

山門寺

Mountain Gate Journal

Winter 2023

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.

Sir Austen Chamberlain, addressing the annual meeting of the Birmingham Unionist Association in 1939, said, "... there was a Chinese curse which took the form of saying, 'May you live in interesting times.' There is no doubt that the curse has fallen on us... We move from one crisis to another. We suffer one disturbance and shock after another."

War, famine, drought, wildfires, floods, melting glaciers, rising seas, hurricanes, earthquakes, bloody protests, gun violence, anarchy, anger and despair. We live in interesting times.

A Buddhist teaching, Gaman, means: Enduring the seemingly unbearable with patience and dignity. Patience, because all things are impermanent. And dignity, because we should not allow ourselves to succumb to despair or indulge in anger. To hold fast our fundamental values and live accordingly.

The Japanese-Americans imprisoned in concentration camps during WW2 used Gaman to build viable communities instead of succumbing as prisoners. They sent their sons to fight for the country that imprisoned them. They faced interesting times, as we also can, with Gaman.

— from a longtime Zen practitioner
of Japanese heritage

Coming to Zen Practice, One Zen Student's Story

My start in Zen practice came about by chance: at the suggestion of one of my professors, I read **Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind**, by Shunryu Suzuki during my junior year of college. Although its words were simple and brief, it shook me profoundly, speaking directly to a feeling of dissatisfaction that I could never quite articulate but that had plagued me for a long time. Part of that was due to growing up in a time of upheaval—the rise of political extremism and decline of democracy; a global pandemic that brought life to a halt; an environmental crisis accelerating in ever-more-tangible ways, and a world generally growing more fractured, isolated, and angry. In reading Suzuki-roshi's words I sensed suddenly that everything I identified with—what I held dear, what I worried about, or thought was important—were all constructions of the mind.

I was attending the Eastman School of Music in Rochester, New York, and it just so happened (karmically, perhaps?) that I lived three blocks away from the Rochester Zen Center. In my free time I attended sittings there, and came to learn about Mitra-roshi and Mountain Gate. I had also started listening to Roshi's teishos on YouTube, and was drawn strongly to her teaching.

The impetus to practice was ratcheted up during my senior year of college—a year that brought new challenges and pushed me "up against the wall," to use an expression of Roshi's. I knew

that I both needed to make a big change and needed to go deeper into practice, but never had the time with my daily schedule. Roshi graciously accepted me to do a year of residential training at Mountain Gate, and I drove from New Jersey to Ojo Sarco just a few weeks after graduation.

Residential training at Mountain Gate has shown me what real, intense Zen training is—something I never would have had the discipline to do on my own—but more importantly, how that is integrated into everyday life and how deep it can go. In particular, working with a genuine teacher who sees where you're at and can guide you along the way is an invaluable experience. There are so many things I've learned—from posture, to how long the *susok'kan* breath is really supposed to go (very long!), to more advanced things, such as what it actually means to work on a koan.

But of course, it's very challenging to try to live up to the ideals of my practice on a consistent basis. I came to Zen practice with the common misconception that it's something magical; that "Zen people" just float above life's challenges. But paradoxically, it's the disillusionment to that idea that has given me hope. There is no magic bullet that will instantly transform us: Zen practice is hard work we have to do ourselves. All of the great masters of past and present are just human beings, not gods of unattainable stature! And even though I am a beginning student with many challenges and weaknesses, learning that fact has given me the faith that I can realize what they have realized. Living at Mountain Gate and seeing the incredible examples set by Mitra-roshi and Shannon (Bodaiko) shows me on a day-to-day basis that it is truly possible to become free, if I can keep working at it.



"...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... God is your being."

—from the **Book of Privy Counseling**

The Vital Importance in Zen Practice of The Long Maturation

Torei Enji was the great Zen Master Hakuin's most notable successor. He was deeply committed to Zen practice, ordained at age 8, and had had his first kensho [seeing into the true nature of reality] before he arrived at Shoin-ji, Hakuin's temple, in his very early 20's. Before he was 26 he determined to concentrate more fully on deepening his understanding by undertaking an extreme regimen of zazen in a solo retreat in the dampest, coldest time of the year in Japan, and suffered the consequences of his extreme privations by becoming so ill the doctors of the time gave up on him. There is a possibility that the illness he nearly succumbed to was tuberculosis, which was rampant in Japan in those days, fueled by the damp, cold winters at a time when even people living in houses had very little in the way of heat, normally only a small charcoal brazier over which a low table was placed—a kotatsu. Torei secluded himself in a remote hut and not only had no heat but also very little food. In the winter climate of Japan that was a recipe for TB.

