

山門寺

Mountain Gate Journal

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Mountain Gate is a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization established to provide the environment and training in the specific mindfulness practices of Rinzai Zen, focusing on meditation and work with koans [traditional paradoxical anecdotes or questions]. Regaining Balance, a nonsectarian outreach program, was established by Mountain Gate some years ago- to offer free, nonsectarian retreats for women veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress, and for women who are wives or partners of veterans with PTSD

“Because of danger, there’s this wonderful human response, which is to think in a new way.”

—Gianna Pomata, retired professor at the Institute of the History of Medicine at Johns Hopkins University, from **How Pandemics Wreak Havoc—And Open Minds**, The New Yorker, July 20, 2020 Issue.

Dr. Pomata is speaking here of the Black Plague and how it ushered in the Renaissance in Europe, but her words are equally applicable to our current COVID-19 pandemic today. When our normal ways of experiencing the world are blocked, limited, dangerous to be engaged in, we are faced with enormous potential for positive (and negative, if we’re inclined in that direction) change. We can collapse in assumed helplessness and depression as those old ways are no longer accessible (or only accessible at the risk of our life). Or we can open to new, freer, more enlightened possibilities! The choice is ours.

Many, many years ago now, my older son was good friends with a woman who was both psychic and an astrologer. She told him to tell me that “the next two or three years would be like a shamanic initiation” for me. I had completed my formal training at the Rochester Zen Center; it was just before I set off to live in and continue my Zen training at Sogen-ji in Japan. I didn’t think much of her seeming warning, as life had always been challenging. And besides, what is a “shamanic initiation”? Years later I asked a friend back in America what it was, and Martha answered, “Everything old ripped away so

there’s room for the new.”

By then, radical change was not unfamiliar, though I would not have conceived of my time at Sogen-ji as “everything old **ripped** away”; it was more like, “everything old let go of.” And that is our amazing potential now!

“Letting go”—does that mean we’ll no longer love our children, enjoy our friends, be interested in engaging in activities? This is what it can seem like, particularly as we get closer to actually letting go of some of our preconceived notions, our assumptions about ourselves and others, about life and death and who we are. But in actuality, this letting go is letting go of what imprisons us in rigid ways of perceiving and acting, and those who have experienced enough letting go—as can happen with insights [kensho] into the true nature of reality—marvel at the amazing freedom to truly **live** life that unfolds as a result.

Please note that insights into the true nature of reality are just that: insights. Whether they have lasting impact depends on how deep and clear they were to begin with—and at least as important!—whether we integrate what we’ve seen in those insights into how we think, speak and live.

Venturing forth into the unknown now that the known is no longer accessible without imperiling our very lives, we have some marvelously effective tools that have been tested and proven for more than 2500 years. *Susok’kan*—the extended out-breath—is incredibly effective in “cutting

to the chase.” But a tool is effective only as long as it is actually used appropriately, and that depends on the user...



From a student:

Your talk yesterday really hit the nail on my head!! I'm diving into a clear intention to be free at any cost, determined to feel what hooks me - to not squirm away from awareness. And yes it toggles between a calm openness beyond physical restlessness and an uncomfortably raw experience of my chronic desire for approval. Now I'm more fully aware of it in myself and how it feels in the body and also fully aware of how others demand the same approval from me in a relentless and confining dance. (Sartre really got this in a way that I now understand) - but understanding the ocean I'm drowning in is kind of horrifying! Feeling moments of freedom from it, tuning into where and how my body holds it I come thoroughly back to this chronic and pervasive addiction to approval that I see is a big part of human suffering. It is so clearly the default focus despite my desire to go for real freedom. Argh!

Roshi responds:

As strange as this may sound and as disconcerting as this may seem, you are in a very good place! To have become aware of the depth of that ocean of suffering and the causes of it is an absolutely essential step toward becoming free of the creation of that suffering. Congratulations on this most vital insight!!! In a word, you're experiencing firsthand, up front, in your face, the First and Second Noble Truths.

What to do? You're already on your way, and going in the right direction. Take a deep breath, and keep plunging into this ocean of suffering with "radical acceptance." [I accept that it feels this way even if I don't like it.] Every time you really feel the visceral experience of it, you are

moving toward that goal of truly letting go! Every moment you tune in to the bodily sensations of that desire so fully that it dissolves, you're effectively weakening the impulse to hang on.

