



# The Oak Tree in the Garden

Journal of the Hidden Valley Zen Center

## Reinspiring Hakuin

During his earlier years of practice—Hakuin was ordained at fourteen (fifteen by the traditional Japanese way of calculating age)—he became discouraged more than once despite the fact that he was driven in that practice by a deep fear of falling into hell. At one point he was so discouraged that he quit practice completely and apprenticed himself to a master calligrapher, only to come to his senses and return to Buddhist practice when he realized his abilities were such that he would never become a master calligrapher himself. Ironically he is known these days not only as the Zen master who singlehandedly reinvigorated Rinzai Zen at a time when it had seriously declined, but also as a prolific calligrapher and artist. Although he abandoned his pursuit of calligraphy and returned to Zen he took advantage of that training to create an incredible number of paintings and writings that inspire people even today in their practice.

Another time, traveling with some other monks, he found himself in a temple courtyard where the books were being aired, a tradition still engaged in in Japanese temples and monasteries today. Japan's climate is quite damp and books and scrolls are vulnerable to mold as well as to being eaten up by silverfish and other insects. In order to preserve those books and manuscripts they are aired out in the sun at drier times of the year. Waffling about his future and depressed about his perceived lack of progress in his practice, he decided to close his eyes and, leaving the results to fate or karma, pick up a book, open it, and use what he read there as an indication of how to proceed. The book he chose was called **Whip for Spurring Students**

**Through the Chan Barrier Checkpoints**, and fortunately for us he took it as a sign that he should continue dedicating himself to Zen practice. ("Chan" is the Chinese pronunciation of what in Japanese and English are called "Zen.") It is said that he carried the book with him through the rest of his life and frequently recommended it to his students.

Now, for the first time that book is available in English under the title **Chan Whip**, translated by Professor Jeffrey Broughton of California State University at Long Beach, and it is well worth the rather high purchase price (\$31.50 in paperback from Amazon.com\*).

The book was originally compiled in China in the sixteenth century by a Chinese monk known as Yunqi Zhuhong. In order to inspire his own practice, Yunqi collected sutras and Buddhist teachings from masters through the ages preceding him; the result is a rich compendium of inspiring texts. He included many writings on working with koans; what is sometimes translated as the "nub" "huatou" of a koan, Professor Broughton has chosen to translate as "cue." Of this choice he writes:

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\*By the way, you can now make a donation to Mountain Gate through Amazon Smile when purchasing from Amazon.com. To make donations through Amazon Smile you must opt in for the program. Although we are not listed in Amazon.com's preferred list of nonprofits, there is another blank where you can enter "Mountain Gate" and it should come up "Mountain Gate - Ojo Sarco NM". If you click on that link a portion of your purchase goes to help support Mountain Gate. We are looking forward to when we are able to get Hidden Valley Zen Center set up for this possibility as well.

*The huatou/nub/cue of a koan is “a single word or phrase that presses in upon one—so urgent, of such great moment that one must do something right now”...the focal point of mindfulness... A Chinese-Chinese dictionary of premodern vernacular, which selects its colloquial words and phrases from drama, novels, Chan and Song Neo-Confucian records, Dunhuang transformation texts, and poetry, gives its first definition of huatou as ‘using a word or phrase as tishi or yinzi’... Tishi can be rendered as point out, prompt, hint, brief, cue. A cue, in turn is a signal, sign, indication, prompt, reminder, nod.... Yinzi refers to the short poem or piece of parallel prose found at the beginning of an act in plays (or a chapter in novels.) The yinzi functions as a hint or suggestion of what is to come...—it cues the reader in.*

