

From a *Zazen* Journal

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For Sekiun Koretsune, Sensei
Now may I wither into truth.

From a Zazen Journal

Self-scrutiny, on the whole, needs words; zen meditation tends to reject them. So if I'm going to record my experience of morning zazen, day after day, I have to balance between the language in which I usually live & zazen's non-verbal ground.

For me, at the moment, the easy reflexivity of students of the spiritual like Kathleen Norris in *Dakota*, is pretty distant. My sense of meditation is overwhelmingly inward, a matter of subduing rushing thought & a hunger for self-validation. & since, in contrast to the powerful theistic texts I've heard since childhood, zazen really has no empowering rhetoric, the phrasing I associate with it can range from the naive, indirect & glancing, to formulas of precedent & ritual. Zazen may or may not look mystical, but at its core it works either in shadow or enclosed in its own illumination – though it's eventually tested in a context dominated by words.

The journal I have in mind here can be phrased in ways that are sometimes derivative, irritatingly hermetic, even banal. The people I've heard speak strongly from a Zen perspective – my first teacher Sekiun Koretsune, & later, Dainin Katagiri, Tozan Akiyama, Masao Abe, Shohaku Okamura, Jakusho Kwong – often sound hesitant & awkward. & yet, because words are so intimate to their lives, their speech, even about silence, is invariably another *do*, another way to encounter the world without disabling dread. I think of zen's promise of noetic independence – Abe's "boundless openness" – as inextricably rooted in moments

when we're just awkward primates, in the tenuousness of all human endeavor. Clearly, hope of unconditional release is a delusion. In zazen I have to move within my limitations because without them, I'm undefined. "Strong concentration!" Sekiun barked, when I went to him in disarray in 1969. His view was that, since zen applies to every conceivable situation, ㊦ accepts nothing transcendent because there's nothing to transcend, any weakening of resources is instructive. I remember his story of the rock that came flying through his office window during the student troubles in Japan – which he kept on his desk beside other, lovelier stones he'd picked up on walks, along the shore, weathered by sea ㊦ wind.

Dogen's haunting, "Study this."

— 2/29/96

I

Morning zazen carrying the night's bleak restlessness. Still, if I focus on the tangible moment, I can sense something parallel that moves more distantly ㊦ slowly. The point isn't serenity so much as to avoid problem-solving, giving chaos its due until awareness is nearly without content, ㊦ the sense of a life caught in a single track an illusion.

If the nature of a larger, liberated consciousness is puzzling, that must be because I see it as something other than an immediate *this!* Plainly the sensations that give body to "illusion" are also the material of what we usually call reality itself.

— 3/13/96

Under a thick surface of ordinary experience, dense layers of anger, maybe a reaction to yesterday's anti-histamine, which leaves a kind of jittery impulse toward brutality. All these archaic reflexes, ready to unleaf at some weird prodding. But there's also a distinct sensation of merely riding ㊦ recovering, a hovering suspension of time, place, craving.

The idea of waste may be the harshest perception that underlies suffering. My father often talked of history in an inflated way, as a validating heroic frame, perhaps partly to avoid noticing that so much resistance & vision go for nothing. In partial contrast, there's Conrad's, "in the destructive element immerse," that I remember Jim Wright mouthing with a sly grin.

— 3/15/96

Settling into engrained psychic pain is the price of living in a continuous present, which carries waste as a comet, largely dirty ice, carries a monstrous tail.

In this morning's paper, terrorism, anti-semitism, local fascism. Clearly, to be peace-bearing is both a skill & the result of cultural luck, like inheriting well-being, a competent ethical code, an articulated concept of grace. These things are wondrous; their frailty is one source of their urgency.

— 3/29/96

Again, while I sit, I'm constantly brushing off shadows, stooping & stumbling through webs. Release comes suddenly, like being pushed out a door. Seconds later I start to contextualize this brief liberation, which is replaced by another train of reasoning, which drops me into a basket of memories, apprehensions, tasks.

Still, there's space to breathe & walk. The sensation is odd but unthreatening. Unlike the intimate God Who helped my father in his dying, giving him reassurance & coherence, it's more like something I hold while it holds me – as it apparently always has, tho I've struggled years to see that now.

I keep thinking of Tozan Akiyama presenting himself at the start of one sesshin as a clownish "hopeless man," though at the end affirming, "I am the master of every situation." He wasn't blustering, & seemed unconcerned about whether others confirmed him. Such unvarying naiveté

can look comic, but Tozan's life manifests strength – or what Jisho called a “haunting humility.”

It's common to feel that, because we're bound up with everything, whatever happens to us is connected with our inmost ambitions ... that something exists that understands everything about us. Anyone alert enough can see how often accident lets these assumptions fall away.

— 4/3/96

Zazen often involves the identical struggle as yesterday, across the same thick mind-weave, trapped in a river of chatter, escaping but quickly pulled under again. Here the hardest work is what Ken Wilbur calls simple *witnessing*, which without interfering holds in suspension the rushing pronouncements, exhilarations, erasures that make up normal consciousness.

In witnessing, words & sentences can continue to form, like the phrases I kept seeing on the white wall-panel that first sesshin at Hokyōji, when I knew instantly not to validate them by reading them.

Now I keep encountering the same surge of articulations. Alone, however, without the support of a formal sesshin, I hardly know what to do next. Clearly, I need to lessen my craving for coherence while drifting through such a torrent. I need to release, & trust.

— 4/12/96

The anxieties of the moment go by in thunder, though in the stillness that follows they're replaced by clones seconds later. In the end, what remains isn't content but intricate, self-renewing form like a Mandelbrot pattern, identical on any scale.

Since the chaos I intuit in the recesses of my life is undoubtedly the same as anyone's, the best course is to let it all resolve gradually, with a deep readiness to forgive. This means treating every illusion – mine,

anyone's – as a potential vehicle of grace.

— 4/14/96

Today's meditation is utterly anarchic, exposing a huge typology of anger, driven by personal fury & crazy news alike. It's exactly like the largest social scale, where so much floating bewilderment & resentment eventually congeal into public "truth." Against this dynamic, the meditator has only an awareness of illusion's roots in impermanence & avidya – ignorance, desperation, greed.

The point is to build an inner stability which, no matter how intimate, will sooner or later touch other lives. To say not just, *go in peace*, but perhaps, *as often as you can, make it possible for others to walk with you*. Whatever enlightenment is, it functions in the world as a moral equivalent of elemental rage.

— 4/16/96

Twilight obsessions, spasmodic decisions, like drifting clouds. I'm tempted to solve all this by figuring it out, so that even the urge to wake becomes another link in the chain. & yet, when I actually get off my zafu & look around, I know that I'm seeking the condition in which I live, though in my head I'm crawling like a mole.

Whatever trust is, it needs to accommodate that which testifies against any confidence at all. So in the Buddhist dynamic that Masao Abe described, *trust* becomes not its negation, *not-trust*, but *non-trust*, a condition which avoids binary responses by embracing them both. One moves toward this third condition not through logic, however, so much as *mu shin*, "no-mindedness," which makes a shift from total resistance to comprehension feasible.

I'm thinking of the double rhythm of these morning meditations: fear, uncertainty, moments of horror exploding in all directions, alongside a slowly gathering momentum toward opening.

One difficulty right now is linked to a memory of my father's blustering suspicion during a disastrous visit in 1970, when I invited him to meet Sekiun, who I misdescribed as "a Zen monk," & who he instantly decided was some sort of Buddhist Jesuit trying to "convert" me. Gauche, hostile, furious about his own retirement, he refused to consider how Zen & Judaism might connect, or what I could gain from the whole thing beyond a demonstration of my habitual perversity. When we arrived at Sandy Goldstein's house, he began almost instantly, "We don't worship idols! We have One God!" Once Sekiun & Sandy (another Jewish Zennist) saw how disturbed he was, they began a discussion that gradually calmed him, & the rest of us as well. Things ended up ok – they had to – but I remained embarrassed, angry, stunned.

I still need to acknowledge his bitter need for me to be as he had been, as if his own validity was at stake. I'd been through this with him before, & I guessed that his sense of betrayal was rooted partly in aging & harsh self-doubt. Perhaps that encounter helped weaken his heart, which gave out on him 12 years later – though things improved between us before the end.

So the conflict I feel now has elements of a child's nightmare, like rubbing against the flank of something dark, recurrent, heavy – though there's also a kind of undefined exuberance on the other side. A complicated balance which probably I should address simply, while waiting for something more intelligible to emerge.

— 4/18/96

It takes nearly 40 minutes to realize that this morning's storm of need, imbalance, drowse carries the rhythm of knowledge itself. Pushed to the wall, all I can do is let my mind blunder until the underlying patience does its work.

Zazen often draws from inner vertigo a quiet understanding that flows outward, into the ongoing world, while the turbulence becomes a buzzing unease in stomach, skull & chest. An awareness that the space

where I've been sitting all along holds all the trash I remember, but also permits me, like any animal, to breathe & possibly heal.

It's as if the old egocentricity remains but a larger insight enfolds it. When the narcissist's unquenchable wish for validation goes brittle, perhaps it's because he's [she's] already been ignoring it for a long while.
— 8/14/96

A crackling whirl of distractions, tag ends, compulsions, exchanges, pieces of dreams. To tame this flow, my impulse is to draw on language, to sort out, categorize, reason. But that quickly becomes another compulsion, with its own assortment of dreams, & pulses of desperation. Then, gradually, the current calms, & I float out on a surge of contemporaneity, & merge with the world & its sounds, like an airplane leveling (to rise? to land? another metaphor!).

The merging occurs when self encounters only world, & world encounters only self. At that moment I see that the inner chaos with its anarchic logic & images, & the constant of my breathing in time, are a single assertion, like the cracked surface of an old plate, not necessarily pure & revealing.

Emptiness then is essentially another face, that appears when I intuit that boredom & the absence of ego-cues are also emblems of truth. In a way this is an encounter with death – a suppression of central memories & passions. Dissolution doesn't happen, however, since I keep returning to my confusions . . . although I feel significantly changed. Yet I'm not wholly comforted either. On the scale of normal "achievement," I sense that I'm terribly limited, as if deserving of loathing.

But now there's a larger context, by which I can be more generous in my dealings. From time to time I see that everything is real, cliché can be useful, grace & clumsiness alike signal vision & will, & that most beings are full of healing.
— 8/19/96

The beginner assumes that he [she]’ll meet true *sunyata* (nothingness, emptiness) only after jettisoning his load of ego-driven trivia. But since he [she] is that trivia, then the flood of impulses, loathings, projects that appear when sitting down to meditate, is *sunyata* itself.

It’s easy to think that one should grasp this ☯ move past. But the observation that the current of waste is emptiness isn’t an insight so much as a response to a craving to fill the vacuum of one’s life. ☯ if this craving comes out of *sunyata*, as a reaction to the void, then the real need must be to ease the heartbeat of unfulfillment that’s the common syntax of most lives. ☯ this means that one doesn’t jettison the burden of waste, like fundamentalist sin, so much as approach it generously. Then perhaps the void shows its own generous face, ☯ one finds the sources of suffering, ☯ ceases to grieve.

At least that’s the way all this seems at this moment. I feel as if I’ve been plunging a hand into the dark, ☯ bringing it toward my face. Hard to make anything out. Yet the sensation, the shape, the inner structure ☯ feeling clearly are there.

— 8/20/96

The thundering fall, the dark rainbow of karma, can’t really be cut off, but must be absorbed in the *Now*, where inner ☯ outer connect. To accept karma ☯ enter the present are the same act, like Yeats’, “holding reality ☯ justice in a single thought.”

So, another formula: to be open toward gritty pain, cramped ugliness, self-delusive desperation, is somehow to reconcile – or merge – with Buddha Nature. In western terms, God from which you assume you are separate, forgives ☯ enfolds you. In Buddhism you take the journey alone, since only you are Buddha. The Way, then, involves intimately both light ☯ dark, deep ☯ shallow, winding ☯ straight.

— 8/21/96

Drifting in the soup of projections ☯ needs, like Milton’s chaos or the rings of Saturn. Desires tangible as morning leaves, ☯ an overly sweet,

deep-varnishing humidity everywhere. The warmth, the odd pleasure of complaining, the fragility of everything. A tiny spider lowers itself under the full branches of the hackberry, passes thru a slab of sun, vanishes again. Once the thought-storm stabilizes, I'm at the center of a rim that extends as far as awareness allows, while the static diminishes to a few booming questions: *What sense to make of the rest? Is what happened in order to get here merely waste?*

— 8/23/96

Familiar waves of bruising entrapment, loss. Then, under an edge of sunlight, I wash up on the shore of the present, shake myself, look around. Briefly, before the accusatory darkness returns, I've touched the vast restorative body of the present. I'm languageless, but willing to use language, or anything else, not to exploit for a further goal, but to fill out as I fill the shape of my body.

It's hard to articulate this. What I've read & heard about such a moment is changed by the sheer banality in which it's actually clothed – the sweaty, itchy temper of a particular life, with its perfectly obvious but unspeakable facts. Still, habits, faces, exchanges, the whole karmic bundle, are the essential ground of any existence; they're all we've got.

I'm constantly being wrapped tight in my particular reality. It's what I use to navigate & survive. *Zazen* loosens it enough for the inner self to breathe, taste, be. But self isn't transformed easily; it's naturally so alone, fragile, untried.

