



The Oak Tree in the Garden

Journal of the Hidden Valley Zen Center

Day 5 of Rohatsu Sesshin 2017

This is day five of this Rohatsu sesshin here in December 2017 at Mountain Gate in Northern New Mexico: Rohatsu, meaning the commemorative sesshin of the first ever sesshin, that of the Buddha's sitting seven nights and eight days, during which he learned much about how his mind worked and ultimately came to profound enlightenment. Already here we are in day five, here, two thirds of the way through this day 5. The important thing is to keep that energy, that depth going, keep that commitment going, letting go of everything, everything...everything!

As usual we will continue sharing Hakuin's Rohatsu exhortations—Hakuin being the Japanese Zen master, who resurrected the Rinzai Sect in Japan in the 18th Century. these are his words on the fifth night, as translated by Norman Waddell.

The master said intensive training sessions known as sesshin continue for periods of 80, 90, or 120 days.

Though we are doing the short form of sesshin here, the level of practice does not necessarily depend on the length of practice. You will hear more about this in a minute here.

"Since the goal of all those who take part is to clarify the great matter, while this sesshin is in progress no one leaves the temple gates and no one speaks unnecessarily. Practice is carried on with a spirit of dauntless and an indomitable courage. In recent years there was a man in a village near here in who carved a stone image of Fudo the Immortal. He enshrined it by a waterfall in the mountains of Yoshiwara.

This is a true story that Hakuin repeats periodically with various different flourishes throughout several of his writings. The man in question lived in a town on the other side of the mountain from Shoin-ji—Hakuin's temple. He was one of the two most wealthy people in the village. It seems there was a stream or river running through the middle of village, and one of the men lived on one side of it and the other lived on the other side. Because his wealth, one day when the villagers wanted to develop this park area and provide a statue to grace it, they asked him to financially support this statue of Fudo, one of the Dharma protectors: the indomitable, immovable Fudo. And so the man provided the funding for the figure, and to honor his gift he was placed in the seat of honor at the celebration in which the figure was unveiled.

The story continues,

He enshrined it beside the waterfalls in the mountains of Yoshiwara. One day as he was watching the water tumbling down the cliffside, his gaze fixed on the bubbles that formed in the pool at the foot of the falls. Some floated over the water for a foot or so before disappearing, and some for two or three feet, and some continued floating for two or three yards. Watching their progress, the man's past karma enabled him to perceive the impermanence of worldly existence. The realization shook him to the marrow of his being. He now found it impossible to find peace within himself. There he was at the celebration. The villagers singing, and celebrating, and enjoying their sake and their special meals at the foot of the waterfalls, and suddenly it all went flat for him.

He realized, some people die young, some people die in middle-age. Some people die older, like everyone dies, including himself. So he left the celebration and went back to his home. And on the way he heard something. He chanced to hear a man recite a passage from the Dharma words of Priest Hakusui, 'Courageous beings attain Buddhahood in a single instant of thought. Lax and indolent beings take three long kalpas to attain nirvana.' So a great burning determination arose in him. He entered the bathing room and shut the door behind him.

There seems to have been a guest area in his home and that was where this particular bath room was. A Japanese bath room is not the same as an American or western bathroom. It is the room where the Japanese bath—and only the bath—is; the toilet is in its own little room by itself in Japanese homes or temples. Moreover, the bath is considered one of the sacred places in Zen temples, and is a place of continuing practice. As with the zendo it is a place of reverence in which to compose yourself in peace and settledness and deepen your search for your very origins.

So great burning determination arose in him and he entered the bathing room and shut the door behind him. Sitting down he straightened his spine, clenched his fists, opened his eyes wide, and began doing zazen with great determination. Illusory thoughts flew thick and fast through his mind. The obstructions of the demon realm rose up to confuse him. But because he threw himself body and soul into the great Dharma battle, he finally severed life at the roots and entered into the formless realm of deep samadhi. At first light, hearing the sparrows chirping around outside the building, he felt that his body had completely disappeared. Suddenly he saw his eyeballs pop from their sockets and fall to the ground. He felt the pain of his fingernails gouging into the palms of his hands and realized that his eyes were back in their proper place. He rose from his cushion and

began to walk about. He continued to practice in the same manner for three nights. On the third night, when day-break came and he got up to wash his face. He noticed the trees in the garden were now somehow totally different. He consulted a priest in a nearby temple about it, but the priest was unable to provide any answers. He then decided to come by and see me. He set out for Shoin-ji in palanquin.