However, Torei did take his practice much deeper, and he survived. You can read his story—as well as his deep teachings, in his Discourse on the Inexhaustible Lamp, available in English translation from Zen Centre London, whose then abbot, a German woman who was a contemporary Dharma successor in the Rinzai Zen line of Hakuin. Myokyo-ni, whose birth name was Irmgard Schlögl, trained at Daitoku-ji, a Rinzai Zen monastery in Japan, for twelve years, and eventually was ordained and authorized to teach by Soko Morinaga Roshi, who had been head monk at Daitoku-ji and inherited the Rinzai lineage. Myokyo-ni translated not only Torei Enji's own Discourse on the Inexhaustible Lamp but also the teishos of a modern 20th century roshi, Daibi, which translations give background information and commentary making the Discourse on the Inexhaustible Lamp a major and inspiring source of Rinzai teachings in contemporary

English. Torei's Discourse is also translated by Thomas Cleary and titled, *The Undying Lamp of Zen, the Testament of Zen Master Torei*, but without Daibi's teishos. The Zen Centre London paperback is still available, and hopefully will remain in print forever; it is a gold mine of information and inspiration. Every serious Zen student should own a copy.

Torei's Discourse is the result of his then-terminal diagnosis following his 100-day period of extremity. On learning of his prognosis he decided to simply sleep when he needed to sleep, and when he wasn't sleeping, to write down everything he understood about Zen practice, in hopes it would be of use to future Zen students. For six months he lived in that way, and as he was completing his Discourse he received a letter from Hakuin asking him to come see him. He did so, taking the Discourse with him and giving it to Hakuin, saying that if his teacher felt it was worth passing along or publishing, he was free to do so, but that if Hakuin felt it was lacking or misleading, then he was to burn it. We know the result, which is why we can benefit from Torei's long, committed, deep experience with Zen practice in our current era.

One of the main points Torei makes in his Discourse is the importance of what he calls *The Long Maturation*.

If you've read other issues of the *Mountain Gate Journal* and, if you've watched the YouTube videos of teishos given at Mountain Gate, you know how important this aspect of practice is. In the early years of modern Zen in America, getting kensho/enlightenment/satori/awakening was considered the main goal of Zen practice. And indeed, in the Yasutani Line it was so emphasized that during Yasutani-roshi's sesshins in Japan, whenever someone had a breakthrough it was announced and the person was named. We don't do that here, nor is it done either at the Rochester Zen Center or in the practice centers of any of my Dharma siblings, thank goodness.

Such a practice is something that might inspire people embedded in the Japanese culture to work harder, but for Westerners it is a recipe for creating the very self-importance we seek to let go of through Zen practice.

Zen practice is a more than 2500 year old set of tools that enable people using them—fundamentally meditation—to begin to see through the self-image we develop as we grow up. This self-image is exactly that—an image, not reality—that comes about as a result of the conditioning that we experience in the process of being born and growing up. How people around us react to us, nurture or avoid us, treat us with honor and respect or deprecate us or even abuse us, all results in our developing a sense of self, a self-image. Yet that is the external appearance, the story, the picture. and not the reality of who we are. Siddhartha Gautama, later to become the enlightened one, saw this quite clearly in his profound awakening experience under the Bo tree in Bodhgaya. He is said to have uttered, “Wonder of wonders! All beings are endowed with this profound mind of awareness, filled with compassion and wisdom, to which I have just awakened.” These are aspects of our fundamental being-ness. Awakening is to see through that artificial self-image and in that moment of awakening, to become free of it.

That said, awakening can be shallow or deeper, and it is a grave mistake to assume that “one kensho and I'm home free.” Kensho is seeing into the true nature of reality. While it can go a long way, especially with a deep kensho experience, to erasing that conditioning, it takes a great deal of attention, awareness and commitment not to fall back into the habit patterns that have maintained it. This is where the *Long Maturation* comes in.