— 8/28/96

Deep *samadhi*, the high meditative stage of Dogen's "not-to-think, not not-to-think," is also a physical skill, an articulation of body that lives every change purely in time. Because, like anything else, such an act of focus dawns, brightens, dims, it's terribly difficult to understand quickly, by an act of will. Trying to enter *samadhi* directly is like trying to glance at the sun: one can do it, but the body's resistance is overwhelming & wise. When one first encounters Emptiness as boredom, vacancy,

death, there's a resistance that can be met only by alert patience. One has nothing else.

In other words, allowing language to recede, even briefly, spills us into another consciousness for which we lack adequate speech but where we also live. Here's one source of the zen conceptualizations that sound so clumsy (at least in English) – Small Self, Universal Self, Big Mind, Skinbag.

Perhaps Big Mind really can be conceived as the self that recognizes that what comes at it externally, from history, memory etc., is also deeply internal: in other words, that body/mind is the only site where much that we think outward – fated, karmic – actually works. That we're truly not *split* so much as constantly being *fragmented*, & yet at the same time we're oddly whole – like the yolk of an egg, just before it's spilled.

— 9/2/96

On the rim of boredom, grey & indeterminate. Slowly words fall away, until both the common & the sudden, sharply insightful phrases seem like background static. The process brings along a vacancy that easily seems to signify a weakness, although it's probably exactly what the lifelong habit of inner chatter was designed to evade. The moment I stop interpreting, heroicizing, inflating, I'm frightened, because there's no predicting the next breath. Scale vanishes, or rather becomes animal, & internal. Exposed, & vulnerable, one must merely *trust*. But what, exactly, is *that*?

— 9/3/96

The morning has a grey-green humidity touched with an odd dryness. There's been no rain for a month. Squirrels chatter around front; in the back, a bird ratchets mechanically. Here's consciousness, both private & subjective, & outward & unending. I can sense the world without any urgency to articulate & follow-up.

What is one to do in this condition? Is it the state in which – in western

terms – God first made us?

— 9/6/96

Lower back pain, ☯, like a plumb-weight, the dry, pollen-filled tension of late summer. A gloom I need to float in, even drown. To just sit zazen, against the fur of the beast . . . the surface of the void.

— 9/9/96

A bright clarity. I can settle into the current, ☯ work forward among multiple imbalances, the ego's almost comic giganticism, the underlying stupor. Such moments are like being lifted into the vaguely miraculous. Sun-filled ☯ awkward, but manageable.

— 9/11/96

The *Yom Kippur* service, ancient but not archaic, earthy ☯ transcendent, dramatic ☯ gorgeous. *Ha Shem's* emergence on a single day, to scrutinize, judge, threaten, release. Days of Awe. A sweet intimacy at the end, like the dish of apple ☯ honey with which *Rosh Hashanah* began a week or so ago. That suggests one origin of the instinctive optimism I associate with my mother, her sisters ☯ my grandmother, ☯ with my father's sketchy tales about his own father's generosity, discovered only at his funeral. Of course, everything rests on the encompassing, impenetrable *Adonai*, who must be struggled toward, through learning, prayer, fear, ethical endeavor, etc.

I keep thinking about the junctures between Judaism ☯ Zen. What's attractive in both has to do with formal devotion (zazen ☯ daily prayer), compassion, a large, tactile awareness of the inescapable world (*samsara* is *nirvana*), ☯ a conviction that the strayed also belong to Buddha-mind, or to God. As far as I can tell, although the two spiritualities are partly irreconcilable, these things stream between them powerfully.

— 9/23/96

The effort to reconcile Judaism & Zen: what drives it is an awareness of the past which must be acknowledged because it carries much of what I know about human identity. Ever since my first sesshin, I've seen the Friday night service in particular much more freshly, & with love. Obviously, to normative Judaism, my unoriginal convictions that God is humanly derived, that the religion is a magnificent artifact, are intolerable. But I think that the personal God of Judeo-Christianity etc. is also intolerable, given the historical events in which He's supposed to act. What's remarkable in Judaism includes the idea that the universe has an actual voice that can be heard, within & without our own voices, in the most intimate moments, in our own solidarity with those we love & our awareness of unalterable time, frailty & death. To speak to this voice, in prayer, is to hear it as well.

Still, I distrust Judaism's communal exclusivity, & its commitment to archaically sacred ground. There may be deep reasons for this, but they probably also explain why God doesn't save us from history. Basically, He's an extrapolation from emptiness, origin, & nameless energy that's endlessly nurturing, ethically demanding & implacably destroying. The Holocaust has foregrounded His indecipherability, & has made the idea of His Person an intimate fantasy. That the world of Auschwitz isn't a caring or even a punishing God's footstool is more than a current cliché.

Yarweh. No Name. Buddha Mind. I can sense these alike in the majesty of the Jewish service, & in the narratives of devotion & pain embedded there. But there's nothing exclusive or excluding about what *Buddha Mind* stands for. Its meaning may be unutterable but it's also perfectly tangible & accessible, given a practice that allows me my longing-in-stillness for it.

I suppose my context is Jewish, my expression Zen – or vice versa. I think I'm talking to my father here, primarily.

— 10/11/96

II

Despite Uchiyama's abrasiveness, there are fine chapters in *Opening the Hand of Thought*. This morning, when I finally surface in present-time, feeling weak & shaky, I remember his observation that we're not rocks, that to be human is to drift, drown, fragment, reconnect. & this implies that the powerful misperceptions encountered in zazen can either grow increasingly demonic & ornate, or be shaped by *shikan taza* into Buddha-mind, your only Self, your original face.

Zazen accepts as real the meditator's own presence alongside the hopelessly brutal, damaged or lost. Nothing can be omitted. Hence Katagiri's comment, one night at Hokyōji, on the perpetrators of the Holocaust: "That was Buddha-nature too." For a few minutes, under the flickering kerosene lamps, everyone sat shocked. What he meant, of course, was the kind of world in which the consciousness of a Buddha must act.

— 10/17/96

Weekend sesshin with Tozan Akiyama, at Milwaukee. We arrive Friday night. Early on Sunday, after a day & a half of strenuous sitting, the jittery desperation I carry into any extended meditation suddenly pops & disappears. Later, on the ride back, it returns as a familiar reflex, though I keep thinking of Katagiri's "There is also deep joy!", and how sunlight suffused the white blinds on Akiyama's front windows, while I sat inside, sifting stress through my breath.

Items: in the car, Dor mentioning Shohaku's talk on "Indra's Net," in which, since all parts are interwoven, the whole functions beyond any conceivable intention, making absurd the idea of getting to a single source. Plus my sister Linda's worn copy of *The Cloud of Unknowing* that I noticed at home, on a shelf, as I reached for a sleeping bag, before I left. So many voices, connecting at any moment.

— 10/21/96

An incessant push-pull this morning between the inner curtain of images, compulsions, formulas – passionate, importunate, endlessly evasive – & one's simple gravity in the world, the source any coherence.

At the end of 40 minutes I feel that I've come to the edge of breakthrough, though my sense that I've got to get it this instant, now! is obviously off the mark. Often what I learn in zazen seems to have been stored somewhere in my body, to come clear hours later.

— 10/22/96

After taking over Tom's class yesterday, full of undergrads with smoldering needs & volatile discourtesies, I'm relieved to be done, frustrated over not saying anything useful, deflated but oddly pleased.

I acquired a tentative, self-effacing teaching style gradually & painfully, once I began to practice meditation. Now I'm anxious again, partly over the hair-trigger tension that's emerged this fall throughout the campus area. The other afternoon, on the way to a zen meeting no less, a guy standing at a corner screamed furiously at me because I had slowed down before making a turn.

The irritability I've noticed in myself the past year obviously contradicts the resonant patience I learned to offer students. Certainly the effort was tiring, & I often felt unsuccessful & unqualified. Still, for a few years, it seemed a vital resource, a skill that embodied Katagiri's assertion that through zazen "your life will mature."

— 10/25/96

Sometimes the bristling cud of thoughts, memories, accusations lasts for days. Once I complained of this to Tozan, who said, "at least you know you're alive." This morning, at the end of a two-period zazen, I could sense it in my solar plexus like a deadweight: the cramped self that can't easily straighten. It's a given of most forms of spiritual discipline that to touch this figure is crucial to awakening – though since mind/body hibernate as one, it can be roused only deliberately.

— 10/31/96

A brief encounter with dread resolves very little. For long periods one has to just be there, indifferent to the possibility of release, while karma appears as tension in chest, gut, joints, & mind drops into free-fall. Samsara isn't paper-mâché.

— 11/1/96

After morning zazen, ongoing stress gathers, then vanishes into bright clarity. In fact, what most often happens in any life has little to do with ego's stories of high stakes, but is impersonal & immediate – like the late autumn, the shrubbery still rich green, the high trees red & orbital. It exists in the particular mind shared by all things, where we float as lumps, or clear waves.

How persistently ego tries to escape from massive insults, like a worm twisting in a tube. A process engrained from childhood, the “I'll show them” throbbing alongside obsessive anger, so that the alternative, simple being, easily feels thin & cerebral.

— 11/20/96

This morning a whole anatomy of mind is visible: descent, depression, a neutral level where things slosh mechanically back & forth: revulsion from inner death, plus a childlike clarity against which the earlier stages keep up a kind of background clatter. Finally there are hints of a further wholeness, in which all I can do is let go of the swirling body of my identity, & wait.

Later a cat, barely more than an overgrown kitten – pretty, black, with a white swatch on its front stomach – suddenly appears in the back yard, chasing a large white-banded bird, that flies frantically toward the lower branches of a maple, raises a flurry of small debris, then lifts toward the back of the house. The cat pauses, & stands up comically over the birdbath. I open a window, lean out, & utter a long determined hiss, over & over. Each time the cat stops, swishes its tail, stares around & up. Finally I storm downstairs & out back, & chase it – though it clearly wants to play, & meows – into the alley. Now I feel silly over all this

effort, since I see how it's shattered my morning quiet. Still, I don't want that cat killing birds around here.

From *The Cloud of Unknowing*, (Ch. XV):

Trust steadfastly that there is such a perfect humility as I speak of, & that it may be achieved through grace in this life. I say this to refute those who state that the most perfect type of meekness is that which arises from the remembrance of our wretchedness and of the sins we have committed in the past.

This contrasts the humility derived from awareness of personal inadequacy, with “the most perfect . . . meekness,” which comes directly from awareness of one's presence in God. The first, rooted in ego, is susceptible to vanity. The second, in Zen terms, is linked to *sunyata*, ego-less emptiness. But *The Cloud* also goes on to imply that a simple binary approach to these polarities is misleading. To grasp the real meaning of ‘perfect meekness’, ego-abasement, with its anguished sense of its own frailty, remains essential. The crux is that the seeker can't intentionally will release from imperfection, so much as actively observe his [/her] own motivating need. & that's so difficult that, in theistic terms, grace alone permits it to happen. For “grace” here, the apparently simple Zen discipline of “letting go” – or *shikan taza* – could suggest an equivalent. Something like, “without anger, chasing the cat?”

— 11/21/96

From *Timeless Spring*, “Manzan's Notes on Practice:”

Therefore, when you realize the mind-source, the whole universe is a great round perfect ocean. But how to realize the mind-source? You must liberate body & mind on the sitting cushion before you can do so.

Whatever is won comes largely from tearing away the fascia that bind one to an endless whirl of names, expressions, expectations, resentments etc. Once these dry up in *zazen*, what remains is the self exposed to the universe, without the formulas that engaged it daily for so many years. ☺ this sets up another dynamic as well.

The experience of suddenly just being here usually first thrusts me into a quiet space largely independent of the flux of impulsive illusions that are always on the edge of consciousness. Being fits into quietness as into a glove. The universe of “ten thousand” things / beings bears us along with everything, in innumerable currents pulsing at different rates. To realize this is like suddenly looking up ☺ out from within the Milky Way.

Realization. One of the losses that drives it is my own isolation over the past few years from teaching, where the warm, often hard-edged interaction could be a source of many kinds of understanding. Still even that particular absence is a current that propels.

Nothing can be erased, or avoided. Everything’s proper – ie, it’s property, to be transformed.

— 11/24/96

Sea of detritus, waste lot of a life. Concentrating on the chaos of the instant, which whirls into the next eddy, ☺ the next ... along with sudden pulses of clarity ☺ calm. This is Katagiri’s mind-storm, an inner anarchy that dominates everything as long as it occurs. One just lasts through it, for 40 minutes, nearly giving in. At the end, however, a quick imperative: stop compulsively revisiting habits, resolutions, histories. Do *nothing* to shame, rage, solitude ☺ grief. Don’t try to reimpose visions of self-abasement, life-blinding fantasies. Have no goal, no aim. Be with the entire suffocating flow of drainage itself.

— 12/4/96

Dense clouds of images, projects, anxieties, though from time to time I can see myself sitting in lotus, cedar boards before me, outdoor cold & falling snow tangible in the rather slovenly room. This brief sense of recovery is reassuring, but since it fails to achieve heroic scale it first seems largely fantasy – until I remember that the underlying boredom itself is a mask over time, death, *dukkha*.

