



The Oak Tree in the Garden

Journal of the Hidden Valley Zen Center

A Memorial Term Intensive

I don't remember when I first read about Fugen's death. It probably was before Christmas, a busy time and the busyness continued. On January 4th my niece married. The house was filled with family for almost two weeks. When all the dust settled I sat down and read **Oak Tree in the Garden** more intently and found myself thinking of Fugen. We had never met in person, but in the spring of 2010 we both did personal term intensives at the same time. Roshi thought it might be a good idea for the two of us to support each other through emails, which we did. That was the only term intensive I ever did. I was impressed when I read that Fugen had completed many of them. My own practice had become lackadaisical and more and more absent from my daily routine. I could explain the events that led up to this happening, but it doesn't really matter. What mattered was I knew that I needed something to kick start my practice.

The idea came to me to do the term intensive that Fugen had planned to do before he died, dedicating the merit to him; he had a fatal heart attack just three days before he was going to begin that term intensive. Roshi was all for it and so I came up with a set of activities which included morning zazen, *metta* meditation, exercise, and on weekends listening to teishos. I pledged to do this for a month.

There is something about pledging to do something. Many times I didn't want to complete all the practices or didn't want to get up to do zazen in the morning, but knowing that Roshi wanted me to email her every day, enabled me to push through the tiredness and the voices

in my head which argued about completing the practice in question. How could I say I was tired or that I just didn't feel like it when I had pledged to do something? Quite a few times I fell asleep sitting upright in a chair while doing *metta* practice or while listening to a teisho. Often, I would go back and play the teisho again later or start over with the *metta*.

I realized early on in the intensive that the mind was multitasking during zazen. It required real effort to try to focus wholly on the breath. When I told Roshi about this she wrote, "EXCELLENT! Noticing that is a vital first step to changing that habit pattern...you're working to change what for pretty much everyone is a longstanding habit pattern. But habit patterns can be changed!!!! Making an effort and setting an intention to stay as focused as possible in your zazen at the very beginning of each round of sitting is a big help; the rest of the work is to notice when you're multi-tasking or not paying total attention and re-focus on your practice." The habit pattern hasn't been changed, but there were some rounds where the mind wasn't hopping quite so much. But towards the end of the month I was able to write her this: "These are some of the benefits I feel that I have gained so far.

"1. I am getting back to a more disciplined schedule of practice like I used to have before I started physically falling apart.

"2. I am seeing more of the places where I am stuck.

"3. I am beginning to feel the slight glimmer of desire to go deeper. I would add more to that but I don't have the words, at least, not yet."

And on Day 22 I was able to write this: “ I accomplished everything. It turned out to be a beautiful day, a little windy but sunny and warm enough that in my sherpa-lined coat, I could sit outside and do *metta* meditation and then take a nap! It was wonderful! The birds were singing. The sun felt so good to my bones.”

There is no question that this was the shot in the arm my practice needed. I am in the process of moving, but once I get settled, I plan on doing another term intensive. Thank you, Roshi for all of your support and thank you, Fugen for your inspiration!



Post-Sesshin Challenge— an Earnest Question

Being a bit of a newcomer to Zen practice, I was overcome with relief at the clarity that I felt upon my return from a recent sesshin atop the beautiful mountains at Mountain Gate. I found that even though I had come down from those mountains to face the most painful and difficult decisions of my life, somehow a deep sense of peace and clarity prevailed amidst the pain in my heart. As I went through the next weeks however, I felt this peace and clarity slowly slip away, and found that I was clinging to it with somewhat of a maddening relentlessness. Despite my determination to practice regularly I have felt caught again in the emotions and have had a very difficult time focusing. I wonder why I seem to have regressed so? Where has the clarity gone? Is my practice now somehow just not good enough?

What you've experienced is something everyone who persists in practice will eventually experience. You opened a bit to a more let-go, more free mind state--our inborn natural state of mind--sooner than many people do. That's a credit to your commitment to practice and the hard work you've been doing in it! Keep up that great work and you'll be able to be live from that mind of clarity more and more--and eventually 100% of the time! That clarity has not disappeared; it's only that the

habit patterns of mind have temporarily obscured it. And though it can be maddening to watch helplessly as a clear mind state begins to float away, if we tune in to the anxiety at its seeming demise it's amazing what can happen next! What holds us away from that clear mind state is our conditioning and our assumptions, habit patterns of mind, and practice gets challenging when we bump into those. The wonderful news is that, as someone I know said long ago, “This practice is truly bodhisattvic! First it shows us where we're caught--and then it sets us free!” It's the “showing us where we're caught” that's not much fun, but becoming free can't happen without it. Keep going! Your practice IS working! Warmly, Mitra-roshi



The Nature of Practice

I noticed this morning that as I did zazen, I was able to keep concentrating on one level and on another I was thinking and planning. I realized that this wasn't putting myself wholly into the breath and would then try to do so, but it was very difficult going.