That's how people of wealth traveled in those days. A palanquin is a carrying chair; it is hoisted up and transported by four strong men. They even run with it if it needs to be moved speedily. Because Heshiro was wealthy this was his mode of transportation. In order to get to Ohara where Shoin-ji was they had to go over a mountain pass; at the top of the pass, Heshiro paused the travel to allow the men to recoup from the climb and from there, the view was apparently quite spectacular.

Upon reaching the high pass at Sata the splendid prospect of the ocean at Koura came into view far below. At that instant he knew beyond any doubt that what he had grasped was the truth that plants and trees and the great earth, all attain Buddhahood.

Proceeding to my temple he passed through the fires of my forge and subsequently penetrated a number of koan barriers.

"Pass through the fires of my forge" meant he came to sanzen. There is a saying from the Zenrin-kushu, the collection of sayings—combination of fragments of Chinese poetry as well the comments and expressions of historic Zen masters.

"How can pure gold be realized without going again and again through the Masters' Forge?" This is another quote from that collection. The true gold, of course, is our realization, our understanding of the deep profound truth of reality. That profound truth, when deeply enough realized, is incalculably freeing.

Proceeding to my temple he passed

through the fires of my forge and subsequently penetrated a number of koan barriers. He was an ordinary man with no prior knowledge of Zen practice whatsoever. Yet in just two or three short nights he achieved a realization, The great victory he gained in the struggle against illusory thought was the result of great determination and single-minded resolve.

It wasn't the result of striving, driving, or fixation. It was the result of knowing that he had to find some resolution to the deep angst that had struck him when he watched the waterfall and wouldn't let go of him. It was the awareness of his advanced age and the recognition that he might not have long in which to find that resolution that gave him the courage to face whatever he had to face in the process of opening to that liberating truth, and that's why he was able to do it in such a short time despite the fact that he had no prior knowledge of zazen. It is the same for us. What makes the difference in our practice is our level of determination and commitment, not the force with which we practice but the level of determination, the need to know, the recognition that this is the only way that we can ultimately become free, that not to open to this deep truth is to spin around endlessly in the world of samsara, pain and suffering: periods of happiness followed by pain and suffering, periods of happiness followed by pain and suffering, endlessly, unless we choose to get off that track.

Here we are in day five of sesshin. Bring forth even greater determination to open to this profound liberating truth. Determination, faith that you can realize it, and commitment to open to this complexity that is the source of our need to know: if this is deep enough it won't take long. But again be warned that we are going through a lot of challenging mind states along the way. In order to become truly free we need to see where we are caught, recognize it, comprehend it (which is more than simply recognizing it), see through it, and let it go. Through that "straightforward bravery," as Hakuin would say, we gain a measure of freedom. But given that we have lifetimes of conditioning, of assumptions, of judgments, of ideas—particularly ideas of who we assume are—it is not normally instantaneous, and even if, like this man, it only takes three days and nights to have an initial kensho experience there's

further and deeper awakening that we must undergo in order to truly be free. A single kensho, while it may feel great at the time and give us some space in our lives, if we stop there it is an enormous loss.

The great victory he gained in the struggle against illusory thought was the result of courageous determination and single-minded resolve. How can you, full-fledged Zen monks, fail to generate this same fearsome, dauntless spirit.

That is Hakuin on the fifth night of Rohatsu sesshin at Shoin-ji in Japan, and Shoin-ji still exists. Not only does it still exist, but people still sit zazen there and the guiding spirit is that of Kannon, of compassion. It is possible to go and visit and sit zazen in that very same zendo where Hakuin himself sat; it is an incredibly powerful zendo. So is this one you are sitting in right now.

Now we will continue sharing the letters of Dahui—Dahui Zonggao, the Chinese Chan master of the 11th century. This reading is from *The Letters of Dahui, Part Two*.

This is chapter 28, Dahui's letter to Shayong Xi also named Zi Wang.