Toshu yesterday talked about how *zazen* reveals personal frailty, since it aims not at tranquility but at a rhythm of breakdown, recovery, waking again. I.e., Hakuin's first response to enlightenment: "the ridge pole is fallen, the house of the self has collapsed!" This cycle is the real source of connection with compassionate mind.

— 12/8/96

Given the conditions of any life, the practitioner waits for balanced awareness, & with it the possibility of adding to the world's store of well-being. Maybe my euphoria today has to do with a kind of resonance that reflects this – as in Dogen's description of enlightenment as 'walls, trees, pebbles & fences gleaming together,' & his comparing it to 'the tiger entering its mountains, the dragon its water.' I'm also thinking both of the way Buddhism calls for the "cessation," not the annihilation of suffering; & of Katagiri's frequent "your life will mature."

— 12/9/96

Concentrating in "bare attention" (Mark Epstein, *Thoughts Without a Thinker*) brings me up sharply against a cacophony of inner voices, an intimate scolding & pleading, a kind of perpetual static folded into the seams of language. But *shikan taza* doesn't abolish so much as welcome. It registers all this uncertainty: no gain without loss, & often no reality without cliché.

Waiting for these mind-storms to exhaust themselves, I spend 40 minutes processing dysfunction, swallowing resentment, trying not to react as fighting demon or vengeful ghost. Since reality consists of violent flux, to actually see things this way, without panic or rage, must mean

a surrender of control assured enough to confront brutality without being swept away – able, when necessary, as a Zen story goes, to “be run through without batting an eye.” Meditation has a dynamic akin to psychotherapy: confronting a condition & allowing it to empty, so that the grieving ego connects with co-dependent beings, & with its larger parent, the character of this world. That is, understanding itself as merely the carrier of a particular cluster of feelings, gestures, relationships etc., the ego can get ready to withdraw, change, & perhaps even forgive & be forgiven. Every spiritual discipline articulates this.

— 12/15/96

Again, falling into pre-dreams, over & over. There's no release, & nothing to be released from, really. I exist not as a substantial whole that gets obscured now & then, but as both whatever I am at any instant, & as the *sum* of what's occurring now. Suzuki Roshi's “suffering is how we grow” means that although the idea of *escape* into tranquility is further illusion, I still can *receive* tranquility as an act of the self experiencing its own condition, its fundamental patience & pain. A gift of Bodhi Mind – or God.

Encountering sheer *plainness*, I sense something poised to trouble the self's need to shape & be safe. Leaving things alone while focusing on nothing except presence, instant after instant, can be not just tedious but intolerably blank. But if I refuse to guard against panic over my own dissolution, I also let go of the will to security that drives my restlessness.

On the deepest level, the world is at peace. There's a tranquility that absorbs language, & its obsession with measure, with space & before-after.

— 12/30/96

For the entire period, I'm carried by a familiar rush of words, plans, discomfort like an idiot narcolepsis that I keep trying to manage, but am swept back into almost instantly. All I can do is be conscious *within* it. Baldly put, this sounds hopeless, but in fact it actually implies a struggle

to keep rewaking, every 10 seconds if necessary, like Sisyphus with the boulder: the two, as Camus says, a single being.

Sitting in zazen, early morning, stiff with lowered metabolic function, eyes glazed, mind still belching the rhythms & panics of sleep-dream, is like trying to light a match inside some hollow monster's brain.

— 1/8/97

Again, a heavy morning daze, with a crust of unfinished night work. This time there's a kind of subliminal narrative about being lost, lacking maps, intelligence, senses. The source may be a recurring dream from childhood: I'm trapped at dusk in a wedge of space between garage-side & driveway, trying to return; I reach a corner of the porch when the dark sweeps in like a clearly defined eclipse. . . . This probably depicts a fear of wandering too far, of lacking a guiding, saving hand. It doesn't suggest "the destructive element" so much as the sea bottom, where letting go means surrendering to sheer decomposition. & yet, at the crisis, I always open my eyes to find that, yes, I still merely am.

In zazen the public equivalences of such anxieties – mugging, plane crash, terror – can seem the material of theater. Today, at some point, I watch them fragment against the wall before me, feel thumb-tips touching in the mudra, hear the hum & bubble of the computer left on all night, & my own labored but steady breathing. This seems briefly akin to the Buddha's sight of the morning star . . . & the deep Hebrew sense of blessing.

— 1/10/97

Mind/body a sewer. Once or twice every minute I break surface, & struggle not to reject but to observe physical facts – knees bent, hands folded, slight headache. Behind this are pulsations like an engine coughing & gurgling, still churning but in trouble – or like throwing off anesthesia in surgery, or gulping air between bouts of thrashing & submerging.

☞ yet, wedged into the chaos, the bits of quiet I achieve make possible a humane decision hours later, ☞ bring closer the probability of intelligent, healing behavior (that sad flower). They represent a face other than the one I thought my own. A tiny grain to carry.

— 1/12/97

Aging, the mind grows frantically busy, trying to round off edges, piece together eventualities, prepare an informed defense. All this must be a response to gathering collapse.

The idea of playing all one's soiled cards over ☞ over, is repulsive but it makes the counter-clarity precious. One doesn't arrive at the second without finding oneself carried in the descending torrent of the first.

So the moments in which one breaks into emptiness now ☞ then are like brushing against death. Still, in its own quirky way, the process remains healing. One persists. Again, I think of my father's astonished, "my mind never stops!", after a series of strokes.

— 1/14/97

Yesterday, the 6 period zazen retreat that a few in the group wanted, ☞ I agreed to reluctantly. After, I read aloud Katagiri's splendid fragment on Buddha-life – the deep sense of existence usually diminished by our efforts to name it, so that we understand only intermittently, ☞ the one feasible response is, "Sit down ☞ do it!" Conceptual formulations don't easily deal with this.

— 1/20/97

Reading Jack Kornfield's *Path With A Heart*, I come across a passage on sensing recurrent pain in meditation, ☞ stumble again across what is virtually my birth trauma, the still nearly totally present memory of throwing a toy wooden duck at my brother when I was 3, my parents away, only the horrified maid in attendance ... the afternoon I knew I had just tried to commit murder, though seconds before it seemed all I had to do, being older, ☞ in control of arm ☞ aim, was throw

that thing directly at my brother's head . . . where it went with unerring direction.

It's hard to put down what happened next. As I remember, I suck in my breath, & grieve. It's as if there never was a time before this happened. Why was no one around to calm my 3-yr old rage & reconcile me to the presence of others, particularly of someone smaller & partly dependent on me? For years after, any kind of loving relationship seemed impossible. At any rate, what followed was my being sent up to my room, convinced that I would have to stay there forever . . . against the sounds of my brother's howling, the frantic arrival of bandages, his blessed quieting. . . . The result was an unappeasable sorrow over my own rising rage, a realization that I could do something utterly destructive

Though there's also the brightness of afternoons during naps, noticing favorite tree shapes in the window, jay cries, light over the street . . . & our mother smiling, turning to watch the two of us in the car.

— 1/21/97

III

In the slow course of 40 minutes, I step away from sheer subjectivity with its blanketing documentation, into dull morning light, where for a moment self is just another object, absolutely sure. Usually this happens after long periods of flailing as if asleep – which must be how most of us usually live, shadowed by innumerable others stumbling down their own dark passages. At first this seems not release so much as simple acknowledgement: O yes, here's where I'm just another contingency, & blessing & miracle are more than distant wishes. I'd forgotten.

— 1/24/97

After my brother's visit, I suddenly hear the sound of my father's hectoring when I was a narcissistic adolescent. As Epstein says, zazen can act first as self-therapy, washing up on some immovable trauma – which

as I sit I try to defang in a counter-dialogue, world without end, until gradually the memory turns into another stone in the belly, large & pulsing, then quiet & cool.

— 1/28/97

Clear brightness, extreme cold, sudden snow. I'm instantly in *samadhi*, a planet around which charges of language, memory, projections etc. play like lightning. I also notice the globe of pain in my *hara*, a nausea which language usually buffers & obscures. Once I stop following inner voices I confront this core, which keeps swelling, dwindling, swelling again.

Old question: what's first, suffering, its verbalizations a screen thrown out in blind reaction; or history, with its wounds around which a self-justifying identity forms? These are like wrestlers in stone, caught in an idiot struggle from which waking is unlikely unless they merge with an ampler self that announces, *I was there*, as well as *I am here*. Think of the pain as a psycho-chemical template that stands out as one gets less resistant. When, in *zazen*, the chatter drops away, there it is, in the *hara*. It's this that one finally learns to absorb.

Squirrel outside, on a cold branch, tail over head, racing off in a small shower of bright flakes.

— 1/29/97

To repeat: the overwhelming whirl of karmic life with its furies & complaints is at once illusory & inescapable. & yet, in 40 minutes of quietly ignoring the tangle, distancing occurs. Can awakening happen, however, if the ego sees itself as hopelessly frail? Probably not, given that formulation. But, as Dor keeps trying to articulate, any idea of unimpeded awakening is probably naive. The point may be to let the ego shatter, its loose ends cry out with misery; to embrace the karmic estate, detail by detail, pleasure with pain. *Zazen* then becomes an act of incessant loosening, often of the same condition, over & over. To cooperate with a karmic situation, in other words, is to live in harmony with it . . . *not* to transform another or even oneself, though this could happen, but

because karma is the matrix of nirvana, an essential of wholeness itself.
— 1/31/97

I'm down with a bug, full of grotesqueries, heart pounding as if in an iron-lung. & yet, when I quiet down, it's clear that even in illness there's nothing to be excised.

For some reason here, I recall my father's face & words one morning when I must have been 5, playful & affectionate before he went to off work. That was a day of sheer adoration. Why think of this now? It may have something to do with his habit of compulsive euphoria, which I now see so differently.

— 2/5/97

Some thoughts on Karen Armstrong's *Genesis*: Armstrong finds in the story of Abraham & Isaac, the prototype of the father's compulsive hostility alongside the child's withered, uncomplaining life. & what in fact could the child ask or say? What would he retain, once he gives up his own imitation of the father's monstrous anger, made even more puzzling by moments of easy gentleness?

In Buddhist emptiness, which can suddenly reveal itself as indefinite, undifferentiated & unvarying, without distraction or narrative, do I also encounter something like "the murderous rage Freud says some fathers feel for their offspring"?



In Jewish / Western terminology this involves anxiety over abandoning God, the God who has in turn both alerted & abandoned one already. In Buddhist terms, it's a matter of abandoning language, & carrying panic & grief like a parachute into an emptiness which in fact sustains one ... & in which one is interconnected with everything else, to the

point of being – despite endless, seemingly grave diversities – utterly identical with it.



Terror is important, but so is entering, & motion. As for the histories of other beings, even those as karmically connected as fathers, I'm welcome to think of theirs as no different from mine, & to grieve over their lives as I do over my own.



There's a parallel story here, which at the moment I can conceive only in banalities, having to do with the journey to hell, & the encounter with death. Call it the voyage to absence, an epiphany one can enter in many traditions. The primitive ache that the Abraham/Isaac story rouses like no other, may also have to do with the fear of suppressing coherent narrative, speech, or explanation. The tale brings us so close to the actual sensation of dying. But what I really need to understand is that the experience of arbitrary violence or mind-stunning emptiness is also something that can quietly take place *here*. & yet the *basic* mystery implicit in the story is impenetrable. Hence Tozan's "faith", & the "trust" I've been thinking about for a long time now.

— 2/11/97

Notes, Sonoma Mountain (California) Sesshin, 5 days after. The zen people from Poland. Sudden wind, redwood twigs smacking the roof, the last morning. Full moon, as I approached or left the zendo, or peed by the cabin late, half asleep. Kwong Roshi's discussion of the Heart Sutra's vision of emptiness. His quiet description of a woman in a wheelchair with an oxygen tank, who came to see him a few months before "she died gasping for air" – which he repeated, then added, "I'm now old enough to see those of my own generation dying around me."

Climbing with Lee on the Pt. Reyes southern trail the Saturday before, dazed & out of breath. Lee's admission of immense inner turmoil, trying constantly to hold himself together. Later, the Shusho talking about the power of people who live well with enormous pain. Roshi in dokusan, giving me standard advice to count my breaths rather than follow words, since breath stays abreast of reality, while speech is always behind – & to “think of the twelve-hundred Neil Myers with compassion”. Compassion: Avalokitesvara Buddha, the Chinese Kuan Yin, whose huge wood statue looms over the zendo. A growing sense of the possibility of openness & renewal. Day after day, trying to peel off concepts, judgments, fixation on past/future. The operative phrases, *don't cling, avoid attachment*, rooted in the Heart Sutra's, *No tongue, nose eyes, ears ... no suffering, no cessation of suffering*, etc. The first group discussion, Wednesday, on Prajna as wisdom, which I joined, shakily explaining what I thought was Sekiun's view of the word as explosive transformation – trembling a long time after, with self-doubt & energy that had been building for days. During the same discussion, a tall, elegant, bearded guy with glasses describing how when linear phrases stop, everything appears fluid, racing, impossible to pin-down or even follow.