Indeed, it is difficult going—at first. That you noticed this morning that you were able to keep concentrating on one level but on another level you were thinking and planning, is an important observation! Without these “ouch!” experiences we'd be flying blind in trying to do the work of what Torei Enji—Hakuin's premier Dharma successor—called “The Long Maturation.” This “Long Maturation” is an essential part of Zen practice; no awakening is complete without that extended work of working to change the habit patterns of body, speech and mind that express anything but enlightened behavior. And the good news is that that work of the Long Maturation doesn't require kensho as a prerequisite; it can begin before any kensho is experienced, and being the LONG Maturation, continues long afterwards.

The point is to persist, persist, persist. Don't try to avoid seeing these crusty habit patterns, for they are what keep us trapped. And seeing them, acknowledging them, diving back into the

practice with even greater awareness, is a vital part of effective Zen practice. Knowing now that such a habit pattern exists, it's important to stay vigilant so that when it begins to arise again we can choose not to indulge in it, as tempting as that may have been in the past. The up side of the "ouch" experience is that when it does begin to re-emerge it is easy to choose not to engage in the behavior; it's as if an inner meter flashes red and warns, "I don't want to do it! I don't want to behave like this any more. It just doesn't feel right!"

But being habitual the way we allow distraction to fill our mind, and the fact that zazen tends to bring awareness into high relief, dealing with the "clouds" that obscure the clear sky of our awakened mind can seem especially challenging. Being habit-driven, however, means we're not locked into that way of using our mind; habit can be changed—by persistently bringing our mind back to the practice, back to the practice, back to the practice, back to the practice... And it is so worth it!!!



Ongoing Practice

As we age we encounter more and more opportunities to face the inevitable—that there will be an end to this life as we know it, that we will die. This can become a challenge but fulfilling addition to our regular Zen practice if we learn to use it as such...

My friend of more than 40 years, Linda Stafford moved in to the lower level of my house a month after Allen died. In earlier years when our children were young, Allen and I had named Linda guardian of our children in the event that anything happened to Allen and me at the same time. My wonderful dog, Stanley, stayed by my side all the time after Allen died, and I constantly felt Allen's presence. It was the Allen without dementia and without any baggage. It was comforting to know that I never altogether lost him. Then earlier this year Stanley began to get sick and nearly died three times. Linda was with him while I was at work and managed to bring him around each

time. For reason's I cannot explain, I knew he was waiting for the anniversary of Allen's death to die which he did. As Stanley was declining so did the presence of Allen decline. When Stanley died, Allen seemed to leave me altogether. He is still with me now but not as strongly as when Stanley was alive. I am grateful to Stanley that he held on for a year and helped me have a peaceful acceptance of Allen's passing and a knowledge of Allen's continued presence. Linda had a strong role in comforting Stanley while he was dying, a role she very much wanted. It seems now that she was preparing herself for what was to come next. Below is most of a post I recently made on Facebook.

I have been away from Facebook and most other parts of my life for months. My friend of 40 years moved into the lower level of my house a month after my husband died. She became very ill in July and was diagnosed with advanced, late stage cancer. I was completely involved with managing her care until she died a little more than a month ago. I have been trying to deal with the loss and the ever present images of her suffering and fear. First my husband, Allen, died, then my cousin George died, then my wonderful dog died on the anniversary of Allen's death, then cousin George's eldest son died, then Linda died. I can't seem to complete the grieving of the most recent death until the next one kicks in. Little by little, ordinary routines are coming back and I hope to be more connected with the rest of the world starting now.

There is a beautiful side to this past year that happened independently of and then mingled in with all the experiences of loss and grief and now seem to be balancing everything out with harmony and equanimity. The year started by flying to Idaho to my cousin's funeral. Although I was sad about George's passing, I enjoyed connection with my cousins who were George's brothers, and with George's family, all cousins I met for the first time and want to continue to know for the rest of my life. In June, I went to sesshin, meditation retreat, in the northern mountains of NM. The experiences

at sesshin set in motion a continuous learning over the next few months that changed the whole perspective of my life. This was helped along by a visit from my cousin John and his wife Gloria a couple of months later. I was able first to actually look at erroneous beliefs about myself, see that they were not true, and then completely shed the erroneous beliefs. Since then, I have been feeling balanced, clear, whole, and unafraid.



