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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]. Reclaiming Balance, a nonsectarian outreach program, was established by Mountain Gate+ to offer free, nonsectarian retreats for women veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress, and for women who are wives or

These Times...

As this issue is being written, the COVID-19 pandemic has infected more than 1.7 million people worldwide, has caused more than 111,000 confirmed deaths and continues to grow, fueling a wide range of behaviors from denial to terror.

Yet at the same time, this very environment where we are pushed to an edge, can precipitate a profound and positive change in our perceptions, in our life, in our very being.

Too many years ago to count, when my brother was young enough to have a subscription to Boys Life magazine, I used to borrow his copies; they had really interesting stories in them. One I remember vividly was about a boy who was hiking up a very steep mountain on a trail that on his left dropped a thousand feet straight down and on his right was a vertical face almost as tall. The trail narrowed and narrowed and narrowed and our intrepid Boy Scout continued on—until the narrow trail abruptly ended in a very wide gap—too wide to jump—until it began again on the other side. Faced with no other choice but to go forward (I don't remember why) he made a great mental leap, took a terrifying chance, and ran—horizontally, **perpendicular** to the cliff face!—and made it to the other side.

We have heard the stories of political prison-

ers in the notorious, Stalin era, Gulag prisons in Russia who, under similarly extreme conditions, took an existential leap and came to Awakening. There was also Jacques Lusseyran, the blind Frenchman interned in the Nazi death camp Buchenwald, who, five months living in that incomprehensibly terrifying environment where the prisoners were given rations barely sufficient to keep them alive, and at the same time were being killed through multiple sadistic means, was dying from stress and starvation. He, too, took a great leap beyond his expectations, beyond his assumptions about himself, experienced an Awakening—and found joy. As you've heard many times, he wrote that that joy never left him, though he was to remain in that hell realm for almost another year before the camp was liberated.

How did they do that? They were not unusually gifted people. The only real difference between them and ourselves—and maybe at this point with the pandemic raging it's not much of a difference—is that they were pushed to an edge they could not endure—and so made that leap in perception, let go of their investment in a self-image that needs to be somebody with certain attributions, and with that newfound freedom from that self-image, were able to experience their imprisonment in a very different way. There are ordinary people who, in the last days, weeks or months before dying—and before that even, hopefully!—take that

leap out of that self-image and discover the profound truth of who they **really** are. The rampant anxiety and fear of dying that this COVID-19 virus has triggered can also bring us closer to a choice to let go of that story. After all, when we do die, whether it's now or later, we will have no choice but to let go.

Shido Munan, a 16th century Zen master, wrote,

If you die before you die,
You won't die when you die.

What did he mean by that? If we let go who we assume we are—the false self image we've developed through a lifetime of conditioning, of people reacting or responding to us and the corresponding assumptions we have made about ourselves as a result—and dare to walk with complete attention and awareness into each moment as it appears to be, it's amazing what can happen!

In order to reach a point where we are truly able to do that, however, requires increasing practice and commitment to tune in to the felt sense in our body at each moment, and offer “radical acceptance” to even the most challenging sensations. Most of us developed the habit of avoidance, or denial in response to difficult, painful or embarrassing experiences. Yet freedom only really comes when we open our arms and embrace the felt sense in our body that arises in those difficult moments—and in positive moments as well. The extended breath practice we do in the zendo [meditation hall] at Mountain Gate, if we do it the way it's meant to be done, will bring us closer and closer to being able to do that in each moment.

Here are two additional resources that can help:

The book, **Focusing**, by Eugene Gendlin, tells more about the “felt sense” and how to develop awareness of it and work with it

to free yourself from difficult mind states, not by getting rid of them but by tuning into that felt sense until it dissolves—which it will do if it's tuned into completely. This is effective but takes practice; it was so for me.

A YouTube video that speaks to several different kinds of meditation practice and gives examples:

American Rinzai Zen 101, Segment 2 - on Mitra Roshi Channel
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UQa-8lkpGbTg>



The following article was written by a student who has done a great deal of work in letting go of the self image despite—or perhaps because of—some extreme experiences in the life of this writer.