When a kensho takes place, we are momentarily free of our conditioning. But then the habit patterns of greed, anger, and delusion come rolling back in. Yet with deep enough seeing, we are more aware of them and that allows us

the option to change that behavior, to opt out of it, to behave more in line with what we have seen through that kensho. It takes commitment and work, but having at least had a glimpse into true reality, it is easier than it would have been otherwise. Because traditionally Zen practice has placed more emphasis on kensho than on post-kensho work, there are all too many examples of people in high places in the Zen tradition who have behaved in ways that do not at all accord with true reality. We all know of “Zen masters”—and it’s not limited to Zen, but is found in other sects of Buddhism—who have abused their students, have used temple funds inappropriately, and so forth. This is because they have ignored the Long Maturation.

This Long Maturation need not begin post-kensho, though kensho offers assistance if we’re willing to accept it. As we work in our Zen practice right from the beginning our mind gradually grows more clear and let go, and we are somewhat more able to see where we are living a dysfunctional life. Those are most important moments, for when we become aware of even a small part of that dysfunction we have the opportunity—made more easily accomplished, even pre-kensho through our Zen practice—to gradually move away from it. We are naturally compassionate, though it may be buried under negative conditioning, and under certain extreme circumstances in one’s development they can be so buried as to be unreachable. Assuming we are not psychopaths or sociopaths, doing Zen practice seriously and with commitment will increasingly uncover that compassion and with it we will be able to live it more fully. This is the process of the Long Maturation. And here are some examples from students at Mountain Gate:

The days have been very busy and somewhat overwhelming but your advice to go directly into the painful uncomfortable scary feelings have been useful. I’ve been doing just that as I’ve confronted the challenges that the days brought.

—Student #1, whose profession is intense

Hi Roshi,

A few years ago, the constant drumbeat of negativity in the political news would have made me despairing--I seriously thought about moving to another country after [the results of an election]. Now, with probably worse negativity in the political punditry, I am more or less sanguine. As you mentioned in your teisho, if a nuclear war erupts, if [a certain party wins] and institute fascism...well, we’ll just have to deal with it as it is. I have been telling people (a remarkable number of whom are well-meaning but assume a lot about how I am feeling, which changes almost moment to moment) that Mom’s death just sucks and there’s no getting around that. It’s ok that it is really terrible. I am not wishing that things were different.

When I heard you tell the story of Jacques Lusseyran again, I got it. That’s something I was unconsciously tapping into with this experience. This really is terrible, and there is no fix, and I can’t run away from it (also because running away would be ultimately unproductive). I can feel the gravity of it in my bones. Still, there is something oddly freeing about just being in the terribleness of it, with accepting it and not trying to make myself or anyone else feel better about it. As opposed to wishing with all of my might that things were different or distract myself, as I have previously done in other circumstances, this feels cleaner and much less complicated.

Gassho...

Roshi responds:

Dear L, This is a beautiful email, rich and full of depth; your mother’s death at this time really has been an amazing gift...

Hi Roshi,

I finally got to listen to some of your October sesshin talks and I was surprised at how many at the end were talking about death...since Mom died on the 6th day of the sesshin, I thought this was eerily appropriate. I am back now and was able to take today off--which was great because between the 14 hrs of travel and jet lag, I was exhausted.

My uncle, who is Catholic, and I were talking at a family gathering on Friday and I commented that for me, that Mom's death came out of nowhere and was completely devastating was a gift. He has been struggling a lot because Mom was his younger sister and closest sibling. He is questioning God, life, etc. For me, at least I didn't have to go through that layer of doubt about God's plans, which I think is a root of anguish. When everything you thought existed is shown not to exist in the sense that you think it does, it's helpful to have Buddhist teachings--with other religions, you really need to talk yourself through a lot of cognitive dissonance. So the first week was terrible with grief but I haven't had anguish. Now, I mostly feel very clear that everything is in a state of change and impermanence. I can either try to deny that or work with it. Now that I look around, I can see change and impermanence everywhere, as well as the ways we try to ignore it. I was flying back and it struck me that I move around very little on the plane so in one frame of reference, I am not moving, but in another, we are moving hundreds of miles an hour. (It was reminiscent of Einstein's theory of relativity.)