Dharma Talk by Sozui-sensei

The last few Sunday Dharma Talks at HVZC were on **Master Boshan's** (*Hakusan's*, 1575-1630) **Exhortations for Those Who Don't Arouse the Doubt**, translated into English by Jeff Shore at Hanazono University in Kyoto, Japan.

In the introductory section of his text Boshan states:

In Zen practice, the essential point is to arouse Doubt. What is this Doubt? For example, when you are born, where do you come from? You cannot help but remain in doubt about this. When you die, where do you go? Again, you cannot help but remain in doubt. Since you cannot pierce this barrier of life-and-death, suddenly the Doubt will coalesce right before your eyes. Try to put it down, you cannot; try to push it away, you cannot. Eventually this Doubt Block will be broken through and you'll realize what a worthless notion is life-and-death – ha! As the old worthies said:

*“Great Doubt, Great Awakening;
small doubt, small awakening.”*

What is this Great Doubt? What is being referred to here is not our everyday worries, anxiety, lack of trust, skepticism or hesitant attitude. Rather it is an intense wonder, a curiosity that OPENS us. At the base of it lies Great TRUST. There is a book titled **The Faith to Doubt**. It

does take faith and a certain degree of centeredness and inner silence to begin to turn towards and tune into the deeper questions that we so often run away from or cover over with all kinds of activities, superficial questions and distractions. Fundamental Trust allows us to face these Fundamental Questions—Questions that we are reminded of when a loved one dies, when things seem to fall apart. Questions like: What is life really about? Who am I really? When we are born, where do we come from? When we die where do we go? The sense of not being able to really feel at home, at peace. So where IS that deepest home, that true peace? Questions that we may not even be able to put into words but we sense there is something deeper there. There IS something we cannot quite get hold of but sometimes touched upon in the wonder at nature, at a new life being born, at losing ourselves in the sunset, being in love, the view from atop a mountain we've just climbed. What is happening at those moments? Isn't there a way to live this wonder, this freshness and openness all the time?

One wonders how we can NOT ask those deeper questions, how we manage to avoid them. Once we open up to those deeper questions, to what really matters, what really touches us, our usual distractions lose their flavor and are seen for what they are: a temporary lull, glossing over our discomfort. Boshan is telling us to stop avoiding these questions and instead face them squarely and dive into them.

We do that by first allowing our mind to settle, become quiet, centered and concentrated. Otherwise looking at those fundamental questions with our usual everyday consciousness and intellectualization will likely lead into further confusion, and the kind of unwholesome doubt which is warned against in traditional meditation manuals.

Do you have the patience to wait till your mind settles and the water is clear? Can you remain unmoving till the right action arises by itself?

– Tao Te Ching

Whether working on a traditional koan or trying to resolve our own burning question (koans always were actual living burning questions for the people who asked them at that original time and place) it is essential to first get out of our head. Best for this is the practice of *susok'kan*, gently and slowly extending the out-breath, all the way down until the belly becomes flat, then allowing the inhalation to come naturally. Actually feeling the physical sensations while we exhale more and more deeply, we open up more and more, relaxing and releasing all unnecessary tension. Having received the basic instructions, if we pay attention, then our body tells us the fine points of what posture is best for doing this and where we are holding, thus creating unnecessary tension. All we need to do is listen carefully and make subtle adjustments that allow us to relax more and more deeply into the exhalation.

It is vital to always practice where we are actually at, not where we would like to be, think we ought to be etc. Then practice will go smoothly. Once you feel settled and your focus is stable, you can gently tune into your question, again feeling into it with your WHOLE BEING, rather than thinking ABOUT it. Digging into it with the extended out-breath, refusing to go back up into your head, where, as you already know from your own experience, those fundamental questions cannot possibly be solved, digging into it patiently and persistently focusing all your energy until you become the question, the doubt completely. When this is done completely, with nothing left to hold onto, nothing extra, then you will realize what in fact has always been there, what we really ARE. We just were not able to see it and live it due to layers and layers of conditioning. As you are already aware, it is those layers of conditioning through which we create our own pain and suffering. But right underneath, when these are seen through, seen for what they are, is where true freedom lies.

*The real voyage of discovery consists
not in seeking new landscapes, but in
having new eyes.*

--Marcel Proust.

Be careful! This does not mean that we should try to eliminate thought, suppress all emotions. What it means is to not get carried away by them.

There are certain obstacles and misperceptions that we may encounter on the way, especially as long as our fundamental doubt, what really matters, what really touches us, is avoided or not correctly focused. Here **Boshan's Exhortations for Those Who Don't Arouse the Doubt** are extremely helpful. They are helping us to breathe true life into our practice, so it can really work for us in our lives. Some of his warnings may not apply to you at this point in time, but you will likely run into them at some point in your practice. The first four address the most common obstacles.