When we are working on the koan Mu, for example, the huatou or nub or cue of that koan is simply the word “Mu,” which translates in Chinese and Japanese into “No” or “Not.” “Does a dog have the Buddha nature?” asked the monk of Joshu. Joshu replied, “Mu.” But just “Mu” or “No” isn’t enough; the real power in this koan is the “Huh? But the Buddha said everyone has this true nature, so am I to consider the Buddha a liar?! What does Joshu mean when he says, ‘No’ in answer to that monk’s question? Not only that, but when asked the same question by a different monk, Joshu answered “Yes”! And to further compound the perplexity, both answers are correct—at the same time. When this perplexity is added to the nub/cue, “Mu,” it has the power to take one beyond logic to the point of comprehending the nature of Mu—if one works on it as described in the quote above and for long enough. This is not an instantaneous process; it can take many, many years. But along the way much vital inner work is accomplished, if one goes about it appropriately. One does not need to have solved one’s breakthrough koan in order to do the work of The Long Maturation that Hakuin’s premier Dharma heir, Torei Enji, wrote about. The Long Matu-

ration is the work of becoming aware of and dropping the habit patterns of attachment and dysfunction that we have developed over eons. As we do zazen and question the koan and go deeper in our practice—and this process can occur if one is doing susok’kan (extended outbreath practice) even if one is not also working on a koan—we begin to become aware of when our behavior is less than stellar. There is an opportunity then to “tune in” to the remorse that comes up rather than trying to avoid feeling it. When we do that, we move toward letting go of that pain-producing behavior. Of course, as soon as we’ve done that brief tuning in and offer that radical acceptance—nonjudgmental acceptance—we return to that puzzling question: What IS that Mu?!

In the Introduction to his translation of Chan Whip, Professor Broughton quotes Dahui Zonggao—Dai E Soko in Japanese—regarding working on koans, under the heading, “Do not perform any mental operation whatsoever on the cue”:

*You must not produce an understanding based on affirmation or negation. You must not produce an understanding based on logic. You must not engage in conscious reflection and conjecture. You must not recognize any single sense object as ‘correct’ or ‘incorrect’[i.e., you must not allow your mind of calculation to come to rest on any single point]. You must not create a lifestyle [that involves chewing on the ‘thorey flavor’ of the sayings [of the ancients and falling in love]. You must not remain confined to [the uselessness place of] nothing-to-do. You must not [immediately] ‘give the okay’ when [the master] starts [to talk]. You must not go around quoting texts to as proof [of the cue.]*

Broughton paraphrases Tahui further: “Keep on lifting up the cue until it is devoid of any ‘tastiness’ or ‘savor’ at all.”

*Over and over again keep lifting [the*

*cue] to full awareness, over and over again keep your eye on [the cue]. When you notice [the cue has] no logic and no tastiness and that your mind is squirming, it's the locus wherein [you,] the 'person on duty,' relinquishes his life.*

This is absolutely vital when working on a koan: to keep plugging away at it even if it becomes like a dry bone, devoid of anything interesting. Working on a breakthrough koan will take you through an infinite landscape of mind states, including many that will try to entice you away from that huatou, from that questioning, from that yearning to return to your true home, from that need to become truly free. But persist and one day you will suddenly understand what is beyond any possible mental understanding. Then it is of absolute importance to continue your work by going through the countless subsequent koans to hone and broaden and deepen your understanding. And all along the way, the vital Long Maturation needs to be ongoing!



*The mere fact of enlightenment does not mean that all of one's impulses are suddenly perfect, but rather that one sees more accurately how one should live.*

— Shōdō Harada Roshi



*You think that you can only establish true practice after you attain enlightenment but it is not so. True practice is established in delusion, in frustration. If you make some mistake, that is where you establish your practice.*

--Unknown



*We sit together,  
the mountain and me,  
until only the mountain remains."*

— li Po, 701-762,

## Sesshin

“To touch the mind” is one translation of the Chinese characters that are pronounced “ses-sheen” in Japanese. Dating back to the time when Siddhartha Gautama, having done six years of extreme ascetic practice and realized that bringing himself to death would not help his quest reach its goal, decided to once again take nourishment and to focus inward until he found his answer to the challenges of old age, sickness, and death. What ensued was seven nights and days of increasingly subtle inner exploration—what we now call zazen—culminating in his glance up at the morning star on the morning of the eighth day, and the profound insight that resulted from all that questioning, all that inner search, triggered by the sight of that morning star.

It wasn't the sight of the morning star that caused the profound awakening to the truth of reality that he experienced; it was all the inner search and exploration, the deep questioning that occurred in the months and years and days before that awakening. As a result of that experience he was known thereafter as “the Awakened One”—the Buddha. That week of deep questioning and his choice to pass along both his understanding and his insight into how to accomplish that understanding became the model for the sesshins held worldwide in Zen, Ch'an and Son\* Buddhist centers and temples.