Thank you for your letter, you wrote, quote,

'If our paths accord we may be as apart as heaven and earth but it is as though we are together; if our intentions differ, we may be standing face to face, but it is as though we are as far away as Chu and Yue.'

Chu and Yue were ancient provinces in China that were quite far distant from each other. Here, Zi Wang is expressing a deep truth: Mind knows no barriers. We can box it in by erecting ideas about ourselves and things, by judgments and assumptions, but Mind is infinite. When people are open in mind, truly open, truly let go enough, communication is as close as if they were standing next to each other. But, again, of course, as he says, when two people are not of that same openness, then they can be standing together and still, misunderstanding and miscommunication will be rampant.

This Zi Wang has deep understanding.

How apt these words are. This is truly a mystery inexpressible in words. Even before you conceived of writing to me and dusted off your paper, you already presented it to me with both hands. Why need you wait until you attained this state of fortitude, or stage of ultimate, before meeting me

These last mentioned—the state of fortitude, the stage of ultimate—are seen as stages along the bodhisattva path; they are nothing we need to be concerned about.

There is a koan that reads something like this: When the horses in such and such a province eat grain, the stomachs of the cows in another province far away are full. It expresses the same understanding as Zi Wang is expressing. It is a koan, but you're not going to pass it by talking about it like that.

The truth of the matter is mutually understood by all enlightened beings without a single word being said, but with deluded people, it cannot be discussed. Yaoping is one of the most pleasant areas in the province of Ming.

Apparently, this man is from Yaoping.

If you skillfully regulate your own mind and are not controlled by the workings of adverse circumstances, you are truly a liberated person.

“If you skillfully regulate your own mind and are not controlled by the workings of adverse circumstances.” How many of us can respond freely to changes of schedule, to sudden things interrupting our life? And yet, when we are truly free, these are not a problem: We are able to turn on a dime and respond, instantly, to whatever the new circumstances are. But if we are fixed on an idea of what we think we need and who we think we are, it's like wearing a straitjacket and trying to play the piano in spite of it. A straitjacket, if you've ever seen one, is a jacket with extremely long sleeves such that a person's arms are crossed in front of

them, and the sleeves are then wrapped around to the back and attached there, so your arms and hands are immovable. You can't do a thing with your hands. It is a way of containing unruly mental health patients. I don't believe they're still used anymore, but at one point when we were living in Burma, where things were anything but regular, right after General Ne Win had taken over. Foreigners stationed there in the Diplomatic Corps, some of them were accustomed to much fancier places to live with far more elegant environs and plenty of luxury amenities. Conditions in Rangoon and in Burma (now known as the traditional name of the country, Myanmar) in general were deteriorating rapidly. People were fleeing the country, garbage was collecting in the streets, and onions were rotting in the northern part of the country because the transportation system was so in disarray that they couldn't be shipped to the south where there were none. Conditions became so bad in the streets that the garbage collectors—who were Indians of the Untouchable caste—were made honorary citizens of Burma so they could remain and continue the work of making sure the garbage was kept moving through the often open sewers. When you couple those and other worsening conditions with the very long annual monsoon—it rained steadily on and off all day so everyone always carried an umbrella with them. You could never come in and get dry. Black mold grew on everything including the cows and the outsides of buildings, and you had to iron your clothes to get them to dry enough to reasonably comfortably wear. This is not what people who had been posted to Paris or Bonn or London expected to have to deal with, and one man at the Embassy—he was the head of = the Administrative Sections at the Embassy—eventually cracked and had to be escorted home in a straitjacket. This was a man who, before that, we had traveled with, at the time we were living in Mandalay and far away from Rangoon's extreme rainy season. Mandalay was quite, quite, quite hot, 110 or 115° every day, day and night, until the trade winds shifted, at which time suddenly it plunged down to 40°. This was quite a shock the first year of our time there, especially since we had no warm clothing nor was there any to buy. It was unexpected, but to be in the Foreign Service is to know that you will not have an ordinary, expectable life. We traveled with this man and his wife to the Shan State. Burma is a group of states as the United States is. It's the Union of Burma, and the ethnic Burmans live in the low

lands of the central area, surrounded by mountains in which live many different ethnic groups. The Shan are one of the major ethnic groups. Within the Shan state there were many other subgroups, all with fascinating and colorful dress. It was a wonderful experience to visit there. This time when we journeyed to the Shan State and its capital city, Taungyi, and it was as usual quite interesting. There was a very colorful market, and this visit we discovered that an enterprising man had established a little hotel. It had real furniture and even served a breakfast of eggs and toast! But our friend from the Embassy couldn't be satisfied until he had catsup to put on his eggs. Here we are in the remote mountains of Southeast Asia and there was catsup. It was too much for him; he couldn't adjust.