Cold cold, entering the zendo early morning, & especially exiting at night. Dawn to dusk screeching from rooster-farm across the way. Inner explorations I barely remember, but that seemed vivid & useful ... especially of my brother, who appeared in a dream one night, young but also contemporary, leaning against a wall, looking utterly harassed but game. A realization of how bonded we are, in our ordinary, often monstrous childhoods, as well as our deep differences. Reviewing how our parents provided warmth but little blessing, inner understanding, provision for fragility & pain. Processing all this, & yielding it – *don't cling!*

The weak indoor light on the dark redwood wall before me. Being here, whole, with nothing to say. Thanking those who'd made the moment possible, especially Sekiun when, on the third morning, I literally saw his system spread out before me (“There's the Via Negativa! There's...”) Earlier sesshins – & my happening on the liberat-

ing present, essentially Dogen's Being-Time, while lying on my bed one evening in Cambridge, 1955, my identity apparently slipping away.

Roshi reiterating that there's no self, no I. We're confluences of streams that merge briefly then flow off. What we call self is a cluster of urges trying to hold on to something stable in the whirl . . . although, as Katagiri said, everything, even a diamond, is "whirling at super-speed". Clearly this is the source of *avidya*, greed, ignorance, anger, my brutalizing my little brother.

Afterwards, the almost inarticulable clarity that follows strong sesshins – feeling it terribly awkwardly, at first, with Lee, but then as a kind of intimate, glowing possession, in the plane, returning.

— 2/27/97

The California sesshin stirred things to the oldest layers. When, impelled by Roshi's *breathe, don't think*, language largely fell away the third or fourth day, I was exhilarated, frightened, & so filled with feeling that for hours I was near tears. Existing wholly in the present obviously implies the death which I approach with everything else, but it also carries the joy Katagiri mentioned, the profound ease with chant, ritual & thought that the sesshin nurtured & sustained. I felt at moments as if I had arrived opposite my vision at Hokyōji – the lantern blown out with a resounding whoosh, echoing Dogen's "like lightning or dew on grass, over in an instant, gone in an hour."

Later in the week, I heard the sharp whack whack of the Shuso's stick on various (requesting) backs. Rather than circulate endlessly in my own head, it seemed to extend into the world – in the light from the windows, the air being breathed by all of us, impersonally.

Now, to deal with ongoing problems, which suddenly seem grave & suffocating. I sense that deep *samadhi* can modify the ache that underlies most of my experience, the mental dispersal like the leg cramps that lingered for days, the stuttering & mumbling that are among the earliest sensations I recall.

Even bodily stress can be breathed through & put into perspective, like an itch or a falling eyelash.

— 3/2/97

This morning, after yesterday's gossip about department politics, suddenly here's the angel of paranoia with its inflatable illusions: i.e., if those people act on what they apparently believe, things'll be very threatening, better get ready etc. Like a recurrent dream. When this kind of thinking takes root in an environment, whoever stays forewarned but reasonable, empathetic & accepting, can eventually heal. Though if the craving for monstrous responses also runs too deep, then demons walk, & nothing helps until the spasm is over. At any moment Holocaust, Terror, Inquisition wait in an inner theater both absolutely private & universal, in the recesses of the skull where most pathologies are transient but hopelessly repetitive, thunderous, & wildly communicable.

Milosz: "I look into life & death as into an empty wine cup."

— 3/6/97

IV

Stumbling monotonously for 40 minutes. But to worry at details would itself be part of the problem. Out of an ungraspable universe, something may emerge which has been there right along.

Zen cliché: any articulation is just a finger pointing to the moon. The actual moon last night, under eclipse, earth's shadow rising on it until only the upper eighth was lit, like the top of an enormous mottled ball. I stood on the porch, in moderate cold, until 11:30 or so. Such clarity. I'd never actually seen anything like that before, & probably won't again. Lovely, & warming to share it: Lorna getting out of bed, half grumpily, to look through my binoculars, standing on the porch & also staring in

wonder.

— 3/25/97

From Jim Moore's *The Long Experience of Love*, on turning fifty in Italy.
7, the sacred figure in Piero's *Resurrection*:

You look up towards the risen Christ, the one who is awake. It is his face that holds you: not a trace of any emotion, unless wakefulness is itself a kind of feeling. He's who you would be if you were no longer afraid of death. How relaxed he is, knee bent as he props his foot on the top of his tomb as if it were a piece of old furniture. You cannot see as far as he does, with the eyes of one who has died and come back to life. There is nothing he desires other than this: to stand squarely in between the bare trees of winter on his right and the full-leaved trees of summer on his left. To stand quietly at dawn and to proclaim once and for all that the moment of wakefulness – this very moment right now – is the only resurrection anyone will ever need.

For me, Zen is a spiritual practice of living by essentials, anchored in daily meditations, & in sesshins in which superficial experience can yield extraordinary “moments of wakefulness” to self & world. The challenge is to pursue that superficiality itself, a paucity of means grounded in ordinary, ongoing experience. Here ethnic formulations are redundant. I'm a Jew in an eroded Christian culture, facing bristling resistances, decays, complexities. Having abandoned much else, the link between Zen & life seems crucial.

— 3/30/97

Hyper-realistic morning dreams in drifting fragments, as if the search engine had been left on, brainlessly scripting. I drift in dull irritability from phrase to image, feeling pressure in sinus, chest. In the essay Dor recommended on Zen & Eckhart, there's an observation that one simply sits through everything, good, bad, annoying, attractive, etc. As

always, the point is to continue, since even deep-rooted assumptions yield once they're clearly perceived.

Dogen: "intelligence or lack of it does not matter. . . . If you concentrate your effort single-mindedly, that in itself is negotiating the way."

— 4/8/97

A layer of sluggish dread, like fog in misty light . . . though again, toward the end, the whole floats in quiet suspension. Still, it's challenging, to let things come & go without jittery interpretation. Ego's instinct is to chatter, as if to avoid feeling exposed before whatever beast is near.

— 4/14/97

At first, intimately, seamlessly, the banalities & comforts of familiar identity wrap around me. Then, at some point, following its own inner clock, an underlying self also steps out. I can easily think this moment ephemeral, a matter of slightly different air in the nostrils, & toss it into the current of backing & filling that makes up subjective autobiography. But seconds later, I'm just there, hands folded, facing the wall, encased in April light. Worries also remain, along with normal confusions, & I can easily access my fury at all kinds of current stupidities. But as always, to my astonishment, experience & history no longer seem so harshly one-dimensional.

For a while I feel as if I'm walking underwater, a thick-limbed cripple. Although I shouldn't, I grope toward phrasing – this time, Eliot's "immense panorama of anarchy & futility", & Zagajewski's recent, "Withdrawal from history strengthens, so that one can return to it stronger than ever."

— 4/15/97

Below the worn strata of fears, projections, phrases, there are layers where for long moments one only sees – a drifting, billowing emptiness, which this a.m. has the tangibility of dreams just before waking.

Large mind – *dai shin* – encloses not just particulars of family, parenting, social pressures etc., but the changing universe where, of course, it also must eat, remember, interact, die. Once it asserts its presence, such a mind can disturb, heal, influence absolutely every object & condition in Indra's Net.

— 4/18/97

How hold in hand a sense of inescapable self-doubt? There's the prescription in that Kornfield book: through monotonous daily effort, gaze until worthlessness appears as emptiness, *sunyata* itself.

Emptiness isn't just an idea. It's somehow actually empty, since nothing fixed can anchor in it. At the same time it sustains us, in the form of our lives as they unfold within. But rather than an annihilating vortex, it's also nurturing, a willful letting go, that upholds.

— 4/20/97

A dense heaviness I ignore, since any effort to ease it makes it more piercing, until all that remains is the cool dark morning, with occasional slow-paced bird flutings & the electric whine of Jim's shears finally working in the backyard.

Though stupor can last a whole day or week, it's tangible as a blank wall, or an odd scraping at night. But the effort to overcome it is a matter of silence, in which the least useful thing to ask is, *what's the next step? & after?*

— 4/25/97

The phrase, *Samsara is Nirvana*, implies that suffering can't be dismissed as preliminary to the instant when masks drop away. Zazen may lack goal or point of arrival, but it involves concrete changes in one's fate. If *samsara* is filled with random variations of fact & feeling, including clumsy failure, it's also our lives in their physical strangeness, their sweaty intimacy (Katagiri: "the stinky human body!"). Clearly,

then, Nirvana – like Zagajewski’s chaos, constantly undergoing the violence of becoming form – is a matter of *process*, a constantly renewed transformative *act*. One usually recognizes it after the parameters have changed, the crossing made.

— 4/29/97

I watch a tiny nuthatch on a branch & feel my own awkward weight. To just be *there*, along with what’s also there, is a tenuous skill honed morning after morning, often across deep restlessness.

Milosz on loss of innocence: “Consciousness is based on envisioning the people we see as *bifurcated* beings.” Change this to “envisioning all beings as bifurcated,” & it glosses the above.

— 5/2/97

In the bathroom, a large, mildly grotesque beetle, kite-winged like an old biplane. It’s dazed, probably just emerged, but gentle, arching slightly upwards, bending in the center, & comically big-footed. I’m both alarmed & pleased to see it, but know I have to get it out before Lorna arrives. I slide an old 3/5 card with some scribbling under it, & it walks delicately on, & clings tho climbing slightly. I carry it quickly to the bedroom window, which I’ve opened, & shake it out. Outside is windy, dark, threatening, but the creature is so light it’ll just blow around, & be ok.

What else could I do? I couldn’t crush it against the wall as I would have years ago. It wasn’t beautiful like some insects, simply big, drab, clumsy, little kid-skinny, & obviously in the wrong place though anticipating the influx that will occur soon.

— 5/5/97

Deep drift, driven by poor sleep & late dreams. A thin buzz in the head, jitters, wispy phrasings. Then I slowly open on nothing except what prolongs itself: multi-cadenced spring birds, sunlight, shouts – an

immense volatility, at the center of which there's a scratch in the throat, a constriction in the nasal passage, the momentum of breathing, other things breathing & chattering back.

Toward the end of meditation, an image from last night's *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*, someone thrusting a hand into an engine to repair a chain, while the huge clanking wheels & pistons churn, driving the submarine ahead – like the harsh, repetitive negations of the Heart Sutra (“no eyes, nose, tongue, body, mind”), denying most ordinary mental grids. Such contexts can embody the anxiety of emptiness, but they also carry what I sensed in Shohaku's apparent naivete the first time I did dokusan with him. Nothing out there, he said very calmly, pointing at the window, not even a piece of grass, has a name.

— 5/13/97

Early this morning, I dream of a city slum, diseased & alien though not overtly dangerous, where I need to get from my shabby hotel to “Ritter Square” downtown. Although I've been here before, using buses & trolleys, I remember nothing. The place is at once Chicago, Mexico City, Paris when I first visited without any French in 1956, & Philadelphia, where I was born. Walking by dark underpasses, boarded up storefronts, figures lurking on corners, I find that the subway stop has vanished, replaced by upscale shops, as on the ground floor of the Zurich airport, where everyone's reasonably well-off & polite. I stand in a line at the Poste, & when I get to the front, I ask, “Où est la Subway?” The girl stares. “Le Metro?” I repeat, & add a few fragments of German. Gradually I hear the people around me saying, in English, something like “nowhere.” I realize that I won't get back into the hotel, which is locked, & that “Ritter Square,” a paradise at the city center, is inaccessible. I have no map, I don't speak the language, huge areas of the town are burned or dying anyway.

All morning this dream hangs on, with its questions: how does the dreamer walk through the world? Are maps, grids, systems essential? How arrive anywhere at all?

An extrapolation from Shunryu Suzuki: the essentials of Buddhism may lie in what I don't think about when I defend myself, in what emerges when I stop trying to signal my identity.

— 5/19/97

I've been thinking again about the tone of clumsy scolding in the first half of *Opening the Hand of Thought*, as well as the insight Uchiyama eventually defines so powerfully that earlier distortions vanish. In much of the book he calls delusions mere "secretions", as if they could be wiped away with a contemptuous snort. Toward the end, however, when he's plainly more relaxed, he says that transformation works only when one lets go of cravings that continue to arouse complex hunger & need.

Obviously the very idea of transformation is a delusion if it's a substantial aim – which can happen easily if one assumes karma will wither under casual scorn. Still, Uchiyama's real strength is his stark insistence that one has to give up all conceptualization, & enter the wordless universe which one actually fills, & which will vanish at death but hasn't vanished yet.

A thunderous boom against the window, a dove slamming into the double pane, despite the hawk decal which is probably on the wrong side. I look up at bits of feathers scattering; 3 floors down the stunned bird seems to be sitting on the grass. Spring profusion plus a false door to the sky. Illusions have consequences too.

— 5/23/97

Consciousness full of pitchy whirlpools & boiling vortices. Ears whistle, sinuses stab. That I can't help formulating remedies is another rag flapping in the storm.

Shohaku suggests working at the vertical/horizontal axis of consciousness before thought begins, exposed to whatever appears. That way, anything that comes up is the matrix of the whole, & self doesn't vanish because (Uchiyama again) the whole is self – self that is the [i.e., pen-

etrates the entire] universe, & universe that is the [i.e., penetrates the entire] self.

— 5/27/97

A dark morning current. I keep bumping into spasmodic eddies of projects, words & memories, alongside the body's leathery pressures & aches, plus light-tipped bird sounds from outside. Occasionally I break into a distant understanding that all this is one, then I'm under the surface again.

