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Mountain Gate Journal

Summer 2021

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.

Stuff That Can Come Up in Meditation

The following is an edited version of a teisho Mitra-roshi gave in the January 2021 sesshin at Mountain Gate in northern NM.

Today is the second day of this seven-day sesshin, the first sesshin in January 2021. If already we have a sense that sesshin is going by quite quickly, that's a good sign. If it seems like it's dragging, then we need to tune in and feel what's going on internally in that moment, not analyzing, but sensing the energy within our body, i.e., that sensation. If we tune into it fully, it will normally give rise to an understanding of what's really going on. Am I bored? Am I frightened? Am I trying to hold something back, keep it from coming up to where I have to feel it?

It's well known now that a child's brain is not by any means fully developed when that child is born; science says it takes 25 years or more before our brains are fully developed. As 18-19 year olds we think we're already grown up, but actually our brain is still developing. What is the point in bringing this up? As the brains of infants develop, not only the actual physiological brain is developing, but also the sense of whether we are safe, whether we are loved, whether the world in general is a safe place, and whether we can count on people to care for and support us. This view of the world comes directly from our encounters with our caregivers, particularly our primary caregiver. If that primary caregiver is loving, and, is there for us, and interacts in pretty

consistently positive ways, then we grow up with a view of our environment as wholesome, and we're able to trust that it will be generally safe. But if we have a caregiver who's abusive or abandons us frequently, then we grow up with a distinct sense, through that conditioning, that the world is not a safe place and we learn to act as if it isn't, developing coping mechanisms in order to survive. If we grow up with a caregiver who is inconsistent—caring sometimes and distant at other times, it results in another view of the world. We are like Pavlov's dogs, who learned to salivate upon hearing a specific sound. (The classic story is about hearing a bell, but it was actually a metronome, an instrument used to keep time in music. Pavlov, in that particular experiment, started a metronome tick-tocking before each dog was fed so there was this tick tock tick tock tick tock tick tock that preceded every time the dog is fed. They naturally connected the sound of the metronome to preceding food, becoming conditioned to expect food after that tick tock sound started. But in one group of dogs he sometimes fed the dogs and sometimes he didn't feed the dogs even though he still started the metronome before each meal or potential meal. The dogs salivated when they heard the metronome regardless of whether they're going to eat or not because their conditioning was that they would get fed; even though there were times when they didn't get fed despite the sound of the metronome, they still anticipated that they might get fed. There are all kinds of things that Pavlov learned through his experiences—including an unplanned experiment caused by a flood*,

that modern psychologists have begun to realize applies as well to human conditioning, including that resulting from how an infant is born and is taken care of, or not taken care of, or sporadically taken care of, by the child's caregivers.

But conditioning is not the same as fate. It's interesting to note that even for people who grow up in adverse circumstances, say a very bad part of a city, where there's a lot of crime and violence, if they have one person in their life, and it doesn't have to be a parent, it could be an older friend, it could be a high school teacher—but it is someone who clearly cares about them, is clearly there for them, these kids are able to develop in ways that that defy their environment. Other kids who grow up in such hellish surroundings and don't get that secondary support almost universally end up in a life of crime, in jail, murdered, or generally living a severely dysfunctional life as they try to compensate for their challenging conditioning.

In our own life, in our environment, do we feel safe? Do we feel like we can trust interactions with other people? Or are we suspicious? Do we find ourselves feeling generally uncomfortable when interacting with others? Most of us, probably all of us, know people who fit in some of these categories. Why am I bringing this up? Let me share something that may initially seem unrelated from a book, **Seven and a Half Lessons About the Brain**, by Lisa Feldman Barrett, Ph.D., a research scientist in psychology and neuroscience, currently Distinguished Professor at Northeastern University, as well as with appointments at the Massachusetts General Hospital and Harvard Medical School.

This is in lesson number four and it's titled ***"Your Brain Predicts Almost Everything You Do."***

A few years ago, I received an email from

*Pavlov's laboratory was near a river, which flooded overnight, leaving the caged dogs neck deep in icy water. The result: Caught imprisoned in their cages, the animals developed PTSD.