1. The Disease of Intellect

If you're unable to arouse the Doubt when practicing Zen, you may seek intellectual understanding through the written word. Stringing together with a single thread the various phrases and teachings of Buddhas and Patriarchs, you stamp them all with one seal. If a koan is brought up, you are quick to give your interpretation. Unable to arouse your own Doubt concerning the koan, you don't like it when someone probes you with serious questions. All this is simply your wavering mind; it is not Zen. You may respond at once to questions by raising a finger or showing a fist. Taking up ink brush you promptly pen a verse to show off, hoping to guide unwitting students to your level. Fascinated with all this, you refer to it as the gate of enlightenment. You don't realize that such karmic consciousness is precisely what prevents this Doubt from arising. If only you would straight off see the error of your ways, then you should once and for all let go of all and seek out a good teacher or Dharma friend to help you find an entrance. If not, your wavering mind will prevail, you'll become as if

demon-possessed, and release will be very difficult.

Boshan does NOT say that we should not read at all. Many famous Zen Masters started out as scholars, but they were honest enough to realize the limits of intellectual pursuits. They did not deceive themselves. Do WE? How easily does study turn into empty entertainment, seemingly interesting perhaps for the moment, but in fact it does not truly touch us, let alone inspire true transformation. How easily do we allow ourselves to get drawn into intellectualization, even on the cushion, which keeps the raw actuality of direct experience at a distance and fails to inspire true transformation?

Apparently in “the good old days” people were facing the same difficulties. Zen Master Rinzai states:

“Followers of the Way, you size upon words from the mouths of those old masters, and take them to be the true Way. You think, these good teachers are wonderful, and I, simple-minded fellow that I am, don’t dare measure such old worthies.” Blind idiots! You go through your entire life holding such views, betraying your own two eyes.”

...“As I see it there are none who are not of the utmost profundity, none who are not emancipated.”

*--The Record of Linji,
edited by Thomas Yuho Kirchner*

Ultimately we lack nothing at all. But we do feel disease, pain and suffering. Trying to get away from our discomfort instead of feeling it and allowing it release, we avoid it by intellectualization, separating ourselves from what IS.

In Teisho (day 7 March 06 MG) Mitra Roshi is quoting from: **Roaring Silence, Discovering the Mind of Dzogchen**, by Nagpa Chogyam and Kandro Dechen:

“Intellect itself needs to taste the method in which it functions as a method of obscuring the nature of mind.”

Roshi goes on to say,

Initially in our practice we are so involved with just simply trying to get the basics of the practice down, how to sit upright, what to do with our mind and the process of harnessing our minds, until we have some reasonable control over it in terms of the meditation practice. And then we need to open to a further place. It is easy to assume from things that are said that the intellect is something to be gotten rid of. But rather the intellect is of extremely limited use. It can be very creative, it can be very helpful, it would be awkward in this day and age to be without it. It can be brought into very useful work in seeing the nature of it’s obscuring of our True Nature.

“We merely need to allow an unlearning process to inaugurate itself, a process in which habits of compulsive attachment to conditioned patterns of intellect start to become transparent. The reach and range of reasoning mind is quite small and although it is capable of remarkable feats it cannot give us access to all the answers....”

E.g in case of emotional pain:

*“Thinking of emotional pain invariably generates thoughts that run circles around themselves, generating more thoughts. Thinking about emotionally painful experiences seems only to make matters worse. It never appears to bring us nearer to an understanding of what we are individually experiencing. Thinking about pain merrily constitutes thinking around it. That is to say, thinking about the circumstances that surround the pain. Apart from certain psychotherapeutic context people seldom think about pain itself. The reason for that is that if we were to think about pain itself we would unavoidably enter the language of pain. **Thought is not capable of***

bringing us to an understanding of the fundamental texture of pain. We can only investigate pain with a nonconceptual observation of meditation. Thoughts merely create a barrier, as if “pain” and the “experiencer of pain” were separate.”