Earlier, near waking, a stunning dream. I need to check under my childhood back porch (a frequent dream site) for openings where something, probably rodents, might get in (& where, in fact, I once let my dog kill a baby rabbit, something that still makes me shudder whenever I call it up). For a crew, I have three or four barnyard creatures (as in *Babe*), a dog, a cat, a black sheep. We find very little under there, though the place seems claustrophobic & scary. I hear vague snarling noises in the corners, however, & under the leaves. Imitating Indiana Jones, I tell my helpers to back out, then I begin to snarl. Suddenly I realize that sitting in a row against a far wall are an actual black then a white wolf, & one more creature. They're interested, not intimidated. The louder I snarl, the more attention they give me, growling & baring their teeth until the third figure evolves, floating, into an old woman with long white hair & an assured, impassive, ancient but beautiful face (much like a neighbor who was subject to psychotic episodes). It's a witch. who's been there right along. Looking at me she says quietly, "hello." As her voice echoes, I recognize that I'm trapped. I try to yell for help to the others waiting outside, but I sense that I won't be heard.

Waking, still hearing that voice, I'm spooked until I fall back to sleep. Later I think that this may have been, in part, a vision of the real scope of *avidya*, of ignorance powered by blinding, monstrous greed.

— 6/10/97

So many conditions. I'm muddled, then open & calm. I hear sharply a bird's peet peet peet in the shadows, & keep seeing the greenery, varie-

gated as the confusion of any life. Everything is distance. Waste is gone in a breath, ego a notion of *not here not now*. Dissonance remains, but so does Self, which is also just *present as well*.

Two insights: That the unease with which one approaches *sunyata*, emptiness in all senses of the word, is anchored in a need for meaning so deep that, as it proceeds, the hunger disappears as well. ☪ that rather than locking blindly onto the past, it's always possible, even in stupor, to enter the present wholly, in body/mind.

— 6/15/97

The difficulty of facing raw volatility, an approaching storm. I keep letting go ☪ getting reattached, as in early Marx Brothers' movies Harpo's leg is suddenly hooked over his neighbor's arm.

Basically the cycle of drowse-drown-recovery that I experience every morning is the "self that is in the world that is in self," in its volatile energy, its fear of exposure, its lust for rhetoric – a complex psychophysical fact, with whatever fixity most facts have, seemingly endless but actually as fluid, as empty as anything else.

The trick to letting it go lies in slowing down, pushing the surge of thoughts further back, acknowledging but outdistancing them so they enter consciousness without warping it. In this effort, scale, pace, measure are transformed. It can take an agony of seconds or seemingly sterile years to come upon what Katagiri calls "Inconceivable Life."

I think of Sekien's "no-mindedness," ☪ the luminously blank expression he took on whenever he considered a question – strength giving itself space to meaningfully respond.

— 6/18/97

Weekend wedding. I give the blessing over the wine, then, "Praise be to the Lord, who has given us marriage, in joy, companionship ☪ long life." Now we're full of staccato energy, pounding with love ☪

jittery hope. A radiance in everything. Whitman's "spreading miracle."

I accidentally kick the new surge-protector & the screen goes dark. I move the thing back, & decide to pay attention to simple processes. Downstairs, & with almost trembling affection I listen to Lorna talk to Julie on the phone. Later I talk to Rachel, & even tell her about some of this.

For a moment zazen is a sun around which bits of passionate speech & experience whirl, erratically or coherently. The powerful emptiness of *samadhi* speaks for itself, absorbing what seems waste but is in fact meaning-charged.

— 6/27/97

Images spinning out of last night's news & this morning's dreams. Now & then I throw them off & decide to get down to it, step into the present, but this produces another train of firecracker explosions & sodden bursts. There's no place to get to, apart from where "I" am now, anchored in wordless totality. Finally I kick even this away, & wake from a dream-of-waking into mere acceptance, where the vast, noisy flood of chatter just passes through me. Below it is a dark, frozen layer of dread, over which thickets of subjective & empirical, compensatory & inherited, private & tribal discourses have grown.

— 7/1/97

I'm thinking of a loved uncle, my father's best friend since grammar school, aging in California. Why does my sympathy feel so inchoate? I know that it can be explosive when tapped directly.

Writing each morning after zazen creates intricate issues of awareness. Karmic knots seem more visible, especially the defensive distancing I've always indulged.

Sitting in lotus, watching the wall, processing a dry headache in my

sinuses, raw fear in my hara, the challenge is just to be with impermanence itself, whirling into the body like an enormous drill.

So, in Katagiri's phrase, each moment is the moment "just arising," different from the next. I sense that, along with my cousin's sadness as I heard it on the phone last night. Clearly my own immersion in the instant can help me accept another's anguish, & not want to change it into something else. Zen is discipline, not magic or transformative wish.

— 7/4/97

I started yesterday's 3-period zazen with the local group in booming confusion, which slowly became sustained stillness, neither scornful nor supportive, & in which everything chaotic was merely held. A condition of presence, unattached to the thousand intentions hanging before me.

Today, against the quiet morning, I'm caught in waves of narratives fractured into shards. There's an undercurrent from last night's tv surfing: a space-craft driven by a scorpion head, & later (from *The Deep*) a snake like creature of water sympathetically miming the face of a person standing before it – images that juxtapose imitative gentleness with a terrifying malleability of body & being, like being fingered tenderly by the Void.

All this belongs to the inner flux that's Buddha Mind too, though it feels like reptile brain. During his last sesshin, when he was secretly struggling with his cancer, Katagiri grumbled that it's easy to do zazen on nice days, "but what about when you don't feel so good?" *Satori* might make life more luminous, but one still meets whatever is on the path, like the schizoid monsters in Van Eyck & Bosch, carrying disfigurements that appear when normal immunity fails. *Makyo*, internalizations not yet translated & absorbed, confronted in meditation or nightmare, can easily seem devil's work, since in their origin, they're undoubtedly truly alien – ie, sources of strength & compassion only after we accept them, & join them to our being.

Maybe the hardest work in any spiritual quest is to encounter such moments as illusions that mask useful truth. ☯ yet that's just what they are – projections on the screen of Plato's cave gone haywire, wires dangling, machinery smoldering, hearts jerking unstopably.

— 7/7/97

Stillness, 7:00 am, after a night of storms. Deep greens, bird songs dark ☯ sweet. From the start I'm largely in the present, but feeling an edge of exposure, a need for Katagiri's "faith."

Katagiri. Last night, at the Tuesday zazen meeting, I read his awkward teisho on "peace," probably given toward the end of the Vietnam War, when people were uneasy over zen's apparent political detachment. His response: although surrounded by "ignorance" ☯ greed (*avidya*), we must "chew on peace," ☯ be capable of gestures like the Buddha's sitting in the heat under a dead tree ☯ turning an army away. Such acts are indifferent to goals or hope, but they tap intimate reserves of understanding, ☯ a vast, often explosive capacity to resist or transform.

— 7/9/97

Lovely being up early, on a wheel of shifting light ☯ distant sounds. For long minutes I enter a surprising clarity, though it vanishes before a rush of chatter about ongoing urgencies. Still, a ways off, I hear the advice from Sonoma Mountain, that first seemed childlike: let go, don't cling to sensations of balance, worry, achievement, defeat.

It'll take long periods of quiet to ripen all this into a logos strong enough to absorb skepticism ☯ anxiety... as in the Rinzai story of Hakuin's fall, just before his awakening, into an endless, paralyzing universe of ice. Clearly, at the deepest levels, distrust ☯ satori work at once, in a recurrent dynamic of failure ☯ recovery, again ☯ again.

I remember something I'd thought merely eccentric, that began making sense a few months ago: Sekiun's habit of pausing anywhere, in a room, on a walk, to gassho to himself. He did that often, ☯ never explained

it, but he must have been acknowledging some surging crisis that he'd managed again to resolve.

— 7/10/97

This morning I keep bumping into corners of darkness, until wall, fan, heavy warmth seem ropes to anchor me down. Again, I sense that a karma of constantly being hurled back needn't dominate; that since *past / future* & *guilt / redemption* operate in a matrix of Now, they're inherently volatile. Letting them go sorts them into configurations I can more easily grasp.

— 7/13/97

Much of the time the raw ego is a shambling idiot, thinking words exist to satisfy it instantly. The extent to which our minds are caged is partly a psychiatric matter, but the further reach of the problem is spiritual, since we're also talking about Large Self – roughly, in western terms, the soul.

At week-long sesshins, a day of meditation usually starts in roaring subjectivity. Only gradually, as the hours go on, does sustained *samadhi* emerge. At home, where I do just one early *zazen*, this descent into nightmare, like being shaken in a bottle, is often the major event, though later I realize I've gained a step, opened a door, loosened a sash.

The darknesses called *samsara* are immensely fruitful. What I do in *zazen*, often with great effort, is just wait them out, until I'm without panic, & things can move toward me peacefully. Only a deeply alert confidence can deal with inner demons without harming much else that is, at root, cooperative & innocent.

The “toys,” the anarchic, ego-bending distortions of our lives, crave verbalization like cancerous cells courting healthy ones.

— 7/15/97

A dark, heavy-leaved morning in this sweet, wood-lined house. The shifting, roiling waves of pain are muted, though I'm grieving over my inability to figure a way into another goofy project of happiness.

But the silence & simplicity of this condition are significant, anchored in dust, loss, sorrow.

Understanding can come when the self is exposed, inarticulate, fumbling. That's why, like learning to walk, loosening the grip of language requires constant repetition.

— 8/15/97

Sunday morning. Kitchen work, coffee, & on NPR a fine lecture by Karen Armstrong, insisting on compassion as the center of any spiritual quest – Esau's lovely welcoming of Jacob, who is twisted with embarrassment & guilt, "raising my face to your face."

I do zazen in the shabby, after-storm darkness of the basement, bothered by last night's rain-damage upstairs. After the familiar cycle of projection-distraction-recovery, I feel as if I've been dumped into raw space, among peeling walls, dirty rug, dank smells, sounds of water shifting somewhere, maybe in pipes, maybe leaking thru the walls & threatening ruin. Then I see that I don't need to blueprint each clumsy fact: that this uninterpretable dullness in which nothing much happens is one face of a final world that won't easily be reformed or appeased.

— 8/17/97

Roofers banging away. It's overcast, & for much of the time zazen's so stuporous that I want to fold head on arm & go blank. On days like today, without the open spigot of inner chatter, I feel denuded, & entering *samadhi* slowly & gingerly seems merely fussy.

Reading & experience make clear that zazen doesn't aim at mere transformation, which easily becomes another limited hunger. What zazen teaches is trust, rooted in the unknown, at the heart of one's life. One

ends up not really knowing anything more, but with a larger capacity to exist without “irritably reaching after conclusions” – to see meaning in the dark where we’re suspended.

— 8/18/97

Drugged by sleep, I’m open to the “deep fear” Katagiri says everyone feels far below. But after trying various mechanisms of escape, I let them go & just sit, in heaviness & ongoing dread. Sun is strong, August leaves at their fullest, air surprisingly cool & clear. Everything’s cyclic & familiar, & the language for it dry & shallow. This seems exactly right.

— 8/25/97

A rain-laden weather front. I drowse & wake incessantly, until at one instant I’m *here*, not just envisioning a pure present but pulsing within it. Issues of past/future edge away – then, in long stretches of dreaming, they intrude again. After, I’m once more looking back on another immense hiatus of confusion.

Reading *Tricycle* on Buddhist views of death. The inescapable suffering Katagiri describes as “holy truth.” There’s an article on tantric treatment of dying, with its elaborate approach to nightmare & dread, & a page of Zen death poetry, minimal & sympathetic. Obviously, awakening into an encompassing present means meeting death so completely that panic gets swept along with everything else. Rick Fields, facing terminal lung cancer, suggests simply trusting one’s fear as utterly natural, utterly human.

— 9/8/97

Zazen’s fairly straightforward this morning, as toward the end of a sesshin, when I sit almost armored, in the shield-cage of the body, drifting back into splintery chatter but at the same time emerging into a steady, unharried awareness. I’m mistrustful of this, since it can easily feel like evidence of power. But at the end it just disgorges into a world in which birds merely chatter & light scatters & fills.

Such moments bring overwhelming pleasure, but at best one can only welcome the way they come & go. Detachment & anguished involvement both belong to the healing “peaceful center” I seek. We move ceaselessly around a central stillness which also (Katagiri) whirls at an unimaginable “super-speed”. My sense of the nirvana state often feels infantile, even defenseless. But there’s also the deeply watchful patience, the powerful containment that flowers out of a child’s constant exposure to unlimited wholeness & dread.

— 9/10/97

Dry September morning light, large & luminous, airy & full. A kind of clarity approaches, in part a response to questioners at the Tuesday meeting, who I tried to answer too quickly. Now I sit almost angrily, allowing various arguments, explorations, analyses to drop away, until I feel spaciousness, & a sharp reluctance to articulate it now.

Refusing to cling, one becomes simple presence in this world, exactly like every flying crawling thing.

Uchiyama, on the first precept:

Self-nature is what I call the reality of life. Since the reality of life cannot be grasped by words, it is said to be wondrous & imperceptible. Within this world, in whatever situation, everything is the reality of life. The reality of life cannot be killed by any means. The precept of not killing means that since all beings are in the reality of life, we cannot kill anything.