Here's a curious analogy: Some years back—and this is a true story—a married couple were out on the ocean in their boat when the boat sank. They were able to cling to something or other that allowed them to stay afloat; I don't remember what it was exactly—a log or a big piece of floating wood? For hours and hours and hours and hours they clung to that floating log, with no seeming end in sight. Finally after something like 17 hours of hanging on the wife said, "I can't hang on any longer," quietly let go and sank. It was quite a long time after that before the husband was finally rescued.

*When we truly "can't hang on any longer" when the effort of clinging is no longer worth it, we are able to let go. While the life of that wife ended, we can die into **truly** living when the suffering of continued attachment is no longer worth the anguish and we relinquish our grip on the attachment.*

That said, attachment can have subtle rewards that make letting go of it more challenging. What benefits are we reaping in hanging on? (This usually has to do with the bolstering of a self image.) What are the downsides of letting go? What is the cost of hanging on? And what is the cost of letting go? Continued work with extending the outbreath coupled with allowing an openness to possibility will bring increasing clarity to this complex situation. And as you persist, gradually that attachment will erode, and one day you will find that it truly is no longer worth remaining invested in it—and it will be easy to let it go for good.

And here's something helpful from another student:

I've noticed that when I get insights into a mental problem the answer always ap-

pears early in the morning when I'm half awake and half asleep. When the mind realizes what is there I jump out of bed and type it up....

With letting go I have found that a feeling of trust and wellbeing comes in and fills the space stress and worry occupied.

But it's trust without knowing which is quite exhilarating.



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.



and from Quantum Mechanics, as expressed by a university professor who teaches it:

Quantum mechanics cannot just be understood in terms of common-sense and normal language. It escapes completely the linear sequential language. It requires an entirely new view of reality, without separation between who observes and what is observed, which is concisely provided by mathematics (in science terms). Any "popular" description in words will provide just a very partial view, which is a view, not the reality. Can one experience at intuitive level through Zen, without explicit mathematics, the world of quantum mechanics, which after all one might say it could be "just" the world as it is (without even calling it "quantum" world)? After reading some accounts given by people

that experienced kensho, though with the limits of the wording, I have this impression....



..and getting down to business:

I have a question but I am not sure I am able to express it in the best way. I definitely have this puzzling (but since long before discovering Zen) and Mu koan also expresses this puzzling... In order to convey this puzzling, should I just hold Mu as much as possible in the out-breath - breath Mu, as I read? I don't know how to explain. I think I should convey with all of my feelings, from my guts the sense of puzzling in the word Mu. Is that correct?

Roshi responds:

This "puzzling" is an essential aspect of Zen practice; it is a different way of naming the Great Doubt, and it's an excellent sign that it's there for you! When working with Mu or with any koan—or with the extended outbreath alone without a koan—it is a very important component of the practice.

It is not about wondering in words, but using the sense of perplexity that lies beneath any words. This is the fundamental underpinning of Zen practice and the force that brings about liberation. Thus when one is working with the koan, Mu, we initially use the wording of the koan—Does even a dog have the Buddha Nature? But Joshu said it doesn't! And another time, Joshu, an enlightened Zen master, said it does! How can that be?—to generate the perplexity, then let that perplexity reach deep beyond words, through extending the outbreath. That is the most effective way to work on the Mu koan. It is the same with any other koan as well, with a

few special instructions when working on subsequent koans, koans taken up following an initial breakthrough in order to deepen and expand that breakthrough and to help bring the insights to life in all we do or say or think. In this way the transformative power of Zen practice is put to work in the process known as the Long Maturation, so essential to true Zen practice.



Don't Make It Business as Usual!

Sesshin after sesshin in the old days at the Rochester Zen Center, a former businessman himself, Roshi Kapleau would say in his opening talk—and sometimes as well, in the midst of sesshin—“Don't do business as usual!” In other words, don't just do the practice, DO the practice! Extend yourself, go the extra mile!

In the gym where I work out there is a statement posted in big letters on the wall, “Life Begins at the Edge of Your Comfort Zone.” Indeed.

Recently a psychology professor who made a career of studying what it takes for people to excel, died. In the following article from The Washington Post, his work and their results is described:

In a career spent studying ballet dancers, surgeons, spelling bee champions, professional violinists and Shakespearean actors, K. Anders Ericsson reached a conclusion that surprised fellow scientists and left self-help gurus nodding in agreement.

Dr. Ericsson, a Swedish-born cognitive psychologist, found that expertise was the result not of natural talent but of hard work — “deliberate practice,” as he put it, that distinguished the most exceptional performers, artists and athletes from the very good and the halfway decent.