a man who served in the Rhodesian army in southern Africa in the 1970s before the end of apartheid. He'd been drafted against his will, handed a uniform and a rifle and ordered to hunt down guerrilla fighters. To make matters worse, before the draft, he'd been an advocate for the same guerilla fighters that he was now required to treat as an enemy. He was deep in the forest one morning, conducting practice exercises with his small squad of soldiers, when he detected movement ahead of him. With a pounding heart, he saw a long line of guerrilla fighters dressed in camouflage and carrying machine guns. Instinctively, he raised his rifle, flipped off the safety catch, squinted down the barrel, and aimed at the leader who was carrying an AK-47 assault rifle. Suddenly, he felt a hand on his shoulder. "Don't shoot," whispered his buddy, behind him. "It's just a boy." He slowly lowered his rifle, looked again at the scene, and was astonished by what he now saw. A boy perhaps 10 years old leading a long line of cows and the dreaded AK-47 was simply a herding stick. For years afterward, this man struggled to understand the unsettling episode, how had he managed to mis-see what was right in front of his eyes and nearly kill a child. What was wrong with his brain?

As it turns out nothing was wrong with his brain. It was working exactly as it should have. Scientists used to believe that the brain's visual system operated sort of like a camera detecting the visual information out there in the world and constructing a photograph-like image in the mind. But, today we know better. Your view of the world is no photograph. It's a construction of your brain that is so fluid and so convincing, that it appears to be accurate, but sometimes it's not. To understand why it can be perfectly normal to see a grown guerilla fighter with a rifle when you're

looking at a ten-year-old boy with a stick, let's consider the situation from the brain's point of view.

From the moment you're born to the moment you die, your brain is stuck in a dark silent box inside your skull, day in and day out. It continually receives sense data from the outside world via your eyes, ears, nose and other sensory organs. This data does not arrive in the form of meaningful sight, smells, sounds and other sensations that most of us experience. It's just a barrage of light waves, chemicals and changes in air pressure with no inherent significance. Faced with these ambiguous scraps of sense data, your brain must somehow figure out what to do next. Remember your brain's most important job is to control your body so you stay alive and well. Your brain must somehow make meaning from the onslaught of sense data it's receiving so you don't fall down a staircase or become lunch for some wild beast. How does your brain decipher the sense data so it knows how to proceed? If it used only the ambiguous information that's immediately present, then you'd be swimming in a sea of uncertainty, flailing around until you figured out the best response, but luckily your brain has an additional sense source of information at its disposal, memory. But then also as it turns out, memory is constantly being reconstructed. In other words, you're not pulling a photograph out of the file cabinet in your brain that is your memory of some incident that happened. You go to try to remember something and your brain conjures it up again influenced by everything that has happened since.

It's a very pivotal point in our Zen practice when we realize inherently that we cannot trust our thoughts. Because we can't. Thoughts are useful for certain kinds of endeavors, but being based on past experiences as recorded in bits of sen-

sory experiencing rather than in accurate photographic representations, they also can get us in a lot of trouble. Given that we develop our view of the world through our ongoing conclusions about our experiences, those early months, years and beyond have given us a sense of what the world out there seems to be like, and we respond or react based on that conditioning. But as you've just heard, that's not reality, it's what the brain has come up with as a result of that history in order to try to keep us safe and alive.

Then what IS the true reality? This is our fundamental question in Zen practice and it's a vital one because, as it says in the Bible, "the truth shall set you free." When that can take place we are no longer caught like that young Rhodesian man, mistaking a line of cows and a kid for a line of guerillas with machine guns. What is the truth in each moment? When we reach a point where we realize that what we think is not necessarily the truth, that we are driven by habit patterns, by conditioning, and we begin to see the power of that conditioning, it is a big step forward in our Zen practice and a very positive step forward in our life. With ongoing zazen we begin to see the details of that conditioning and the impact of that conditioning. It's so easy to mistake a situation because of our assumptions about it, because of what our brain, conjures up based on our history and our resulting assumptions.

Long ago when I was in grade school, everybody sat in rows at desks, hands clasped together unless we were actively holding a book or using a pencil. We were silent unless spoken to. In the row next to me, her desk across from my desk, sat a little girl my age who seemed to be in great psychological pain. Her skin was all mottled with what I now recognize was psoriasis; she was extremely shy and kept to herself. She had the vibe of being in anguish. Most likely she was living in an abusive situation, and was likely abused herself, though I have no way of knowing that. Feeling her isolation and wanting to comfort her, wanting to let her know she had a friend, I reached over to gently touch her arm.

Immediately, she reacted calling to the teacher in distress, saying I was trying to hurt her. I wasn't trying to hurt her—quite the opposite, but her perception was that I was, which suggests that most likely there were people in her life who had done exactly that. We can so easily misinterpret the intentions of other people and as a result, we have murders and wars and all kinds of suffering, so often perpetuated down the generations.

