



The Oak Tree in the Garden

Journal of the Hidden Valley Zen Center

Emptiness

*The following is a Dharma talk given by Sozui-sensei. In chanting *The Harmony of Relative and Absolute* we recite "To encounter the absolute is not yet enlightenment," yet people misinterpret it and assume it is awakening.*

This points up the danger of not working with a genuine teacher who knows from experience the difference.

Today I would like to share some quotes by Suzanne Segal (1955-1997), a writer, psychologist and teacher, known for her sudden experience of what she called 'vastness' which she shares in her book: **Collision With the Infinite: A Life Beyond the Personal Self**. It is an example of how experiences can occur spontaneously and how, without proper guidance, one can get stuck in emptiness, in her case for over ten years. While many of her insights and experiences are valuable, it is important to keep in mind that they describe emptiness and later an emerging sense of unity, **but not awakening**.

One day in 1982, while boarding a bus in Paris, the 27-year-old Segal experienced a sudden shift in consciousness, which confused and frightened her:

I lifted my right foot to step up into the bus and collided head-on with an invisible force that entered my awareness like a silently exploding stick of dynamite, blowing the door of my usual consciousness open and off its hinges, splitting me in two. In the gaping space that appeared, what I had previously called 'me' was forcefully pushed out of its usual location inside

me into a new location that was approximately a foot behind and to the left of my head. 'I' was now behind my body looking out at the world without using the body's eyes.

—Suzanne Segal, **Collision With the Infinite: A Life Beyond the Personal Self**, p.49

In the years after her first experience, Segal continued to function with seeming normalcy, completing a doctorate in psychology. She continued to feel as if her own name did not refer to anyone. She described it as if her

...body, mind, speech, thoughts, and emotions were all empty; they had no ownership, no person behind them. I was utterly bereft of all my previous notions of reality".

—Ibid.p.63

She began years of psychological counseling to find an explanation and "cure" herself from this state before realizing that she was undergoing a spiritual transformation.

The infinite reveals itself to the mind in mysterious, unimaginable, and ungraspable ways. But the mind, by its very nature, tends to reject what it cannot grasp. ... In my case, the mind mounted an all-out effort to pathologize the emptiness of personal self in an attempt to get rid of it."

—Ibid.p.147

Twelve years after her initial experience, Segal dramatically entered another phase, centered around a sense of unity of perception between her self and the world:

In the midst of a particularly eventful week, I was driving north to meet some friends when I suddenly became aware that I was driving through myself. For years there had been no self at all, yet here on this road everything was myself, and I was driving through me to arrive where I already was. In essence, I was going nowhere because I was everywhere already. The infinite emptiness I knew myself to be was now apparent as the infinite substance of everything I saw.

—Ibid.p.49

This sense of oneness remained with Segal for years. Her engaging account is a fascinating view of the unfolding of insight without a spiritual practice or intention. She shows us through her eye the vastness, unity, and simple sanity that we all are. Unfortunately Suzanne Segal died of a brain tumor in 1997 at the age of 42, before she could fully break through emptiness and oneness and truly awaken.

In the Afterword to the 1998 edition, Stephan Bodian, her very close friend and the one who encouraged Suzanne to write the book, says:

Suzanne's example speaks to us of the importance of integration -- of the personal and the transpersonal, the psychological and the spiritual By dying before this integration had occurred, Suzanne left each of us with the koan of discovering it for ourselves... I get the sense that Segal required a return journey. It is as though she went from the streets directly to the moon and needed to come back and see what rockets and the journey through space were all about."

—Stephan Bodian,
Fairfax, California April 1998

The traditional Zen image is that of climbing a mountain, reaching the top, and then the need to go back down and live, refine, integrate, deepen and share what has been realized, in the crossroads of our busy lives. See Koans like **Mumonkan** Case 46:

Master Sekiso said, "How will you step forward from the top of the 100 foot high pole?" Another eminent master of old said, "Even though one who is sitting at the top of a hundred-foot pole has entered realization, it is not yet real. He must step forward from the top of the pole and manifest his whole body throughout the world in all ten directions."