Sesshin is traditionally a seven-day period of cloistered residence in a place of Buddhist practice, and usually it involves a group of people dedicated to that practice. There are also solo sesshin, in which a single person removes him- or herself from their mainstream activity to a place where they will be able to give uninterrupted attention to their inner search for truth. There are also sesshin of shorter duration such as the weekend sesshins we hold frequently at Hidden Valley Zen Center, as well

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\*“Zen,” “Ch'an,” and “Son” are transliterations of “Dhyana” in Japanese, Chinese and Korean, respectively. “Dhyana” means meditation. “Zazen” means seated meditation.

as the five-day sesshin held there and the five-day Elder Sesshin held each year at Mountain Gate, which latter is followed within just a few days by a seven day sesshin also at Mountain Gate. This double sesshin offering provides a tremendous opportunity to give an especially significant push to our practice. There are also periodic work sesshins, at this writing usually beginning on a Friday evening and ending on the following Sunday night when held at HVZC.

Sesshins are traditionally done in complete silence except for the teisho—Dharma talk—given by the teacher and whatever talking is appropriate in sanzen—the meeting for private instruction of each student. On rare occasions the jikijitsu or jisharyo will make an announcement relevant to sesshin and important enough to be voiced. Why silence? Because if our practice is to bear fruit we need to go beyond thoughts. Talking is thoughts out loud, and only leads to many more thoughts, even if they are not voiced. When we engage in unnecessary chatter in effect we are seriously hobbling ourselves with regard to the practice. When someone wants a horse to stay close and not wander away, they hobble it, attaching a strap of a certain length between a front and a back leg, thus limiting its movement; when we indulge in speech and thought during sesshin we hobble our practice, limiting its depth and breadth and so limiting our ability to become more awake, more free. Not speaking allows the mind to settle down more readily so that it's easier to go beyond thoughts. This is absolutely critical to coming to awakening.

The temptation to engage others in conversation—or even to engage oneself in an inner conversation—can become quite strong during sesshin. It's important to recognize when that temptation arises that we are usually trying to escape from the deepening focus and awareness that occur when we truly commit to our zazen. While consciously we seek to come to awakening, we can subconsciously try to derail the process out of fear. Beware!

Another practice that can help us in our zazen is during sesshin to eat slightly less than we

ordinarily would eat outside of sesshin. This can help with concentrating from the hara. It's important, however, to remember that the Buddha, having experienced both the extremes of excess and of deprivation, emphasized the Middle Way between extremes as optimal for life and training. It is NOT appropriate to engage in fasts during sesshin. Our body operates differently when in meditation as many hours as it is during a sesshin; metabolism can change as well as the rate at which medications and food are absorbed, and if we add additional change such as that during fasting, there is negative potential. Do not fast during sesshin.

How best to go about sesshin? Set **everything** aside except the practice for the duration of the sesshin. Before sesshin arrange your responsibilities so that there is nothing that need concern you during sesshin. During sesshin, keep your practice foremost. If distractions come up, don't fight them, but also don't engage in them. But of course here it also needs to be said that if you have a history of trauma and that comes up you need to work with your teacher regarding how to do your practice in that context, and it's also important that you work with a competent therapist—preferably one who does Zen practice or Vipassana practice him- or herself—regarding any unresolved issues. But apart from that, if makyo—"devilish phenomena"—arise during your sitting, just ignore them. All manner of enticing mind states, visions, memories, thoughts, can arise; ignore them as you would the occasional traffic on the road, the airplane overhead, the dog barking, the coyotes howling, the television in the next room when you're reading a really interesting book. In this way your zazen will deepen, and as you continue to do so, little by little you will become more aware and more free. When it comes to insight into your own behavior, that is the subject for a different article...