This is a rather major example of the condition of many people these days. In particular, we are fixed on ideas of what we think we need and when we don't get those needs met there is a great deal of anguish and anger, pain and suffering. These fixed ideas of what we need are just that, just ideas. And the most fixed idea, the most difficult, and the most confining, is that of a self-image. This idea that we are this person that has particular qualities, a particular history, and because of the history of fears and joys and assumptions about our power, about our role in life, about our status in society, and all the rest, is our prison. To come to awakening is to allow ourselves to see through these ideas into the profound truth of who we really are. Because those ideas, that self image, is composed of stories; it's conditioning. That self image is not real.

So if they are not real, then who are we? This is the source of our perplexity and the source of the Great Doubt that is so vital a prerequisite to awakening. This perplexity may come in different formats for different people. For myself it was one of, even as a child, having a sense that there was something beyond what I could grasp with my mind at the time. It was important to return to, to live from once more. For other people it may be "Why is there pain and suffering in this world?" There are lots of different wordings to this really wordless perplexity. It is the source of why we are sitting here together in this little zendo in northern New Mexico on this fifth day of sesshin. And this perplexity has great power to liberate us! This is what we do with practice. Our fundamental Rinzai practice is the extended out

breath called *susok'kan* in which we simply tune in to the bodily experience of breathing out and bring that breath further out at the bottom instead of breathing back in right away.

Over and over again we do this when we are seated on the cushion. What this powerful practice does is require us to drop everything else in our mind in order to focus on the bodily experience and extend that breath far out, and over time our focus gets honed, sharpened. At the same time there is an expansion of awareness, which is also very, very important. An important aspect of this practice of *susok'kan*, of course, is that in extending the out breath we have to let other things go, and so we begin to train ourselves in letting go. Letting go gradually becomes easier a result of the practice on the cushion and the result is we are not quite as readily caught on things in our daily life. Furthermore, it develops presence and focus.

Now there is a further dimension to this practice and that is that as we are extending the out breath we are reaching through that out breath, propelled by whatever this fundamental, wordless perplexity is, stretching to understand that perplexity, to reach that Source, to find out who we really are. This practice is necessarily wordless, which is why we cannot think our way to a solution. There's a disconnect between words and the reality. Words are a tool; they're not the reality.

So when you do this practice on the cushion you're doing what has just been described. When you're off the cushion, you allow that perplexity do run underground but keep the awareness expanding as you focus fully on what you are doing in any given moment. You let go of extending the out breath, because, if you're in the midst of activity, it's not going to work; you're dividing yourself if you try to do so, and it's going to produce a major barrier to your for being aware and truly focusing on whatever your task of the moment is.

Awareness is vital. There was a great Chinese Zen master who was asked by a student, "If there is one word that defines practice, what is this most important word?" He picked up his brush and wrote the character for attention. The monk said, "Okay, what else?" And again, the master wrote the word for attention. The monk said, "What you you mean, "attention"? What do you mean by attention?" The

master said, "Attention means attention."

When we pay utter attention to whatever we are doing, the awareness is there. We are doing whatever we are doing without the barrier of ideas or thoughts about it. There is just the bare awareness of doing whatever is being done. There is nobody doing it. This is a vital aspect of practice in activity. The two—susok'kan on the cushion and total awareness in activity (with an occasional peek through of that perplexity)—combined will bring you to awakening.