“Consistently and overwhelmingly, the

evidence showed that experts are always made, not born,” he once wrote, explaining that when it came to the development of experts and other masters of their craft, nature took a back seat to nurture.

Dr. Ericsson, one of the world's preeminent experts on experts, was 72 when he died June 17 at his home in Tallahassee. A longtime professor at Florida State University, he wrote widely cited articles and books in addition to offering advice to coaches, executives and organizations such as the Philadelphia Eagles, Cirque de Soleil, Google and the CIA.

Dr. Ericsson reached an increasingly broad audience after Malcolm Gladwell drew on his research for the best-selling book “Outliers” (2008), which popularized the “10,000-hour rule” for the amount of time it takes to master a given field. Citing examples including the Beatles, who honed their sound through grueling all-night concerts in Hamburg, Gladwell wrote that 10,000 hours was “the magic number of greatness.”

But there was nothing “magical” about that figure, said Dr. Ericsson, who had co-written a 1993 study finding that top performers at a German music academy practiced for an average of 10,000 hours by age 20. “The point that we were trying to make,” he told Psych Report magazine in 2016, “was that even the most talented individuals, in order to reach the highest levels, spent tremendous amounts of time working and practicing by themselves.”

Crucially, Dr. Ericsson argued that the way a person practiced mattered just as much, if not more, than the amount of time they committed to their craft. Deliberate practice occurred “at the edge of one's comfort zone” and involved setting specific goals, focusing on technique and

obtaining immediate feedback from a teacher or mentor.

“He really stressed that usually, deliberate practice is very onerous,” said his wife, fellow Florida State psychologist Natalie Sachs-Ericsson. “It’s not fun. If you’re having fun playing your musical instrument, that’s great, but it’s really the times when you’re struggling and working consistently to push yourself further that you get better.”

And so it is: When we really give ourselves to the practice—all the more so when it is challenging or it seems we’re getting nowhere—we are really working. We are not indulging in “business as usual.” We’re “pushing the envelope” and that brings about progress.

Many years ago I was complaining to Albert Low, who, with his wife, Jean, was in residential training at the Rochester Zen Center. “I just can’t seem to focus! I can’t seem to make any progress! There’s nothing but difficulty in my practice!” I said. Back then there was a prevailing sense, borne out by the happy, joyful faces and hugs that characterized my fellow Zen students at the end of sesshins. It was that Zen practice done right meant things would be lovely. And of course, who wouldn’t want things to feel like they were better, freer, for the hours spent on the cushion?

Albert’s answer surprised me: “It’s when it seems most difficult that the most progress can be made in your practice!” And indeed, if you’re really trying to focus your mind on the practice and keep working at it, it is. So be careful if your time on the cushion is seeming TOO easy. Beware “business as usual,” treading water, easing up ever so subtly on the practice. This is especially easy to do after we’ve been through a period of challenge on the cushion—it’s such a relief to have some smooth sailing for awhile! But... Beware! Roshi Kapleau knew what he was talking about!

The following article was written by a serious Zen student, dedicated to his practice with openness and curiosity, and to living it fully.

Doing Zen Without A Cushion: Reflections on Work Practice

There’s nothing special about meditation or sitting on a cushion. Even though zazen may take place in a zendo, or at home, though it may be accompanied by bells and incense, it is nothing special. There’s nothing to get from zazen! It may or may not make you feel better. It may or may not help solve a problem or inspire a response to a situation in life. It may not make you a better person.

Last year a foolish monk

This year, no change.

—Ryo Kan Taigu (1758-1831)

If the purpose of sitting is not to feel better, why sit at all? Meditation practice may have the effect of making us calmer and thus better equipped to deal with life’s situations, but if that is all we are looking for, then we are only skimming the surface of the depths of what is available through Practice. Sitting gives us the opportunity to open up to who we are now at this very moment, Being open, totally open with our whole body, in the presence of whatever is going on at any moment in our lives: this is zazen.

While Zen practice may start on the cushion, if it ends there, we have missed its deeper meaning.

Practice is much more than when we do zazen. Practice includes all activities.

It begins when we open our eyes in the morning and ends when we close our eyes at night. Everything in between is practice.

—Kapleau Roshi,
teisho delivered in Warsaw, Poland in 1984

This means bringing the light of awareness to all that we do. Every activity in our waking day is

part of practice. There is no difference between the practice of zen when on the cushion and the practice of zen when off the cushion. Every activity, ALL of it, is Zen!