So how can we know what is reality, what is truly true, if we can't trust our thoughts, if we can't trust our conditioning, if what comes into our brain is simply a barrage of sensory data? How do we know what's what?

Buddhism teaches that there's a place of deep, profound Knowing that is accurate and is true. Seeing through our conditioning little by little as we continue to do our Zen practice, the truth of each moment beyond the skewing of perceptions by conditioning begins to be revealed.

I remember an older member of the Rochester Zen Center. He actually lived in Buffalo, but he would come to every single sesshin, which was pretty amazing given that he had a job. He was an art teacher in a school. John would also be at every Sunday morning sitting. Buffalo was an hour's drive on the freeway (in good weather) from Rochester. In Rochester and Buffalo, the lake effect weather can be unbelievably fierce particularly in winter. As an example, when my older son was going to get married to a woman in Buffalo, they picked two dates for the wedding. It's a good thing that they got married on the first one because on the second one, in one overnight eight feet of snow fell on that second date in the Buffalo area. People were stranded, and taken in by total strangers wherever they were caught in that snowfall. I don't recall that John came to Rochester at times during extreme snowfalls and the freeway would have been closed as well, but nonetheless when it was possible to get there he came regularly to sesshin, regularly to Sunday morning sittings. He was dedicated. But he told me that after 13

years of a consistent, dedicated Zen practice, truly sincere and deep Zen practice, he went into dokusan with Roshi Kapleau feeling really down. He said to Roshi, "I've been practicing for 13 years and no kensho!" Roshi said, "Thirteen years, 30 years..." And John said, "At that point, suddenly it didn't matter anymore." It took him seven more years, before he actually did have a kensho experience, but when he did it was quite deep. Although our Zen teacher can see where we are at in our practice and the progress we've made in it we are so immersed in it that for quite a long time we cannot accurately judge it. So don't bother trying. The most important thing is to keep going, keep trying, keep the faith that if you keep on you'll uncover that true reality—and it will have been worth it.

Joshu, the famous Joshu of "Does a dog have the Buddha nature?" in T'ang Dynasty China, trained for 40 years, and then, since his teacher died, went on pilgrimage for another 40 years, testing the depth of his practice, challenging himself. It doesn't matter how long it takes, assuming we are doing our best, because each moment we give ourselves to this Zen practice, to this reaching into the mystery of who we REALLY are, work is being done. It's not necessarily obvious to us. Though it's obvious to our teacher, it's not obvious to us until we have advanced deeply. This is why faith is so important; for a long time we are flying blind, which underscores the importance of committing to an experienced teacher.

Yesterday you heard about Native Americans who teach their children when they have questions to go into the forest and silently ask their question, and that if they did it for a long enough time, the bushes and the trees would give them their answer. This is not so different from going to our cushion (or chair) and silently asking within, that primal question.

As fellow human beings we have the same capacity for understanding through wordless inquiry, except that our culture emphasizes intel-

lectual prowess rather than working with intuition and a deeper level of understanding, and so it's not something that's normally taught. Nonetheless through that miraculous *susok'kan*—that extended out breath, coupled with perplexity, the need to know, with patience and an “openness to possibility,” with reaching really into the dark beyond anything known, we will begin to see where we are caught. We'll begin to see where our conditioning is driving our outlook on life and our assumptions about ourselves and others, and consequently our behavior. And as we see these things, something odd takes place. It's like we see through them and as a result they no longer have any validity. We've seen that they're basically a bunch of stories, that they're not real and so to try to keep them in place makes no sense whatsoever. So it's easy to let them go. Most of you are familiar with Velcro, which comes in two parts, the kind of hooky part and the soft fluffy part and is used to join two things like fabrics, or attaching something to something else. When you place the two opposing parts together they stick to each other rather tightly. I have often had an image of all of us being upholstered in one of the halves of the Velcro—either the hooky part or the fluffy part. Then every time we run into somebody else or something else, that has the other = half of the Velcro, we get stuck, we're attached to that other person's Velcro. Human interactions are so like that; one person's conditioned reaction triggers another person's conditioned reaction and Boom! They're stuck together in round after round. If Zen practice is gradually peeling off the Velcro—metaphorically reducing our delusion, then no matter if we brush up against someone's opposite type of Velcro, there's no Velcro on us that it can cling to. It's a long process of letting go... But wow! Zazen works!