—The Gateless Gate, Koun Yamada; p.21

Unfortunately Suzanne did not encounter a genuine spiritual guide who could help her see through what was happening and guide her towards full awakening and integration, which we strongly emphasize here at HVZC. But her contemporary, genuine account of her experience of 'vastness', of becoming One, as well as her psychological insights can be useful, as long as we keep in mind that what she describes is not the whole picture. The following quotes are taken from the book, **Collision With the Infinite: A Life Beyond the Personal Self**, unless indicated otherwise:

The experience of living without a personal identity, without an experience of being somebody, an "I" or a "me", is exceedingly difficult to describe, but it is absolutely unmistakable. It can't be confused with having a bad day or coming down with a flu or feeling upset or angry or spaced out. When the personal self disappears, there is no one inside who can be located as being you.

—p.54

The mind, body, and emotions no longer referred to anyone - there was no one who thought, no one who felt, no one who perceived. Yet the mind, body, and emotions continued to function unimpaired; apparently they did not need and "I" to keep doing what they always did... All conversations were carried out as before; language was employed in the same manner..."

—p.55

What had vanished was the reference

point of a personal self... No thoughts, feelings, or actions arose for any personal purpose anymore... When I received the news of his [my father's death] I cried. There was no one who felt sad, yet the emotional response occurred as before and appeared to be about a someone, though it was not. Crying was there - simply that."

—p.82

When the sense of a personal self is seen through, we still feel and function, in fact even better and most appropriate in any given situation, but now without stumbling over our own feet.

... the appropriate responses just happened as well, arising out of and subsiding into themselves. Everything appeared and disappeared on the broad screen of the infinite -interactions, emotions, talk, actions of all kinds..."... the concept of service took on an entirely new dimension. Now action and speech were seen to arise not out of any personal purpose, but out of what was needed in the moment for the situation at hand. There was no personal functioning, yet functioning in its entirety continued unimpaired - a co-presence of functioning and non-functioning, existing and not-existing.

—p.109

When there are no projections, our mind simply reflects everything precisely, functioning like a mirror. Everything is seen as equal. The mirror does not pick and choose what it wants to reflect. "I" does not hold on to anything whatsoever. There is no double exposure, no judgment, no mental understanding or interpretation, nothing whatsoever added onto what is perceived. This is called the Great Perfect Mirror Wisdom. There are three more ways of 'knowing' to be clarified: The Universal Nature Wisdom, The Marvelous Observing Wisdom, The Perfecting-of-Action Wisdom.

Trying to understand all this mentally however is

futile. Working with the extended outbreath, as taught at HVZC, helps ground us so that we can allow curious not knowing to unfold. Who am I? Who or what is it that sees colors, hears sound, raises a hand or moves a foot? Allow perplexity to draw you deeper! Investigate thoroughly!

In attempt to understand what had occurred, the mind began working overtime, generating endless questions, all unanswerable. Who thought? Who felt? Who was afraid? Who were people talking to when they spoke to me? Who were they looking at? ...Why did this body continue? Who was living? Life became a long, unbroken Koan, forever unsolvable, forever mysterious, completely out of reach of the mind's capacity to comprehend. The oddest moments occurred when any reference was made to my name. If I had to write a check or sign a letter, I would stare at the letters on the paper and the mind would drown in perplexity. The name referred to no one....

—p.55

It took eleven years to finally accept that the mind was simply incapable of grasping the vastness of the experience of no personal self. This acceptance cleared the way for the mind to comprehend that an ungraspable experience is just that. It's neither wrong or crazy - it's simply ungraspable.

—p.117

In Case 41 of the **Mumonkan**, "Bodhidharma puts the Mind to Rest", Eka Daishi, the second Patriarch to be, finally, after intense inquiry finds: "*I have searched for my mind [or better self] but have never been able to find it.*" (**Zen the Authentic Gate**, Yamada Koun; p.4) For Eka Daishi at that time and place this was a breakthrough, complete release. After that he continues to train under Bodhidharma for many years.

When Master Hakuin reached this point he was warned not to stop there:

Hakuin's Master Shoji (Dokyo Etan) pressed Hakuin for his understanding of MU. "Joshu's MU?" replied Hakuin. "No place at all to lay a hand or leg on it!" Shoji reached out abruptly, seized Hakuin by the nose and twisted it. "Well," he said, "Just got a real good hand on it." As Hakuin cried out in pain, his whole body broke out in cold sweat. His rampant self-esteem was twisted completely away in Shoji's fingers. "You cave dwelling Zen corpse!" shouted Shoji, howling with laughter. Hakuin was unable to offer any response at all. "Are you really satisfied being like this?" Shoji asked.