As you are extending the out breath, if you've got a history of some kind of trauma, some aspect of feeling will eventually come up. It may simply be a feeling of being blocked, like there is a great massive boulder somewhere stuck in your chest so you can't get that breath to really extend out. If something like that takes place then it's important to tune in to the energy of that mythical boulder and stay present with that body sense of that energy. When you are present sufficiently you will be able, right in the midst of that, to extend the out breath far, far out, and you will sink deeply into that search. It's as if the boulder simply dissolves. However, if you've got some seriously traumatic history, it's important also to work with a therapist who understands trauma and has a personal history of ongoing meditation. Therapy and zazen combined can be incredibly effective in achieving liberation.

So continuing with Dahui's letter:

If you skillfully regulate your own mind and are not controlled by the workings of adverse circumstances, then you are truly a liberated person. Such people themselves control the workings of circumstances around them and are vigorous and lively throughout the day.

This sounds a little odd, but when you don't need to exert control according to your ideas of how things ought to be, what goes on in your life, and when instead you flow with unfolding circumstances with awareness and clarity, then your innate wisdom can come forth. Then flexibility is there and you are able to respond to circumstances rather than to react to them. As you do that it influences everything around you, people and things.

An example of this, as you've heard before, took place when Harada Roshi was a monk in training. He was a senior monk, one of four head monks at Shofuku-ji Monastery in Kobe, Japan. One day he led a work detail outside the inner gate of the temple to an area that was still on temple grounds. At the time there was a group of homeless people—and yes, there are homeless people in Japan—who were living on outer areas of the temple grounds, not within the practice areas, but in the outer grounds. They seemed to have felt that somehow the temple was cheating them out of water. The leader of these people was someone who was described to me as "appearing to be no stranger to violence." This homeless leader came and stuck his irate face right into the face of Harada Roshi and started screaming at him, furious about this issue with the water. Harada Roshi just got more and more quiet inside, offering his full attention to the man. He didn't mentally check out, and he didn't leave. He was there fully present with that infuriated human being. The situation appeared dangerous enough that the person who told me about it said he hung on to his shovel just in case he needed to whack the guy if he took a swing at Harada.

What happened? Harada Roshi's simply quieting down inwardly and yet staying fully present and listening to this man, affected the man himself. His fury began to de-escalate and quiet down; eventually they were able to talk quietly and the man went away. All this took place in the way it did simply because Harada Roshi was free enough to be able to simply be present with this man's rage and not be pulled around by it.

If you skillfully regulate your own mind and are not controlled by the workings of adverse circumstances, then you are truly a liberated person. Such people themselves control the workings of the circumstances around them and are vigorous and lively throughout the day. They can be neither confined nor provoked. Should you attain a direct understanding of this, then everything that obstructs you will quite naturally disappear.

This is one of the byproducts of having a deep enough awakening experiences or series of awak-

ening experiences.

An ancient master said, 'The Buddha preached the various teachings to liberate all minds. In me there is no trace of mind so what use have I of any teachings.'

Longron said, 'When the mind functions without tension, there is no tension and no mind. Roundabout talk labors under names and forms. Straight talk has no encumbrances. When functioning at ease and no mind, one's function is at ease and no mind for however long one functions. The no mind I speak of is no different than Mind. This state of mind applies to Longron but to you and to me as well. These contents cannot be taken hold of and shown to others. This is what I meant when I wrote that quote 'Without a single word being said, it is mutually understood.'

This is deep teaching! May inspire you to enter a deep stage of letting go yourself—and not to stop there but to continue dropping deeply within, searching for what it is, that perplexity, or I should say what created that perplexity that brought you to practice to begin with. We have a few more days in sesshin. The final night, we will sit all night. We'll sit formally, at least, for some hours after the end of what is normally the formal sitting schedule other nights. Don't let up in your work. On the zendo door there's a plaque that was written in kanji by Harada Shodo Roshi. It reads, "*Great effort without fail will bring about great light.*"

Great effort without fail will bring about great light. And that great effort is not a tooth grating, fingernails digging into palms type of effort. It is a profound sinking deep within, utterly quiet, on and on and on, deeper and deeper and deeper. As Hakuin would say, "If you practice like this you cannot fail to come to awakening anymore than you can touch the ground when you reach down at your feet."

Thank you for listening. We will stop now and recite the four vows.