COVID ZEN

Every moment of life presents us with an opportunity for deeper understanding, deeper clarity, a more profound realization of the simple truth of being. This life in the time of Covid-19 is such a moment. At times like this, the ‘ordinary mind’—reactive, fearful, labeling, judging, worrying—works to assert its delusional superiority. ‘I've got this,’ it says, ‘I'm in control.’ And it attempts this in the face of a stark truth made visible by the extremely contagious nature of this virus: Our life is, and has always been, subject to contingency. Our existence, no matter how much we try to control events, is subject to the workings of chance.

Who we happen to be standing next to, and how closely, who they stood next to, how closely, who that person stood next to—the chain of circumstance, usually hidden by the façade of order that lies like a thin sheet

of ice over our civilization, is melted away by an anarchic viral force that can only be perceived by the most sophisticated of technical devices. We are, as we have always been, vulnerable to the force of fate's fickle finger.

Here the practice of Zen offers the possibility of liberation: breathe in and out, and repeat, letting go of all attachment (yes, even attachment to our health and well-being.) Just breathe in and out again. What is present now? Where is the 'I' that fears, analyzes, hopes, reaches for the quick cure, the return of prosperity, the attachment to what was or what might be? Breathe again, in and out. Notice what is here now. Yes, fear. But also, quiet, the absence of traffic, the clarity of bird song in the morning, temporarily freed of the buzz of the city coming awake. Feel the web of human connection being exposed, paradoxically, by separation. Breathe in and out again, and everything changes. Now 'form is emptiness/emptiness is form' becomes not conceptual but experiential—a lived rhythm of ceaseless change, expressing an unchanging truth.

Sit quietly and do nothing. Embrace this moment fully and let its richness, both beautiful and tragic, unfold. There has never been a moment like this on the planet, this moment with both its omnipresent danger and its opportunity for a more profound opening to the mystery of life. Tune into that. Take a shower. Watch a hummingbird. Hug a child. Sew a mask. Do the next thing that needs to be done, simply, with an ever-increasing awareness. This is Zen in a time of Covid: an opening, a gate. Breathe and walk in!



“Your time is limited, so don't waste it living someone else's life.”

--Steve Jobs

The following was written in an email to Mitra-roshi by another student:

“I continue to practice with the extended breath technique and have increased my sitting time from 30 min to an hour - I have noticed a significant difference. I'm more able to observe the transparency of thoughts - although they still eclipse my awareness of the felt sense in my body periodically throughout my sits. Also, I am more continually aware of where I am in the breath cycle, and I am having a deeper felt sense of my body. Also, I started paying attention to how I feel when I am getting that sense of in-authenticity we discussed, and it has been a month or more since I have felt it. It is interesting that I am feeling more settled in my mind and body - in the midst of the global crisis.”



And from another student who has dealt with anxiety much of his life:

Burnout...

“What is more important – your state of mind or completing all the things that need to be done on your list?”

The Burmese Vipassana meditation teacher U Tejaniya poses this question in the epilogue of his book **Relax and Be Aware**. As a professional I have felt for much of my life that my state of mind is inexorably linked to how efficiently I am able to complete my to-do list; that only after getting to the coveted state of all boxes checked can I actually relax. And that belief is what brought me here: eight weeks into a ten-week period of sick leave from work as a result of burning out. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

I have a high pressure job that requires substantive knowledge, logistical expertise, and

extensive written analysis for current and public events, often requested with very short-fuse deadlines. After years of performing well and slowly advancing in my organization I recently arrived in a new position that required the same high impact output, but also technical understanding of a field that I have no background in. This didn't daunt me at first, and I applied myself to this new position with the same discipline that I had put into this career in the years prior, with positive results. I accepted the reality that at any given moment I may be called to write an analysis piece for an issue that I knew very little about with almost no time to do it. I accepted that I would be asked to travel at a moment's notice, or that a trip I had been planning for months may be cancelled at the last minute. And I accepted that senior leadership seemed not to care about the hours and the stress felt by their employees. Slowly I noticed an acute fear settle into my conscious mind. Fear of going to work. Fear when I was not at work. Fear in meetings—such as of being unprepared for something, or of having to cancel a precious family event because of a work engagement. Through this period I continued my daily zazen routine. I also used the exquisite technique of tuning in to the felt sense of this fear—tightness in my face and chest, sometimes my throat and solar plexus—always the dull pain in my gut. The tuning in helped me navigate the immediate situations that unfolded in front me, but the underlying sense of un-wellness and fear persisted.