I also was able to finish reading "The Master and the Emissary," which is a deep dive into the neurological research of the different functions of the brain hemispheres and how they apply to human society. It is absolutely fascinating but also pretty dense and 450 pages long. One thing that

I picked up on was that not only is today's Western society left-brain oriented and has been since the Enlightenment, the left hemisphere's view of the world is also so tunnel-vision that it cannot appreciate the right-brain view unless it is shocked out of its fever dream. This book featured a fascinating exploration of Western philosophy through the perspectives of the different hemispheres and how the left-brain ones (Plato, Socrates, etc) favor self-reifying explanations of the world where right-brain ones tend to be more ecumenical. This is also an interesting topic for me because I can see how in my life, in reaction to trauma like Porges says, I favored a left-brain response that tried to rationalize everything to limit suffering. When it became clear that didn't work (after the Virginia Tech massacre), I had to turn to other ways of being in the world and somehow picked one that combined left and right brain perspectives. I am still grieving but also feel oddly optimistic. I have developed more spiritual grounding and friends since the VT massacre and being able to really lean into practice and my friendships/my community has been incredible. More than ever, I really feel the interconnection in the world and appreciate the beauty around me in big and small things. While we were grieving Mom, another friend's mom died, and several babies of friends and former students were born. Even the grief changes. Every cell in my body is replaced multiple times over the course of my lifetime, so what is my Original Face?

Zen student #2

Roshi responds:

Bringing the fruits of our practice—increasing awareness, openness to possibility vs. automatic reactivity, increasing equanimity, and so forth—is the work of the Long Maturation. Always being vigilant—a relaxed vigilance, not tension—so we can catch and stay present with any previously

unseen negative habit patterns—this is the work of the Long Maturation. How the person above responded to her mother's sudden and unexpected death vs. how she recognized she would have previously is evidence of that work. And that work unfolds when we are willing to walk bravely into the inner energies we normally and habitually work to escape from when things are painful, threatening or difficult. This transformation is vital to Zen practice. Experiencing kensho helps open us to this, but is not a prerequisite; the Long Maturation begins the moment we set our rear end on the cushion or in the chair or on the seiza bench.

If we do not work on the Long Maturation process we are eliminating a major benefit of Zen practice and risking staying stuck in our dysfunctional habit patterns. This is not something normally spoken of by Zen teachers but it is essential.

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 century 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.*

—Student #3

Ultimately it is about facing our own death and finding meaning in our mundane life. And that has been my focus since the last sesshin; that is sensing my physical presence in the world and also dealing with one day the absence thereof. What is life and death all about? These days I have fewer interactions with people but when I do there seems to be an intimacy and loving caring attitude more so than pre pandemic. Even taking my mother to the doctors yesterday and the day before was engaging and everyone was present and very caring.

Maybe it has to do with my mother being 95 and everyone shows her respect and my mother can be quite comical as well. But my mother can also be very challenging.

—Student #4

Roshi comments:

That last sentence above is what we call a “Dharma Door”—an opportunity to take a look, turn inward, and sense the energy behind that feeling. When we do that, something can shift and we can open to a sense of freedom from whatever it is we would have been constricted about. One of the Bodhisattva Vows speak to this:

*Dharma gates [or doors] are boundless,
I vow to master them.*

Anything can be a Dharma gate; the example above is but one of millions of possibilities in the daily lives of each of us. Working with these Dharma gates is a major part of the Long Maturation. We need not look elsewhere for some esoteric thing to become enlightened by, or at least, to become free from!

As a new year begins, it’s an especially optimal time to dive more deeply into practice, including increasing awareness of where there are “caught places,” as my dear friend Chi-san calls them. With a renewed interest and commitment to that Long Maturation process, it’s a prime time to make that renewal come to life.

Traditionally in Eastern and Southeastern countries the new year is a time of renewal. Prior to that new beginning, people make special efforts to clear out debts, super-clean their homes and environments, so that the new year begins truly free of clutter. The light is beginning to grow in the sky, announcing the coming of Spring (despite the fact that technically this time of year is considered Winter), and this, too, adds to the potential for change. What better time to re-up

your determination to truly free yourself from encumbrances, especially mental-emotional ones and old habit patterns of reaction?