Here is a personal example: I have recently begun to making recordings of free-style improvisations that I create at the piano. The only rule in doing this is that there are no rules. There are no chord changes to follow, no number of measures to fill up with sound, no musical form to adhere to. The improvisations are like musical calligraphy. Sitting at the keyboard, I may have a musical idea in mind. But the moment my fingers touch the keys, 'something' takes over. Ideas flow and the 'I' who sat at the piano disappears. For this kind of improvisation to work, it is necessary to let go of judgements and thoughts about the improvisation as it unfolds. Extraneous mental activity stops the flow of creativity, and the improvisation stumbles.

If we color our activities with all the unnecessary evaluations, judgements, conclusions, opinions and so on, then we are dirtying our activities and dirtying our minds.

—Kapleau Roshi, *ibid.*

So my improvisations are an example of Work Practice! Spontaneously creating a sound-structure while being present, without concepts and judgements, is Work Practice. Allowing whatever happens to happen, without expectation or the desire for a 'perfect' result, is Work Practice. To simply be in the moment of creation (and every moment of our lives is a moment of creation!), is Work Practice. Is this easy? Yes! But can it sometimes feel difficult and scary? Yes! If we have a lifetime of conditioning about how things should be, then seeing things as they are can appear difficult. If we can see things just as they are, letting go of how we are conditioned to think they should be, then it can, especially at first, feel like we are walking forward without a map. It can feel like we are shining a bright light into an unknown room. We see clearly, and the more

we see, the more the shape of the room changes. Its dimensions unfold in our light as we step forward. What we thought was a square room changes into a corridor. What we thought was a corridor changes into a round room. Shapes, dimensions unfold as we move with our light. But we cannot know what we'll see next.

I record an improvisation. I listen to it. I may or may not like what I hear. I may hate it one day, and like it the next. It may sound wonderful two weeks later, or I may decide it is not worth keeping. I may share the recording with others and receive compliments. Others might politely ignore my efforts. No problem!

If we sit in zazen egolessly, if we perform all daily activities in the same way, without judgement, without evaluation, taking things as they are, then we are actualizing Buddha nature.

—Kapleau roshi, *ibid.*

Sitting at the computer, writing this article, the thought comes "Is this good enough? Will people like it? Will it be understandable? Is it clear? What if it isn't?" Letting go of thoughts like this, letting go of thought, is letting go of control of the outcome.

A leaf falls from a tree into a stream. Depending on the strength of the current, depending on where the leaf falls, it may flow quickly and easily downstream. Or it may get caught on a rock and be pushed into the muddy bank, where it decays. It may be picked up by a passerby, who, looking quietly at it, perceives some deeper truth. The leaf doesn't know what will happen – it just flows. Not knowing, with a clear mind and a deep curiosity: This is Work Practice!



The meaning of things lies not in the things themselves, but in our attitude towards them.

—Saint-Exupery,
The Wisdom of the Sands

And from another student...

The Surprising Importance of Posture

For a long time I've wondered about Dogen's suggestion that just to take the zazen posture is to be liberated. "To sit in the meditation posture is to transcend the deepest and most intimate teaching of the buddha ancestors . . ." (in "Dogen Zen Quotations" www.oaks.nvg.org). Finally, I've noticed that when I sit straight-backed in a cross-legged posture my mind seems to automatically settle down more than when I'm in other postures (lying down, kneeling, sitting in a chair). I've never been able to do full lotus or half lotus, and now as an arthritic elder I often resort to a chair with gratitude and relief. I don't think I'd make it in Dogen's 13th zendo, but he seems to have known what present day Somatic/Sensorimotor psychology prescribes, posture as an experience of resilience in the face of trauma, suffering.

In a conversation with Mitra-Roshi, I learned that this is a key part of Pat Ogden's approach in her therapy and her books such as *Trauma and the Body*. (I think it's interesting that the names "Ogden" and "Dogen" are anagrams of each other!) She encourages sitting and standing with a straight back, which expresses, to one's self and others, strength and focus. Somatic therapy asks one to simply be present in the body and to use it to experience resilience, without thinking, without analyzing or telling stories. This is completely in line with zazen and Dogen's wisdom and with my humble and scattered experience.

Though any posture in zazen has the potential for deepening one's resilience, I've found that for me the Burmese posture is the most fertile for calm alertness. Instead of spending time fretting about not being able to maintain it for hours, much less days, I try to always use that posture for at least 30 minutes a day. I could wallow in shame for not being able to sit in the lotus position in a cave for forty days (or even a few minutes) or I could take advantage of those

30 minutes of Burmese sitting - and the time I spend doing zazen in other positions - to sit with patience and confidence. As Ogden says in her book *Sensorimotor Psychotherapy*, "Patience is our best resource." Zen seems to me to have discovered, long, long ago, the key elements of how to literally and figuratively position ourselves to alleviate suffering.