Seeing reality as beyond language has immediate ethical implications. Zen vision isn’t simply passive, a matter of pure exposition, of merely entertaining mystery.

As for writing here, it’s a willed betrayal. What else?

— 9/12/97

All's scattering. Trying to stay alert is like facing a thunderhead, where narratives of pain flash violently, scripts thrown up to make anarchy cohere, exactly as in dreaming, projection, lifelong compulsion.

Day by day I see that pulling away from karma isn't just a matter of pricking balloons. & yet, after 40 minutes I'm bruised but oddly exhilarated, as if I've been reaching toward the simplicity of my own death – another intimate gift of things as they are.

— 9/15/97

This morning a hail of public apprehensions: economic collapse, hysteria, anti-semitism, criminality, earthquake. Against all this, *samadhi's* willed presentness, seems both unlikely & the only feasibility, a means of touching fear like a huge animal & just sitting down alongside.

Yesterday a wonderfully simple letter from Shohaku, to all friends of the sangha. Driving to Los Angeles, he stops at Grand Canyon, whose size makes him feel utterly small, & reminds him of the vastness of the inner self. The twin poles of everything.

— 9/16/97

After days of distress, zazen consists of long periods occluded by karmic shrapnel, spinning & cutting, but which I also hold in a larger awareness of just sitting there. & at moments I see that if I make an effort to dismiss even this, then I come for an instant truly into present tense – which seems more pain-filled because no distractions stand between self & its sensations.

One reason for all the inner chatter in the first place may be self's reluctance to see itself fixed in an intolerable emptiness. Still, pried away from language, even minimally, the discomfort starts to disperse, & suddenly there's nothing else except raw presentness, with no verbal matrix, & no way to escape or move ahead – as if any conception of spiritual progress is also illusion. In that case, what I'm encountering here is Katagiri's "purity" & "clarity," key phrases in the teisho I read at the end

of the 6 period zazen on Saturday, to Dor, Sun Hom & Derrick, after which we all sat tranquilly, not wanting to leave – even though, for me, the entire time had been spent submerged in shifting dreamscapes, needy voices & raucous illusions.

Of course what I'm confronting in all this is ur-self as an ordinary fact. But presentness also seems to have spatial resonance, as in Taoism's "ten thousand things". Only later, when normal speech & various comforts (a cappuccino) return, do I sense that it's something I can share with whatever's out the window in the late September light – endless leaves bunched & clustered on the backyard maple (a survivor of two trees, one of which, in my clumsy incompetence, I killed years back), shaking slightly, a bit withered, with first touches of yellow & brown. In a way it's like the wisdom one can find in clichés – the *Smile, God Loves You*, on my mother's refrigerator magnet, on our fridge downstairs now.

— 9/22/97

The intricacies of working toward presentness. Often what I think is a state of emerging into the *now* turns out to be another layer of distraction – signaled by how easily it gives way to pounding anger, followed by a restaging of some dialogue or event, a projected scene, a formulation, etc. – until soon the upper teletype is churning out phrases, & I'm back in the world of repetitive karma. To let go at that point implies surrendering all control, abandoning any mastering, liberating narrative. This truly is to "kill the buddha," & usually when that occurs, the banal swims into place with a rush of simple truth, the old apprehensions still looming darkly below, in a world of loss/gain, life/death which is at the same time Abe's "boundless openness" – a quiet phrase, clipped, luminous, deliberate as a mathematical fact.

— 9/23/97

Zazen these days is like entering a jungle, then moving toward a layered immediacy, usually less interesting than the booming dramas ego invents for future & past, but with a distinctly spatial, wrap-around feel, & a certainty that there's nothing here except itself, & that the en-

ergy ego expends merely keeping itself intact is also accessible out there – extending past me yet at the same time of me, in a contour so encoded that it's not readily graspable. That is, the kind of healing that ego hopelessly craves is actually feasible in *Dai Shin*, Big Mind – but must be approached differently.

Is my wish for nurture a remnant of the theist's urge for a guiding, protecting father? Or is it also fundamental in the Zen quest, though startlingly transformed? The "peace" that Sekien & others speak of – plainly it can't be understood as the work of an external being. But is it meaningful to see the void, *sunyata*, as our origin as well?

Something of what the west calls God is in Zen accessible within the meditator's reaching toward a less definable but tangible coherence in everything, even at its most scattered, volatile, & apparently meaning-deprived.

— 9/25/97

V

Long passages of stupor, in which my "I" is obviously just a label for sensations with a shared, volatile history. Whatever 'True Self' is, it's tethered to this restless, constantly ballooning core. In contrast, 'True Self' is "peaceful, pacified & thankless" (as D. H. Lawrence calls his totem snake), because it must be evoked by a natural but perfectly deliberate act, a gesture of compassionate, disciplined trust.

— 10/6/97

A calmness in which ordinary ego-dramas feel like spasms of a jumping bean – in part a response to the haunting articulation in the *Yom Kippur* service two days ago. "Lord, I am as dust." The warm, impersonal Jewish ritual, elegiac & cleansing, alongside Zen's unyielding inwardness.

Earlier another dream of passage. I'm walking behind the Pennsylvania vacation farmhouse of my childhood. The way zigzags across a pasture, almost vanishes up-hill, moves into woods & follows a river. Virgilian, funereal, it goes through a dark cave to a sort of water-side beer-garden, where groups of people appear, as in Renoir, celebrating a fete. Since I want to leave, however, I take a boat, in which I'm comfortable though it's either going home or toward some shadowy inner place. In fact it drops me at a parking lot, where I find my shoes & pick out a car, driven by a woman with a family, who soon gets lost.

— 10/13/97

From Shohaku's comments on Suzuki's *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, last weekend in Milwaukee: For him, zazen began as two years of pain, followed by two of sleep, & two of sheer thinking. Now, at 49 he's back to the zazen of pain. . . . Since death occurs entirely in this life, the task of the older meditator is to deal with it. . . . "Enlightenment" is a clumsy term for something often approached in a waking sleep. . . . The idea behind the phrase "beginner's mind" is linked to that of Indira's Net, of the universe as an immense weave, that vibrates at any single act. . . . That we're totally dependent on what surrounds us is clear in the narrow range of temperatures & air we can physically tolerate. . . . The inner act of 'letting go', at any moment, is simply not subject to change.

— 10/29/97

November steel-grey, a luminous yellow, some leaves tinged with snow, shrubs still full-bodied, green. In zazen I keep generating coherent scenes: the grid work of the Hindenburg, the ship's skin stripped away, exposed to the violent sky; or the battle lines at Stalingrad, the reserves still safe on the west bank of the Volga, but having to cross to the front at night. All around an arching nothingness, booming, fecund, implacable. In Uchiyama's "actualizing the Self which is the Activity of the Universe," each self experiences its own unique Life / Death. At times, under a powerful craving for validation, I see this condition as literal emptiness. Then what I'm aware of is fear, of isolation, inner loathing, bodily death – the particular Via Negativa my karma has chosen.

Whatever we try to erase from the mirror of consciousness always reappears there, much of the time magnified & hostile. *Where is there room for dust?* In an important sense, everything persists. Yeats, “All things remain in God.”

A wintry red blue gold, clear, bright, nearly medieval.

— 11/12/97

Again, this morning, instead of looking narrowly *toward* a resolution, I’m at the center of a circle with constantly receding horizons, where I sense things peripherally, side to side. & though the moment vanishes, it carries what Dogen sees as a difference between knowledge & delusion, witnessing & frantically grasping – what he describes as the ability to let things approach, rather than move assertively out to engage them externally.

At moments I feel as if I’m being cleansed of routines chosen long ago to keep me fruitfully in the world.

— 11/21/97

Fog, pressure in chest, until pulse slows & eventually self appears, free of its skirt of triviality. On & off, for about a third of the period, there’s a buoyant numbness, & a wedge of fear – perhaps over what may seem anarchic if I focus on it. But I don’t.

— 12/3/97

Another minimal zazen, like walking among dark trees, a deadened rustling everywhere. Slowly I’m getting the hang of no-mindedness, the fluttering contradictions it involves. Being one-pointed, dismissing nothing, ego-self feels tattered & dispersed. In place of demonic figures in some big narrative are just leaves, stones, & twigs to step over, though old panics rattle distantly.

— 12/4/97

This morning's paper is full of allegations of local racism. In zazen I keep confronting faces, unanswerable or wildly skewed accusations, personal guilt, & the caste rigidities by which societies avoid doubt. It's difficult to hold this fierce muddle for 40 minutes, but I sit in the center of it, drifting away & returning.

The dharma resists evasions. Each injustice, cruelty, catastrophe has its weight.

— 12/8/97

Reworking this journal stirs & sharpens things here & there. I'm far more aware of the tedious distractions that fill the mind every day. & of the need to balance *samadhi* against the system-making attracted to it, the eagerness to make things legible, measurable, tight.

A pre-waking dream: I have to fly a small plane, with cars & dumpster attached, a short way, from one airport to the next. Since I hardly know how to fly, I make it up as I go. My companion is a silent kid. Take-off is ok, but once in the air, the prospect of landing is terrifying. I plead to be let off, but I'm told very firmly that the experience 'll be good for me.

Later, in zazen, I drift in a tunnel toward a small point of awareness, which turns out to be the boring present I've been evading right along.

— 12/15/97

No matter how repulsive self & its contexts, letting go shows instantly how life / death shapes the consciousness folded within the larger world.

That's why small self must be the central actor on the stage of zazen. Once the mental static lessens, what's evident – though resistant, alien, unutterably banal – is everything. Nothing's to be avoided or escaped.

As for the numbing anguish that starts many meditations, it's basically repetitious & uninteresting. In contrast, letting go is an act rather than a barely resistible condition, never the same because so interwoven with

what it meets – like waking up, extraordinarily alert but in a familiar place.

At Hokyōji, this was relatively easy partly because of the setting: birds nearby & from the woods, cows moaning, transient storms, smells, chills. Or walking slowly on the kinhin platform outside, seeing weed flowers on the hill, insects flitting on screens, tiny bats upside down in the planks overhead.

— 12/19/97

In December gloom, I'm enclosed in pre-dreams, broken quotations of images & plots, submerging again & again. After, in the window, I study the shallow, dirty light, the dry leaves slightly shaking like tiny flags, the innumerable tangles & branchings, the mud-patchy ground. To give up the wish to be anywhere else seems one answer to the koan of a life.

— 1/6/98

Reports of violence & towering stupidity in the news, like demons in a quest, that one can pass only by staying exquisitely concentrated. Slowly I move across a set of almost recognizable stages, each of which echoes the last, toward a quiet present. To follow this path, it seems crucial not to contemptuously dismiss grief, guilt, pain of any kind, no matter how tortuous, but to receive them as givens.

— 1/7/98

I'm in a New York hotel. Everything's so wired & anonymous here that the inner life seems elemental as a weed. Tranströmer's great poem (in Bly's translation) on the likelihood of someone's playing Schubert in one of the numberless towers, seen through a window.

Zazen yesterday gave a piercing clarity. Today it's storm-tossed, but still, at one moment, I sense the reassuring presence of physical body, thin-striped wallpaper a foot ahead, & my constant foolishness – minor ele-

ments in the pulsing whole.

— 1/9/98

Home again. Saturday meditation with the group, in an irritable drowse, blinking open, filling with distraction again. Still, in the second period, I'm less scattered, & more aware of worries (February sesshin, rains in California, change the return reservation, buy waterproof boots, etc.). Finally I realize, hey, these'll get resolved, I'm just here, along with this sangha, & all else . . .

After, searching through *Returning to Silence* for a brief reading, I find "Serenity & Tranquility," which affirms what I've just felt: that most meditative acts require a calmness within kinesis that must be actively earned .

— 1/18/98

Again, I reach a point at which the urgencies I've been riding give way to a blankness like a pause between thunderstorms – hard to sustain since one needn't actually do anything to it, only let it take its own course. Soon enough, it fills with other thoughts, & the discursive engines begin. Still, one sign that this isn't just another stage is that it seems to contain & not condemn everything else. If I want to get back to it, however, the entire process has to recur, over & over, day after day.

— 1/19/98

A dark nondescript winter morning. It's difficult to wake – body abandoned in a heap, mind squashed somewhere inside it. Eventually, however, I'm just there, facing the room, drifting in lingering states of vulnerability & dream. Then at one point I notice that I breathe just like any other being. Suddenly – unlike the sense one can have of mental reality as not-yet-resolved energy, a layer of dust over worn patterns of perceiving & projecting – presence deepens into a grace that upholds everything.

— 1/23/98

Sitting takes place in an intimate approximation of death – which resembles humiliations gathered over a lifetime, both personal & imposed by fate. At such moments the mind feels as if it can only recognize darkness – & therefore can be in some sense free, since the rest is ego-driven prancing.

Clearly, in meditation, I need to reject palliating language, trusting whatever I encounter at any particular time. The price may be a sharp sensation of emptiness.

& yet, the consciousness that zen exposes also exists beyond the meditator, in the ordinary world of greetings & goodbyes where generosity & compassion function. One year at Hokyōji the front, formal entrance was to be used, since “the world is your zendo.”

From Karen Armstrong, *The Fall of Jacob*:

All the great world religions insist that vision & ecstasy can never be ends in themselves. The test of true spirituality is that it be successfully integrated with the rest of life . . . The word ‘ecstasy’ means a going forth from the self. It is the corollary of blessing, which enables a person to break the imprisoning boundaries of space, time, and the ego to achieve an enhanced, liberated life.