Eventually I reached a breaking point. It was as though I was running on a constant injection of adrenaline, but that my body's overall adrenaline supply was depleting, and I couldn't bring myself to work on anything anymore. I knew I had to do something.

I spoke to my immediate supervisors,

expressing what I was going through as skillfully as possible, and to request some time off. To my surprise, and absolute gratitude, they approved a two month leave of absence. Through a stroke of additional synchronicity, an eight-week Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) Course was available a few blocks from my house, coinciding perfectly with these two months. I wasn't sure at first whether I would get anything out of this course. After all, I had been doing formal zazen for many years at this point, and I was skeptical that this would compare to the rigor of a sesshin. But I gave Mitra Roshi a call and asked her opinion. "Give it a shot!" she suggested. And I am very thankful that she did.

Founded by Zen practitioner Jon Kabat Zinn, MBSR uses guided meditations similar to *susok'kan* and *vipasana*, along with a weekly three-hour class taken with other students. The format is such that it takes place in the midst of your daily routine, and asks that you commit to at least 40 minutes a day of sitting, along with mindful pauses throughout the day, the doing of one activity each day totally mindfully, and the intention to be deeply present as much as possible. It also focuses heavily on treating ourselves with the same loving kindness that we radiate toward all beings through our bodhisattva vows. This was exactly what I needed—a true gift to have all of these events lined up just so.

Which brings me back to the present. The MBSR course has been incredibly helpful. It doesn't hurt that I have this Zen experience behind me as well, and I see no real difference between the two, but rather a real complementary quality. As I explained to Mitra Roshi over a recent chat, there is a place of deep stillness and peace between each thought that can be experienced not just on the cushion but off the cushion as well. This stillness is both profound, and truly ordinary at the same time. The MBSR tech-

niques helped to tease this out of me even while going through the daily schedule of modern living. To sit formally, to pause and take a few intentional breaths, to practice zazen or mindfulness in action is absolutely necessary, and perhaps all the same thing. Prior to my leave of absence, I tried to focus on zazen in action as much as possible. I expended great effort doing this—sitting daily, using the timer on my phone to remind me to take deep intentional breaths every so often, and doing regular term intensives.* At times I thought I was getting nowhere, and perhaps regressing. I still felt the pangs of anxiety, frustration, and stress that led to burnout. However, stepping back I see that these efforts formed a base of practice, which allowed for a more deep and full expression of this abiding peace during my two months away from work. I do not have the distraction of a constantly refilling inbox or a plethora of tasks to attend to during my leave, so I can be with my breath while going to the grocery, doing the household chores, and while talking to family and friends. Slowly the great space of awareness has begun to seep into all aspects of my life, naturally of its own accord.

In two weeks I return to my job. The world has been shaken by COVID-19 over these last eight weeks, and I don't know what to expect when I return. Some fear still exists, but along with it is a renewed and grounded faith. Faith that I will choose my state of mind over my to-do list, and faith in much more.

Mitra-roshi comments:

To do an authentic MBSR course at this time in his life was a highly successful endeavor exactly because it was built on an already established base of zazen, developed over years of practice, including sesshin [cloistered, intensive meditation retreats, normally of seven days duration], and bouts of the

*increased intensity of daily practice called for in *Term Intensives. [A Term Intensive is a limited period of time during which a Zen practitioner commits to a more concentrated practice, adding more meditation time and other types of commitment for the period of that term.]*

In addition, he attended an authentic MBSR course, which is also quite important, as there are imposters out there, people who have not undergone the rigorous training demanded to be fully certified MBSR teacher. Here is what is required to be a basic level MBSR teacher:

“The Process Of Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction Certification: Teacher Training Path

“Phase 1: Beginnings

- *Completion of 8 week or intensive MBSR course as a participant*
- *Participation in at least one silent, teacher-led, 5-10 day mindfulness meditation retreat.*
- *Daily meditation practice for a least one year*