Penetration into truth can be shallow or deep. Now a shallow penetration will have little effect on character. It takes long training to establish firm character...

Most important, until one has integrated an awakening into one's daily life so that one is able to LIVE by what one knows to be true, one is not really enlightened.

—Roshi Philip Kapleau

These words of Roshi Kapleau cannot be underestimated. Our practice is not yet sufficient if we have not activated whatever insights or realizations we have experienced into every word, every thought, every action in the ongoing unfolding of our life! This was emphasized as well by Torei Enji, the deeply enlightened successor of the great Zen master Hakuin.

Think about it: If we're just up for the joy that an insight can bring forth in us, it becomes a superficial practice. Real practice is transformative, and necessarily so. Otherwise, of what use is it beyond entertainment?



Enlightenment is the arrival at detachment, through freedom from all habitual attitudes.

—Vimalakirti Sutra

"Detachment" means being truly present, in radical acceptance of what appears to be. Free from habitual attitudes, our vision is clear and unhindered; no longer are we caught in our "stuff."



UPCOMING Calendar

Monday/Wednesday/Friday Zoom Sittings:

Every Monday and Friday evening from 6-8 pm Mountain Time, join those sitting in the Mountain Gate zendo for zazen, beginning with guided Metta [lovingkindness] practice. **Every Wednesday evening from 6-8 pm Mountain Time**, the sitting begins with a short talk by Mitra-roshi. To be added to the mailing list for announcements and the Zoom links, please email mountaingate1@gmail.com

October 3, Zoom Talk plus Q&A with Turtleback Zendo 9:30 am; please contact Shotai at turtlebackzendo@gmail.com if you would like to attend

October 10-17 Zoom Sesshin at Mountain Gate, with room for an additional few participants within the social distancing guidelines. Masks are required for all chanting. Whether you would like to attend via Zoom or in person, please download an application form, available on the sanmonjizen.org website, fill it in and submit it to apply for sesshin. Anyone applying for full time via Zoom is also eligible for sanzen during those days they are full time. Part time participation is possible but without sanzen.

October 27 Zoom Talk plus Q&A with Turtleback Zendo 6 pm; please contact Shotai at turtlebackzendo@gmail.com if you would like to attend. **And please note that some of the TBZ Zoom talks/Q&A's are mornings and some, like this one, are on Tuesday evenings.**

November 1 Zoom Zazenkaï at Mountain Gate, 9 am to 4 pm, with a lunch break from 12-1 pm. You can join for the entire day or for just the morning or just the afternoon segments but no partial segments. Please email mountaingate1@gmail.com for the links and to attend.

November 13-20 Zoom Sesshin at Mountain Gate, with room for an additional few participants within the social distancing guidelines. Masks are required for all chanting. Whether you would like to attend via Zoom or in

person, please download an application form, available on the sanmonjizen.org website, fill it in and submit it to apply for sesshin. Anyone applying for full time via Zoom is also eligible for sanzen during those days they are full time. Part time participation is possible but without sanzen.

December 4-12, Rohatsu Zoom Sesshin at Mountain Gate, with room for an additional few participants within the social distancing guidelines. Masks are required for all chanting. Whether you would like to attend via Zoom or in person, please download an application form, available on the sanmonjizen.org website, fill it in and submit it to apply for sesshin. Anyone applying for full time via Zoom is also eligible for sanzen during those days they are full time. Part time participation is possible but without sanzen.



2021 UPCOMING Calendar

January 8-15 Zoom Sesshin at Mountain Gate, with room for an additional few participants within the social distancing guidelines. Masks are required for all chanting. Whether you would like to attend via Zoom or in person, please download an application form, available on the sanmonjizen.org website, fill it in and submit it to apply for sesshin. Anyone applying for full time via Zoom is also eligible for sanzen during those days they are full time. Part time participation is possible but without sanzen.



Do not be dismayed by the brokenness of the world. All things break. And all things can be mended. Not with time, as they say, but with intention.

So go. Love intentionally, extravagantly, unconditionally. The broken world waits in darkness for the light that is you.

For information about the RegainingBalance program and to offer support: www.RegainingBalance.org
For information about Zen meditation practice and sesshin [meditation retreats]: www.sanmonjizen.org