— 1/27/98

Toshu spoke yesterday on the Heart Sutra, particularly on *prajna*, which he called “seeing through” – & which Sekiun once described as universal energy. With its litany of denials, this text always calls up the core radicalism of zen. If the “Bodhisattva relies only on *prajna*” then there are no categories that anchor any existence, though no naive denial of categories works either.

I’d found a corollary the previous night, at the Schul of all places, during a wild, jittery discussion of religion & spirituality. When a physicist

commented that everything is in motion, I added, “nothing is fixed,” & to my surprise others (liberals, disturbed by orthodox fundamentalism) began to agree.

— 2/1/98

Winter Sesshin at Sonoma Mountain. A week of struggling with uninterrupted, humbling storms & floods. In a first dokusan on Monday I tell roshi about my stunning encounter with transience at Hokyōji in 1987, when I mourned for days over life-waste, corrosive distrust, & my frayed link to Sekiun, who I saw had been my first master. I give him my view of illusions as crimped, demonized energy which strong focus can change into liberating strength. “An intellectualization,” he snaps. Later, when he says in a lecture that terrors of any kind are empty, devoid of content like the wind, I’m deeply stirred.

For days, in zazen, I struggle between my habit of letting thoughts, phrases, images just emerge & lapse, & roshi’s view of samadhi as a deliberate, wordless “awareness of awareness,” illuminating only itself. Replaying my life & the tangled brutality of recent history, I’m plunged into prolonged, roiling pain. At the same time, I push incessantly toward emptiness, pumping from the hara, concentrating on my breath, until, late Thursday night, something image & voice, moonlit & silvery, appears from a great distance, signaling among other things that there’s nothing to fear. For an instant, as with Hakuin, ‘the ridge pole collapses, the roof beams fall,’ as if in response to my shock years earlier – & to Katagiri’s promise of “deep joy” against the horror of everything’s being scoured instantly away.

Minutes after, I come across *Dai Shin*, Big Mind, an extrapolation of the lacquered oriyoki bowl into which roshi’d poured tea for everyone the previous day, now holding all things, including failure, violence, loss in a circle of calm light. I can’t tell whether this image, accessible & exact, is tiny or huge, but I know that size isn’t an issue. I can sense its vast, sustaining generosity, & its stunning authority, beyond any doubt.

Again, this moment also is provoked by my effort to pit attentiveness against blockage & despair. All week I've been visualizing the Holocaust, partly because of the presence of people here from roshi's Warsaw zendo. When I come upon this new emblem of consciousness, like the "cup of the hands" I've been using recently in poems, I break into tears.

At the end of the week, still hesitant, I ask for another dokusan, & tell roshi about these incidents, at first calmly, then choking, sputtering, dazed. I'm exhilarated when he calls them meaningful, though, since I'm leaving the next day, he warns me that he's seen people unprepared for such experiences lose jobs, have bad accidents, die. "I'm an old hand at this," I grin, instantly embarrassed but suspended in light. After, thinking about my return, I see beings moving like schools of fish in a beginningless universe, its laws just outgrowths of its intentionless persistence. I can feel turmoil again, heightened & grown dangerous unless observed carefully; but I'm also aware of watching itself, as a state of pure focus. I know that if I go on putting these together, I'll have the prospect of sustained, tortuous struggle & transfiguring insight alike.

Back in West Lafayette, I start to feel manically irritated by the stupefying, spasmodic, self-absorbed aggressiveness around me. The following Tuesday, when the *Walk* signal flashes at a crowded corner, I step coolly into the path of a squealing pickup – then, since the guy doesn't slow, leap for the divider, & as he storms past, scream "What in hell ya *doin'!?!?*" The instant I hear myself I know that I could have been crushed like an eggshell. I've hardly escaped the implications of Sekiun's repeated, "Zen is very dangerous," or his *Sho Ko Kyak Ka* – "to see the light, look at the ground under your feet." I have to be mindful of the contingent universe, because, in every way, there's never been anything else.

— 3/3/98

VI

For a while, morning zazen seems a matter of choosing *not-suffering*, serene, “fluttering its empty sleeves”, over *suffering*, often weighted with debilitating self-doubt. In fact, this is a caricature, though the broader possibility, *non-suffering*, can be reached only by determined *shikan taza*, that teaches how to carry insult & uncertainty without being swayed. & that skill is possible only if the apparent choice between pain & well-being, at some point, collapses on itself, pulling the meditator into the contradiction as well.

This process is among the first things I read about thirty years ago, when terms like *sunyata*, *mu*, nothingness seemed road signs indicating places to explore. What remains now is Dogen’s, “dropping away of body & mind” & his view of life-death as a dissolve that holds all conceivable perceptions, memories, needs. Like Donne’s sleeping in his coffin every night, nothingness scares, clarifies, transforms.

A long bird cry in the bright spring sun coincides with the alarm shrilling, as if the rest is peripheral.

— 3/5/98

Yesterday, a fine lecture on Philip Hailie’s *Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed*, in which French Protestant villagers rescued Jews during the war, in acts of compassion a survivor compared to God’s rainbow after an inconceivable storm.

Today, summery warmth. I’m boxed by words, scraps of snarling news, until the stillness coheres, & I stop the flow of chatter & dream-mutter, whatever the content, & sit for long minutes elementally absorbed. With the windows open, I can anchor on bird-sounds, which as at Hokyoji offer another language, alien but for pitch, trill, timing, energy. Even the most abrasive particulars that surge when the mind wakes can be suspended inside the rim of the present. Then the breathing body is the larger vehicle, while the words, scenes, sensations that provoke it

are petals in a pool. Here English phrases like “Big Mind,” “No Mind,” “Boundless Openness,” chosen to identify this process, seem awkward & bland, though after years of effort, exact also – just as the Judeo-Christian “fear no evil,” & the Buddhist “save all sentient beings,” can vibrate everywhere, across the common web.

— 3/30/98

Against the subdued tick of the little clock the kids gave me, & tangled noises flowing past the windows, an edge of boredom, along with memories linked to the last years of the war, called up by Stephen Ambrose’s superb *Citizen Soldiers*. Suddenly I come upon a current of love for my father, in 1944, just before my adolescence exploded. Elemental grief, for the roles we play, & the stage where they’re enacted.

Uchiyama’s use of the word “secretions” to characterize illusions, implying that they’re biochemical & not easy to dismiss, seems limited, but accurate enough. It’s why, in sustained practice, awareness of waste doesn’t diminish pain but turns us toward the present where, usually unknowingly, we actually live.

— 4/8/98

Dark, rainy, green-sheened. Again, I replay my deep, fatiguing love / hate combat with my father, which at 16 (wanting to run off to the Near East as a zionist fanatic), exploded in what I still see as a traumatic, self-abasing muddle.

I can’t wholly encompass this event, but I can see how false is the assumption that when I stand up after a meditation, I’m in a world where I’m condemned to constant rebuff. Buddha-mind is accessible in zazen, the budding yard outside, & my feet meeting the carpet. The fact of surface (in time, & in space) always indicates reality, which permits touch & change. In theistic terms I’m probably talking about grace.

So giving up attachment to such memories resembles the strategy of surrender in quest-myth – say, Ike, in Faulkner’s *Bear*, dropping his

compass in order to get lost enough to find his totem animal . . . which can seem monstrous until the instant it's seen as the Buddha saw a flower, a companion's smile, the morning star.

— 4/9/98

Conversation with Toshu yesterday, about sudden enlightenment (*satori*, *kensho*, realization), as important in Soto as in Rinzai, though often treated as unmentionable, somewhat like God's true name in Judaism. This diffidence about a central topic can be powerful. One thing that attracts me at Sonoma Mountain is Bill Kwong's habit of flamboyant, teasing indirectness — "You can call it *prajna*. But that won't do any good!"

Identifying *satori* as a goal — as Sekiun, following Rinzai tradition, usually did — can make it a brittle abstraction. Without *satori*, however, zen practice can easily seem shallow. The usual concept of enlightenment may carry spiritual clichés — abandoning the imagined prison, entering the non-existent gate — but in practice it works wholly in the word-resisting present, as a crossing charged with enormous energy, to be negotiated in consummate mindfulness.

— 4/12/98

Migraine last night, dry wind, storms on the way, followed this morning by magazine-cover redbuds, daffodils just opening, full moon in the west. In *zazen* heart & body pound furiously, until, as I begin to feel the rhythm of my breathing, anger changes into strength. It's like a semester in the classroom, when, by acting patient day after day, real patience finally arrives. This outcome, achieved by long stretches of restraint despite constant stress, is always surprising.

But my ur-rage isn't just an archeological remnant. It still belongs to the body of my spirit. There's no way to sense the dynamic of any life except at each instant, *now*.

— 4/17/98

A tide of stupid irritability, as if the anarchy I wake with won't let go, & can't be relied on for humane intelligence. At such moments it's got to be the adaptive, socialized self, small-talking, accepting limitations, responsive to context & rules but awkwardly cognizant of larger truth, that handles the work of the world.

Again, in zazen, when the chattering voices stop, a space opens that's frightening, since I don't know what to do with it, or how to keep myself on track. As if the void needs to say *abandon hope* years before *fear not*.

— 4/23/98

At some point during Saturday's 6 period zazen, mindless scream-ing & rock music burst out of the fraternity out back. I switch on the white-noise maker, then go through a range of furious responses, until, very, very slowly, I begin to sense how to accommodate thoughtless nuisance, ranging from road-rage & bullying to the violating, the paranoid. Rage apparently has got to be first fully possessed – like the rock of Kohinoor that the ship must brush against in *The Secret Sharer*, so the hidden fugitive can swim toward reconnection.

Later, a concert performance of the Beethoven 9th literally manifests how powerfully transforming joy is cradled in turbulent energy – as in Kwong Roshi's warning that, as *samadhi* deepens, life-threatening danger runs parallel. Enlightenment implies that there's a fold in the surface of reality, which requires an acute sensitivity to frailty, blockage, potentially violent change. Light has a demonic shadow: call it karma, fate. They're the same.

— 4/26/98

Heavy sky, dark storms approaching, kids shrilling through the open windows. Trying to follow my breath leaves a dense, drifting vacancy. For long minutes I feel harshly diminished & blank – then I remember that what I'm facing is my own life/death. Which, within seconds, suddenly seems another abstraction, to be negotiated & dismissed. So, a chain of exertions begins. . . .

Almost daily, the body of emptiness. Costello, *what's on center stage?*
Abbot: *an incomprehensibility, an original face.*

— 5/3/98

Letting go of “toys”—Uchiyama’s word for illusions – isn’t child’s play. As in early adolescence, when I usually felt like a shadow trying to entertain a shadow, I sift through my history until the whole thing cracks into ragged splinters. Gradually, I sense a distant robin, a raucous squirrel, the dense, gentle humidity on my skin.

Yesterday a rush of memory, triggered by an Amichai piece in *The New Republic* on Israel’s 50th anniversary. If my father hadn’t stopped me, I’d have gone there in the heroic days of ’46–’47. For a moment I’m that adolescent who felt he was ready to burst into flower. Of course I easily could have been violated, made murderous, or killed.

When I drop the inflation, I see what’s before me – early sun, dense green, & some sort of noise from an immense distance, like small cannon shots. A firefright? An immense staple gun connected with the work on the high school, 3 blocks away, but echoing everywhere? Pop! Pop! Pop!

— 5/12/98

Another mind-storm – crest after crest of surreal projections, suffused by impatience & dread – both reality & illusion, since I compose it, though the self it moves through is a membrane, a label. This realization is deflating & calming. The problem isn’t to find how to redeem my life, but to understand that I have a role in this world because I’m always in it. Day after day, the same horizon, empty & clean.

— 5/26/98

Deep green. Jays in the backyard, chattering at nestlings. I see how everyone shares an overpowering subjectivity, with its negotiations, mini-dramas, storages, late communiques – & how waking up implies em-

bracing whatever the mind encounters now. So the central “I” is a locus of what it assumes is real, including its own extension in time & place. & again, this implies a vacuum, both familiar & not-me (ie, *not-mastered-by-me*), to be kept free of clichés while fumbling toward death with everything else.

— 5/27/98

Early, before heat supposed to rise to the high 80’s, I clear away urgencies fizzing like bubbles. At one point I remember the *fu shiki* advice from that ragged Korean Zen group in Paris – “Tell yourself, ‘*don’t know, don’t know*.’” Still, *zazen* today has an almost lyric edge, like a World War II pop song set in the tropics. Trees wave broadly in the wind, & there’s a slight darkness as if a storm is coming or has just left.

— 5/31/98

After last week’s heat the day is fresh: robins & cardinals, light scattered through leaves. Eventually I enter a state like stunned sleep, sensing something twilit & impersonal. I notice my steady breathing, my feet below me, the coolness in the room. When I start to construct elegant phrases about solitude & fate, I just pause, listening.

— 6/3/98

An earth mover’s scraping & spitting across the street; out back I can hear two workmen talking quietly. At one point in meditation, I think of research Dor described to the group last week to explain why Uchiyama’s view of illusions as “secretions” is so compelling: apparently the left brain is programmed to supply coherent narratives for whatever it encounters, even where none are warranted, while the right just notices & waits. In that case it’s neurology that promotes embedded fictionalizing, including distortion, denial, paranoia. The only recourse is to gaze steadily, even at extremes of violation & waste.