—Hakuin's Precious Mirror Cave:
A Zen Miscellany, p.244

A stern warning for us, not to become self-satisfied and settle into dead emptiness.

Further realization:

"For years there had been no self at all, yet here on this road, everything was myself, and I was driving through me to arrive where I already was. In essence 'I' was going nowhere because I was everywhere already. ... The infinite emptiness I knew myself to be was now apparent as the infinite substance of everything I saw.

—p.130

Nothing needed to change or be eradicated; nothing needed to do anything at all but be. Everything occurs simultaneously - form and emptiness, pain and enlightenment, fear and awakening. Once seen, it seemed so incredibly simple. ... Fears grip now broke, and joy arose at once....I finally saw what had been in front of me the whole time but had been obscured by fear: There is not only no individual self, but also no other. No self, no other.... The fact that "I" no longer existed, that there was no person any more, gave way finally and completely to the realization that there is nothing that is NOT myself. What remains when there

is no self at all is all there is.

—p.132

Selflessness [no self] is not a case of something that existed in the past becoming nonexistent. Rather, this sort of 'self' is something that never did exist. It has been an illusion to begin with. There is no greater warmth than being without self.

... People who tell me they don't want to give up the personal because they believe they would be giving up love or joy or deep feeling don't understand that the personal never existed. Nothing is given up. ...Love that appears to be personal is based on a mind-constructed sense of being separate. ...The moment-to-moment flavor of the vastness undulating within itself as it perceives itself through every particle of itself everywhere brings a love that is limitless, far surpassing anything the mind could construct as the ideal love it seeks."

—p.142

Though a calming and settling down allows us to perceive more clearly, there is no need to try to stop thoughts. They are just like clouds in the sky. The sky has no need to chase away the clouds. The sky is always the sky, no matter what the weather is like. Once we begin to settle in our sitting and cease to get caught in the content of thoughts, we might catch a glimpse of the mirror like quality of mind, which is always present.

A mind that generates thoughts is not the problem... Whether the mind is active or quiet, this emptiness never changes. Nor does the infinite wait for the mind to do or stop doing something in order for the vastness to reveal itself to itself. ... A problem occurs only when the mind interprets the presence of thoughts to mean something -for example, that I'm bad or unspiritual and I'll never succeed in my meditation practice unless I stop the arising of

thoughts. Thoughts and ideas are never a problem unless they are taken to be something they are not. If they are seen to be just thoughts and ideas, then they are not identified with...

The most common predicament people bring to me is the experience of feeling "cut off" from the infinite. They find this particularly painful if they have had clear experiences of the vastness which they then feel have "gone away". They want to know how they can stay in contact with the infinite at all times. This very question contains two implicit assumptions that pass themselves off as truth- that there is an "I" who is cut off from the infinite who could "apply itself" to reconnecting if it had the proper technique, and that the infinite has gone somewhere. These are prime examples of how ideas masquerade as truth.

—pp.149/150

Suzanne goes on to reject the notion that further practice like e.g. Character Work is necessary. It is very dangerous to at this point think that since "there is no one to practice and nothing to practice", we can stop there. While unfortunately there are less than fully realized "teachers" proclaiming precisely this as 'final', all realized beings point out the importance of the "Long Maturation"—continued work with the precepts and life long practice, integration and Bodhisattva work. Dogen: "To study the Way is to study the self. To study the self is to forget oneself. Forgetting oneself is being enlightened by all things. Being enlightened by all things is to remove the barrier between self and other. No trace of enlightenment remains, and this traceless enlightenment continues endlessly." Chew this thoroughly!

As teacher and therapist Suzanne observes how the illusion of a separate self develops, how our conditioning creates suffering and how we can welcome our experience with radical acceptance:

I begin with everyone by asking them

to tell me who they take themselves to be... From early on, we're given a clear picture by our culture of the right somebody we're supposed to become, and most of us wholeheartedly undertake the enormous task of becoming that somebody.... Everyone I've worked with has become aware that they have constructed their "identities" out of information received by inference. Based on an interpretation of what all this information means about them, they have constructed who they take themselves to be. For example, Dad ignored me, therefore I must be unlovable or uninteresting. Or Mom always called me lazy, therefore it must be true....These constructs exist in multiple spheres, not just in the mind. Personal reference points can be constructed in the emotional, physical, and energetic spheres as well. ...Thoughts, feelings, sensations, and energetic frequencies do not mean anything about some imaginary someone; the simply are what they are... A further entanglement that occurs in the face of these ideas about who we are is that the negative is usually taken to be the truth. ...This overvaluing of the negative is rampant in our culture. ...It is absurd to think that we have to get rid of certain aspects of our experience to be acceptable...

