poems, journals, etc. , so much dust-ridden probing & phrasing, dropped over the edge. Only “the stone's in the midst of it all.”

— 2/8/06

Sesshin, Sonoma Mountain

Balmy & comfortable two, three days, then fierce cold. I use ibuprofen again, in small portions at first, but this only makes my zazen edgy, & prone to narcoleptic dream-states. Sciatic nerve attacks & violent leg cramps build as the sitting goes on, along with a depression I've felt on & off for months. At moments I'm so muddled I decide to rely only on the public rituals of the practice, which alone seem resonant, carrying meaning beyond my struggling frailty.

Still, as in Katagiri's image of the mind as an alternately calm & storm-ridden sea, there's a counter-current. Remembering roshi's warning that zazen “excludes nothing, no block or negativity” once “we acknowledge it,” my head clears, & I stare fixedly at the boards half lit by the candle at Suzuki Roshi's altar, as if to pry out meanings planted there. Then I realize that this effort is based on a fiction I've essentially discarded. The wall before me, bearing the same colors, textures, whorls as in previous sesshins, is no longer a matrix for insights or ideas, since it's merely what it is. For a long moment I'm off-center, breathing in quick pulses, darkly irritated, dazed.

Suddenly my pupils widen, I shiver, hairs rise on my neck. With astonishing intensity, light is swelling from a single board. It's as if I'm in the presence of something else which is nonetheless coming from myself, taking the intricate pathways of my karma, brain & breath, while gathering every approximation of divinity I've ever had from any source. I'm literally receiving it & at the same time entirely making it up. All I

can do is I stare, immeasurably moved. The light-source, powerful but composed, doesn't fade, even when I look away. As long as I need it, it remains.

With this I get a complex set of instructions which unfold quickly, though now I barely recall anything, except that once I turn back to the wall-grid, I understand that I can no longer use it to arrange intuited concepts as if on a blackboard out *there*. Assuming that reality is somehow beyond my mind is simply too constricting. Instead, I'm focused wholly on the primacy of being *here*. I utter inwardly, *the world is my sangha*, & the wall before me instantly goes dark, then fills briefly with after-images, written & printed phrases, letters, graphs, designs, all winking on & off as if about to be let go. I see that the reality words point toward exists primarily in moments & events which, though perfectly concrete & often unruly, are at once apart from my subjective system & intimate to it as well.

As for language, I realize how I crave it, like a scaffolding suddenly become a burden, as in Diane Martin's "corpse that I carry." Then I notice that all this time I've been talking to myself, reinforcing a narrow, solipsistic stridency. In allowing all this monitoring, re-arranging, revising during prior sesshins, I've been fixed largely on the interior universe I began to construct edgily for myself probably at two & a half, heart sinking, stunned by my father's belittling. The system of withdrawal I decided on then, with its defensive irritability & evasiveness, is for me the essence of what Roshi calls ego's lifelong "conditioning," like the radios everyone is required to wear in Slaughterhouse 5.

Now I've got to take another tentative step toward full witnessing, in zazen & my ongoing life alike. No air between.

Gradually during this sesshin I sense my constant monitoring of self & world diminishing. I'm moved especially by Roshi's talks on "call & response," "coming home," & "*rigpa*" as seeing rather than giving way to words, which have "no origin" in the same way that, in the Heart Sutra, "with no hindrance in the mind, no fear exists." Again, though mental systems are crucial to our ability to articulate coherence & survive,

they're also a limited response to a far more dynamic whole.

So in *samadhi* this time, once my concentration deepens, I pull the candle light that embodies illumination away from the wall where I usually diagram insights, literally *outward* to floor, ceiling, wall, the literal 3-dimensional reality around me. This is awkward to describe but easy to recognize internally: a matter of freeing mind-body experience to extend spatially, just as Wanshi's meditative "jewel that illumines only itself" also touches the living world in every way. I sense that, practiced enough, such witnessing can eventually flood into corners, channels, spaces previously hidden. Its absence of "hindrance" promises connectedness, compassion, an awareness of possible fellowship – an actual sangha – everywhere.

Saturday, after Chuck Ramey's wonderful improvised talk, I add my bit about another passage from Katagiri, about the hundred-foot pole, which to my surprise seems to puzzle people, who seem to be taking it quite literally. Chuck also wonders about what Katagiri means by "no effort." After a bit I raise my hand & say, "the universe doesn't 'make an effort.'" The very idea is absurd, I mean to imply. "The universe simply is," Chuck replies, quietly. & here's the key idea again, as in Psalm 96's "the earth is so established it cannot be shaken."

Ie, trust the universe, stand on it firmly. Illness, pain, ache, age, difficulty, dread, grief, fear of dying all are perfectly adumbrated *here*.

— 2/24/06

Colophon

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