Thus because of our deepening practice we find our life changing in positive ways. Every time we extend that out breath, we're letting go of assumptions, ideas, stories, self-images, at least momentarily, and opening little by little to something deeper, clearer, freer; that is what our practice offers us. In the vernacular of today,

How rad is THAT!

If it didn't work and if it wasn't worthwhile it would not have prevailed for more than 2500 years; the results are proven so the only thing we have to be concerned with is just doing the practice, really doing the practice. Part of that is to have faith that if we keep going, this deeper, clearer truth will be revealed, and as we keep going beyond that, that too, reveals yet a deeper layer, a more subtle layer, and so on. It is truly liberating. If I've realized what I've realized this far, what more can I become free of if I just keep working, because the freedom is real!

Of course, that work involves not just seeing through where we're caught, but also making sure that we don't reinvest in those formerly caught places, substituting new ideas where the old ones had been. It's vital that we work seriously on what's called The Long Maturation, which starts even before we establish our first practice moment on a cushion or on a chair. When you have an uncomfortable insight into your behavior, it's vital not to deny it, not to shove it under the carpet, but to own it, to feel it. In that feeling of remorse and regret, it's almost as if there's an innate vow not to continue that way of being. It's much easier than just simply trying not to do something. If we see it first with a depth of realization that brings forth that regret and that remorse, then it's so much easier to just not go there—a critical part of practice.

So what IS the REAL reality? What is this profound truth that centuries of human beings, that for millennias people have experienced themselves and taught how to experience so we also can do it? We're down to just five more days of sitting. Yet that's enough to get so much closer to becoming truly free—because you can.



“Truth is by nature self-evident. As soon as you remove the cobwebs of ignorance that surround it, it shines clear.” —Mahatma Ghandi

The following is from a Zen student, echoing the article that preceded this one:

There was so much heartbreak that I experience growing up. Abuse, the loss of my birth father in the divorce, an overbearing stepfather, and the experience of poverty all made growing up very difficult for me. I had developed a film over my vision and that only allowed me to see all the horror, pain, and tragedy that was part of my life and the human condition at large. I'd have thoughts like: "What is the point of living if all there is is suffering?"

It was Mitra-roshi who pointed out to me: "Yes there is suffering, but there is also joy. Don't limit your view only to the negative." And when I looked, yes, there was goodness in the world and a lot of it. When my car broke down my boss stayed late, picked up an extra car battery he had at his house, and put it in my car for free. There was a co-worker who brought me a sandwich without asking when she saw me working late past dinner time. The more I looked for the good in the world the more I started to see and the film over my vision started to change color. I saw that the glass was neither half-full nor half-empty but it was both.

In recent days I started to see the heartbreak I used to carry fall away like leaves falling from a tree in autumn. Where are they now? I don't see them. Losing my house to the bank once appeared as a big heartbreak but I no longer see it that way. I now see it like a ride at Disneyland. What a wild ride and after the ride was over I saw I was a person who could survive losing a home quite easily, land at a new location, and start over. No problem. No heartbreak. It was just a happening and it wasn't personal.

I also noticed that these phenomena didn't stop. Sometimes they were sweet, sometimes they were sour, and sometimes they were a mixed flavor. Over time I've been learning to let go and enjoy all of the "31 Flavors" being offered. I no longer have heartbreak but instead, a rich and

meaningful life full of interesting twists and turns. I can't wait to see what happens next.



Zazen

by Virginia Hamilton Adair
[from the July 20, 1998, New Yorker Magazine]

When I first floundered in
no one knew me.

Not even myself
staggering under a Saratoga trunk
crammed with humiliations
bottled like urine samples
nail kegs of anger
carbons of abusive letters
chemistry quizzes with F's
even the horse I never had
and two casseroles left over
from the dime-a-dip supper.

No one remarked that
I had brought too much.

I was wearing three fur hats
donated by opulent cousins
my feet encased in cement
ever since the failure
of the patio project
and my mouth full of barbs as an old trout.

No one praised my appearance.

The trunk fell off my back
disgorging its unusual contents
at my stone feet
which also came off.
The fur hats tumbled like a
moth-eaten avalanche
burying a small monk.
No one noticed.

My sweat began to dry
I folded myself into one piece

NO ONE.



Fresh greens from the greenhouse!