“Phase 2: Ongoing Training

- *Practicum in MBSR*
- *Preliminary teaching experience (short classes and workshops)*
- *Ongoing relevant personal and professional education and training; regular mindfulness meditation and retreat practice; and yoga and other body-awareness practice*

“Phase 3: Developing Teaching Skills

- *Co-teaching with a designated mentoring teacher for 2-3 MBSR course offerings (alternatively the Teacher Development Intensive course could be completed in lieu of mentoring)*
- *Review of video of your teaching of week 5 by MBSR Ottawa*

- Completion of online teaching modules (still to be developed)
- Completion of a 2nd silent, teacher-led, 5-10 day mindfulness meditation retreat.

“By successfully completing the above you will have the minimum qualifications for beginning to teach the complete MBSR course on your own.”

Please note that last sentence. Because “mindfulness” and “MBSR” are such popular buzzwords in America these days, there are people who have taken perhaps one online course and then started calling themselves MBSR teachers. What the author of the above article did was an authentic MBSR course with a certified, very experienced teacher—one who had worked directly with Jon Kabat-Zinn, so the course was indeed authentic. If you are interested in taking an MBSR course, it’s wise to check the credentials of the person teaching it, or you may be about to embark on an expensive course in MBSR Lite.



A Question:

What do you think of meditating with your eyes closed?

Mitra-roshi answers:

This is a natural question for many people, as there are many types of meditation and many meditation traditions that instruct meditators to close their eyes. But in Rinzaï Zen we are taught to keep our eyes open during zazen. There are several good reasons for this:

- 1) You’re less likely to fall asleep.
- 2) You’re less likely to start dreaming.
- 3) And perhaps most importantly, although

its initially more difficult, it is quite effective in helping us bridge the gap between meditation on the cushion and awareness and attention in daily life, exactly because when our eyes are open there is visual impact that can vie for our attention. That means we have to pay more attention to our practice than we might have to otherwise, which strengthens it. Rinzaï Zen, with its format of sitting facing into the room vs. facing a blank wall, offers an optimal opportunity to practice this. The more we are accustomed to tuning in, attending to this very moment, the more we are training our brain to be less distracted. That means less distracted by all kinds of things, which means we can focus more completely on what is important.

That said, there may be times when it can be more effective to practice with our eyes closed. For example, it is known that hearing is usually more functional when our eyes are closed. So if you are doing a meditation on sound—which means you are tuning in, focusing on even the most subtle sounds in your environment, then to do so with your eyes closed can be helpful. But once you are able to tune in well to ambient sounds, then you can take the practice a notch higher by tuning in with your eyes open.

The same can be said with regard to tuning into the felt sense in your body, especially if that felt sense is quite subtle and not easily identifiable. At that point, closing your eyes while tuning in can be helpful. But it’s also important to practice tuning into the felt sense when your eyes are open, since often that felt sense gets triggered when we are active or engaged with situations outside of meditation, and it’s not necessarily safe—not to mention as effective—to close your eyes.

So each moment offers a different opportunity; there are situations when eyes closed in meditation or daily life is more effective, and those where it is not.

A Program to Help Relieve Suffering

The United States entered WWII in December, 1941, upon the attack of Pearl Harbor, eight months after I was born, and my father, who had gone to college on an ROTC scholarship, was drafted. Initially my mother and I followed him through various posts until he was sent to the Pacific to fight.

My mother and I moved back to live with her parents in Youngstown OH until my father returned home. As a toddler I would awaken before my mother and grandmother, go halfway downstairs, sit on the stairs, and peer silently at my grandfather in his armchair below, soberly listening to the radio announcements of troop movements in the war. His deep concern was palpable.

Years later after my father returned home and we moved to Canada for his work, the Korean Conflict occurred. We were living in Sault Ste. Marie, which small city was located where the locks were that allowed the boats carrying iron ore from mines off Lake Superior to drop down to the level of the waters that flowed into Lake Michigan, through which they could reach Chicago and the steel mills. It was frequently stated that “if the Chinese wanted to eliminate the steel industry in the States [and its weapon producing potential], all they had to do was bomb the locks. *Where we were living.* More fear and anxiety. Then Life Magazine published a large-format photo essay of the Pacific Theater in WWII, replete with pictures of dead American paratroopers hanging from the trees they'd become entangled in while attempting to parachute into the Philippines, and dead infants (and some adults) crushed in the panic of people fleeing into the bomb shelters in Tokyo.