*When you cease creating delusion, the truth remains.*

— Motoko Ikebe,  
female disciple of Uchiyama-roshi



## Koan Work in Rinzai Zen

When one begins working on koans in the Rinzai Sect, a specific “breakthrough” koan is assigned by one’s teacher. It is very important when undertaking koan work to do so with a teacher trained in, experienced, and sanctioned to teach koans, as to do so on your own (or with an unqualified teacher) can lead to your going far astray, including thinking you’ve “passed” a koan when you’re nowhere near to doing so. In the Rinzai Sect koan work is undertaken for the specific purpose of bringing a person to awakening and then further clarifying and deepening that awakening until everything—everything!—has been let go of. As our clarity of mind increases through this process we begin working to help relieve suffering, and if our karma supports it, eventually we begin teaching Zen as a way in which to do that. The Mahayana Way, of which Rinzai Zen is part, is the Way of life practice wherein we work to come to awakening and clarify our mind for the benefit of all beings, not just for our own relief.

In order to proceed on that Path of clarifying there are classic breakthrough koans, the most famous of which is the koan “Mu,” taken from the encounter between the great Chinese T’ang Dynasty master Joshu Jushin [Chao-chou Ts’ung-shen in Chinese] and a questioning monk. Having been told that all beings are endowed with Buddha nature yet living in a country and in an era where in the judgment of human beings dogs were despicable creatures, the monk had a hard time comprehending that one of those yucky critters could actually have the qualities of enlightenment inherent in its potential. So he went to that outstanding Ch’an master and asked if it were really so: “Does even a dog have the Buddha nature?” And that enlightened Ch’an master responded, ‘No.’ (“Mu” means “No” or “negative” in Chinese and also in Japanese.) How could that be? It is the perplexity engendered as a result of that seeming contradiction that is the main power of this—or any—koan.

Other breakthrough koans are “The Sound of One Hand” and “Show Me Your Face Before

Your Parents Were Born!” and its modern version, “Who Am I?” As well, some people are naturally endowed with a life koan such as “Why is there so much suffering in the world?” Roshi Kapleau, having worked as head court reporter recording—in an old-fashioned form of shorthand—testimony during the post-Second World War war crimes trials both in Germany and in Japan, had such a question as his own natural koan and it brought him to Zen practice in Japan and a long and widespread career teaching Zen practice to those eager to do it all over the world. For Harada Shodo-roshi it was the chance encounter with Yamada Mumon-roshi on a bus in Kyoto early one morning that led him to experience the radiance and deep calm of a person transformed through long and serious Zen practice.

Once one works deeply enough with a breakthrough koan—and this typically takes years, even decades—and reaches a point of having let go enough attachments and clarified one’s mind sufficiently to have enough insight to work on subsequent koans, then there are many, many subsequent koans traditionally used to further open, deepen, broaden, and clarify that initial, usually shallow, *kensho* [“seeing into” one’s true nature]. The traditional number is 1780 but that is just a representative number.

Hakuin Ekaku, known as the Zen master who singlehandedly regenerated the at the time moribund Rinzai Sect of eighteenth century Japan, did so in part by reorganizing and reinvigorating the koan system. Among other things he classified a number of subsequent koans—eight, according to some translators—as “*nanto*” or “difficult to penetrate” koans. For more information on these koans please see Victor Sogen Hori’s excellent exposition in his introduction to **Zen Sand**, his translation of the capping phrases used in subsequent koan work in the Rinzai system. Ruth Fuller Sasaki’s **Zen Dust**—long out of print but rumored to come back one of these days—also explains some of the categories of subsequent koans within Rinzai training.

But there is another “*nanto*” koan that is a vital—a truly essential—part of our Zen training,

—one that is not ordinarily listed. And that is that of The Long Maturation, dubbed such by Torei Enji, Hakuin's first and perhaps most significant Dharma heir. Torei wrote a very short autobiography—more an explanation of why he was writing what it was the introduction to—as part of an excellent map of practice that has been carried down to us today in two excellent translations. Myokyo-ni—the Western Rinzai teacher Irmgard Schlagl—who taught in England, was so moved and inspired by the Japanese rendition that she worked long and hard and with some assistance from native Japanese to translate it, along with the commentaries of a 20th century Rinzai Zen master, Daibi. Her translation appears to be back in print, titled **Discourse on the Inexhaustible Lamp of the Zen School**. A more recent translation by Thomas Cleary, sans Daibi's commentary, is published under the title, **The Undying Lamp of Zen: the Testament of Zen Master Torei**. Both are highly recommended for anyone serious about Zen training.