—pp 152-.154

It might be helpful to understand that the 'negativity bias' of the brain used to be an important survival mechanism, helping us avoid potentially dangerous situations. The clear mirror-like functioning of mind however does not pick and choose.

...I give only two [practice] suggestions. The first is to see things to be just what they are... Thoughts are thoughts. Emotions are emotions. The body is just the body. It's the mind's interpretation of things that ends up creating suffering - the sense that there is a problem,

that fear or anger or sadness means there's something wrong with me, that certain emotions or experiences have to be eliminated for me to be OK, that something needs to be practiced or achieved in order to become the infinite.... After I speak to people about seeing things for what they are, they frequently go home and practice this "technique" rigorously, then conclude they have failed because what was seen didn't go away. But the vastness has no goal of ridding itself from anything....

—p.155

The second suggestion, ...is to follow the obvious. Now I'm not saying you need to figure out what the obvious is and then follow it. The mind doesn't usually perceive the obvious, and it tends to devalue what it can't perceive. Take the expression "it's just too obvious"...

—pp.163/164

Understanding this only intellectually however is as useless as trying to still hunger by looking at a picture of food. That's why the 6th Patriarch put it like this: "Do not give rise to thoughts about anything you see and hear, while at the same time pay no attention to anything that arises within." It is not that we do not see and hear, but we do not add anything to what is perceived. We are not moved around by anything.

In aikido, you are taught that when your opponent attacks you, you actually use his momentum to set him off balance. If you try to resist him, you create unnecessary conflict. It's the same with all the thoughts and feelings and other experiences that arise in the ocean of ourselves. The ocean never resists them... When they arise the ocean just sees them for what they are, and they pass away naturally.

—p.166/167

To realize this completely for ourselves, to let go completely and be reborn, and to continue, working for the liberation of all beings. This is what we have come into this world for.

The flow of delusion gives rise to notions of self

Distinguishing self and other opposes the law of heaven.

Departed spirits are pleased by dropping "like" and "dislike".

All nations in mutual harmony, forming neighborly ties.

—Shodo Harada Roshi
September 11th Memorial Poem,
offered at Tahoma-san Sogen-ji Monastery,
September 11, 2013



The living self has one purpose only: to come into its own fullness of being, as a tree comes into full blossom, or a bird into spring beauty, or a tiger into lustre.

—D.H. Lawrence



Have you ever ridden a bicycle? The bicycle does not run on its own. The bicycle only runs when somebody is pedaling it. The moment we stop pedaling the bicycle, it falls over. Unenlightened consciousness works in the same way. It doesn't perpetuate itself. The moment we stop perpetuating it, it dies. Like everything else, it dies on its own. Meditation is not so much like doing something or going somewhere or acquiring this and that. Meditation is actually a way to stop feeding this unenlightened consciousness.

—from **No Self, No Problem**
by Anam Thubten, edited by Sharon Roe,
published by Snow Lion Publications



But now I want you to understand that although in the beginning I told you to forget everything save the blind awareness of your naked being, I intended all along to lead you eventually to the point where you would forget even this, so as to experience only the being of God, It was with an eye to this ultimate experience that I said in the beginning: God is your being.

—The Book of Privy Counseling,
Chapter 12, pp 171,



At the heart of Zen practice there is a kind of radically intimate attention. This absolutely firsthand quality of experience characterizes the beginning of our lives and, if we are not drugged, the end. No "other" mediates between us and the intimate aloneness of birth. No memories, no thoughts, no plans invade this pure innerness with their shadowing images. So, too, in the spare simplicity of our deaths.

Here attention is reality and reality attention.

But in the days and years of our living somehow we lose touch with this clarity and think to possess ourselves in images. In so doing, we fall into a bad case of mistaken identity. We think our living instead of living our thinking. In the language of koan study, we miss the point of life and so live at second, third, and fourth hand.