Garden news from Mountain Gate

This year, thanks to the expert help of Shokei, who was with us at Mountain Gate through several sesshins, we planted the greenhouse again, crossing our fingers that the aphids—which had been endemic the last several years—would not make a repeat appearance. She did such a marvelous job of it that so far...no aphids! Peas, salad greens (wonderful arugula as well as several types of lettuce), beets, parsnips, Russian kale, Swiss chard, bok choy, tomatoes (blooming now, but not yet fruiting), carrots—and an incredible amount of self-seeded shiso (an herb used to color and flavor umeboshi plums in Japan and which we harvest, dry, crumble, and use in our own version of a condiment with toasted sesame seeds and crumbled nori [seaweed] to sprinkle on rice). That shiso is quite difficult to get started, but once it's done so, it comes up every year on its own, and would crowd out the other plants if we didn't harvest it first. It has its own wonderful, unique flavor, the plant being related to basil.

The greenhouse is tiny, but does produce enough for frequent salads, and once the tomato plants begin bearing we will be gifted with an abundance of tomatoes from the three plants. At our altitude it's quite difficult to raise tomatoes to

their delicious ripeness because the season is so short. But in past years we've eaten tomatoes right off the vine as late as December.

This year we also planted all three of the outdoor, raised (and insulated) beds, the big one with three types of raspberries, and the two smaller ones with two plants each of sprawling vines that will produce delicata squash, Steph kuri [a relative of that wonderful Japanese kabocha squash], and a type of very early ripening small melon. Now, if the squirrels, birds, and gophers don't get there first, we should have some delicious squash and melons later this year. As for the raspberries, though we may see some fruit appearing this year, next year we should have an abundance of sweetness throughout the summer since we have early, ever-bearing, and later bearing varieties coming up beautifully.

Our challenge is drought. Although we had enough rain in several storms earlier this year to fill our three big rain storage barrels—one, 800 gallon and two 450 gallon ones—we've already emptied the bigger one and most of the smaller ones, between the greenhouse and the outdoor beds. Rainy season should have begun, but it remains dry, as global warming continues its relentless march in the Southwest in particular, producing record-breaking temperatures and too little moisture.



With the spring and summer sun and heat, our solar panels do a good job of keeping the building radiantly heated through the piping embedded in the floors, upstairs and down. (Days not, nights chilly.) These panels circulate a glycol solution to collect the solar heat.



RegainingBalance® Program

Even with COVID-19 infections and deaths diminishing as we write this, we will not be holding RegainingBalance® program retreats this year. With so many ups and downs in this ongoing plague, and with the new highly aggressive and contagious Delta variant becoming the predominant strain of the virus, it was decided to wait until 2022 to reopen the program. So we are working on scheduling our Retreats for Women Veterans with PTSD for 2022, with the faith that by a year from now the pandemic will have so diminished that it will be safe to do so. Stay tuned, and as soon as we can get volunteer staff lined up, we're looking to schedule four retreats for 2022, tentatively for late May, early July, late August, and late September.



Calendar

Although we will wait until next year to again offer our RegainingBalance® Retreats for Women Veterans with PTSD, we have continued to offer our Zen meditation retreats [sesshin] all along, with all sesshin providing full and part time Zoom attendance, as well as limited in-zen-do attendance for people who are either fully vaccinated or have self-quarantined for at least two weeks prior to arriving at Mountain Gate—a requirement of the State of New Mexico until quite recently. In addition to October, November,

Rohatsu [December], January, February and March 7-day sesshins, a pair of sesshin with just six days between, were held in late April and early May. June 7-day sesshin was also held, and we are looking forward to the upcoming July sesshin. There will be zazenkai in August. The next 7-day sesshin will be in late September, along with another “double header” in late October and early November, finishing 2021 with the traditional Rohatsu 8-day sesshin in December. This pandemic reminds us daily of the ephemeral nature of life, and the importance of using whatever time we have left to diminish the amount of greed, anger, and lack of clarity of mind that cover up the compassionate, wise beings that we are and cause us to react to situations and life rather than to respond clearly, compassionately and wisely to them.

August 21, Zazenkai at Mountain Gate. In house for anyone fully vaccinated, or by Zoom.

September 22-29 7-day Sesshin at Mountain Gate. Attendance in house for anyone fully vaccinated or by Zoom. *Anyone wishing to attend in person must submit a sesshin application; anyone wishing to attend any full day by Zoom must also submit a sesshin application.* All in-house attendees receive sanzen twice a day; anyone attending any full time days via Zoom receives sanzen twice a day on those full time days. **NOTE: This applies to all subsequent sesshins until further notice.**

October 26-November 2 7-day sesshin - the first sesshin of the Fall “double header”

November 7-14 7-day sesshin -- the second sesshin of the Fall “double header”

November 30 - December 8 Rohatsu sesshin

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