— 6/23/98

After a while, the overwhelming clusters of pain that surface in zazen seem – like Tolstoy’s happy families? – surprisingly alike. It’s as if, in deep *samadhi*, seeing reality has priority over establishing inner peace. & of course, there are some forms of imagined comfort that are just inaccessible. Thus Tozen’s, “at least you know you’re alive”, when I complained about unending distraction; & his conviction that, without zazen, we’re all basically “hopeless.” Here’s original sin again, though the only help is ourselves & our companions, in body & in memory.

— 6/24/98

More on Dor’s observation: “Words are in the saddle & ride mankind” because the brain is primed to generate stories out of anything – keeping ego “stitching & unstitching,” running in place, making itself up.

Zazen functions beside this flow, carrying the monitoring voice but not attending to it. Again, here’s the region of the Heart Sutra, with “no eyes, ears, taste, touch,” like Stevens’ humbling “things as they are,” indescribable but essential to the identity of mind, & individuality.

We sense suffering – rooted in unchangeable conditions of origin, consciousness, interconnection, death – the way a sail feels wind. In reaction we easily fall into *avidya*, insatiable & blind.

Put very simply, the skill needed in zazen is that of trust, a generosity based on the recognition that we live in a grid vaster than any individual life. That’s why all spiritual quests say, Fear Not, since grace comes partly from the labor by which we gradually define ourselves. Basically meditation shares the deepest imperatives of western prayer, though it asks only immersion in presence & memory.

— 6/25/98

Adrift & dazed, I keep trying to loosen the grip of heroic mini-dramas & scenes, particularly involving barricaded enclosures, fortresses. I know that in powerful *samadhi*, abandoning familiar formulas can propel me into a grim, indeterminate, debris-filled space.

Practice doesn't suppress waste. At moments I am waste. I.e., a comment at Hokyōji, about Katagiri's last days: "his concentration was all over the place!"

— 7/2/98

A sweet, towering early morning storm, curtains of rain, long surges of wind. At first, the stone of pain dominates, then, slowly, it yields to a surprising sense of self & world as measurable events, alongside spurts of thunder, & a massive downpour over leaves & roofs – which abruptly sighs & goes away.

— 7/7/98

Last night, in our little group, zazen was a matter of horrendous jerks, bumps, wildly branching dreams – which, after a struggle, I was able to accept as the dominant condition of the moment. After, we talked about mindfulness & compassion in a mood of tangible exhilaration, apparent to everyone.

This morning, as at Hokyōji, I hear birds near the eaves, liquid & chattering. Habitual grids, hierarchies, gestures, panics burst like balloons. For long minutes what's left is Uchiyama's "self becoming Self," aware of its indescribable ground.

The purpose of zazen isn't to find a releasing vision, a hidden template. Fact & surface, crowded, depressing, exalting, are a whole. But thinking about reality is like smashing a mirror, then studying the shards as if they each were mutually opposed.

— 7/10/98

After reading a review of a bleak, low-keyed book on UFO abductions, in much of this meditation I'm plunged into monstrous dread, imagining a universe without compassion, from which the only escape is blind denial. At such moments I can see the value of birthright theism, with its external rescuer.

Dread: an archaic fear of abandonment, infantile, but also configuring something more difficult of access, & meaning filled.

In abandonment, there's no shared language, feeling, space. One is in Hakuin's universe of ice. Or in Auschwitz. Still, even hell must be absorbed & let go.

— 7/15/98

VII

2 weeks of Sesshin & Anjo at Sonoma Mountain. Ten to twelve 35 minute zazens daily, with formal services, oriyoki meals, work, exercise etc. Pre-dawn fog & cold, usually giving way to heat, straw colored hills, red-wood shade, patches of clean green. Lotus pond, & two stupa-gardens in the bush. One is Shunryu Suzuki's, another Chogyam Trungpa's, whose miniature house / tomb carries the words, *When you live, live, when you die, die.* Each afternoon, beside the bath house, a wild turkey mother & four young passing through, she occasionally flinging into a tree, chicks foraging below.

At the start, for a day, I apologize to my father, acknowledging our similarity, & the narcissistic isolation of our intimate lives, except for moments of playfulness, or the tentative warmth I usually rejected – along with his anger as he aged over my lack of Jewish identity. Later, roshi's suggestion that I sew a rakusu touches off a rush of archaic guilt, though I know that the deep reality I've touched in zen is no different from that implicit in Judaism, but without intervening notions of loyalty, behavior, belief. So I speak to my father both to let him go, & because I know that we rarely talked to each other generously. When roshi asks me what he replied, I can only answer, *nothing*. I love him but also need to deny him, since I rarely made him see.

As always, I go to each dokusan interview sure that little has occurred. Every time, at a slight prodding, I come to the edge of tears over insights I've thought merely cerebral. Tuesday, the trigger is an assistant's

improvised, rather hectoring lecture about *samadhi* (just shape up & do it), after which Shinko speaks of sheer human fragility, the difficulty of maintaining a tenuous stability. A few minutes later, trembling & incoherent, I mention the Buddha's view of suffering as the first noble truth in which any practice must take root. When I say hoarsely, "it's a matter of balance," roshi, seated before me, breaks his silence & agrees.

My mood in dokusan that evening is marked by rage over the abrasive scraping I've been hearing all day in the zendo, as if from a busted piece of machinery on the water tank downhill. Wind pushing redwood branches over the metal zendo roof, Roshi explains. I laugh. Obviously I've been treating *samadhi* as retreat, a state of strenuously protected tranquility. Roshi talks about theravadin *sati*: engaging with the raucous, uncontrollable world as it is, letting one's subjectivity be honed by all contingencies. Establish *sati* firmly, he says, & *samadhi*, grown strong enough to deal with anything swept into consciousness, will lead to *prajna*, the wisdom energy of awakening.

What follows is a week of heightened concentration, trying to crack the pure present, discarding rigid agendas of perception once I see them – & at the same time dealing with challenges, from noises to waves of sorrow when I think I lack the low-keyed sociability everyone else seems to possess. In the charged silence of the sesshin, the few times I whisper or speak my longing for connection seems to replay a lifelong constriction, day after day.

The second time I describe my agitation & irritability to Roshi, he tells how, standing on a smoky, crowded train in Poland, passing intermittent acres of appalling devastation, lines of shabby freight cars possibly used in the Holocaust, he decided to try a Vipasanna technique: put your breath a few inches from your nose, look down, & at each inhalation accept whatever is before you, & with each exhalation deliberately abandon, blow away. When they get to Warsaw, he asks how long he's been standing there. "3 hours, Roshi," to his astonishment, his companion Jurek says.

On Wednesday, images like guideposts begin to appear. One seems to represent death, ☯, as in February, another instantly repeats Katagiri's "great joy," to counter paralyzing dread. This new emblem grows astonishingly powerful as I describe it to roshi, who in an aside earlier in lecture, has said that realization can carry meaning past every particular prediction or hope.

The next morning as usual, just before dawn, I walk outside during the first *kinhin* to pee, ☯ again notice the morning star in the west, along with a large swath of slightly brightening sky that emerges whenever I pass a group of trees. This time, under the impact of days of *zazen*, the sight doesn't come across as a symbol but as precisely what the Buddha saw just after his awakening, when he smiled at Kashyapa ☯ pointed up. I mention this casually to roshi, ☯ once more find myself speechless. Eventually I surmise that the sky is the mind, ☯ the "star" sheer otherness, shining in companionship. A week later, at a powerful *mondo* ceremony, I decide to ask, "Shuso! Can you share with us your thoughts on this line from Thoreau, *The sun is but a morning star?*" "Darkness ☯ light, before ☯ after!" he replies.

At another moment, I recognize that my earlier image of the vast lacquered cup of *Dai Shin* as *Mind Holding Everything*, refers not to something out there, like a deity named *Dai Shin*, but to my own consciousness: ie, it's not symbol but direction, instruction, diagram! ☯ that the force that quietly contains "all beings in the six worlds," including the indifferent, the shame-filled, the paranoid, is the mind I already have – from the viewpoint of liberation, not another bean ball careening among billions, but a single, nurturing, comprehending source.

Toward the end of *ango*, staring at the wall, rigorously discarding thought after thought, I see that I'm still pursuing a "pure present," conceived as rolled up under the dark ledge of the splintery panel before me, boring but hovering 10 inches from my nose. The instant that falls away I'm suddenly in a space charged with the rose of the setting sun reflecting off the cedar planks, the polished floor, the redwood beams, where boredom can't last. Energy, the world's fullness, is filling all of our bodies, ☯ my own continuing breath.

Again, I discount this to roshi as arrived at through deliberate reasoning. “That’s ego,” he says quietly, bewildering me until I realize he means not inflated vanity, but that which clings relentlessly to a predetermined, limiting scale. Real *Mind*, in contrast, belongs to the quotidian but – through it – is also engaged powerfully with something else. Body & mind will die, since they’re structures thrown off by the force that brought us here, but they’re vehicles of all conceivable meaning as well.

A few more events. One night during angu week I sit in zazen, hearing the likable older woman who usually works in the kitchen, belch in rhythmic spasms, as if a zipper keeps opening in her gut. Again, I’m faced with disruptive trivia, like catching the body odor of a waitress during a meal. Jolted out of the *samadhi* I’ve been building earnestly, I stay sullen until, after the next kinhin, I go to the corner chair, & put in ear plugs – with which I begin every subsequent meditation, though I take them out once the coast sounds clear.

Once more, I bring up my fastidiousness with roshi, who wonders if she’s in pain, then says that one should do zazen even in Auschwitz. When I demur, he gives me another story from Poland – how on an unheralded trip, without accompaniment, he went as *jisha* with the Dalai Lama to Auschwitz . . . how dark & unthinkably evil the place had seemed as they lit incense in a gas chamber, where, since the walls were so smooth – such craft – there was no space to insert the stick between the bricks. Finally roshi laid it on the floor, they held a brief service, &, in that impossible environment, did zazen.

Days earlier, in the dark, after dokusan & just before the bell, I’d sat on my zafu, crying then laughing uncontrollably. Now, back in the same dark, aware of continuous belching & my own compulsive overreaction, I move further into *samadhi* by internally repeating “Auschwitz” as if that’s the purpose of my visit. I can see how much of the trivial & the terrifying a zazen grounded in *sati* can hold – as if anguish over suffering, & joy in the possibility of *prajna* are simply the same.

In a sense, what I find this sesshin is my own mind, no different from any other, & no less thwarted, judgmental, & needing to act more gen-

erously. Despite deep, often obvious impulses of anger & withdrawal, I keep meeting gestures of warmth from others. Everywhere, delusion, archaic patterns of loss & craving, moments of overwhelming immediacy, whirl in a vast, charged emptiness. It all comes together at the lotus pond one morning in *ango*, soon after sunrise, when, shuddering, I recognize the flowers as they must have seemed in ancient India: figures of enlightenment, “rooted in muddy water” yet superbly vibrant & magnificently straight.

The last Saturday afternoon, standing with Lee (who’ll drive me back to Santa Rosa) by the lotus pond, I look up & see Jeanne & Noel, two young long term residents, approach smiling, down the slope. I’ve been working alongside Jeanne in the kitchen right along, feeling alternately intimidated, annoyed & exhilarated by her enormous intelligence, & her flamboyant, often brilliantly self-dramatizing swings of mood – earlier that afternoon, I’d talked with a mutual friend about her for over an hour. Now, with almost everyone else gone, I greet them as if they represent the central contact of those turbulent weeks. The encounter has a quality beyond skepticism, utterly focused on essentials, that marks the charged concentration of any sesshin, & perhaps carries the real implication of zen, as if I’d been working all the time toward an act that shares deeply, & thereby heals – an assertion of grace, reaching through the prickly fragility & neediness that mutters all the time.

In my experience, the longing for full human touch – embodied in the sangha, manifested as compassion – can be assuaged only indirectly, & with immense patience, across long passages of anguished & sometimes paranoid isolation. Since the world is endlessly complex, & each sentient being a universe, deep bonding is rare – probably that’s why it generates such strength & peace, the Talmud’s “come, let us be strong, let us make others strong.” In its crude form, it’s triggered by ego’s aching self-doubt, yet it can be achieved only by abandoning ego’s insatiable self-insistence. At that brief moment Noel, Jeanne & I, with Lee watching a few feet off, are persons, elemental & grounded, caught in the twisted dramas & crises of personhood, sharply attuned to each other’s karma. Clearly, struggle & informed response – along with an openness to accident, & a willingness to let seemingly naive anger ripen into trust – has

brought us there, making a simple embrace final & redeeming. Perhaps what patience really means is holding all this in suspension until it's truly ready. Again, I'm back to the image of mind as the generous receptacle, the lacquered cup of ceremonial tea reflecting everything around us. As the man says, the readiness is all.

— 9/6/98

Colophon

From a Zazen Journal was designed and typeset by Timothy Moore. The text and headlines are set in Adobe Caslon, with Adobe Woodblock Ornaments used for decoration. The programs L^AT_EX and Ghostscript were used to produce a file in Adobe PDF format.