*What really is going on in our mind? If we take a look, we see how we get sucked into mind states, - habitually allowing ourselves to get sucked into mind states. We see how those mind states shift with the changing weather, just like the weather outdoors. So where was the reality of that mind state a few minutes ago when we were absolutely sure it was this particular way? Where is that particular way now? And what is going on in **this** very moment at this point in time?*

In genuine practice the intellect is brought into service to comprehend how it creates delusion, how it creates pain and suffering. We look at a situation and immediately there is a thought: I like it, I don't like it; it's good, it's bad; it's euphoric, it's boring; it's painful, it's nice. And out of that comes a frame through which we perceive. We're trying to freeze this mind which has no abiding place; it's impossible to freeze this mind. And so as soon as we freeze something and try to hang onto it, or try to get rid of it, we've launched ourselves into the realm of illusion. To return to the pure awareness, to see where we are caught, to feel, to taste, to know the texture of that framing which is such a habitual pattern. And to recognize it as it begins to come forth the next time and to choose not to continue that coming forth, but rather to stand naked and vulnerable instead. This is how we work with it. This is the path towards freedom.

It is within the realm of each one of us to go there, daring and courageous, persistent and determined. This is

how we need to be in order to reach that place of becoming that pure gold that is our True Being. Only then can we experience the incredible joy and freedom that comes from having LET GO, from NOT needing to be somebody any more. From letting “the old man” die and not to replace it with somebody else, but rather to know intimately the mind that abides nowhere.

When neither something nor nothing remains to be known, there is no alternative left but complete nonreferential ease.

—Shantideva

Having realized the limits of the intellect we turn to practice with our whole being.



In our mind there is a depth so profound that waves of grief and joy cannot even reach there; no one can damage us in this place.

Our place of birth is there—and if we don't believe it we have to make a deep, determined effort to realizing it.

—Nishida Kitaro



Never mistake knowledge for wisdom. One helps you make a living, the other helps you make a life.

- Sandra Carey



Tilopa said to Naropa, Naropa said to Marpa, Marpa said to Milarepa, Milarepa said to Gampopa, and Gampopa said to everybody, ‘Just observe the mind without distraction.’

—quoted in **Three Teachings**,
by Tenzin Palmo

Please help! There are a number of members who wish to attend sesshin as well as daily sittings but suffer from chemical sensitivity.

If we could all refrain from using perfume, aftershave, cologne, and scented lotions, soaps, and shampoos prior to sittings and in sesshin it can make a difference between our Sangha brothers and sisters joining us for sitting—or not.

July 5 Half-day Introduction to Zen Meditation, 9 a.m. - noon; please see www.hvzc.org to download application form.

July 8-15 7-Day Sesshin at Mountain Gate; application deadline is June 24.

July 26-August 2 7-Day Sesshin. This is our only 7-day sesshin of the year at HVZC, the only chance without going to Mountain Gate to do a full seven days of deepening practice. Yasutani-roshi used to say that to do a 7-day sesshin was to deepen one's practice to the degree possible otherwise only in two to three years of daily practice.

August 9 Half-day Introduction to Zen Meditation, 9 a.m. - noon; please see www.hvzc.org to download application form.

August 17 All-day Sitting 6 a.m. - 6 p.m.; please note that this sitting goes only to 6 pm and is on SUNDAY

PLEASE NOTE: the August 7-day sesshin at Mountain Gate has been cancelled due to its too-close proximity to the Regaining Balance Retreat for Women Veterans with PTSD.

August 22-24 Regaining Balance Weekend Retreat for Women Partners of Veterans with

PTSD, at Mountain Gate; this retreat is open to female partners and spouses of veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress. For more details please see www.RegainingBalance.org

September 17-21 Regaining Balance Retreat for Women Veterans with PTSD at Mountain Gate. This retreat is for women veterans suffering from PTSD. For more details please see www.RegainingBalance.org

September 20 All-day Sitting 6 a.m. - 9 p.m.

September 27 All-Day Workshop on Rinzaï Zen, led by Mitra-roshi. Please go to www.hvzc.org to download an application form. Roshi will be at HVZC Sep 26-Oct 3.

September 29 HVZC ANNUAL MEETING - *Please note! We need a quorum in order to cover business, so please put this important date on your calendars! It's the only time in the year where the whole sangha meets to make decisions about the Center!*

October 4 Half-day Introduction to Zen Meditation, 9 a.m. - noon; please see www.hvzc.org to download application form.

October 15-22 7-Day Sesshin at Mountain Gate; application deadline Oct. 10.

October 24-26 Weekend Work Sesshin; Roshi expects to be at HVZC October 24-31.

November 1 Half-day Introduction to Zen Meditation, 9 a.m. - noon; please see www.hvzc.org to download application form.

November 19-26 7-Day Sesshin at Mountain Gate; application deadline November 2.

November 31-December 8 Rohatsu Sesshin at Mountain Gate; applications due by Nov. 18

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A monk in all earnestness asked Joshu, "What is the meaning of Bodhidharma's coming from the West? Joshu answered, "The oak tree in the garden!"