And then there was the trauma one day in my own life, and the terror—already primed by my war time experiences—of losing my

life suddenly because of the rage that could flare ferociously in our house.

We moved back to the States later, and Life Magazine published two more photo essay volumes, one on the Romanian Revolution and the other on the Hungarian Revolution: more grisly photographs; I couldn't look through either of those books but the few pictures I saw remain with me today.

I grew up, stuffing the terror more or less successfully, at the cost of living a shut down life in which it would still emerge from time to time. And then one day my life crashed in shards at my feet, and I was handed a book on Zen.

What did the Zen masters—not to mention Socrates, whose story was also related in that little, long out of print volume—know, that they could die peacefully, with no fear, no anxiety, and full acceptance? I needed desperately to know. And so began my practice of Zen meditation. It was grueling. Almost constantly I wanted to flee. Why? Because it was increasingly difficult to keep the terror, the trauma, stuffed away, out of sight, out of mind. At the same time, I knew also that there was no way out but to face it, with help.

With years of Zen practice and psychotherapy—and the fortuitous discovery of the **Focusing** book by Eugene Gendlin, things changed. I learned that the dragons, if you looked them in the eye, shrank and disappeared. And so, in 2014, Mountain Gate established the free, nonsectarian RegainingBalance® Retreats for Women Veterans with PTSD, to offer such relief and healing.

For information about the RegainingBalance® program:
www.RegainingBalance.org

For information about Zen meditation practice:
www.sanmonjizen.org

The Very Beginnings of Mountain Gate

While Mitra-roshi was living in Japan and training at Sogenji Zen Monastery in Okayama, her father died. Less than a year later she returned to the United States, was authorized to teach Zen meditation practice, and returned to New Mexico, where she had lived during the 1980's. A very special piece of land came up for sale in the isolated mountain village of Ojo Sarco at exactly the time her father's will was probated and she received an inheritance sufficient to purchase it. Walking the land and sensing its deeply peaceful energy, she drew upon her training and experience in architecture and completed working drawings for a zendo [meditation room] to be built of adobe bricks in the tradition of the Southwest. A longtime Zen friend who was a contractor and licensed electrician did the power drop as a gift, thus making possible electricity on the land. Another friend donated an elderly but at one time elegant travel trailer, and it was in this that Mitra-roshi lived for some time. A third friend donated enough money to buy adobe bricks to build the zendo, and others gave enough to buy cement. We borrowed a neighbor's cement mixer, dug sand out of local arroyos, and in one very long day mixed and poured the trench footing for the zendo building.

In the beginning it was simply raw land in the high mountain valley of Ojo Sarco.



With the help of friends, by the end of the first summer of construction, a not quite complete adobe structure—the zendo—had been built; the walls were unfinished but there were windows and doors and a rudimentary roof covered by tarps. With no heat and no electricity we held our first sesshin [Zen meditation retreat] by kerosene lantern light. Because it had snowed before we got the planks above the beams, the floor was wet mud; we built rudimentary platforms to provide a place for meditation and to use as a sleeping platform for the men, who slept in the zendo. Women bunked in the old travel trailer, which doubled also as tiny kitchen and dining area. We had an outhouse.



This photo was taken from the site of the zendo; that glorious tree, which began at what was originally an irrigation ditch, has, in the twenty-some years since, become a shadow of its former self, most recently splitting and breaking in the severe spring wind.

After the pit was dug by the same backhoe that did the trenches for the footings for the zendo, the outhouse platform was built. It was an elegant outhouse indeed, despite its exterior walls of masonite and roof of cast off corrugated steel. It boasted not one but two windows, the one rescued from a school that had been torn down and donated by a neighbor, the other, a brand new, metal framed, double-glazed window that has been repurposed as the window in the upstairs storage closet in the new addition.



The finished outhouse. We planted tulip bulbs at the back side of it, beneath the window.



The old travel trailer, with the outhouse behind it. In the foreground is the leveled pad where the zendo would be built.