Yet the opportunity to be restored to our original, unborn, divine condition is always immediately at hand. There are no real or absolute contingencies.

Every moment lived in absorbed attention is simultaneously a beginning and an end, at once a birth and a death. In such attention we are radically open

to the unexpected, to letting life live us. Any event, however small or seemingly trivial, properly attended, opens the door to infinity.

—from **The Door to Infinity,**
by Flora Courtois,
appearing in Parabola,
Vol. 15 No.2 Summer.1990, p.17



My domestic responsibility for the duration of the retreat was to clean the communal bathroom. I would do this chore at four o'clock every afternoon. At the very same time, though another nun would appear and proceed to wash herself before performing an afternoon ceremony at which she had to officiate. This went on for several weeks and I began to feel extremely resentful. Then one day I went down at four o'clock, and it suddenly didn't matter any more that she was there washing herself. It was my time to clean and her time to wash. How wonderful it felt to be free of resentment! Although a small incident, it was somehow very meaningful to me. It showed that meditation worked quietly. Without my intentionally forcing any changes, it dissolved the grasping and attachments that gave rise to the irritation.

—Martine Batchelor,
Women in Korean Zen, Lives and Practices,
p.41



In our zazen we can let go of all of these senses of being only a human body and all of its sensations and realize this huge, wide open world, this greater Mind which is unlimited. And for realizing this directly we do zazen. This huge, wide open freedom is so often left unrealized.

—Harada-roshi,
February 2011 Ōsesshin, Tahoma Monastery

November 4-6 2-Day Sesshin; Mitra-roshi expects to be at HVZC November 1-8.

November 19 All-Day Sitting led by Sozui-sensei.

November 15-22 7-Day Kosesshin at Mountain Gate; THIS IS A CHANGE from what was previously announced. A Kosesshin is half-way between a Sesshin and a regular period of training. The purpose of kosesshin is to help practitioners with the process of integrating the results of their practice into their daily lives. Hence, there is more zazen scheduled than during a regular day of training, but less than during a sesshin, specifically, the morning schedule remains the same in or out of any kind of sesshin, but the evening sitting during a kosesshin is from 5 pm- 9 pm, with sanzen morning and evening. Between the end of breakfast and the beginning of the evening sitting at 5 pm there is an extended work period along with some rest time. For further information, please see www.sanmonjizen.org to download a kosesshin schedule.

November 30-December 8 Rohatsu Sesshin at Mountain Gate; deadline: Nov 9.

2017 Schedule:

January 10-17 7-Day Sesshin at Mountain Gate; Application deadline: January 1st

January 23-30 7-Day Sesshin at HVZC; Application deadline: January 21st. This is a change from previously announced, and replaces the summer 7-day sesshin; the summer sesshin this year will be a 5-day sesshin.

February 26 All-Day Sitting led by Sozui-sensei; schedule to be available later

March 3 - 10 7-Day Sesshin at Turtleback

Zendo in Lawrenceburg NJ; www.turtleback-zendo.com for more information.

March 17-19 Weekend Sesshin led by Sozui-sensei

March 26, 2 pm Piano Concert with Peter Gach; Peter is a gifted pianist and he is offering this concert to help support Hidden Valley Zen Center. The concert, at HVZC, will feature J.S. Bach's Well Tempered Clavier, Vol. 2 (Complete); tickets to be announced.

March 19 - 26 7-Day Sesshin at Mountain Gate. Application deadline: March 8.

April 7 - 9 Vesak Ceremonies These ceremonies are the annual celebration of the Buddha's birth, enlightenment, and parinirvana. More details will be available closer to the time. Mitra-roshi expects to be at HVZC April 4-11

April 18 - 25 7-Day Sesshin at Mountain Gate. Application deadline: April 2.

April 23 All-Day Sitting

May 20 All-Day Sitting

May 31-June 4 Regaining Balance Retreat for Women Veterans with Post-Traumatic Stress, at Mountain Gate

NOTICE

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.

The Oak Tree in the Garden is published bimonthly by Hidden Valley Zen Center, P. O. Box 1355, San Marcos CA 92079-1355; subscriptions are \$20 per year for hard copy. For information about our Centers, log onto our websites at www.hvzc.org and www.sanmonjizen.org.

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!”