What is this Ninth Nanto Koan? It is our day-to-day, absolutely essential, continuing clarification of our mind, leaving nothing out. That means that when we encounter a sudden insight into our behavior—and this is usually an insight into negative or pain-producing behavior—to look straight at it, to offer it radical acceptance, the honest (ouch!) recognition that while we may not have been aware of it, we've not been behaving in the exemplary way we would like to believe we have. If there is sincere regret alongside that recognition we know that we are allowing that recognition. And that in turn opens the door to letting go of that unskillful behavior, for if we've acknowledged it—felt its energy, become one with it—completely enough, the next time the urge to indulge in that behavior begins to arise it's as if there's now a stop sign there, and we have the option then of not going in that dysfunctional direction again. There are other signals that we are caught in attachment: Do we rankle when someone says something to us that seems critical of us? Do we get angry or embarrassed? These are cues that we may not have let go of that self-image. This *nanto* koan is a lifetime koan; it's not one

solved quickly. It must be entered into, chewed on, looked at squarely, experienced deeply, over and over again. Moreover, as we go through a layer of our attachments we open to a more subtle layer beneath it, and so on until we have reached a truly awakened mind state. Enlightenment doesn't happen without that transformation of character demanded of our practice, no matter what *kenshos* we may have had. For this important work we have the guidelines of the Sixteen Bodhisattva Precepts, the Eightfold Noble Path, and the Six Paramitas (Perfections of Character). Further, we have Bodhidharma's words:

*Letting go all our connections to  
anything external and dropping all  
concerns within, with our mind like a tall,  
strong wall, then wherever we are we  
are at one with the true Path.*

Right in the middle of our life, 24/7, on or off the cushion: “Piercing through everything to its source, that is the Buddha.” As we continue this prodigious work, we flow more and more in harmony with life, seeing beyond attachments and continuing to let go as any arise. In allowing ourselves to experience the felt sense of whatever arises, spaciousness and clarity open and we are able to truly let go by neither suppressing nor engaging in whatever dysfunction has come into view. To quote Harada Shodoroshi, “The world is not making us narrow, we are making ourselves narrow.” But we can choose, little by little, with the increasing clarity that comes from committed Zen practice, to become wide, clear, and free.



## Mountain Gate's New Website

*Thanks to the wondrous efforts of a bodhisattva Dharma sister of Mitra-roshi's, Mountain Gate now has a brand new, expanded website! If you go to [www.sanmonjizen.org](http://www.sanmonjizen.org) you will be able to download teishos, explore and purchase calligraphies to help support Mountain Gate's important construction of an addition to the main building, see photos, and more! Check it out!*

## Celebrating the Buddha's Birthday

The traditional date celebrated as the Buddha's birthday is April 8th, but modern America being what it is, celebrations are often planned for the closest weekend—unless, like the Rochester Zen Center, there is every chance of very cold weather, even snow, and so it is scheduled much later in the year. At Hidden Valley Zen Center we gather together to celebrate on the closest weekend to that date, and this year that weekend falls on April 10-12.

**Friday evening, April 10**, will see the zendo transformed into **Temple Night**, lit solely by soft candlelight, and with additional altars where one can do prostrations, or simply sit in the presence of Kwan Yin, the Buddha, or Jizo Bodhisattva. One is free to move about as often or as little as one wants. There is no incense. Temple Night is a beautiful opportunity to do devotional practice, and people who attend find it deeply inspiring. Zendo clothes are appropriate for the occasion. Our Dharma brothers and sisters from other groups beside our own are also welcome to attend.

Vesak—the Buddha's Birthday—is a celebration to be shared with family and friends. **Saturday morning at 10 a.m.** the traditional **Ceremony of Bathing of the Baby Buddha** will take place. Here, everyone including children can go up to the special Baby Buddha altar and “bathe” him by pouring sweet tea over him. ***Fresh fruit or flowers is offered by each person as part of the ceremony, so please remember to bring such an offering that morning.*** Following the baby Buddha's bath the story of the Buddha's birth is told. **After the morning's ceremony we will all gather in the Dining Hall for a potluck meal. Please bring a vegetarian dish that can feed at least eight people, to share at the meal.**

**Sunday morning there will be the usual sitting beginning at 9:30, followed by chanting. Mitra-roshi will give teisho** that morning as well. Following teisho we'll all take down the special altars and return the zendo to its usual appearance.