From a Term Intensive student:

Day 12 was a gigantic whirlwind with phone calls coming in at 11:30 pm the night before and fires to put out right at 5:30 am and through the entire day. I had no time to do zazen that day - a sprint and filled with intensity. But I did the breaths and sutra and found pockets to re-center which helped.

Day 13 completed with zazen and breaths and thankfully much less intensity.

Day 14 (today) another whirlwind of craziness but zazen will be complete before I go to bed.

The advice of going straight into the dragon's den is helping immensely as my body opens to new—or old rather—sensations that I have been 'protecting' myself from for years. Allowing those feelings to be a natural part of my breathing and my life...

Roshi's response:

When you have those days of hyper-intensity where all you can do is a breath or two but no traditional zazen, your practice is to become absolutely One with the moment just-as-it-is—i.e., total focus, total presence (including with whatever especially funky sensations are rumbling through your body/mind). When this is done properly there is no one doing it, just the phone call being responded to, the fires being put out from that place of total presence. It becomes exhilarating and no problem at all despite the incredibly long hours and the intensity of it.

Thanks Mitra Roshi Days 8-10 (Friday to Sunday) complete and day 11 (Monday) almost complete.

The days have been very busy and somewhat overwhelming but your advice to go directly into the painful uncomfortable scary feelings have been useful. I've been doing just that as I've confronted the challenges that the days brought.

As I do that it feels as though frozen spots in my head melt just a little bit.

On to bed and another day tomorrow!



Calendar

January 3-10 7-Day Sesshin at Mountain Gate. Deadline for applications is December 31, 2017

January 12-14 Weekend sesshin led by Sozui-sensei

January 21 Zazenkai in Albuquerque NM; for details and to reserve a place, please email monkzenshin@gmail.com

February 4 Sangha Work Day

February 16-21 5-Day Sesshin; deadline for applications is February 9. *If you intend to apply for this sesshin you MUST have your application submitted by that date in order to be considered.*

February 26-March 5 7-Day Sesshin at Mountain Gate; application deadline: Feb 12

March 4 All-Day Sitting led by Sozui-sensei

March 9-16 7-Day Sesshin at Turtleback Zendo; application deadline is March 1.

March 9 Monk ordination of Serita Scott at Turtleback Zendo. Family and friends as well as Sangha members are invited to attend. This will take place the opening night of sesshin, an optimal time for such a practice-affirming event. For more about ordination, please see the July-August 2017 Oak Tree in the Garden.

Vesak [Buddha's Birthday] Ceremonies:

Friday evening, **March 30, Temple Night**
Saturday, **March 31, Buddha's Birthday Ceremonies** followed by **Communal Meal with Sangha, Families and Friends.**

Sunday, April 1, Mitra-roshi will give teisho during the regular Sunday morning sitting. Mitra-roshi expects to be at HVZC March 27 to April 3. More information will be forthcoming closer to the time.

April 8 Benefit Concert for HVZC by

international concert pianist Peter Gach

April 13-15 Weekend Sesshin, deadline for signing up is April 10

April 11-18 7-Day Sesshin at Mountain Gate; deadline for applications is April 10.

April 28 - All-Day Sitting led by Sozui-sensei

May 6 - All-Day Sitting led by Sozui-sensei

Please NOTE: There will also be as yet unscheduled Zazenkai [All-Day Sittings] at Mountain Gate in the coming months.

May 30 - June 3 Regaining Balance Retreat for Women Veterans with PTSD; this is a special retreat—free and nonsectarian—for women veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress. For more information: www.RegainingBalance.org

June 8-15 7-Day Sesshin; deadline for applications is June 3. This is the only 7-day sesshin held at HVZC this year.

June 2 - July 1 Regaining Balance Retreat for Women Veterans with PTSD; this is a special retreat—free and nonsectarian—for women veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress. For more information: www.RegainingBalance.org

July 10-17 7-Day Sesshin at Mountain Gate; application deadline is July 3.

August 3-5 Regaining Balance Retreat for Wives and Female Partners of Veterans with PTSD; like the Regaining Balance Retreats for Women Veterans with PTSD this is a special retreat—also free and nonsectarian.

September 26-30 Regaining Balance Retreat for Women Veterans with PTSD; this is a special retreat—free and nonsectarian—for women veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress. For more information: www.RegainingBalance.org

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