One way to help make a difference is to commit to a Term Intensive—a set period of time where you add greater intensity to your practice. There are a number of ways to do this: extra zazen, learning the chants by heart and taking them into your sensibility, offering yourself in service in ways you don’t ordinarily do so, and I’m sure you can come up with some other possibilities. Term Intensives are formalized with a form specifying what you are committing to in addition to your regular Zen practice. The form—which can be downloaded from www.sanmonjizen.org/intensives.html, is filled out and mailed to Roshi. In response, she will ask that you contact her each day of your commitment and let her know how it’s going, including what obstacles you may have encountered. FaceTime, Messenger, or Zoom sanzen is especially available daily during those times.



Ojo Sarco sunset, Christmas Day

This photo was taken by our neighbor and old friend, Richard Holland, whose parents are the reason Mountain Gate came to be in Ojo Sarco. Frank and Rosemary Holland were Third Order Benedictines, beautiful, honed by personal suffering, human beings, generous, inwardly quiet and calm. Spending weekends with them in the 1980’s cemented the commitment to one day live in this deeply peaceful valley full of kind and generous, like-minded people.

CALENDAR

January 21-28, 2023 Sesshin at Mountain Gate
Deadline for applications is one week prior to the beginning of the sesshin.

February 4-11, 2023 Sesshin at Mountain Gate
Deadline for applications is one week prior to the beginning of the sesshin.

March 25 - April 1, Sesshin at Mountain Gate
Deadline for applications is one week prior to the beginning of the sesshin.

April 8-15, Sesshin at Mountain Gate
Deadline for applications is one week prior to the beginning of the sesshin.

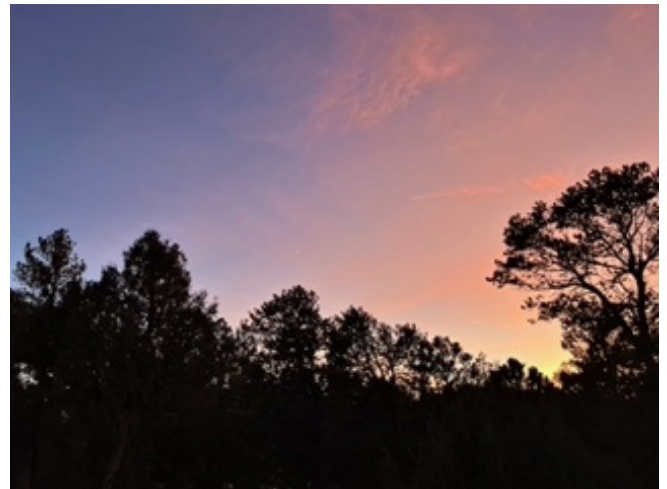
May 27 - June 3 Sesshin at Mountain Gate
Deadline for applications is one week prior to the beginning of the sesshin.

June 16-24 Sesshin at Mountain Gate
Deadline for applications is one week prior to the beginning of the sesshin.

We are scheduling a RegainingBalance Retreat for Women Veterans with PTSD for July 12-16 at Mountain Gate. These retreats are not sesshin, but special, free, nonsectarian retreats for women veterans diagnosed with post-traumatic stress. For information about these retreats, please see the website: www.regainbalance.org

We expect to offer two more of these retreats this summer, one in August and one in early September; dates to be announced.

A note about attending retreats at Mountain Gate while COVID is still an issue: Everyone MUST be fully vaccinated, including booster shots, and should check themselves for COVID symptoms, which can be as mild as cold or allergy symptoms, and if these are felt, then delay arrival until a PCR or NAAT test has been taken. If the test is positive, isolate for 5 days and after 5 days is up, wear a mask for 5 days. This information may be updated depending on changes in CDC rulings.



Another Ojo Sarco sunset...



*“those same distant peaks”
we think, each day, knowing
no day is the same...*

Richard Holland



*Wisdom tends to grow in proportion to
one’s awareness of one’s ignorance.*

—Anthony de Mello



Have you ever ridden a bicycle? 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

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