Vesak weekend is a joyful celebration of the Buddha's coming into this world, an event countless beings have benefited immeasurably from in the two and a half millennia since then. It was his deep questioning of sickness, old age and death that brought about a profound awakening and the decision to teach others how to free themselves from greed, anger and delusion. Because of the efforts of so many people in the ensuing centuries we, too, can do that same inner work and, depending on our commitment and depth of practice, become to one degree or another free as well. During this celebratory weekend we remember the efforts of this truly dedicated human being, Siddhartha Gautama, and are inspired in our own practice.

Vesak weekend is also a celebration of the harmony of Sangha. We are part of our HVZC and Mountain Gate Sanghas—true family, working to embody the Mahayana ideal of coming to awakening for the benefit of all beings. We are as well part of the great worldwide family of spiritual practitioners, each of us in our own way working to bring harmony and peace to everyone. May we all awaken to our true nature and work meticulously on the Long Maturation that will ultimately result in our being able to truly embody that vow.

### NOTICE

The morning following a weekend sesshin is a “sleep in” morning, i.e., there is no morning sitting that day; there will, however, continue to be an evening sitting the day following a weekend sesshin.

As usual, the day following a longer sesshin—one of four, five, or seven days—will be a “free day,” i.e., there will be neither morning nor evening sittings that day. It's a day off.

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.

**March 7-14 7-Day Sesshin at Turtleback Zendo;** for info please contact [seritas@com-cast.net](mailto:seritas@com-cast.net)

**March 20-25 5-Day Elder Sesshin at Mountain Gate;** deadline for applications: March 14.

**March 28-April 4 7-Day Sesshin at Mountain Gate;** deadline for applications: March 19. This together with the Elder Sesshin is a pair of sesshins at Mountain Gate specifically planned to offer the chance to greatly deepen your practice by doing two sesshin in quick succession, offering the possibility of greater deepening than to come to two sesshin spread further apart. This practice is done at Sogen-ji with the 8-day Rohatsu sesshin followed within just a few days by the “second December osesshin”—it’s remarkably easy and effective.

**April 10-12 Vesak Ceremonies;** Mitra-roshi expects to be at HVZC April 7-14. Please see the article in this journal for further information.

**April 19 All-Day Sitting in Albuquerque NM** Contact Zenshin Haederle at [monkzenshin@gmail.com](mailto:monkzenshin@gmail.com) for details.

**May 6-10 Regaining Balance Retreat for Women Veterans with PTSD,** at Mountain Gate. These are not sesshin, but specialized

retreats for women veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress. During these retreats women veterans are taught tools that they can use to help center themselves.

**May 30 All Day Workshop on Rinzai Zen;** see [www.hvzc.org](http://www.hvzc.org) for more info & to download an application form. Members attend for free. Roshi expects to be at HVZC May 28-June 4.

**June 12-14 Regaining Balance Retreat for Women Partners/Spouses of Veterans with PTSD,** at Mountain Gate. Please see [www.RegainingBalance.org](http://www.RegainingBalance.org) for further information.

**July 7-14 7-Day Sesshin at Mountain Gate;** deadline for applications: July 1.

**July 25-August 1 7-Day Sesshin;** this is our only 7-day sesshin this year at HVZC. *August 2nd is a Free Day with no formal sittings that day,* since it’s the day following a longer sesshin. Roshi expects to be here July 23-August 2.

**August 19-23 Regaining Balance Retreat for Women Veterans with PTSD, at Mountain Gate.** These are not sesshin, but specialized retreats for women veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress.

**September 25-27 2-Day Work Sesshin** Mitra-roshi expects to be here September 22-29.

**October 3-10 7-Day Sesshin at Mountain Gate** Deadline for applications: Sept 20

**October 14-18 Regaining Balance Retreat for Women Veterans with PTSD, at Mountain Gate**

**October 30-November 1 2-Day Sesshin** Mitra-roshi expects to be here October 27 to November 3. **November 2** there will be a **Jukai [Precepts] Ceremony**

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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!”*